

Missouri Youth Write 2022 Silver Key Winners

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



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Missouri Youth Writes 2022 - Silver Key Award

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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: Personal Essay & Memoir

Brown Leaves**2014: Autumn**

Brown leaves fall from green trees, from perfect branches

Just like a snowflake, each leaf makes a unique pattern when it crumbles. Brown leaves crunch under good sneakers, so every time I pass one I jump on it. Every Friday, I walk the same path from school to my dad's apartment. *Crack*, another crunchy leaf appears and I squash it, picturing Ms. Carman, Dad's landlord. Her face in the wrinkles, her poorly dyed straw-straight hair and her bright grey roots. Cold air bites my throat. Our dismal apartment complex looms over my head in a shadow of grey. Before unlatching the wobbly entry gate, I whip off my coat and shove it into my backpack—futilely trying to protect it from the smell. Mom doesn't like it when I come home smelling like smoke. While climbing the concrete steps to our garage I see Jack's old, mud-caked racing shoes. Time glued them against the moss-and cigarette-bud-covered bird bath. I notice something disrupting the ever-same landscape: a sign, half-observed by broken and yellow stained blinds. It stares at me with its dark black background and white block letters that read:

BLACK LIVES MATTER

I cringe at the message, associating it with all the oddly dressed characters I saw on our TV screen two weeks before. The ones who wear their pants inappropriately. The ones who listen to violent music. The ones who burnt down half our city over some dead man. People die all the time. Every day I watch the news with my mom and see one of them dressed in orange and chains or next to a store that was robbed or a woman who was killed. Ms. Carman's words solidify in my mind: *only criminals have a reason to hate the police.*

2016: Winter

Brown leaves cover pavement, insulating earth from snow

My sixth-grade history teacher, Mr. Callahan, lets us watch a movie every Friday. This week it's the *Planet of the Apes*. Aaron, who sits three seats behind me, clumsily throws a note at the back of my hair. As I unfold the paper, I hear him and his friends slowly burst into laughter. The first word on the note I can't recognize. It's smudged and looks something like the spelling of booger. I could only make out the words that follow:

You look like the girl monkey

I giggle. Cheerfully, I twist around in my chair to get a better look at him so I can decide which monkey he looks like. My heart flutters at the attention; normally boys like him don't talk to me. He's too busy with all the other girls who can't keep their hands off his long blond hair. Before I make a full circle, Mr. Callahan tears the paper out of my hand. He offhandedly scolds us for passing notes while he reads the paper and mumbles something unintelligible. Abruptly, our easy-going teacher's countenance becomes stark. He folds up the note suspiciously and walks to the back of the room towards the phone. Once he leaves I look back at Aaron and shrug my shoulders. He flashes me a smile and the butterflies return.

"Miss Miller and Mr. Williams to the office," Mr. Callahan hollers, "immediately!" All the butterflies fall out of my stomach as I hurry to gather my things. I look at Aaron quizzically, but he won't meet my gaze. I had no clue Mr. Callahan was so strict about note passing. *Why am I going to the office? I didn't even write anything!* I really, really don't want my mom to find out about this. A rush of panic swallows me; I can't breathe. I glue my eyes to the floor; all I can focus on is keeping the tears inside my eyes. I realize Aaron's words must have been mean; he was laughing at me; of course he was. I should know better than to get my hopes up. He will never treat me like a pretty girl—a straight-haired thin girl—I'm not one. Before I know it I'm stuck slipping down a tunnel of bad memories:

Saying goodbye to my dad's dog and rubbing his soft brown ears.

Packing up my room, watching my dad load all his things into his blue sedan.

My feet pound the white-tiled hall.

Mom telling me he wasn't coming back.
 My hand grasps the railing as I descend to the main floor.
He isn't coming back

I'm crying. Tears sting my cheeks before I even step foot into the office—my breath is ragged and deep. I can't stop.

It's this that shocks all of the secretaries into statues. This that gets Aaron a full week's suspension. Ms. Jones, whose size usually makes her move like molasses, crosses the room like lightning and wraps her arms around me. Normally I hate hugs, but from her, I don't mind. Her dark skin is warm, and she smells like coconut. In her arms, I collapse. In her arms, I feel home.

She strokes my curls and whispers, "Oh sugar, everything's gonna be alright, you can't let those white boys keep you down." I believe her because she looks like my aunt and her voice sounds like my dad's. I steady at the sound of those smooth baritone vowels. She holds me until my lungs are once again my own.

2018: Spring

Brown leaves once broken, become dirt

No one told me, but I figured it out. *I* am Black, I'm African American. I understand that now, but I would be lying if I said I wasn't white. How could I not be when I'm surrounded by whiteness everywhere? My mom, my family, my friends, my teachers; desperately, I want to look at my family and feel like I belong. I want to look *like* my family. But I don't.

I've never had a Black friend, or a Black teacher, or a Black mother.

I don't know how to be Black. And I can't be White.

I hate my dad for not teaching me.

I hate my mom for not understanding.

I hate myself for how I thought of Black people when I was young.

I hated them.

I hate myself.

I can change everything about who I am except the color of my skin—so I do. I fight to blend in, a chameleon. I shrink and squeeze myself until I'm invisible. I give everything up: my sneakers, my appetite, my identity. Changing with the seasons until I blow away.

I crumble.

But even my scattered pieces look different.

In time I realize that I'll never blend in. Not when wherever I go I'm an outsider, an enigma, each box recognizing parts from another.

Something new blooms, a rebirth. Yes, I'm Black, I don't fit in—that doesn't mean I have to disappear. I realize that I can't change the way the world perceives me or what it calls me. When someone calls you a slur, they can never put the words back in their mouth. The word will never be erased from their mind—or yours. When Micheal Brown died I felt nothing, but now every time I think of him I get mad. Every time I think of Ms. Carman I get mad. Every time I think of Aaron I get mad. I am mad, I'm mad for the family I lost, for the chances I missed. But I can't be mad. I can't be or I'll become just another angry black woman, another writeoff. I keep my mouth shut to survive. I keep quiet so someday I can speak.

2020: Summer

New trees grow from dirt, from leaves

I don't have everything fixed, but I'm trying. I start an equity advisory board at my school. I campaign to provide elementary kids with diverse books, so everyone can see themselves as a main character. I grow my hair out and stop keeping it in a ponytail. I used to tell everyone I got 'good hair' from my mom, the smooth texture and highlights, but the curls (and my sweet tooth) are from my dad. Ironically, a full day never goes by without someone telling me that I have pretty hair. I do have pretty hair.

When I was little I didn't understand what the BLM movement stood for. All I saw was my community's support for those in blue and disapproval of those who didn't. I was blind to the obvious humanity in those I didn't recognize, to the color of my own skin, my face in the mirror.

I'm trying to stop blaming my father. I'm trying to keep my family educated about race. I'm trying to keep my grades up so I can be the first Black woman in my family to go to college. I'm trying to speak for those who cannot. I'm trying to find beauty in my face, to be something I cannot see.

Today I carry a black and white sign down the streets of Saint Louis:

BLACK LIVES MATTER

I don't have to choose one side or another. I can exist in between, create my own narrative, build up from my

roots—all of them.

BENNEKIN, AVERY**Avery Bennekin**

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Center High School, Kansas City, MO

Educator: Jonathan Danduarand

Category: Poetry

waiting for the bus (ode to black boys)*for the boys on my bus*

it's a gray day in november and the bus is late. the wind is frigid and my coat isn't helping, i have lost feeling in my fingers and am quickly turning numb. over there is a group of warm bodies, their mouths aflame with curse words and brotherhood. i am angry at how well they hold heat, and i think that makes me colder. when the second biggest boy taps me on the shoulder and tells me to come stand with them, i do not fight him. he tells me it's too cold to be standing all the way over here and he is right. when i reach them, i do not ask for any warmth but they'll share some anyway. by *share some* i mean they ask me how i'm doing, if i have to walk far from my stop to get home. i tell them it's just a couple blocks, but they are skeptical. i have learned that laughter gets them to look away, so i'll ignite my tongue with a joke, hoping they let me burn among them. they welcome my flame, but not without reminding me it'll be even colder tomorrow. and when the scrawniest guy starts trembling from the cold they each hit him on the arm. they tell him they love him and by *tell him* i mean they ask him if he wants to wait inside. when he says no, teeth clattering like a frozen choir, they hit him again. they say he needs a bigger coat, that their sister works at Burlington, just ask for Kayla at checkout. that their brother had a growth spurt last year and if you need anything just ask. they love each other like cold loves skin, like sticking close but never asking too loud for acknowledgment. like just look around and know i'm there. and when he laughs off their offers, they'll hit him once more for good measure. this is their way of warming him up. by the time the bus pulls up I am no longer cold. there is wind but there is also warmth, i wonder if they know they can manipulate weather and time. they do not ask about the things they've lent me, i don't think they realize everything they've done. giving so much so quietly, because they are like the cold, never asking for a thank you.

BICK, LILLY**lilly bick**

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: St Raphael School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Sioux Roslawski

Category: Poetry

Time

86,400
86,400 seconds I'm unable to live
86,400 seconds that could have been memories
86,400 moments relived each day
86,400 repeated moments that I cannot change

My prosaic mind doesn't notice the changes my body is enduring
Eyes get wetter
Silence gets louder
Body gets weaker

"I'm just tired."
I have to repeat that at least twice a day to someone who doesn't actually care
Am I really that easy to just gloss over?
Just a background character?
Am I living my life or just watching it on a TV screen?
But of course, It'll get better soon right?

Depression finds a way to collapse time
Memories start to fade
And every inch of happiness you thought you had, starts to slowly fade away
The ache, the stomach drops, missing emotions
All things I've painfully gotten used to
No amount of pills, therapy, or self destruction can fix this

Everything blends together to create a loop of one day
I can't seem to escape it
Everything is the same and I've grown envious of the people around me
They can live freely
They have another day to live
But for some of us, we don't have that luxury

Maybe for you there's a tomorrow.

BOLLINGER, KYLEE**Kylee Bollinger**

Age: 14, Grade: 9

School Name: Smithville High School, Smithville, MO

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Poetry

Spite

You put a noose around my neck,
Kicked the barrel beneath my feet,
You thought me dead with a face of blue,
Yet here I am,
Breathing freely,

You buried me in the cold hard ground,
You cherished my screams,
You thought me to have passed,
Yet here I am,
Crawling out of the dark,

You put a bullet in my skull,
And watched my blood run,
You thought me to be gone,
Yet here I am,
Laughing in your face,

You killed me a thousand times,
Each death more painful than the last,
But darling, don't you know?
When a bone breaks,
It heals back twice as fast,

So kill me,
Break me,
Torture me into madness,
But watch your back,
'Cause I'll pry Death's grasping fingers,
Off of my cold, dead body,
If only to snap your spine,

BÖRK, CAROLINE**Caroline Börk**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

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

Educator: Brian Percival

Category: Humor

The Transportation Security Administration*Cast:*

JOSH

DAVID

FRAN / DMV OVERLORD

ROSE / Voice of CHASER The drug dog

DUDE / PIERRE PANTS

SUSIE

ROGER

LINDY

SPOTS the dog

UNDER THE COUNTER CLORIESE / Puppeteer of CHASER The drug dog

(Two TSA agents stand and talk with name tags and police uniforms. A long bench with a metal detector stands center stage, a podium with a stool is on stage right, and a metal detector is on stage left opposite.)

DAVID: So Josh, are you ready for your first day on the job as a TSA worker?

JOSH: I guess David- I mean my dream was to become a DMV worker, but I had to settle for this.

DAVID: Josh, I think you'll find that being a TSA agent is surprising. The airport is a great workplace, don't worry. And guess what, if you do well today you'll become an official TSA agent! Let me show you the ropes- Here's our first traveler of the day. *(FRAN walks up with a suitcase and yawns)* Remember; you're going to want to put your game face on. *(DAVID slides down his sunglasses and makes a funny, not intimidating face. His voice has changed.)* ID please sir. *(FRAN hands over his ID)* Name?

FRAN: FRAN.

DAVID: On you go.

(FRAN walks over to baggage check and continues down the line)

DAVID: *(his voice and face is back to normal)* See it's easy!

(As he says 'easy' a large group of people come in. The order: ROSE, DUDE, ROGER, LINDY, SPOTS, SUSIE. DAVID claps JOSH on the back and gives a thumbs up.)

I'm going over to baggage claim, you'll be fine. *(At baggage claim, FRAN has a furby, a dead baby, and what looks like a suspicious substance in their bag.)*

(JOSH nervously steps up to the pitch, readies himself funnily then puts on his 'game face').

JOSH: ID.

ROSE: Here ya go.

JOSH: mmmm *(looks up and down from face to ID)* You're free to go.

(As he hands back the ID, there is a really funny picture on it that doesn't look like the woman, ie; Doctor phil, beautiful squidward, etc. ROSE walks on by. As FRAN leaves the metal detector there is a beep- and everybody pauses. Spotlight on JOSH; internal monologue.) I DID IT! I DID IT! I sent my first person through the Transportation Security Administration Line! She looked exactly like her photo so I know I'm keeping the world- that much safer. *(satisfied)* The only thing is- the airport doesn't have the sweet tight moldy sweat ridden putrid musty aura of the DMV. *(Sighs)* Maybe someday you, glorious Department of Motor vehicles, maybe someday.

(everything comes back into light and people move again. JOSH puts back on his game face).

JOSH: Next. *(DUDE comes up)* *(JOSH On mic.)* Can I have I.P Freely please come to the TSA counter- I.P

Freely.

DAVID: What's this in here-? (*Looks in ROSE's bag and pulls out chain and ball weapon*) Oh my goodness... (*continues to pull out lots of weapons and a bomb*) Aha! (*Pulls out a bottle of shampoo*) Twenty ounces?! Tisk tisk what were you thinking. I'm going to have to confiscate this. (*DAVID sets the shampoo bottle aside and puts weapons back into the bag.*) There you go mam- have a nice day.

JOSH: You're good to go. (*DUDE moves to baggage check. As ROSE leaves a click sounds and there is an internal monologue of SUSIE.*)

SUSIE: (*internal monologue.*) Hurry up, hurry up, hurry up! I really need to pee. Like ~~really~~ really need to pee- And poop too... actually. Come on, move faster! (*Susie starts her pee dance and doesn't stop till she is relieved.*) (*Back to normal. ROGER, the person in front of SUSIE is at the counter. DUDE is at baggage check; inside his bag is a large amount of cereal boxes. There seems to be just one but they keep coming and coming as ROGER and JOSH have their conversation.*)

ROGER: Here's my ID.

JOSH: Name?

ROGER: ROGER Batt.

JOSH: Date of birth?

ROGER: 2001, July 12.

JOSH: Country of origin?

ROGER: USA.

JOSH: Mom's first name?

ROGER: Martha.

JOSH: How many dogs do you have?

ROGER: 2, and a cat.

JOSH: What keeps you up at night?

ROGER: a fear of failure.

JOSH: What was the specific childhood trauma that gave you all the flaws you have today?

ROGER: uh, it was when I was six, I dropped an ice cream cone and then my parents blamed me for their divorce.

JOSH: Are you ok?

ROGER: No.

JOSH: And what is the best American TV show?

ROGER: Uhhh- Friends I guess.

JOSH: Best app?

ROGER: TikTok.

JOSH: EEEE WRONG! Red alert guys I need a pat down here, bring out the drug dogs. (*DAVID runs back and gets a very cute stuffed animal named CHASER. It has a little pink bow on its head*)

DAVID: Do your thing Chaser! (*CHASER does not move.*) Good work. (*Gives the dog a scratch on the head. (SUSIE is still doing the gotta pee dance.)*)

JOSH: Alright you're good to go.

(*as DUDE leaves and the beep goes there is a spotlight on SPOTS the dog, and the stuffed animal CHASER. The symphonic version of WAP plays and the SPOTS does the dance, cerniating CHASER. Ending by wiggling its butt, SPOTS returns to the line.*)

JOSH: (*Into intercom*) I need PIERRE Pants to please come to the front of the TSA line. I found your granola bar- PIERRE Pants?

LINDY: My name is LINDY, and these are my daughters Julie, Joline and Rebecca. Say hi girls! (*her daughters are two dolls on ropes and one in a baby carriage.*)

JOSH: (*High voice*) Aww hi there! (*voice drops*) ID please.

LINDY: Here ya go sir. (*they continue their conversation silently to the side*)

DAVID: Psst- hey psst, UNDER THE COUNTER CLORIESE...

UNDER THE COUNTER CLORIESE: yeh? (*CLORIESE pokes their head out from under the counter. She is dressed in a hospital gown*)

DAVID: You in for buy'n this nice *twenty ounce* shampoo bottle?

UNDER THE COUNTER CLORIESE: Depends Davey, how much you want?

DAVID: Im lookin at 50.

UNDER THE COUNTER CLORIESE: 50 (*scoffs*) nahh- ten at most for that thing.

DAVID: How bout 40?

UNDER THE COUNTER CLORIESE: 25.

DAVID: 30.

UNDER THE COUNTER CLORIESE: 20

DAVID: 15.

UNDER THE COUNTER CLORIESE: 8.

DAVID: 5.

UNDER THE COUNTER CLORIESE: Done. Nice doin deals with ya Davey. *(slaps cash on counter, monopoly money, and snatches shampoo bottle back under the counter with them.)*

LINDY: ...So that's why we are all going to Hawaii! Island life here we come girls!

JOSH: It was nice meeting you mam', Next.

(At baggage check LINDY has a tiny doll suitcase and doll clothes.)

(There is a weird sound as Roger goes through the metal detecto).

DAVID: We are going to have to pull you aside sir.

ROGER: Oh- ok.

(DAVID takes out oven mitts and begins to pat down ROGER. He makes him do the YMCA in a pat down)

(SPOTS the dog comes up to the counter)

JOSH: ID?

(SPOTS the dog places collar on counte)

JOSH: *(Reads tag.)* Spots, you're a good boy- I mean good to go. *(SPOTS strokes the face of SUSIE as he goes by.)*

(There is ding as LINDY goes through the metal detector. Stuffed drug dog CHASER, has an internal monologue while SPOTS stares into the stuffed animal's eyes. The actor playing UNDER THE COUNTER CLORISE puppets the dog while another actor talks.)

CHASER: *(internal monologue, dramatic)* Two worlds: separate but united- for our love will break all hounds that the world has tried to enact. SPOTS, my dear, when I sniff your butt it sets my soul on fire- it reaches to my farthest depths calling- For love, for peace, for us. One day my delicious frozen poop-cicle, one day.

(DAVID takes out a lightsaber and begins to scan ROGER. The saber lights up at funny places in breaks of conversation.)

SUSIE: Finally!

SUSIE: *(Fast)* here's my ID

JOSH: One second. *(He takes out a granola bar, sits back on his stool and slowly unwraps it.)*

(The lightsaber makes noise)

(CLORISE comes out from under the table and whispers to the dogs)

UNDER THE COUNTER CLORIESE: psst, HEY! You want to escape to where your love can be free?

(dogs nod their heads.)

UNDER THE COUNTER CLORIESE: *(CLORISE takes a swig of her shampoo and white liquid spills everywhere.)* Then follow me, I know the secret ways.

(They crawl through the tarp on the table, CLORISE takes another swig, and are seen sneaking off another direction into the audience together.)

(DAVID has Roger climb up on the counter and tries to shove him through the Baggage detector. Lots of physical comedy and well placed "Oofs" between conversation. ROGER gives an 'Oof.')

SUSIE: Can you just look at my ID please?

JOSH: Take it easy dude, I'm getting to it.

(DAVID gives a 1,2,3 then ROGER gives two 'Oofs')

SUSIE: *(quickly breathing)* JUST TAKE MY ID OR IM. GONNA. PEE. MY PANTS!

(DAVID crosses in front stage left into a runner pose, he stretches then runs full speed at the metal detector and

ROGER. ROGER gives an Oof.)

JOSH: Calm down, calm down, in a sec. *(JOSH slowly takes another bite of the granola bar)*

(SUSIE calms down but then the audience realizes there is water on the floor as she does so. She stops her pee dance. Everyone looks at her. DAVID stops pushing ROGER for a moment to see.)

PIERRE PANTS: *(Walks in oblivious.)* Hey its PIERRE PANTS, I came to collect my damn granola bar.

JOSH: *(stashes bar under desk still mouth full of food)* We don't have it. You'll have to check somewhere else.

PIERRE PANTS: Well, poop.

(SUSIE'S eyes go wide as she looks down.)

(DAVID pulls Roger through the metal detector and slowly off the floor into a heap. There is suddenly a happy ding sound on the baggage metal detector; they help each other up and dust themselves off. ROGER leaves stage right. The spotlight focuses on PIERRE.)

PIERRE PANTS: *(Internal Monologue)* You know what- I could really go for a sandwich.

(Blackout. Lights come up and the stage is empty but for JOSH and DAVID.)

DAVID: You did well on your first day JOSH. (gives him a badge) You know, I think it's time you become a full fledged TSA agent. But there's one last hurdle, what we do *at night*. (They nod seriously then rip off their clothes into disco uniforms and dance to 'I like big butts'. Suddenly the music fizzles out with static and a figure in a black cloak comes down the aisle. Figure lifts hand dramatically.)

DMV OVERLORD: JOSH, I am from the DMV. Your time has come.

(JOSH cries joy, jumps off the stage, and goes to him)

(Curtain)

END OF PLAY

Character Descriptions

JOSH: New TSA worker on the job. Has secret dreams of the DMV.

DAVID: Experienced TSA worker, training JOSH on his first day. Makes some shady deals.

FRAN: The first traveler of the day.

ROSE: JOSH's first traveler. Probably selling weapons illegally.

DUDE: A random person. A lover of cereal.

SUSIE: Needs to pee, otherwise probably going to Alabama for the holidays.

ROGER: Is questioned on life, is subject to random security checks.

LINDY: Mother of three.

PIERRE PANTS: Is kinda hungry.

SPOTS the dog: A great dancer and true lover.

CHASER the drug dog: A stuffed animal, poet, and lover.

UNDER THE COUNTER CLORIESE: Makes deals with the don't travel with.

DMV OVERLORD: Do not question his power. Do not resist the calling.

BOYCE, WILMA**Wilma Boyce**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

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

Educator: Nancy White

Category: Poetry

A Pair of Poems About Death**Plague (1)**

There's this woman. We've never met
but I know of her tree resting down
the path of the MKT trail.
The little plaque is stone and brass and worn
though the tree is so young and thin.
I wonder if one day the plague will be gone entirely
and the tree will be left ancient and tall,
it's connection to this woman severed say for
shards of plastic casing buried beneath the earth.
It's those moments when I cannot help but stop there and say her name.
Is that why humans make memorials like that?
To keep a name, an idea, around for a little longer?
Rose Heller,
who lived for seventy-two years.
whose death meant a sapling was planted.
I wonder who she was, to have received a memorial.
A plague along the trail, meant
to make cyclists and runners and dogs and birds
read the dates she lived
and store her name in their hearts.
If a person truly dies
when their name
is said for the last time,
it is comforting to think that
Rose Heller will stay in this world
for a little while longer.
But when the tree dies,
and the plaque is blown away by the breeze,
and no one ever says her name again,
what will happen then?
A human,
a being with so much life and love and complexity.
To think they could simply be forgotten,
left abandoned in the storm of time,
it's a terrifying thought.
So I will keep Rose Heller with me
for as long as I can.
And I will pray others
will do the same for me

Sand Storm(2)

History is a sand storm.

Fast and confusing and eager to take and to erase.
I am living in history.
I am standing, for a short time,
in the storm that claimed all before me,
and that will claim all beyond me.
And yet as I stand here,
I write prose no one else will ever write.
I speak words only some will ever hear.
I feel emotion only I will ever know.
I gaze upon the same moon as every other human,
and toil under the same sun.
I am alive,
but one day the sand will take me.
If I leave anything behind It won't last long,
and one day my name will be said for the last time.
But I write prose no one else will ever write.
I speak words only some will ever hear.
I feel emotion only I will ever know.
I gaze upon the same moon
And I toil under the same sun,
as all the others whose names have long since been spoken for the last time.
Maybe that is worth being forgotten.

BROZIO, HONORAH**Honorah Brozio**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

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

Educator: Jennifer Staed

Category: Critical Essay

The Problem with Sex

Vagina. Sex. Lube. These words often make people uncomfortable. If someone were to yell, “penis,” in a room full of high school students, there would be unanimous giggles. But why? Why are people so antsy when discussing body parts and sexuality? The answer is school. More specifically, Catholic school. School is the perception of the human body forms. Teaching students to be embarrassed about their bodies has dire consequences for their personal lives and futures. Catholic school sex education consists of traditional religious teachings of which can be damaging and factually incorrect. These teachings chastise LGBTQ sexuality and exclude discussing queer sex education. Nerinx Hall High School, an all-girls school located in the predominantly Catholic city of St. Louis, is an example of inadequate Catholic school sex education. Government-approved facts, official Catholic laws, and St. Louis student experiences will be compared to uncover the reasoning and solution behind the sex education crisis Catholic schools face. Catholic schools use religion as an excuse to withhold essential sex education from students which causes young people, especially LGBTQ, to go into the world without a sufficient understanding of their bodies and their world.

Catholic teachings of sexuality are fundamentally outdated and harmful because they do not discuss multiple forms of birth control. To begin, natural family planning is a form of birth control approved by the Church. This method tracks the female fertility cycle so couples can control when they want to get pregnant. Natural family planning, along with abstinence, is the only birth control technique approved by the USCCB (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops) (“Love”). This paper utilizes several anonymous interviews to protect privacy. The first anonymous source is Teacher 1. Teacher 1 is a theology teacher at Nerinx whose views on sex education can be considered more liberal. Regarding theology curricula, Teacher 1 says Nerinx relies entirely on the USCCB, a Catholic organization that believes artificial contraception to be morally corrupt. Natural family planning and abstinence are admirable to use, however, they are often the only methods taught in Catholic school. Students need to learn about every form of birth control, artificial and otherwise, so they can come to their own conclusions. An anonymous student states in an interview, “I was taught false information that wasn’t factual. They told me [all] contraception was abortion. They said all forms of birth control were against Catholicism” (Anonymous Nerinx sophomore 1). This student received warped information because the Church is not against all forms of birth control. Teacher 1 even says, “It is very important to present this information to students as often they are only presented with abstinence to avoid pregnancy although there are other methods out there that are in line with Church teaching.” A survey using data from 255 students (all of which attended Catholic school at some point) says 45% of students received abstinence-only education. Teacher 1 also says, “As Catholics, we must be properly educated regarding modern women’s healthcare, even if it’s not something we specifically believe in or will use.” This quote shows how Catholic schools should at least acknowledge birth control options like condoms, the pill, and birth control implants. Although Catholics may have special sexual virtues to honor, they still need to learn all options of birth control to avoid learning misinterpretations.

The best way to be an independent and intelligent young adult is to balance Catholic morals with real-life situations. Schools cannot pretend young adults will not have premarital sex. “My education was don’t have sex or else you’ll go to Hell” (Anonymous student 1). Religious morals aside, it is inevitable teenagers have sex. About 40% of Americans between the ages fifteen and nineteen have had sexual intercourse according to a survey (Martinez). Although this is less than half of all young people, it is a concerning number because people born in the years 1999 to 2020 make up roughly eighty-six million of the United States population (“U.S.”). In short, teens need sex education because millions of teens are having sex regardless of what the Catholic Church teaches. Of 255 students, 99% are disappointed with their sex education. “I feel like my Catholic grade school actually tried to keep us *uneducated* about sexuality” (Anonymous Nerinx student 1). Surprisingly, Nerinx Hall is known for empowering young women. Their motto is “Women must know themselves and their world.” For a Nerinx woman to be able to

use critical thinking, she must be allowed every opportunity to make her own decisions. As a traditionally women's high school (Nerinx has many students who do not identify as women), Nerinx cannot empower students and keep them in the dark at the same time. "They [my Catholic school] were more worried about me giving away my "purity" than keeping us safe" (Anonymous student 2). As beautiful as faith is, it is preventing schools from teaching diverse and substantial sex education. This quote is an example of poor sex education causing a student to feel unloved and unaccepted. Students need to feel welcomed and safe in school and the current standards of sex education are not meeting this expectation. Overall, students deserve to be thoroughly educated even if the Church does not agree with some facts.

Another important component of sex education Catholic schools need to recognize is the queer community. The laws of the Catechism of the Catholic Church explicitly state, "Among the sins gravely contrary to chastity are masturbation, fornication, pornography, and homosexual practices" ("Catholic" 576). This shows that homosexual relationships are clearly unwelcome in the Catholic Church. It also states, "homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered" (566). Since these are the stances the Church has towards homosexuality, it is no surprise Catholic schools do not have LGBTQ discussions as a part of their sexuality curriculum. But the scariest part is these teachings are not tucked away in a large book most people never open. They are taught openly to Catholic school children. Teacher 2 is another Nerinx theology teacher whose views on sex education contrast Teacher 1. Teacher 2 explains in an interview that marriage and sexuality should consist only of traditional Catholic teachings. "[C]omplementary of the sexes is something I'd never leave out. We have to talk about how men and women are different ... sexually speaking, [sex] is binary." Teacher 2's teachings express a rigid way of viewing sexuality. Additionally, these teachings are negative for students because it suggests strict roles for people and does not encourage students to explore identity options outside of heterosexual and cisgender. Furthermore, *A Catholic Handbook on Sex* is written by a priest who proclaims that sexual intercourse is only for married couples. He further explains that "[Same-sex couples] are not seen as possessing all of the qualities necessary to constitute a marriage" (Graham 34). This ideology is detrimental to LGBTQ students because they are not allowed to be themselves. The Catholic Church has a history of dehumanizing the queer community and these morals bleed into schools. These teachings need to stop because they enforce a damaging idea that everyone has to be the same to be loved by God.

Traditional Catholic views of the LGBTQ community are damaging to students because they ignore, scold, and treat them unfairly. No matter how strongly Catholicism tries to ignore and dehumanize the queer community, the gay cannot be prayed away. More than half of the surveyed 255 students say they identify as part of the LGBTQ community. The high rate of young people identifying as LGBTQ shows that schools need sex education that is not heterosexual-focused.

"I think it's important to discuss Church teaching regarding LGBTQ and I always like to define the terms for students and ensure everyone is aware ... I also think it's very important to remind everyone that LGBTQ peoples, like all people, have dignity and are made in the image of God. I am not uncomfortable with including LGBTQ topics in my teaching because the LGBTQ community exists and we cannot pretend it doesn't" (Teacher 1).

Schools need more teachers like Teacher 1 because Catholicism should be about diversity and inclusion. Traditional values can cause religious schools to lose sight of the fact that the center of Christianity is love and unity. Moreover, the way Catholicism tries to justify its teachings is unacceptable. "The Church does not consider it wrong to be a homosexual person. They are careful to distinguish between homosexual persons and acts" (Graham 33). This sentiment is often brought up in schools to justify homophobic teachings. An anonymous student says, "I hate how they [Catholics] say oh I love gay people, just not their actions. Like how can you separate that?" (Anonymous Nerinx student 2). Another anonymous interview retells an instance of homophobia in school. She identifies as bisexual. She explains that her religion class gave the students links to homophobic websites. The articles on the websites say homosexuality is a mental illness that needs to be cured. The sites include the promotion of programs similar to conversion therapy. "I just like cried and wanted to run out of school. It was the most disturbing thing the school did [to me]" (Anonymous Nerinx sophomore 2). This bluntly homophobic example demonstrates why schools need to discontinue lessons that upset queer students. Catholic schools need to end practices like this because beliefs aside, it is false information. Medical experts say homosexuality is not a mental illness ("Being"). Undoubtedly, these examples illustrate that the Church's homophobic teachings in school need to change because they are harmful toward the growing number of LGBTQ students.

Religious schools need to teach sex education more openly because the current teachings leave students confused, frustrated, or ignorant. Sex is a normal and necessary part of life and almost everyone will experience it. The average age for a person to have their first sexual experience is fifteen or sixteen (Mackay). Since humans tend to become interested in sex at a young age, this means teenagers need to understand their bodies and safe sexual practices. Catholic schools, however, limit the availability of the information they share with students. One student is

especially troubled by her sex education. “I didn’t know what a penis was until I went to public school. I didn’t know what LGBTQ+ was until I went to public school. Catholic school sex ed is absolute shit” (Anonymous student 3). Logically, a religious school teaches sexuality per their beliefs, and there is nothing wrong with religious schools teaching their stances. However, when their views cause students to go through life without a basic understanding of human anatomy or the existence of LGBTQ people, there is a problem. Additionally, Sandy Dove (her real name is omitted for privacy), a St. Louis native and Catholic school alumni, shares a time when she felt her Catholic school was hiding something. She is an adult who attended Catholic school in St. Louis her whole life. She says she did not receive a sex education class but they did show her a video on puberty. However, she was dissatisfied.

“There was a film for girls and a different one for boys ... the girls watched only the girl’s film, and the boys watched both the girls’ and boys’ films! I felt this was not equitable ... I asked the teacher why we couldn’t see both films too. She said that the girls didn’t need to see the boys’ film, but had no answer for why the boys’ needed to see ours. [B]oys were given more information than I was being given about how our bodies work in puberty and that somehow it was ok for boys to know more than me and/or that I wasn’t supposed to be thinking about those things outside of what was happening in my own body” (Dove).

This story demonstrates how a Catholic school made a student angry. Sandy’s school did not include her in all the discussions taking place which made her confused. When schools hide topics that directly impact students, they are not being open enough. St. Louis Catholic schools need to stop teaching sex education as a taboo secret because young people have sex, body parts, and minds to notice when they are being lied to.

Along with hiding essential information, schools trust parents too much when it comes to educating their children. An instance of a misguided teen is Lana Glen (her real name is omitted for privacy). She is a sophomore at St. Francis Borgia Regional High School, a private Catholic school. In her interview, she speaks passionately about body positivity and quality sex education. Lana proudly considers herself Catholic and is devoted to her faith, however, she still has concerns when it comes to the way her Catholic schools handle sexuality. “They aren’t very clear or informative because well, Catholic schools ” (Glen). Lana’s school left her in the dark about menstruation which made her very insecure and confused since she started puberty at the young age of ten. Furthermore, a similar pattern is seen with adults who attended Catholic school decades ago. Sandy Dove says, “I was super confused when I went through puberty and experienced feelings of sexuality for the first time. I thought there was something very wrong with me since no one seemed to be talking about it.” These examples show that when neither one’s school nor home discusses sexuality in a clear and supportive manner, it makes students alienated and desperate for explanations. Moreover, of the 255 St. Louis school students, about half say their parents give them sex education. Of the half, only three say the sex education they receive at home is informative and helpful.

“Sex education is extremely important for teenagers because not everyone is lucky enough to have parents who can teach them. Especially with the topics of LGBTQ+ inclusion ... we should normalize sex talks and not treat it like some horrible sinful thing, because everyone deserves to know how their bodies work”

(Anonymous Nerinx sophomore 3).

This student says they do not receive proper sex education from home or school. They are another example of students being disappointed in how sex education is handled. Teacher 1’s opinion on the matter is “[S]chools should ensure that students have at least a basic education regarding reproductive health before reaching adulthood.” On the other hand, Teacher 2 thinks sex education should primarily be at home. Contrary to Teacher 2’s beliefs, it is evident well-rounded sex education needs to be discussed in school because parents are not managing to teach at home. Catholic schools cannot rely on parents to educate their children about sex because there is too much evidence students learn nothing from either.

Although poor sex education may seem like a temporary inconvenience, its issues leak into young adulthood. For example, fifty-eight-year-old Mary Moore (her real name is omitted for privacy) says she did not figure everything out until her late twenties. “I went to the GYN for the first time, she explained everything” (Moore). She is referring to how the female reproductive system worked. This is a sad result of poor sex education and an example of how no one should not have to wait decades to fully learn about the human body. Furthermore, she says, “I learned about sex from my friend. My school and parents never said a word about it.” The root of this problem is that an alarming amount of people learn about sex informally and unrealistically. Nearly 60% of the 255 students say they find most of their sex education information from friends and the media. 20% of the students say they learned more from shows like Family Guy, The Office, and Big Mouth than from school. Furthermore, an anonymous interview says, “I learned most of everything about periods from talking with friends and the internet” (Anonymous student 4). These claims show how Mary’s experience in the 1970s is prevalent today because teens are still using inaccurate sources. If schools gave students good resources, they would not have to resort to cartoons. Moreover, a Catholic school alumnus who is now in college says, “They [Catholic school] lied about so much. In college it’s better but it’s just too late” (Anonymous college). Students should not have to wait until college to feel their sex education is adequate. Most humans go through puberty well before college which means they need sex education

sooner. Schools also need to introduce sex education to prepare students for real-life situations. In summary, Catholic schools need to teach sex education to prepare students for adulthood.

Overall, Catholic school sex education proves to be close-minded and uninclusive. Nerinx Hall students deserve to know themselves and their world. For them to fully be able to do this, they must be given access to all information. Young adults should not have to learn about sex through Family Guy or go through decades of life without knowing how their bodies work. In the long run, statistics, religious boards, and teachers are not the ones suffering the consequences. Students are affected. Students hold the only relevant opinion, and what is their conclusion? An overwhelming amount of them are confused, desperate, and misguided. Too many adolescents are receiving biased and false information. The reason behind the epidemic of lackluster sex education is religion. Nerinx Hall's mission statement is about teaching young students to be aware and informed which means they need to live up to the standards they set for themselves. The stories and statistics of St. Louis Catholic school students prove that keeping information such as birth control, the queer community, and puberty a secret causes them to be confused and unprepared for life.

BROZIO, HONORAH**Honorah Brozio**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

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

Educator: Jennifer Staed

Category: Dramatic Script

Ten Kids on Waldorf StreetExcerpt from *Ten Kids on Waldorf Street*:**Scene 1.2**

Scene changes to the Donovan living room. FIONA and KATHERINE enter having come from a day of walking downtown. They come in laughing telling the story of KEVIN's flying pencil. The Donovan children are all crowded in the living room talking, fighting, braiding hair, and being teenagers. The room is worn and the furniture is old. URIAH and FRANK are looking at a new "pet" rat they brought in the house. Everyone is occupied except OTTO who sits in a wheelchair in the back.

FIONA: *(swings open the door)*...and did you see her face?

KATHERINE: *(in mocking voice)* You've blinded her!

FIONA: *(laughs)* Going to the arch grounds was way better than seeing the nurse. I mean look at you, you're fine.

KATHERINE: It didn't really hurt, it just kinda shocked me.

ROISIN *enters. She is wearing an apron and is holding a plate and rag.*

ROISIN: *(with a heavy Irish accent)* Katherine, did I hear you skipped school after having a pencil thrown at you?

KATHERINE: Yes Mom. *(smiles innocently)*

ROISIN: *(huffs)* That's my girl. That old wretch treated the whole lot of you like dirt. Hit your brother Uriah real hard. *(looks at URIAH. He grins. Jokingly.)* Not that he didn't deserve it. Anyone ever lays a hand on you and you run straight home is that understood?

KATHERINE *nods.*

ROISIN: Should I call and say you and Fiona needed to stay home?

KATHERINE: Would you?

ROISIN: I can't wait till you graduate. *(scoffs)* Calls herself a woman of God. Oh and you're the last one. I can't believe it. All my babies grown.

FIONA and KATHERINE *move to talk to LIZA, LILY, and SARAH. URIAH drops his rat. It runs around and everyone lifts their legs to avoid it.*

ROISIN: Maybe not all grown. Uriah put that thing back where it came from.

URIAH: *(grinning)* But it's my pet.

ROISIN: (*pointing*) Now.

GEORGE: Stop bringing those things in the house, it's gross.

FRANK: They're no different than hamsters or mice.

GEORGE: They smell rancid.

URIAH *sneaks behind* GEORGE *and puts the rat on his shoes.* GEORGE *screams.*

GEORGE: Get that thing away from me! I'm wearing my Vans.

URIAH *moves rat into* GEORGE's *face.*

URIAH, FRANK, *and* GEORGE *go into a silent fight and focus shifts to the girls* LIZA *is reading a fashion magazine while talking.*

FIONA: Liza, tell your sister she's going to Leoni Bennet's party tonight.

KATHERINE: I still don't know if that'd be a good idea.

FIONA: I heard you and Harry making kissy lips at each other. You made Harry a promise.

KATHERINE: I said I'd maybe go. Mom would never let me anyway.

LIZA: Katherine dear it's your first high school party you have to go. Lily, aren't high school parties fun? It's nothing like those middle school sleepovers you're used to.

LILY: (*sarcastic*) Yeah real fun.

SARAH: (*also sarcastic*) A real blast.

LILY: Liza why can't we go? You'll bring your baby sister but not us?

SARAH: She's just a freshman. She won't know anyone.

LIZA: This is Katherine's first party. You two have been to plenty. And Katherine, don't even worry about Mom. I wasn't planning on telling her anyway.

FIONA: (*leans to Katherine*) Harry Bennet.

KATHERINE: Alright fine. But it's just for the experience.

FIONA *gestures her hands and points at herself.*

KATHERINE: Um, Liza? Can FIONA come?

LIZA: Of course dear can't have you hanging out with seniors all night.

LILY *and* SARAH *gawk.*

LILY: What?

SARAH: That's no fair.

LIZA: Sneaking two people out of the house is one thing. Four would be impossible. Get over yourselves you've been to plenty of parties. (*smiles at KATHERINE*) She'll be my plus one.

FIONA: *(checks her watch nervously)* I, uh, got to go.

KATHERINE: We can give you a ride to the party—

FIONA: *(flustered)* No. Sorry, I'll uh, walk it's not far from my house. I really need to go *(plasters a smile on her face)* I'll see you there.

FIONA *leaves quickly.* KATHERINE *looks confused but is cheered up when* LIZA *grabs her hand.*

LIZA: What do you say we get this party started?

KATHERINE: What do you mean?

LIZA: *(scoffs)* Well we only have two hours. *(looks her up and down)* You don't seriously expect to go in that? *The living room changes around them. A wardrobe and bed is brought in.*

KATHERINE: *(slightly offended)* What's wrong with this?

LIZA: *(aghast)* Katherine Donovan you think you can go out in that? Our family would be the laughingstock of the year.

KATHERINE: It's like the nicest thing I own.

LIZA: SARAH, do you still have that blue dress?

SARAH *and LILY sit jealously watching them get ready.*

SARAH: *(shocked she would even ask)* Absolutely not.

LIZA: Lily, would you get me that brush?

LILY: *(rolls eyes)* No.

LIZA: *(puts lipstick on)* Katherine dear there's a powder blue blouse in the closet that would go great with your eyes.

SARAH: A circle dress?

LILY: It's the 70s not the 50s anymore.

LIZA: Oh hush.

KATHERINE *goes offstage to change. She comes back in an old blue dress. She does a twirl and smiles.*

LILY: *(snorts. Hides her chuckle with her hand)* God you can't wear that. Me, Liza, and Sarah have all worn it to death already.

LIZA: *(curling her hair)* Oh stop it now you're just being jealous.

LILY *and SARAH start trying on all of* LIZA *'s clothes.*

LILY: Liza you're so lucky you're the only one who doesn't get hand me down clothes.

SARAH: Kath is it true you're going to this party because of a boy?

LILY: I've heard things about that Bennet boy.

KATHERINE: Like what?

LILY: He's a complete ass. A lazy kid who thinks he can get all the girls he wants because he made varsity football freshman year. I heard he's been dating around since seventh grade. Can you believe that?

SARAH: (*dreamily*) I wouldn't mind kissing him.

LILY: Ew!

SARAH: You know, if he was our age.

LIZA: (*putting on mascara*) Oh Lily stop trying to ruin Katherine's night.

LILY: I'm not, I'm just saying. Anyone who has a reputation before they're in highschool is trouble.

LIZA: (*miming with her lips*) Jea-lous.

SARAH: (*holding an outfit up to herself*) Katherine what about this one?

LILY: (*snatches the clothes out of SARAH's hands*) Stop helping her.

KATHERINE: Oh I don't know, isn't it a bit much?

LILY: This isn't fair. (*slumps down on the bed*) Kath did I tell you how much I hate you?

KATHERINE *hits* LILY *playfully with a pillow*.

KATHERINE: (*leans over her with kissy lips*) You're my favorite sister Lil.

LILY *pushes her off*. KATHERINE and SARAH *join* LILY *on the bed and they lay on their stomachs facing the audience*.

KATHERINE: You're going to help us sneak out right?

LILY: Pfft. Like hell I will. I'm grounded right now. You want me to get in more trouble? (*hits her with a pillow*)

KATHERINE *giggles*.

LILY: The next thing I do Mom's gonna send me to the convent.

SARAH: What was it this time?

LILY: (*mumbles*) I shaved the neighbor's cat.

SARAH: You what?

LILY: (*quietly*) Shaved the goddamn neighbor's cat.

LIZA: Huh?

LILY: (*covers her face with a pillow*) Christ's sake, I shaved the Anderson's cat!

They all laugh. The next few lines are said at the same time or close together.

KATHERINE: It must've looked like those ugly hairless things.

KATHERINE *leaves to put on the outfit* SARAH *picked out.*

SARAH: I don't blame you, that cat is a demon.

LIZA: (*dramatically*) It has eyes that glow red I swear!

LILY: (*grumpy*) It's not funny! I'm not allowed to go anywhere but school.

LIZA: But you really shouldn't do foolish things like that anymore Lily. You're sixteen.

LILY: (*whiny*) Not all of us are a perfect adult already Liza. You have your perfect boyfriend who we all know you're marrying and you act like our second mom.

LIZA: (*sets down hair curler*) At least I'll have a good life.

LILY: What is that supposed to mean?

LIZA: I won't be a gas station employee, I'll have a family and kids and a nice husband.

LILY: I'll have a family too. And a big house, bigger than this shit and a job and a white picket fence. And I sure as hell won't give my kid any siblings.

LIZA: Mom works so hard to give us everything we need. It's not a mansion like you want but it's enough.

LILY: Mom doesn't even work, she makes us all have jobs.

LIZA: (*exasperated*) All of us except you Lily. We work so you can focus on your gymnastics, because you think you're some "prodigy." (*shakes her head*) Even Katherine has a job. All so you can learn to flip and twirl little ribbons around. Do you know how expensive all that is? You think your pathetic dream is worth it? You're not going to be in the Olympics or anything.

LILY: (*caught off-guard*) I don't—

LIZA: (*without thinking*) Dad would be so ashamed of you.

SARAH: Liza—

LILY: (*angrily*) Well I guess we won't know for sure because you went and killed him.

LILY *leaves.* SARAH *nervously follows.*

KATHERINE *comes back wearing a new outfit. She sees* LIZA *standing lividly with her fists clenched.*

KATHERINE: Is everything okay?

LIZA: (*closes her eyes. She slaps a smile on her face*) We should be heading out so Mom doesn't catch us.

KATHERINE: (*tries to ignore LIZA's previously sour expression*) Okay.

BUCHOWSKI, MADELINE**Madeline Buchowski**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Robert Henningsen

Category: Poetry

The Urge

Ever since last summer, I have had the urge
To hang eucalyptus on the shower faucet
And press my putty-stained pictures onto all four walls.
To buy the "I will always love you" card,
Not fully knowing why until I tape the two flaps closed
And stick it in the upper left corner.
To abandon the metronome beats
To scribble down fleeting poetry
And hope the tempo imprints subconsciously
To the syllables of words I wish I wouldn't say.
To hold the little girl even when she won't look up from the screen,
And hope that one day my own children
Will learn reliance on nature, or music, or dreams.
To trace the lines on the street
In the middle of the night and laugh at
Nothing while I skip in the moonlight.
But most of all, I have had the urge
To say welcome home to you, even
In this place.
I know it isn't your home.

BUCHOWSKI, MADELINE**Madeline Buchowski**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Robert Henningsen

Category: Flash Fiction

The Snake Died in the Washing Machine

The snake died in the washing machine. You said it pushed through the lid of the cage, lifted the weight of the precalculus textbook you had put there to keep it closed, slithered into the laundry room, into the basin, and drowned away in the suds of your dad's work clothes. You never named it. I think the only pet you ever named was the fish you had, back in elementary school—the one that was named after me. Your sister scooped it up with her net, and like that she was finless and couldn't swim anymore.

...

We dropped our bikes on the shaded gravel and pushed through golden prairie grasses and bumble-bee-speckled wildflowers to reach the pond. It was spring and the tadpoles clung onto the tarp-lined edges of the water, so motionless that we were sure they were dead until our craning heads shaded the sunbeams and alerted them back into their constant wiggling dance, crashing into each other by the thousands. On all fours, we could see ourselves and our laughs denting the surface of the water, sending tsunami ripples into the darkened portions of the pond. The Tupperware was greasy with fish oil, but we dipped it into the water to collect some and biked back carefully, staring straight ahead and peddling rhythmically, so that nothing would splash out. With some neon pink gravel from your late pet fish's old tank, they sat there, stacked on top of the chapter books on the second shelf of your nightstand. After three weeks, the pink was speckled with black and we named the last one "Smarty" for outliving all of its brothers and sisters.

...

We compare APs and you pet your brown bunny, and I reach for the white one but she hops away too fast, leaving little paw print pee stains on the concrete, and you're saying how at your school, nobody gets above a three on the physics exam, and I can't grab the white bunny because she's too scared, and your sister's Kumon is in the corner, and Vietnamese echos through the tall white hallways, the ones that always smelled like Ikea to me, and I think about forces and failure and how math was so different in fifth grade when both of us won the math competitions without trying, and I ask what their names are, but when I picture life in a year they're not part of it. Before friendship had a time and place, we always said we would keep one hundred pets in our shared college apartment, the one that we house hunted online for, that night when your new snake bathed under the heat lamp.

BUCHOWSKI, MADELINE**Madeline Buchowski**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Robert Henningsen

Category: Flash Fiction

Murmuration

She pressed the ignition and the headlights flashed on, illuminating the bird feeder every once in a while as it swayed back and forth in the yard, like an old windchime in the early spring. We had just barely missed the sunset, but the sky was still a deep blue striped with violet--like the berry flavored candy from when we were young--and she sat there for a moment, hand on the gear shift, squinting and searching for stars. (She always looked for the stars. Ever since she was little.) The smooth sound of the clarinet excused our familiar silence, and she reversed out of the driveway silently, pressed the accelerator as light as a feather, and drove off towards the city.

The birds darted past the high-rises, shattering the moon's glowing reflection on the glass into silver shards. I raised my voice over the music to point out the murmuration, which was passing now towards the east. I wondered what was waiting for them there; it could not have been much more than the winter's choppy ocean, as we were just a few miles from the coast, but I chose to think that maybe they were returning to a distant, tropical home, far away from there, where there would be nothing to remind you of something you can't quite recall.

I heard the engine scream before I felt the car lurching sideways and saw her staring straight ahead, passively. It was the first time I ever saw her with that expression, and I was unable to muster the instinct to yell at her, or grab the wheel, or do anything but watch her. She looked significantly older sitting there, under the fluorescent beams of the traffic signals and surrounded by the buzz of cars and lights and laughter, and I wondered how much of her life I had missed in the years I was gone. Perhaps by then, this place I stopped calling home was so ordinary to her that the streets and the sidewalks and the endless black buildings blended together, jolting us into the corner store and smushing the gutter into a flat sheet of metal.

BUCHOWSKI, SOPHIE**Sophie Buchowski**

Age: 14, Grade: 8

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Shannon Koropchak

Category: Flash Fiction

Pearl

Why? Why me? A burning rage rises in my throat, and an inferno grows within the pit of my stomach. My nails penetrate my skin, creating crescent moons on my palm. How could she leave me? How could my own mother leave me with such an abusive monster of a father? How could she be so selfish, killing herself to be free but leaving me to clean up her mess?

"Genevieve, you're such a disappointment!" screams my father, whom I barely recognized. His voice is thunderous, making me scared the neighbors could hear. His eyes stare down on me, a gleaming shine reflecting off his indignant, dark eyes.

Before I can contemplate the consequences of my actions, my shaking hands yank off the pearl pendant necklace that has been resting permanently on my collarbone for the last two years. The pearl almost falls to the ground when the chain breaks at the clasp, but I catch it before it drops to the wood floor. My fist unclenches, feeling the cool pearl lying limp in my sweaty palm. My puzzled eyes, both confused and angry, focus on the chain resting in my possession, fixating on its intricacies. Its surface is irregular, not round and smooth like you would expect, yet it reflects an ordinary but captivating iridescent cream color. It's actually quite beautiful, but I can't appreciate it because of my mother's dying memories. I suddenly remember my mother's voice in my subconscious, moments before I'm about to destroy the last memory of her.

"Genevieve, you are the pearl. Never forget that," she whispers, handing me the pearl pendant necklace right before she put a bullet through her head.

The agonizing pain and grief of my last remembrance of her jolt me back to reality. Her words refuse to leave my mind, even while trying to push them out. My legs carry me out of the house, oblivious to my father's screams. My calves burn as adrenaline rushes through my body, but I keep running until I reach the ledge. My muscles tense, and I throw the necklace off the ledge, bringing my mother down with it. You are the pearl. You are the pearl. You are the pearl...the words repeat deep inside my head. What does that mean? I doubt she meant that I am beautiful and perfect like I am the target of admiration. No, that doesn't sound right. That can't possibly be the case. I should gather my thoughts, but instead, I find myself joining the pearl at the crust of the earth, where it does not belong. After all, I am the pearl.

BURSTEIN, RILEY**Riley Burstein**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Jason Lovera

Category: Critical Essay

Redemption

My journey to becoming a black belt in taekwondo began in January of 2019. Since college was approaching within the next few years, I wanted to be equipped with self-defense moves that I could use in a threatening situation. Enrolling in taekwondo seemed like the perfect opportunity for me to learn how to handle myself as a young woman on a college campus. The road to becoming a first degree black belt had officially begun, and I could not wait to hold that prestigious title.

Along with learning self-defense, I was required to compete in local, state, and regional tournaments held by various companies in the taekwondo community. After only a few months of training, my first tournament to compete in was approaching. I was required to perform my form, weapon routine, and battle opponents of my similar age and belt-rank in sparring. Although I had been practicing with my sister and father who also enrolled in taekwondo with me, I quickly came to realize how different it is to spar with your family who I was accustomed to versus a brand new opponent. The anticipation of what your partner is going to do next is quite different when sparring with your family than it is with someone new of the same caliber.

When tournament day arrived, and I entered the ring to spar, my heart fluttered. It was both thrilling and nerve-racking to be present at my first competition, and I didn't want to disappoint myself with the expectations my instructor and I had set. As "15-17 girls white through yellow belts" was called over the intercom, I rushed over to the ring. With the sweat trickling down every inch of my body, I easily slipped on my foot gear, hand pads, chest guard, and helmet. The judges pointed at me, signalling I was up to spar. I anxiously ran up to the ring and stuffed the rubber retainer into my mouth. A girl who was twice my size stood in front of me. "Great," I thought to myself. Before I could take my next deep breath, "ready.....SPAR" was called out by the judges. With my dancer flexibility, my leg extension is quite high when I kick; however, this didn't help much when my opponent was half a foot taller than me. Anytime I tried putting my knee up in an attempt to kick or block, her leg shot up and knocked mine down. Clearly, kicking was not going to be the best option, but going in for a punch did not seem promising either considering the 50 pounds my opponent had on me. My best bet was to run around the ring, hoping I would tire the girl out and then I could go in for a kick. These thoughts stirred in my head with only thirty seconds having gone by in the match. I still had a minute and a half to come up with a plan. My opponent had a similar thought, as she began switching from playing defense to offense. Point by point, I was losing immensely. This girl was too quick for me to anticipate any possible defense, and there was not much I could do to combat someone much bigger and taller than me. The time buzzer went off, and the scorekeeper's cards read "0-8." I lost, and I was devastated. Although I had only been doing taekwondo for four months, I felt defeated. All the time I put into training seemed like a waste because I could not even score one point. Not one punch or kick got me further in my match. Mentally, I was so low.

Self-defeat, however, is not limited to a sport. Aiming to fulfil a desire where the reality differs from one's previous expectation can lead to disappointment and consequences instilled upon either by oneself or other outside forces. For example, in the novel *Paradise Lost* by John Milton, Adam and Eve end up enduring punishment from God by fulfilling their desire to eat the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. After the serpent convinced Eve to eat the life-changing fruit, "Earth felt the wound, and Nature from her seat / Sighing through all her works gave signs of woe, / That all was lost" (Milton IX 780-784). Shortly after, Eve convinces Adam to enjoy the fruit with her, as he "scrupled not to eat / Against his better knowledge, not deceived, / But fondly overcome with female charm" (Milton IX 994-999). When Eve indulged in eating the forbidden fruit, she expected to become a better person with a heightened sense of knowledge and power. Her reality was quite different though, as she did not realize this act disobeyed God's orders. Contrastingly, Adam knew he was not supposed to eat the fruit but did not fully know what the consequences would be of doing so. He followed his desire to be by Eve's side, which led him to eat the fruit. Comparably, in the play *Oedipus The King* by Sophocles, Oedipus' original desire and expectation to marry his

wife and bear children with her is much different than his reality when he finds out his wife is actually his biological mother. He ended up unknowingly fulfilling the oracle's reading that Oedipus would sleep with his mother and kill his father. After realizing the incest and paricide he has committed, Oedipus is blinded: "O god--all come true, all burst to light! O light--now let me look my last on you! I stand revealed at last--cursed in my birth, cursed in my marriage, cursed in the lives I cut down with these hands" (Sophocles 1306-1310). This is the anagnorisis of the play—Oedipus finally transitions from being in a state of ignorance to knowledge, and he recognizes his hamartia. In this scene, the light represents the image of Oedipus sleeping with his mother and killing his father. The "burst" he refers to shows the influx of knowledge he was recently presented with, which suggests Oedipus' condemnation of his previous ignorance to the situation. Oedipus' expectation to have a normal relationship with his wife is contradicted when he realizes the incest he has participated in. Oedipus also did not expect the man he killed to be his father, the King of Thebes.

Furthermore, in the article "Is Hell Dead?," Rob Bell's expectation of his band's success differs from the failure they actually endure: "The band became central to him. Then two things happened: the guitar player decided to go to seminary, and Bell came down with viral meningitis, 'It took the wind out of our sails,' he says. 'I had no Plan B. I was a wreck. I was devastated, because our band was going to make it'" (Meacham 43). Much like my defeat with my first taekwondo tournament, Adam and Eve, Oedipus, and Rob Bell all endured some sort of situation in which their expectation differed from the reality of what actually ended up occurring.

After my unexpected performance at the taekwondo competition, I could not let myself sulk in defeat—my loss only increased my motivation to do better in the next tournament, which would only come through intense, hard work, preparation, and experience. Although I was disappointed that I did not medal, let alone even score one point against my sparring opponent, there were plenty of opportunities in the upcoming months for me to redeem myself. During the week that followed the tournament, I changed my thought process of how I approached sparring—from now on, I needed to focus on both offensive and defensive techniques. "You have to treat each opponent the same no matter their size. When entering a sparring match, on most occasions, you should always aim to begin with offensive techniques. It is important to establish superiority over your opponent so *they* have to be the one who must anticipate what your next move will be." This advice given by my instructor became my guide for training. Instead of only practicing with my father and sister, who were the same belt-rank as me, my instructor gave me first and second degree black belts to spar with. This allowed me to have exposure to higher-level thinking strategies during sparring, as well as the more advanced kick and punch combinations used. Over the next few months, I was consumed by endless rounds of cardio, conditioning, and strength training. With every kick, punch, and block, my muscle memory began to build. Each day, new techniques were introduced into my routines. My mind and body had to act as one in the attempt to complete classes with utmost effort and concentration. This was the most physical exhaustion my body had ever endured. My muscles ached in new ways, and bruises in varying shades of purple lined my hands from breaking the wooden boards. Nonetheless, even the occasional immobility of my limbs wouldn't stop me from continuing to train.

The road to redemption cannot be achieved in a short amount of time. When a mistake is made or expectation differs from reality, one must work hard to counteract, or at least lessen, their previous actions. Much like my perseverance to become better at sparring after losing at my taekwondo competition, in *Paradise Lost*, Adam and Eve had to work to build back God's trust following their disobedience by eating the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. After being dealt punishments by the Son of God such as painful childbirth and inability to harvest crops, Adam and Eve both begin to pray. They feel guilty for their actions—Eve for eating the fruit in the first place and then convincing Adam to eat it and Adam for letting him and Eve disobey God after being warned by Raphael. Adam and Eve want to repair "where he judged us, prostrate fall / Before him reverent, and there confess / Humbly our faults, and pardon beg, with tears / Watering the ground, and with our sighs in the air / Frequenting, sent from hearts contrite, in sign / Of sorrow unfeigned, and humiliation meek" (Milton X 1086-1092). In order to begin their redemption, Adam and Eve pray to God, asking for forgiveness for their sinful actions. The Son of God presents his Father with Adam and Eve's repentance and intercedes for them. Although God accepts them, he banishes them from Paradise—a place of purity—since they are now impure.

Likewise, in *Oedipus The King*, Oedipus must try to redeem himself from the incest and paricide he committed. After finding his wife/mother dead, he uses pins from her robe to "dig them down the sockets of his eyes crying, 'You, you'll see no more the pain I suffered, all the pain I caused! Too long you looked on the ones you never should have seen, blind to the ones you longed to see, to know! Blind from this hour on! Blind in the darkness--blind!'" (Sophocles 1402-1409). Oedipus could not handle the terror of coming to terms with the crimes he committed, so he gouges his own eyes out. Oedipus treats his eyes as if they are an external being and humanizes them by wishing they have told him the truth since they had supposedly seen him become polluted the entire time. He blames his eyes for keeping this secret from him and resorts to blinding himself as punishment for their wrongdoings but also to relieve him from some of the painful truth. Although it seems as if Oedipus has just instilled physical pain

upon himself, he got rid of some of the suffering of his sins and showed some redemption by punishing himself for his wrongdoings and recognizing his errors.

Moreover, in “Is Hell Dead?,” after feeling defeated from the failure of his band, Rob Bell aimed to redeem himself and find his purpose. He preached his first sermon when he was “teaching barefoot waterskiing at HoneyRock Camp, near Three Lakes, Wis. ‘I didn’t know anything,’ he says. ‘I took off my birkenstocks beforehand. I had this awareness that my life would never be the same again.’ Bell says it was just intuitive, but the intuition suggests he had a sense of himself as a player in the unfolding drama of God in history” (Meacham 43). Similar to my determination to gain strength and redeem myself at my next taekwondo tournament, Adam and Eve, Oedipus, and Rob Bell, in one way or another, all showed the beginning steps to redemption after enduring the tough situation that they each experienced.

Following many months of conditioning and preparation, the next taekwondo tournament had finally arrived. Although this competition was at a different location, I got *deja vu* walking into the arena. While waiting for my age and belt-rank category to be called on deck, I ran through the various sparring combinations I had been drilling each day. I felt prepared for almost any situation my opponent could throw at me. My punches were stronger and more aggressive, and my flexibility had increased, which would allow my kicks to be higher.

Soon, I was called to the 15-17 year-old female ring with my fellow camo through brown belts. I felt the same sweaty sensation I had for my first tournament, but I knew I was more equipped this time around. I put on all my sparring gear and stood up with confidence. Luckily, I was not the first pair to spar again, which allowed me to advance further regardless of whether or not I beat my current opponent. When the judges pointed to me, I waltzed up to the mat and stood back ready to fight. The same words were uttered to begin my match—“ready.....SPAR.” Once the time began, I immediately picked up my knee and slid into my opponent with a hard side kick to her chest, pushing her back in slight shock. “One point red,” one judge said. I was red. The girl seemed to have gained more motivation after I started off the round, as she started coming in towards me with her knee up. I continued to counteract each move she tried to make in an attempt to create space for me to go in with a kick or punch. My efforts were working, and out of the corner of my eye, the number of red points increased steadily. After the back and forth between my opponent and me, time was finally called. The scorekeeper’s cards read “9-5.” I won—I actually won. I was in such disbelief I could not contain myself. As my opponent and I shook hands and exited the mat, I was internally screaming. Not only had I beat this girl, but I was moving onto the next round for a chance to place in the top three in my age and belt-rank. I was overcome with such pride and accomplishment.

Redemption can be achieved after hard work is put in to save oneself from sin or error they have committed. In my case, after failing to perform well at my first taekwondo tournament, I had to train and persevere in order to do better at the next competition. I redeemed myself by advancing further than I had before and feeling proud of myself. This can be applied to Adam and Eve, Oedipus, and Rob Bell. In *Paradise Lost*, after praying to God in the attempt to gain his trust back, Adam and Eve were banished from Paradise. They eventually accepted their fate and “with dreadful faces thronged and fiery arms: / 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 XII 641-649). The two lovers came together in the end and united at the gate of Eden, as they left Paradise. Although it was difficult since Paradise was their first home, Adam and Eve followed God’s wishes and left to wander into a new world. This redeemed them from their sinful actions of eating the forbidden fruit.

Similarly, in *Oedipus The King*, Oedipus ends up leaving his home as well. In the conclusion of the play, Oedipus tells Creon to “drive [him] me out of Thebes, in exile. Take me away. It’s time” (Sophocles 1666 & 1672). By completely removing himself from Thebes, Oedipus aims to rid himself, at last, of anything relative to his actions of incest and parricide. As he exits, Oedipus remains in a state of acceptance. He cannot go back and change the oracle reading nor find out about it after committing the crime, so the only thing Oedipus can do is somewhat embrace it and move on. In the end, Oedipus ended up surviving reality and redeeming himself by leaving Thebes. Additionally, in “Is Hell Dead?,” after exploring different life paths, Rob Bell found his calling: “After seminary, Bell’s work moved in two great directions. He was recovering the context of the New Testament while creating a series of popular videos of Christianity called Nooma, Greek for wind or spirit. He began to attract a following” (Meacham 43). Bell did not let the failure of his aspiring band stop him from persevering to find his calling. He continued to explore his options and discovered his passion. Bell redeemed himself from his failing band by becoming in tune with Christianity.

Oftentimes, one’s expectations of the outcome of a situation differ from reality. In order to be redeemed from sin or error, one must put in work and determination to counteract their previous actions.

CAMPBELL, CLARKE**Clarke Campbell**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Shannon Koropchak

Category: Short Story

Replaced

“*Certo, Signori*. Anything you need.” The Bishop wrung his hands tightly in front of him, squeezing each finger methodically, twisting its rings and ornaments, before moving to the next. The *carabiniere* he had been speaking to, a slim, pale man, nodded his head slowly and rhythmically. His gray, wrinkled face was obscured by an obscenely bushy brown moustache, but underneath the low brim of the officer’s tricorn, the Bishop could just make out his two colorless eyes following the path of his fingers as he scrawled notes onto a scrap of yellow parchment, torn irregularly along the edges. The officer, who had introduced himself as Antisti, didn’t look a day under forty; and yet, the Bishop swore he had baptized an Antisti boy just a few years ago. More likely, actually, twenty-odd years ago – was the Bishop really getting that old?

Finally, the *carabiniere* stopped his writing and looked up at the Bishop, stating gruffly, “we’ll be in touch, *padre*.” With that, the officer and his stout partner tipped their hats, crossed their hearts towards the altar, and swiftly exited the cathedral. The Bishop sighed and turned towards the altar as well. As he gazed at the marble cross, with the life-sized *Gesù Cristo* suspended from its horizontal beam, the Bishop muttered a prayer of hope.

“Brother Cesare, wherever you are, come home to us. No matter what, we shall accept you into our hearts as the Lord demands of us. And if Cesare shall not return, Lord, protect him in his travels, for he is a man pure of heart and resolute in purpose.” The Bishop stood frozen, deep in thought, until the clanging of the church-bells, announcing a new hour, abruptly removed him from his stupor. He stepped off the chancel and shuffled down the middle aisle, tracing each pew with his hands as he passed. As the Bishop reached the doors, he thought he heard a faint, rustling whisper bounce around the cathedral. He turned, inquisitive, expecting that another deacon or priest had entered the church from the stage doors, but when he looked, there was nobody to be found. Confused, his eyes roamed around the room until they landed on a stained-glass window with a shattered pane, high up near the rafters. The Bishop’s eyebrows furrowed and the corners of his lips turned downwards. In all his years at the church, he’d seen some of the cathedral’s windows develop cracks once or twice, but never was a pane completely missing afterwards. Regardless, the Bishop’s frown eased, and he waved off thoughts of haggling with the groundskeeper over repairs, attributing the break to a bird or stormy winds hastily in the process. As he turned back around and pressed on the polished walnut doors, grunting with exertion, he heard another muffled whistle, but he was unperturbed – most likely the wind coming through the window, he decided. *Perhaps*, he mused, *it was the voice of the Lord himself, manifest in this house of worship*. And so the Bishop exited, adjusting his paraments before stepping out onto the cobbled path that led back around the chapel towards his lodgings.

Later that evening, the Bishop sat at the desk in his suite and tried to write a supportive note to Cesare's family, but each draft felt less reassuring than the last. Finally, as he was crumpling another attempt in frustration, a sharp rapping on his door, followed by a muffled “*Mi scusi*,” caught his attention. Groaning, the Bishop stood from his desk. He really was getting old! He shuffled to the door, cracked it open, and peered outside.

“I have a message from the venerable *Arcivescovo* Augustino.” A teen-aged errand boy blurted. The boy was drenched from head to toe, and struggling to hide his panting breaths. “Without the missing *diacono*, there is no speaker for tonight’s evening sermon. The *Arcivescovo* laments that Cesare’s replacement cannot reach the chapel in time; and thus, your cathedral cannot offer services tonight. *Buonasera, padre*.” The messenger turned to leave, but the Bishop stopped him, hoping to send an immediate response.

“Please tell the *Arcivescovo* what a pleasure it is to hear from him, even in such unfortunate circumstances,” he began. It had been quite a while since the Bishop last received correspondence from his direct superior, and he hoped showing his respect would reinforce his standing with the Archbishop. “However, ensure that he does not fret further; I am happy to fill in for Cesare myself in the evenings for as long as is needed. *Grazie*.” The errand boy nodded his understanding, took a deep breath, and scampered away whence he came.

As he searched his belongings for his spectacles, which he sorely needed if he planned to actually read the Lord's words, one question gnawed at the Bishop's mind. Cesare had a 'replacement' already? The man hadn't even been missing a week, and the Archbishop had already arranged someone to fill his position? *Even when he does return from wherever the Lord has sent him*, the Bishop mused gravely, *he will find himself displaced by a stranger in his own home*. Finally finding his eyeglasses, the Bishop shakily removed them from a drawer corner they'd somehow become wedged in, and pocketed them. Next, the Bishop lumbered over to his nightstand, collecting his many rings from where he'd set them down after the morning's police interview, and slid them back into place, one by one, on each of his fingers. Satisfied, the Bishop slowly exited his chambers, the door creaking shut behind him. As he walked down the empty hallways of the clergy-house, and out to the cobblestone path, sounds of sporadic thunder and drizzling rain became more apparent, but the Bishop didn't mind the rain. And so he strolled outside into the dwindling twilight, walking the quaint path that he'd traversed every day for decades, pondering what he might like to sermonize as he went.

Eventually, the Bishop came upon the propped-open doors of the chapel. Patting the water off of his vestments, he cleared his throat and entered just as the church-bells struck the hour. As he slowly shuffled up the aisle, he noticed that there were few congregants in attendance – *a sign of the times, perhaps*, the Bishop speculated soberly. He recognized many faces as he walked, of longtime churchgoers and new members alike, and uttered quiet greetings as he walked by. Only one person was especially unfamiliar: in the very back corner, two eyes stared out from the shadows intently at the Bishop, eyes that he didn't recognize. No matter – *new attendees are always welcome*, he reminded himself. Finally, he reached the chancel, softly grunted his way up the steps to the pulpit, and fished his spectacles from his pockets.

"*Buonasera*," he rasped, before clearing his throat again and donning his eyeglasses. What little chatter had been bouncing around the nave fell silent, with only the persistent rain and thunder to accompany his words. "*Buonasera*. Thank you for joining me at this evening's service," he began. "The absence of our beloved *Diacono* Cesare," he continued, making a point to meet eyes with a man in the third row that he recognized as Cesare's brother, "has left me in his stead, and I will try – and most likely fail – to fill his shoes tonight. I ask that you all pray now for Cesare's swift reappearance, before we begin." The Bishop lowered his head slightly, but kept his eyes open, and scanned the room again. Every congregant had their head bowed and their hands clasped together, apart from the shadowed stranger in the back, whose eyes were still trained directly on the Bishop. For a fleeting moment, their eyes met, before the Bishop looked down fully and repeated his prayer from earlier in the day under his breath again. Gradually, each parishioner completed their own prayer, and returned to an upright position. "*Grazie*," the Bishop resumed. "Now, our faith in the Lord carries us through these troubled times – every one of us must accept his word as law. Just as the Son died for our sins, and is perpetually with us through his *spirito Santo*, we must become one with Him, as we seek to better observe his teachings. Let us look to *Due Re 23:25*, as we follow the example of Josiah..." and with that, the Bishop was back into his old groove, and he let his mind wander elsewhere as he spoke. Who was this shadowy stranger, now almost invisible as the wind whipped around the cathedral, suppressing the candle-flames along the walls? *Perhaps it is Cesare*, the Bishop contended hopefully, *returned in shame and seeking forgiveness from God*. Still intent on learning this mysterious person's identity by the end of his winded speech, the Bishop concluded, "the confessional will be open to those who seek absolution this evening. Thank you, and may God bless you all." Some older congregants frowned – confessional at the night service? – but otherwise, the sermon had been a success, and a proud smile snuck across the Bishop's lips as chatter resumed in the pews. The Bishop removed his spectacles, placing them on the pulpit's lectern, before descending the chancel steps and heading into the confessional booth. As he expected, voices faded away as each family trickled out, but there was no sign of the stranger. Could the Bishop have missed his chance? Just when he was ready to leave, he heard the thud of someone sliding into the booth across the lattice, and his heartbeat quickened. Could this be Cesare, as he suspected? The individual's face, in the sparse light, was still obscured. "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit..." the Bishop offered, hoping to garner a response. They sat in silence for a moment, before the stranger began to speak.

"Forgive me Father, for I have sinned," the stranger muttered, moving forward into the light. The Bishop's hopes fell; this was no Cesare, that was immediately clear, as this man had long brown hair under his cloak, with deep scars crossing his face. Still, the Bishop listened, as was his obligation. "It has not been long since my last confession. These are my sins..." the man trailed off, reached into his cloak pocket, and withdrew two silver rings. Immediately, the color drained from the Bishop's face, and his heart began pounding once more. He'd seen these rings before – after all, he had an eye for such ornaments – on Cesare's hands.

"Where did you get those?" the Bishop demanded, but the stranger said nothing. "What happened?" Again, no response. Finally, the Bishop composed himself, and, trying to glean more, probed cautiously, "have you accepted the Lord and his teachings into your heart?"

Suddenly, the stranger grinned, a gruesome expression without warmth, and responded softly, "the real question,

padre, is if He has accepted you and your teachings into his.” With that, the man swiftly left his side of the booth, his cloak sweeping behind him, and the Bishop prepared for the worst – he was in no position to defend himself from this man, and if this was the fate that God had planned for him, then so be it. However, the man’s footsteps receded instead, and the Bishop heard the chapel doors swing open and shut. The Bishop’s mind reeled. Had this man harmed Cesare? Part of the Bishop was tempted to immediately sound the alarm, and publicly apprehend the stranger. However, fighting this urge was the piety that the Bishop strived to espouse; the confessional was meant to occur in confidence, and the man hadn’t explicitly mentioned harming Cesare or any others. Would he not be betraying church doctrine? His mind a tumultuous battleground, the Bishop made straight for the doors, fished the key from his pocket, and distractedly locked up from the outside before walking briskly back to the clergy-house. He needed to consider the situation in greater detail before acting, he decided. Upon reaching the entrance to his quarters, however, he noticed a torn slip of parchment protruding from underneath. Something seemed vaguely familiar about it, as opposed to the other paperwork the Bishop received regularly. Finally, it clicked in his head: the parchment matched the yellowed scraps that the Bishop had watched the *carabiniere*, Antisti, scribble on that morning! Perhaps there was news of Cesare, or perhaps the officer had delivered a means to contact him expeditiously – something that could be useful, as the Bishop’s internal battle raged on. With tremendous effort, the Bishop bent down and clasped the scrap between two fingers, then righted himself and squinted at his find. However, whatever was written on the slip was too small to be legible to the Bishop’s aging eyes, so he scrambled to retrieve his eyeglasses from his pockets. Eventually, it dawned on him that he’d left his spectacles on the pulpit in his hasty departure! Thus, the Bishop turned back around, parchment in hand, and marched right back outside, through the clergy-house and into the pitch-black darkness.

Guided only by decades of muscle memory, the Bishop trod along that cobblestone path, still perplexed by the conundrum he faced. Upon arriving back at the church doors, the Bishop automatically inserted his key, but before he could swing the door open, he heard a faint clatter from within. Cautiously, the Bishop pulled open one door just enough for a crack between the two to emerge, and he slowly poked his wrinkled head inside. Up in the broken window, there sat a humanoid silhouette perched above another, awkwardly-splayed out figure. The man swung onto the rafters, jumped back to the wall, and then scaled slowly downwards to ground level. Even more shocking, however, was the statue of the *Gesù Cristo*, the front of which was swung open to reveal a hollow cavity inside. “*Mio dio!*” the Bishop muttered involuntarily. What was going on here? Suddenly, the figure froze, and dashed straight towards the doors. Before the Bishop could even react, he felt the sticky, cool grip of a callused hand around his wrist. The doors were abruptly jerked outwards, and the Bishop was pulled into the nave with a surprised yelp.

“Hello, *vescovo*,” a soft voice drawled from the figure – the very same as that of the shadowy stranger in the confessional. If he didn’t already, the Bishop now regretted returning to the chapel. The figure, – stranger, rather – marched the Bishop to the pulpit with little resistance, where he picked up the Bible resting on the lectern, before forcing the Bishop into a kneeling position in front of the altar. “Father,” the stranger began, “I asked you before: does the Lord accept you and your words into His heart? I don’t recall you answering.” The Bishop thought awhile before responding.

“Yes, *mio figlio*, you are right. I didn’t get the chance before. But, I tell you now: God accepts me into his heart, as his faithful and perpetual servant. Furthermore, God accepts my words into his heart, as they are extensions of his own gospel. God will forgive you yet, my child, if you only ask.” Another ghoulish grin stretched across the stranger’s face, and he wrenched the yellow parchment from the Bishop’s hand. After glancing it over, he snorted.

“Well, *padre*, you live a life of conviction,” the stranger proclaimed, heavy with irony. “However, as you so eloquently lamented earlier, you ultimately seek to become one with the Lord. Fear not – *that* I can help you with. *Buonanotte, Vescovo*.” With that, in one quick motion, the stranger raised the Bible behind him, and brought it down swiftly against the nape of the Bishop’s neck, and the Bishop slumped over sideways. Immobilized, the Bishop could only pray and stare up at the broken window, where the other body still lay – one wearing suspiciously similar clothes as his own. After the second blow came down on the Bishop’s neck, he immediately lost consciousness.

The Bishop groggily awoke to the muffled sound of conversation somewhere nearby. Opening his eyes, he found himself tightly encased in marble of some type, and looking through two small pinpoints. His head throbbing and strangely sticky, the Bishop found he couldn’t move his limbs, or turn his head. In front of him, he could see the chancel, where a man wearing Archbishopal garb stood talking with two *carabiniere*. Was he behind the *Gesù Cristo*? Within it?

“*Certo, Signori*,” the Bishop heard the *Arcivescovo* say. He tried to shout for help, but no sound would leave his mouth.

“We’ll be in touch, *padre* Augusto,” one of the officers replied. The Bishop tried again to call for help, but again, nothing would come out. He watched the officers tip their caps, cross their hearts, and leave the cathedral, all without being able to make a peep, and when the Archbishop followed them towards the door, the Bishop began to

panic. Unable to speak, he instead whistled through his teeth as loudly as he could, grimacing from the sharp echo within his tomb-like prison but hopeful that the sound might travel to the Archbishop. Abruptly, the Archbishop turned around– but upon realizing nobody was there, the Archbishop’s eyes wandered, until they locked onto the broken window. The Bishop could see the Archbishop frown, and he was sure that Augusto would put together what had transpired. After half a minute, however, the Archbishop simply smiled and turned back towards the doors. The Bishop made one last-ditch effort to whistle for attention – and yet, the Archbishop simply walked out of the cathedral, adjusting his clothing as he went. So there the Bishop stood, bleeding from his head, finally one with the Lord and the Lord’s heart. As his world faded to black, he wondered with a crazed grin how long it would take the Archbishop to replace *him*. The church bells rang, striking twelve o’clock, and the Bishop died a pious man.

CAO, SARA**Sara Cao**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educators: Jill Donovan, James Lewis

Category: Poetry

The Myth of the Cocoon**The Myth of the Cocoon**

Silk threads rip,
falling to earth like exoskeleton forgotten.
A moth crawls out hesitantly, her wings
a testament to the torn threads of today.
She's been eased out- no-
clawed out of comfort by the talons of time,
salad days disappearing as
she can't mouth enough leaves.

The moth reaches for light,
for guidance,
but nothing comes-
so she bears with
the weight of wings,
heaving, waiting.

At last, she reaches for her threads of youth,
sewing her quilt of infancy back together.
The silky smooth cocoon of childhood welcomes her;
once again becoming an acquaintance of darkness.

CAO, SARA

Sara Cao

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educators: Jill Donovan, James Lewis

Category: Poetry

tunneling into the center of an egg

tunneling into the center of an egg

Crack!

The egg fractures,

Fertility becoming Fragility as

a trickle of yellow creeps down, color

a delicious threat to white shell skeleton.

The egg will have to learn to rebuild herself:

stop letting people scramble her skin &

cook her core, the yolk of her yellowness

is not a pallid protein to savor. After all,

she's not your savior.

CHUA, KIMBERLY**Kimberly Chua**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Rolla Senior High School, Rolla, MO

Educator: Star Hargis

Category: Short Story

Silver Spirit

A pleasant autumn evening found Gwenhwyfar kneeling in sand, surrounded by the sun-warmed walls of her castle. Her name was not actually Gwenhwyfar, but she liked the name, particularly when she was feeling romantic. At that moment, she was digging a moat around her castle, meticulously scooping handfuls of sand aside and leaving faint fingernail grooves behind. They would, she decided, be smoothed by the tide when it came.

The castle was a little lopsided, the left wall slightly shorter than the right, and the central tower was already leaning over from the weight of the sea-glass and scallop shells studding its conical roof. As much as Gwenhwyfar yearned to fix it, though, the sun was setting quickly, and shadows had begun to creep from the ripples patterning the beach. *If the castle is still standing tomorrow, I'll fix it* With that promise to herself, she was finally able to step away and trudge across the beach, bucket swinging from her arm like a flower basket.

When she returned the next evening, to her surprise, all the towers but one were intact; the central tower, which had been the tallest and grandest, had succumbed to gravity and laid its head to rest across the sand-bed, its crown of seashells and glass strewn like wine from a glass. As she moved closer, though, and the setting sun's blinding light found a different focus, Gwenhwyfar saw the fish flailing amidst the scattered pieces of ocean treasure, a delicate silver fin pinned to the ground with a broken shell. The stench of its blood, soaked into the wet sand and the once-white seashells, was almost flowery under the sting of iron, as sweet as the sight of the fish's little body rising and falling; not dead, just struggling for air. The girl carefully picked the shell from the fish and ran the creature to the ocean. For a few heart-stopping moments, the fish sank, its slender, iridescent body frozen, but then it flicked its tail and darted through the shallow water. Its body arched gracefully from the water just as the sun reached the horizon, sending rays of colour across the expanse of blue to illuminate the flying droplets of water like stars.

"Thank you," it said to Gwenhwyfar, then was lost in the water.

Gwenhwyfar cracked open the door to her bedroom to find Leigh hunched on her bed, notes scattered haphazardly around her.

"Where have you been?" Leigh asked acidly, gesturing to the paper. "We have a test tomorrow."

"The beach." A dreamy smile crept onto Gwenhwyfar's face. "My castle was still standing, against all odds"—Leigh raised a plucked eyebrow—"and I helped to save a talking fish."

The annoyance vanished from the other girl's eyes instantly. "A talking fish?"

"It thanked me."

In less than a second, Leigh had rushed from the bed and grabbed her shoulders. Behind her, the notes fell slowly, softly, like confetti.

"Did it grant you a wish? What did you ask it for?"

Gwenhwyfar, this time, was the one to frown. "A wish? What do you mean?"

The other girl rolled her eyes and sat her roughly down in the chair. "You rescued a *magical fish*. You should have asked it for something. You'll have to go back now and call it, before it swims too far away. Maybe you can ask for a perfect score on the test, since you haven't been studying."

Flicking her hair, the other girl went to retrieve her notes, tossing her head in clear dismissal. Gwenhwyfar hesitated in the doorway, then turned to return to the beach.

"Magic fish? Excuse me, Magic Fish?"

Gwenhwyfar waded through the water, peering into the dark depths for a flash of fish-scales.

"Magic Fish?"

A metallic flicker.

"Magic Fish, is that you?"

A fish head broke the water's surface. Under the pale light of the moon, the fish seemed to glow.

"It is."

She waited, but it said nothing more.

"I was tol... will you grant me a wish?"

The fish had incredibly round, big eyes, the pupil massive in comparison to the tiny sliver of cerulean iris that surrounded it. They swallowed the moonlight, gaping holes that ate through any mental defences and saw straight through her, reflecting nothing back.

"I will."

The silence stretched on, pulled into the endless depths of those wise eyes.

"Then..." Gwenhwyfar's mind was blank, lost somewhere in the surrealism of the situation. "Then I would like to do well on my test tomorrow, please. I haven't studied."

Was that humour in the fish's eyes? Or was it just the moonlight?

"Go home, for it will be done."

Then the fish was gone.

No light came from the crack under the bedroom door. Cautiously, Gwenhwyfar opened it, then jumped back in fright. Leigh sat on the floor, back resting against the bedframe, knees pulled to her chin. The moonlight, almost blue, streamed through the open window and fell upon the girl's face, glinting from the lens of her glasses. Her eyes were glazed, wide and round and awake. Gwenhwyfar thought of the fish, of the clear film over its eyes and the giant pupils.

"Well?" The word fell from Leigh's lips in a soft breath, wrapped in something like hope.

"I suppose we'll see tomorrow," Gwenhwyfar replied, wincing at the loudness of her voice in the cathedral quiet.

The next day, Gwenhwyfar's hand moved of its own accord across the page, penning perfect script and flowing prose without any mental input. Even without the confirmation of an "A" penned in red, she knew, without a doubt, that she would receive full marks. The casing of her pen was polished steel, shining silver as it moved under the cool fluorescent lights.

"You know," Leigh said later, "you should have asked for more."

"Magic Fish?"

It surfaced almost instantly. Its expression was as unreadable as it had been the day before.

"I have another request."

A beat. Then, "Ask."

"I would like to actually *be* smart. Like, to know everything to be learned in school, so I can do the tests consciously. If that's possible...?"

"Go home, for it will be done."

"Ugh! Why won't you *behave*?"

"Leigh?"

From across the hall, the bathroom door was flung open. Leigh poked her head around the doorframe, long hair tumbling around her head in messy curls.

"Yes?"

"Did you see how our classmates glared at me today?"

"Hm. Well, it is a little obnoxious when you call out answers when the question has barely been asked."

"Oh."

"But you know, maybe if... maybe if you were prettier"—Leigh lifted an unruly lock of hair—"they'd like you too much to be irritated."

"Magic Fish? I would like to be pretty. Beautiful."

"Go home, for it will be done."

And so it went.

A wintery midnight found Gwenhwyfar and Leigh sitting across from each other on the wood floor. The curtains were drawn, but still a thin shard of moonlight stole through the gap, casting a chalky line across the ground between them. No words were exchanged, but none needed to be.

"Magic Fish?"

Beautiful hair effortlessly waterfaling around her shoulders, the girl bent down to run her fingers through the water, then again and again, the water swirling to fill the lines in the surface before she'd finished each motion.

The familiar fish head, with its abyss eyes and penetrating gaze, appeared.

"I would lik—"

“Go back home, for you are neither smart, nor beautiful.”

The flick of its tail, and the splatter of cold droplets it left on her skin, were laced with the poison of finality.

Leigh stood there, messy hair a tangled mess down her back, surrounded by the crumbled remains of her castle, and looked up at the full moon. *I would like to be happy*

And, alone as she always was, she sank into the ocean and let her tears be lost in the salty waves.

CHUA, KIMBERLY**Kimberly Chua**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Rolla Senior High School, Rolla, MO

Educator: Star Hargis

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Put your chairs up before you leave!”

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

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

When I carry him, I feel strong.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He loves sausage rolls.

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

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

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

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

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

“Do you want to play too?”

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

“Can you help me?”

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

“Why don’t you go ask dad? I’m busy.”

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

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

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

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

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

“Who said that ever—”

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

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

“Who said that every wish

Would be heard and answered

When wished on the morning st—”

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

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

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

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

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

“Spoiler alert!”

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

“Spoiler alert! Spoiler alert! Spoiler alert!”

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

“Spoiler alert! Teenager!”

Please stop.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Besides, the stack of books at my bedside awaits.

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

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

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

“What is your greatest ambition?”

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

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

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

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

My brother.

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

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

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

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

It will be perfect. Gifts have to be.

CHUA, KIMBERLY**Kimberly Chua**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Rolla Senior High School, Rolla, MO

Educator: Star Hargis

Category: 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.

CHUA, KIMBERLY**Kimberly Chua**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Rolla Senior High School, Rolla, MO

Educator: Star Hargis

Category: Short Story

As the Cradle Falls

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

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

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

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

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

“Why have you and Papa been fighting?”

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

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

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

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

“But you love him.” *You love me.*

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

Against that sharp collarbone, I shivered.

I dream in colour.

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

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

In, out.

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

In, out.

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

“Papa? Are you alright?”

He looked up at me, attempting a weary smile.

“Carlotta. What a beautiful name...”

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

“How did I let it come to this?”

“Come to what, Papa?”

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

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

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

“Mama is jus—”

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

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

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

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

Pain. I know pain, too.

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

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

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

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

The only light brings its weapon down on me.

The walls were too thin. They sounded like thunder.

“Please.”

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

“Please.”

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

“Don’t leave.”

“Why shouldn’t I?”

“Because I sa—”

“How da—”

“How dare you!”

Silence. Then, “I have had enough!”

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

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

I cannot breathe.

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

“Rock-a-bye baby, on the tree top”

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

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

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

“When the bough breaks—”

A thump outside the door.

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

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

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

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

One.

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

Two.

Three.

“How do I look?”

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

“Like a queen,” I answered, truthful.

Her painted, practised smile slid into place.

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

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

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

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

“Carlotta . . .”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

That sound...

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

Oh. Laughter.

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

I was laughing.

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

So why do I want to cry?

“What is it?”

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

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

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

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

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

A prayer?

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

“Let death be felt and the proof remain;

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

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

“She is sure to remember his dying face!

Has she not returned? It’s already morning.

“Papa?”

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

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

I took a step away, then another.

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

I stumbled on my third step back.

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

Why am I removing this hinge?

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

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

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

There. The last one.

“You thought you could run?”

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

I gaped stupidly.

“You thought you could run from me?”

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

“F-fath—”

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

“That hur—Mama! Mama!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Father! I’m your daughter! Please!”

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

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

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

Please—

I collapsed to the ground, hiccuping and gasping desperately.

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

Thump, thump.

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

But I was petrified.

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

Letmeoutletmegopleaseletmeplease—

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

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

Then, darkness.

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHUA, KIMBERLY**Kimberly Chua**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Rolla Senior High School, Rolla, MO

Educator: Star Hargis

Category: Flash Fiction

The Girl in Yellow

The first time I saw her, it was in the grocery store window. It was a normal Tuesday—though normal is always relative—and she was sipping from a carton of strawberry milk. She wore a bright yellow dress, the colour's obnoxiousness exacerbated against the dusty shelves. I hid behind a gravestone and watched as she skipped out, opaque bags swinging from white arms as she bid the shopkeeper a cheery goodbye. I waited until she had long blurred into the darkness down the road to emerge. The shopkeeper's gaze, as always, was shifty, but when I questioned him about the girl, he met my eyes, something unreadable lingering within his black pupils. "Don't be absurd," he said. "No girl around here wears yellow." And that was the end of it.

Another time, I was walking down the road on a morning more foggy than usual—though usual is always relative—and my fingers were stained dark from finger painting. The cloying grey tendrils of mist parted as I walked, re-coalescing behind me in a dark shroud.

Everyone knows that the greenhouse is empty; what could possibly grow in such darkness? On that day, though, I heard a soprano voice singing in a major key as I reached the sharp turn in the path—you know the one I speak of. It is not at all unusual to find trespassers on abandoned properties. I shouldn't have been as surprised as I was to find life, even in the dead greenhouse. My senses had, however, taken leave of me, and I admit I was quite on edge. To satisfy my curiosity, I stepped around the gate and down the dirt path, then through the thick wall of trees that blocked out what little sun there was left to see by. At the end of that darkness, the greenhouse glowed a warm orange—the glass panels looked lit on fire, a burning beacon in a dead night. I entered the greenhouse—cautiously, as you surely understand—and saw that the light came not from fire, but from the flowers that grew from and covered all surfaces, each one with petals in a different, brilliant jewel tone. At the core of each open blossom was a drop of some unfathomable substance that shone brighter than any flame. In the light, the shadows between the vines seemed to slither and creep toward me, and I felt the roots, woven into the chiaroscuro of cracks and veins, creep along the back of my spine, tingling and warm. The only logical thing was to flee the place.

Really, you must understand the almost-terror that comes from such warmth. Oh, but surely you do.

It was only when I stood on the cobbled path again, looking warily through the now-impenetrable wall of trees, that I remembered the reason I had first entered at all.

But there had been no one there.

You might think I'm crazy, but I'm not; there is a girl—I swear it! Her cheeks are rosy and her voice is high pitched. She wears the same yellow dress with the empire waist and bell sleeves.

The next time I saw her, she wore a crown of the same flowers I had seen in the greenhouse, albeit lacking the golden centres that I knew flowed like stolen sun. She stood on my front porch, a woven basket dangling from her arm.

"Hello!"

I shut the door in her face because her voice was the same as the one I had heard from the greenhouse. Cautiously, I cracked the door open again, and there she was, peering through the crack with her bright blue eyes.

"Hello," she repeated, those clear eyes locked on mine through the sliver of an open door.

And then she pushed it open and entered my house without an invitation, poking around and touching things no one should touch. She didn't speak again, exploring every inch of my home, peering around every corner and inspecting every surface, in silence. When I tried to stop her, she sidestepped gracefully, shooting me a patronising frown and shaken head.

Even days after she had finished her witchery and gone, I could still smell her floral perfume on everything,

everywhere.

From then on, she seemed to show up every time I wanted to be alone—in the library aisle where I read a book, in my house when I had an urgent call, and in the forest, after I'd seen her and run away to hide. She is real, though whenever I mention her, people look at me strangely and tell me, *no girl around here wears yellow*. But she is real! The yellow dress stained when she fell down the stairs and a dagger impaled her heart—though she seemed unaffected, I saw the bloodstain spread! And on the day she bumped her head on the wall of my study, I heard her neck break—and yet the next day, she was fine!

She is real—I swear it! There is a girl who wears yellow, and she smells of roses and bergamot and vanilla. She is real—she has pink fingernails, straight teeth, and she will not leave me alone!

CHUA, KIMBERLY**Kimberly Chua**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Rolla Senior High School, Rolla, MO

Educator: Star Hargis

Category: Short Story

It Started With the Roses

It started with the roses.

They were innocent enough—a fragrant bouquet from the attractive boy who introduced himself as my new neighbour. He knocked on my door, eyes shining the same rich blue as the flowers he held. Summer light bloomed behind him, the bright light flooding into my open doorway and illuminating the normally-shadowed room behind me. “To attaining the impossible,” he said, grinning contagiously. “To life!”

I spent the night swathed in my colourless blankets, dreaming of bright blue eyes that whispered promises of hope.

A month later, he knocked again, this time carrying a hibiscus. Still in that impossible colour, its five flawless petals encircled a pistil that matched the red of the little scars peeking under his gloves. He seemed flustered, some of that compelling confidence gone.

“Althea,” he said breathlessly, folding the flower into my hand. “These are known as the ‘flowers of Althea.’”

I displayed it with the still-fresh roses on my coffee table and, swaddled in bright-coloured blankets, dreamed of blue eyes that somehow knew my name.

The third time I saw him, he carried a flower of a species I had never seen before.

“Calydon,” he said upon seeing me. “Created just to flourish under your rule.”

An inventor? With his unruly appearance, that wasn’t at all what I had suspected, and yet... the flower, with its layered, square-shaped petals and blood-red stem, was unlike anything I’d ever known.

I accepted it, opening my mouth to ask his name, but he was gone as quickly as he’d arrived.

Every month afterwards, he was at my door bearing another flower created and named for me; *Helen*, after my mother, then *Anima*, because I was his “soul and sanity,” and *Soleil*, because I was “the morning sun and solace.” As the flowers grew more elaborate, however, he seemed to fade before my eyes in snapshots, dulling in comparison to the perfect blue flowers he held. As they overflowed from the original vase of roses and spilled around my living room, casting it in a golden-blue light that smelled of nostalgic summer, the old anticipation of new, precious treasures dimmed with the boy who had made them special.

In June, he came to my door as he usually did, a blue flower in his hand. Once, I would immediately have been drawn into his eyes, but they were no longer captivating. Instead, my gaze flickered over him a little uncomfortably, taking in his dusty hair and slouched posture. Where that careless pose might previously have come across as fashionable, with his muted pallor and the way his still-bright clothes hung from his figure, he just looked... wrong. His long sleeves were patterned with a kind of ombre, strokes of red twining up his forearms and diffusing into grey; the bright colour blended seamlessly into the red stalk of the flower and was harsh against the vivid petals. Today, the petals were arranged in a geometric pattern through more dimensions than I could count or comprehend, layering and fitting together in the way the grey boy and I no longer did; a juxtaposition as obvious and obscene as the deep red and bright blue of his sleeves, the stalk, and the flower. I found it hard to force my eyes back to his—nearly as hard as I found it to speak when he stood in my doorway.

“Althea,” he said, his voice still sultry and deep. A ghost of a smirk wormed its way onto his drawn face. “This is Gilda. Happy birthday—she is my gift to you. My sacrifice. My labour of love.”

His words seemed to run together like the red on his sleeves. *Happy birthday*, I thought. *Gift. His sacrifice.* And those thoughts were followed by, *What will my sacrifice be?*

Every month, he seemed more deadened, as though life had been sucked straight from him and into those gorgeous

flowers. Unable to smile—smiling at him had become exponentially difficult in the recent months—I bared my teeth in a sort of grimace; a parody of a smile, just as this grey boy was a parody of the enthralling boy he had once been. I took the flower and tossed it into one of the many vases in my living room. It seemed to stare at me, its red, red pistil pointing at me like an eye. Hunching my shoulders, I left the room to surround myself with soft and worn blankets. *Next time*, I told myself, resolving to speak to him; first to ask his name, then to find out why his eyes had become sad and empty.

The last time I saw him, he was pale, and shadows bruised his under-eyes. His hands were bare—for the first time since he'd first appeared—revealing deep scratches on his fingertips that coiled up his arms, shoulders, and neck, then grew over his hollow cheekbones like ivy. He looked sickly, diminutive in my low doorway, and all intention of speaking to him flew from my mind in fear that he would break in front of me.

“Please,” he said, pressing the flower into my palm and leaving, shoulders hunched to his ears. An “I’m sorry” floated behind him, nearly torn away by the raging wind. The stalk of the flower was dry against my skin, the petals papery.

Please joined the other flowers in their vases, all in a now-meaningless blue.

At night, with my threadbare and wash-faded blankets restlessly flung about my feet, I dreamed of blue eyes that had faded into mournful grey. *Next time*, I promised. *Next time*.

But then next month came and went, and he didn't come—perhaps he'd fallen ill, the shaky paleness a symptom of his sickness. Perhaps the following month, he'd be the boy I missed so desperately, instead of the shadow he'd become.

November passed too, though, and still no grey boy came bearing blue flowers for a bouquet finally beginning to wilt.

December arrived, and by then, the flowers drooped down to the tabletop, rot-brown tarnishing that once-special blue. I threw the flowers away.

Or tried to. Looking closer, I saw that the stems had grown through the many vases scattered around the room, sewing them down with red roots of unbreakable silk. Panicking, I used every sharp item at my disposal in my attempt to saw through those indestructible threads, breaking the vases in the process. Freed from their confines, the flowers spread out, veins of red creeping down the arms of my furniture and into the ground like the scars on those of the grey boy. What had been a distant worry flowered into an obsessive paranoia accompanied by dead flowers that refused to *go away*. No longer dreaming, I stared at the dead flowers, wide awake and restless.

What were they plotting?

A once-sweet scent became cloying and suffocating, and when I emerged to ask, no one knew why buds of sublime blue on stalks of blood-red had begun to bloom in their yards except that they were *more than welcome in this dreary season!* My inquiries of the boy-who-knew-everything—*the one who moved in three years ago?*—were met with confused head shakes and *I don't know who you mean and no one new has come to town*

When I lay down seeking rest, insomnia chained my eyes open, forcing me to stare and listen. “Althea,” the dead flowers murmured, dulcet tones nauseating through my blankets of shadow and nightmare-marred dreams. “His creation. His life. Your sanity. Your soul. Our cure. Your cure.”

CHULICK, TESSA**Tessa Chulick**

Age: 14, Grade: 8

School Name: South City Catholic Academy, St. Louis, MO

Educator: Barbara Ryan

Category: Poetry

Condensation

Prologue:

I am a stream.
 I flow softly,
 I'm glistening in the sunlight,
 And dark and drowsy in the rain.

I am a stream;
 I quench life's thirsts.
 Wildlife drinking out of me, enjoying their peaceful oasis.
 Until doom strikes,
 and there is fire,
 then ash,
 then nothing.

I *was* a stream;
 but I've been put **Out of Service**,
 according to the sign standing next to the frail bush.
 The sign that sits right next to the **No Smoking** sign.

Epilogue:

Sitting in the sky,
 I watch the crowd of thousands from the clouds.
 They're all dark, no glimpse of feeling in their eyes.
 Toneless expressions, as if they're all in sync.
 Except me, acting like the black sheep,
 the odd one out of the link.
I just want to grieve, I kept telling myself.
 And that's what I did, let it *all* out.

*Rain.**Rain.**Rain.*

Now when I'm sitting alone, and want to breakout,
 I imagine myself back in the sky, looking over the burned caskets and
 Rain.

Rain.

Rain.

COLEMAN, MAKENNA**Makenna Coleman**

Age: 13, Grade: 7

School Name: Parkway West Middle School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Lindi Schoenfeld

Category: Short Story

Memories of You in a Coffee-Colored Sweater

memories of u in a coffee-colored sweater

The thought invaded my brain for the thousandth time as I shakily stood, looking out at the broken, deserted land. There was no life any longer, no more elegant flowers or divine chocolate. No cars driving along the road, or people bickering about drama. Why? Why did she want this? Why did she? Did she mean to? Did she want to? Did she even think about how it would affect me, affect everyone else?

I choked on salty tears again, wiping them on the sleeve of my dirty, stained sweater. Maybe she thought that it would all get better, and maybe it did. I don't blame her, she was in a lot of pain and hurt, nights spent crying in my arms were too much. I wish she would have gotten help. I wish I could somehow understand. Understand I didn't have to follow her. Understand that I didn't have to jump.

Ten Days Earlier

Crowded streets and honking cars played outside the crowded café window as I stood at the wooden counter, tapping my fingers lightly against the stained wood. Black round lights hung above the ceiling, a soft golden glow gingerly spreading across the old café's interior. The bell chimed to my left as a new customer arrived, briefly breathing in the calming smell of French chocolate and cinnamon lattes before sitting down in a corner seat. They peered at me, a mix of curiosity and wonder embraced in their ocean blue eyes. Who could blame them, I might as well have been the tourist attraction in which everyone stared and took polaroids of.

"Bonjour Willow," The familiar sweet French voice immediately plastered a smile across my face. I sat up straighter and looked over to the swinging gray door, a black boot appearing from the kitchen inside.

Fawn walks out of the café kitchen with a grin, her apron now stored away, not covering her coffee-like sweater and the sun necklace that hung delicately around her neck, as if it would break by gentle winds. "Ciao *amour*," I say, sitting down at one of the bar stools.

Fawn and I knew different languages, me being born on the Italian side of the border, her born on the French side. We both shared poor English and my French was the equivalent of a broken record, but it worked. Fawn and I didn't need to talk to understand.

Fawn blushes and waves before starting to make a boba blend, gracefully moving around the tiled floor. The miniature water lilies tattooed on her wrist glowed bright, making them look even more abundant. A personal tradition before her shift ended for us was to drink boba together before going to a little place we called Hiraeth. Hiraeth was a huge mountain with a cliff covered in dandelions and a single willow tree. It was our little happy place in a world full of sorrow. Sometimes we would spend the night, laying on blankets or towels and staring up at the stars without another thought in our brains.

Fawn sets the strawberry flavored boba in front of me after putting on the plastic cover with the machine covered in tiny stickers from all around the world. We were quite the tourist site. I stab my boba with the pointy straw while she makes her own. I caught myself staring, staring at her black curly hair tied up loosley, Fawn's effortlessly glass-like skin glowing in golden light as she sat down next to me at the bar, stabbing her drink.

"How's school?" Fawn asks, looking over at me.

"It was alright. I did good on my science test. I wish you were there though," I say, slowly stirring my drink. Fawn was homeschooled, while I went to public school. Ikigai café was the only place we could meet without being

called the f-slur and having rumors spread about us kissing behind the school dumpster. Fawn was rich and pretty, and I was poor with vitiligo. The differences between us made it hard for us to be together. Yet all we were was just two girls living our own lives, our own stories.

Fawn opens her mouth to respond but was abruptly drowned out by the old TV sitting in the corner, the news channel turned up by one of the workers. I look over to see a disturbing image of a girl lying dead, face down in the pool. The headlines read ‘MURDER OR SELF CAUSED?’ Beth starts talking in her thick Italian accent about how everyone should stay home until the police could get to the bottom of this. I couldn’t blame them. We lived in a small city with barely five-thousand people, nothing like this ever happened. I suddenly felt something spark inside me, a sense of familiarity, like déjà vu. I knew the girl that had died, but I didn’t. I don’t know the broken body on the screen, or the soaked red dress.

“Wow, that’s weird, they should be able to find the person who did it though,” Fawn says, staring intensely at the T.V. “At least I hope so.”

I stare at the TV, watching the scene play over and over again for a few moments, my feelings a mix of curiosity and uneasiness before responding, “I’m sure they will. Small town, small amount of people. Unless you did it.” I smirk at the ending and she giggles, shrugging.

“Who knows, maybe I did. And maybe you’re next,” Fawn says, moving closer to my face, lifting my chin softly. “You would like that wouldn’t you, hm? My hands at your neck-”

“Keep it PG kids,” A worker on the other side of the counter says blandly, cleaning out a glass with a rag calmly as if he had already said it a million times. Fawn cheekily grins again before letting go of my chin, continuing with her drink as I flusteredly start choking on one of the tapioca balls.

Fawn slaps my back a few times, giggling. “Hey, let’s go to Hiraeth?”

I took a few seconds to calm down before nodding, getting up. I reach for my pocket to pull out some euro for the worker as a tip but was quickly stopped by Fawn’s hand. “Larry is a bitch, he doesn’t need your euro.”

I stopped, “You are just saying that because he stopped us from kis-”

She puts her hand over my mouth before practically dragging me out the glass door. The silver bell of the door chimes as we walk onto the streets of our small town. I look around at the blue sky and bluebirds standing on low-hanging wires. The sun felt warm against my splotched skin, contradicting the cool café I was just in. I looked down at my hands and bare arms, the white marks along them standing out against the dark brown of my natural skin.

I take a couple more steps, admiring the city and refreshing summer breeze. Suddenly however, I started to feel sick. Sick like those days when you feel horrible and can’t get out of bed, but all at once. I gritted my teeth, quickly sitting on a wooden bench beside the sidewalk. Probably too much boba, way too fast. I looked up, expecting to see Fawn standing there, probably confused. As I looked up, however, the city turned dark, the streets no longer held anyone. No one. Not even the homeless girl sitting at the lamppost, holding up a dirty cardboard sign, not even the broken red cup next to her. I stood up on my wobbly legs, looking around in confusion and a slight mix of terror. I looked to my right, the café where I had just been, enjoying the day no longer had any people enjoying an afternoon fika, or sitting on barstools with friends. The lonely street lights blared green and the cold, black asphalt without any cars to go. I felt my heart drop to my stomach as I looked around again. What was going on? Was this reality?

“Hey, Willow!”

I whipped my head around to see Fawn at the end of the street, smiling and waving as if she didn’t just see the terror town. Noise crashe throughout my ears, the honking of car horns and bicycle bells. People noisily chattering, the loud barking of dogs, birds calling out to the wind. It was back. I was okay. I look over at Fawn who was walking towards me with a smile.

I push away what just happened into the back of my mind and walk towards her, grinning. We go up to the crosswalk and she hands me an earbud to listen to music. I put it in and the song starts playing in my ears. *Kiss me hard before you go, summertime sadness.*

I roll my eyes down at Fawn after she pulls me away from getting hit and we continue to walk across the white-marked asphalt. It was a short distance to the bottom of Hiraeth, but then we had to walk up a mountain. At least it was worth it when you got to see the view from above. I used to think it was scary. Scarier than my dad coming into my room with an empty beer bottle. Now I think it’s pretty.

My mind wandered back to what had just happened. I was really tired lately, maybe it was a still-kind-of-conscious type dream? That was most likely it. Just a weird dream, caused by my horrible, overtaking insomnia. I could be hallucinating though, like a psychotic schizophrenic, like the rest of my family. That would be worse than anything. I

feel a hand on my shoulder and turn to see Fawn holding out her phone to pick a song. I pick a new song called 'Planets and Stars' and take a breath, letting the negative thoughts fall back into the corner of my mind.

After a long walk with comforting music in our ears, we arrive at our safe space, sitting down against the weeping willow. The music had ended as the air got colder, sending chills down my spine. This place, it allowed me to cloister away in hiding with the one person I adored, not having to worry about the terrors that awaited me in my old home. It made me calm. I didn't get eaten whole by my thoughts. The coarse black rocks at the end of the cliff faded into white dandelions, before being overtaken by grass.

I feel a tap on my shoulder, and turn to see Fawn pointing to a bright white owl, sitting on one of the long branches of the tree. It turned its head, looking around at the foreign land before its deep eyes landed on us. It peered at us with a look I couldn't quite make out before flying away with a flap of its wings. We watched it fly into the now auburn sky, and I felt Fawn rest her head on my shoulder, her hand taking my own.

The next hour was us resting under the tree watching the ocean start to swallow the sun, casting a luminous glow across the city. At one moment Fawn started humming, before falling asleep on my shoulder while a crow landed in front of us. It probably wouldn't have noticed me if I didn't have white splotches all over my face and bright blue eyes. There were always a lot of birds here, flying in the air. At night you could even hear bats squealing if you let your window down. I suddenly felt grateful, a warmth spreading to my heart. Grateful for someone who actually cared about me, how I could live here in this beautiful city with my beautiful girl- *CRACK*.

I jumped as Fawn shot up from my shoulder. A branch from the willow tree laid in front of us, the end broken off, and in jagged pieces. The wood now lay dead in the dandelions, resting softly on the ground. I put a hand on my chest, feeling my rising heart rate through my thick shirt. Fawn leans against the tree, her breath unsteady. We make eye contact and after a few moments of silence, we start laughing. Tears form in our eyes as we start trying to get words out. She starts coughing and I laugh, even more, slapping my knee.

That's how we spent the sunset, laughing and dancing like no one was watching, twirling around in a mess of limbs. We eventually pushed the tree branch off the cliff and chuckled as it made a *splash* in the small pond. We both laid down on a small blanket that we kept in an old fox hole, looking up at the shimmering stars. That's how we fell asleep, enjoying each other's company, talking about our feelings of fernweh.

I woke up as the sun rose, the new day starting. I woke up as the birds started coming out of wooden nests, as bats started resting. I woke up with everything I technically needed to survive, not everything I really needed. I woke up without *her*. I abruptly sat up, looking around, calling her name, but she wasn't there.

And then it all hit me like a wave, a wave full of nails and missiles, at your heart, closing your throat, giving ten gallons of water to your eyes, making you sob out loud. Fawn died. She jumped. Jumped off the place where she was happiest. I felt my heart burn as I looked to see the whole town was gone. Everyone left after Fawn committed suicide, not wanting to be left with the memory of her haunting around. Some even followed. Fawn was loved a lot by everyone, by her benevolence and her amiable energy. She never used her model-like looks or fame to get attention, she just wanted everyone to be happy.

I look down at Fawn's bloody sweater that I had taken, it still smelled of her, a mix of coffee and perfectly browned marshmallows. The coffee color still stood potent, reminding me of how it stood against her olive skin, filling my mind with memories. She had worn this, then killed herself. At least I stayed. I didn't break my promise...right? I stayed. I promised her. I promised I would stay, and she did too. After her family had all died, however, she couldn't. She couldn't stay. Fawn couldn't hold her promise, and I couldn't either.

I realized between heart rending sobs that I had been in this life for two days, searching in my memories hoping that something would change. I was in my hell-loop of sorts, replaying memories of the one I loved kissing me before backing up off the cliff, falling. Falling, falling, falling. Falling before dying. Dying in the water. The flashback that I had felt was me now, losing myself. I knew I was. I had nowhere to go, nothing to live for. Everyone was gone, even my father laid still in his old rocking chair. Maybe I could try though? I got up off the ground, shaking, and started walking to the café. The café to see Fawn again.

Days started blurring. Two days turned into four, six, ten. Ten days, laying on my broken bed in a state of dysania, crying in despair and agony, smashing windows with bloodied bricks. Ten days of not eating anything except a protein bar on a good day, ten days of looking at the café out my apartment window and getting reminded of when

she had jumped into the air, accepting death's open arms. I felt like following. The newly cut scars along my splotted arm growing in amount each long, dreadful day. I found myself at the café day and day again only to break down in a tsunami of tears and throw up my small lunch when I saw her apron.

The tenth day of grieving I found myself at Hiraeth, her sweater still draped over my thinning body. I sat against the willow tree where she was buried, placing a dandelion on the rich soil. I didn't have the energy to cry anymore, I was a loser in love, wishing I was dead, wishing that this never happened. My acceptance was fading. I knew Fawn was dead, but I couldn't fully accept what happened. From the moment I met her, I fell in love with her eyes, her laugh, her angelic, affable personality. She was the only reason I had to keep going with the shitty life I lived. Fawn was my ikigai, she is my ikigai. Now she is gone, and I'm gone too.

Two hours of sitting passed before I found myself looking out at my cold, abandoned city as icy winds turned my skin to frost. The lights no longer shone on the streets as everyone left. I looked behind me at Fawn's grave and felt hot tears slide down my face for the last time. I remembered how dimples would form on her soft cheeks when she smiled and how her black hair fell lightly on her forehead, her coffee-colored sweatshirt engulfing her figure. Memories of her soft lips hand grazing my jawline as we shared the last ever form of affection we had played through my head. I came back to my senses after feeling myself grow nearer to the edge of the cliff. I look down at the long drop where Fawn had once been. The water below was almost inviting me to join her, Fawn in the reflection, staring up at me with regret caused tears to roll down my face. I reached my shaking hand out to her, the wind pushing against me. I reached into my pocket and pulled out the note she had left. *Je t'aime, ma fleur*. I opened my hand, slowly letting it fly into the calming winds. I would say it back soon my love.

COLSTON, NOELLE**Noelle Colston**

Age: 15, Grade: 11

School Name: Smithville High School, Smithville, MO

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Novel Writing

The Case**Brief summary:**

Tom is an overlooked agent in the FBI office. He wishes to find his place and be welcomed back again, but his memories of an incident keep replaying in his mind. Just when Tom loses hope, a case comes up. He thinks that this could be the case to help him win back the favor and acceptance of all his coworkers. Tom will get a flashback as he gets on the case and we will see what this incident was. He will then continue his case and stumble upon the remains of a girl. Tom will find out that this is not the girl he is looking for and later gets accused of murdering all of the kids who have been found near the tetons. He will face trial and fight for his side. The FBI accused him because of his past but Tom will prove them wrong.

Excerpt:

Chapter 1

The Case

Casey

As I run down the uneasy pathway, I trip over sticks and rocks. My heart beats faster and faster as I hear the sound of him behind me, crushing the leaves with every footstep. The sound of his raspy voice yelling at me to stop only makes me run quicker. Hundreds of trees are surrounding me, they are dark emerald green with hints of brown and blood orange. Thick fog is forming all around me and I begin to lose my sight. I keep running until I come to a halt, for there are two trails I could take. My chest is pounding so much I can feel it pulsing in my head.

Come on, just pick one.

The voice grows louder as I think.

What are you doing?? Just go!!!

My body is trembling as I step forward until I notice something. There is no horrifying voice coming after me anymore, and there are no more footsteps. It's so quiet I hear birds chirping happily in the trees and the slight breeze, picking up the leaves. I stand for a moment staring at the moist, dirt ground, listening to the river nearby. For one moment I feel at peace, the sound of nature is so calming. But then, my head lifts, I turn around, and I find myself looking right at the face of the one who was chasing me. The bloodshot eyes, with hints of green, and yellow teeth make me paralyzed with fear. Suddenly, the speed of my breathing picks up and I grow dizzy. This was the moment I knew, it was over.

Tom

The warmth of the sun, shining through the glass is resting on my face. I move my face away from its rays and look around the room to get my vision back clearly. As I look around I see the seven desks identical to mine, standing in pairs of twos, down the aisle of the black carpet. The men all around me are dressed in blue and black suits with neatly looking red ties. Not all are dressed up like this though. A few are wearing regular blue jeans, a long sleeve with a vest, and letters printed on in yellow reading, "FBI" on the back. I jolt back a bit, waking up from my daydream as the loud sound of the phone plays throughout the office. Some part of me wants to reach for the phone in the hope I get it this time, but just like always, another hand gets to it before I do.

"Hello?" says the voice, of who got the phone. "Yes, this is Jim."

Jim usually gets to the phone first, he's one of the head FBI agents in the office but so are a lot of people and you don't see them bragging on about themselves as Jim does. I would like to keep the peace as much as I can though, so I stay quiet and let him talk if he wants to. I don't mind all that much, but what I do mind, is when he brings it up.

COLSTON, NOELLE**Noelle Colston**

Age: 15, Grade: 11

School Name: Smithville High School, Smithville, MO

Educator: Danielle Finch

Category: Short Story

Scarlet

Scarlet

October 30, 1979

The floor creaks as I slowly walk through the narrow hallway. I feel eeriness vibrating off every inch of the walls as the old portraits stare right back at me. I continue to walk carefully and alert but something rushes by me and makes a slight breeze. I turn around quickly to see who was there, or what was there, to see if I was alone or being watched. There's nothing but darkness surrounding me, along with cobwebs that I keep swallowing. Something else is there though, on the wall. Not hanging like a photograph, but seeping down. I step closer to the striped wallpaper with my flashlight to find dark, scarlet, red blood dripping down. I try to cover my mouth before I can let out a scream, a cry for help of some kind. But before I feel my hand on my mouth, I feel someone else's.

34 hours earlier

As I walk up to the school, a slight chill goes up my back. The cold breeze stirs my dark brown hair and makes my mouth feel like a desert. I enter the school, down the hallway, and head for my classroom.

"Anna! Wait up!" said a cheerful voice.

I look back to return the warm smile.

Kate and I have been best friends for as long as I can remember. Our moms were friends in high school and grew up together, so there isn't a memory of mine without Kate. If it weren't for her, I would probably be out of this town. Marysville is an abandoned town, and it's too quiet. Quiet enough to hear each leaf blow across the wide, orange, brick roads.

I wake up from my daydream to the sound of the loud, ringing bell. As I head out of the classroom with Kate, it's oddly quiet. Usually, Kate is pretty talkative and always has gossip to share with me, but not this time. I begin to wonder if I should break the silence or keep the peace, but she speaks before I can decide.

"Hey, wanna do something fun after school? I heard there's a haunted house on a back road on the way back to your place."

I look at her confused and say, "Uh, sure. But we've already been to a lot of haunted houses this fall, maybe we should do something else?"

"No, not that kind of haunted house." her eyes light up as she continues, "A real haunted house. I overheard some kids talking about it in my class."

I think about it for a moment, haunted houses aren't real, ghosts, vampires, even werewolves I don't believe in. So why not, why not make her happy.

"Yeah I guess we can, but I need to be back home in time for dinner, so we can just stop by and look, okay?" I say, waiting for her to promise.

"Yeah yeah, sure." She says, clearly brushing off what I just said.

At the end of the day, I wait for Kate outside the school and then head off for my house. The trees are showing their colors of vibrant orange, yellow, red, and brown. Fall is in the air, you can smell it, but you can also smell Halloween. The crispness of the air, the fog, and you can hear the wind chimes. As the wind blows colder, I curl up in my arms even more as I walk down the road.

"Look!" says Kate, interrupting my thoughts.

I look up to see an old house sitting on a hill. The house was painted black but the paint had worn off so much it almost looks grey. The tattered windows and looming porch make me feel uneasy.

"Come on Anna," Kate says confidentially.

"What? No, Kate. Kate, now come on we're not going in. It doesn't look safe." I say, watching Kate ignore me, climb up the broken steps, and into the house.

“Wow! Anna! You gotta come in here!” I hear echoing from the ominous building.

“Kate I’m serious, come on out. It’s not safe and we really shouldn’t be going in there.”

The voice suddenly stops speaking and I wait to hear her again. All I can hear are the autumn orange leaves blowing in the breeze and cars in the distance, but no sound of Kate. I step closer and closer to the house in the hope she will come out before I get too close but I find myself inches away from the steps. I turn my head slightly and shut my eyes to see if I can hear anything coming from inside. A loud crash makes me jolt back and a rush of fear comes over me. I run in and immediately I can not see anything so I pull out my flashlight and begin to walk deeper into the home. As I creep in I see old, dusty wallpaper and loads of cobwebs surrounding every inch of the walls. As I’m studying the wallpaper a breeze goes by me and I get more of an eery feeling. But never have I ever felt the way I did when I looked up at the wallpaper to find dark liquid flowing down the old wall. At the same time, I feel someone’s hand on my mouth, and it goes dark.

I slowly open my eyes, it’s cold, pitch black, and I can feel my arms weighed down on a stiff bed, they are not tied down, yet I can not lift them. I can’t make out anything in the room yet, it’s all still blurry and spinning. I close my eyes again and squeeze them to see if that will change anything, and when I open them I can focus on little things in the room. It’s still dark but I can see tables not too far away from me. There are two tables with little objects sitting neatly on top, but I still can’t quite distinguish what they are, but I can tell they are shiny like metal. I turn my head to examine the rest of the room, to figure out what is happening. Then I see it: a body in the shape of a young girl, who looks to be my age, and to my horror, that body belongs to Kate. I want to throw up but all I can do is stare at the lifeless corpse in the corner of the room. The stench is overwhelming like rotten meat and blood. My body is numb from my shoulders to my feet, but I can tell they are in some kind of pain. I lift my head slowly and my heart races faster, I can hear my breathing getting louder and I get a hot flash as I look down at my leg. I see nothing but the same scarlet blood that I saw on the wall in that dreadful hallway. I scream in terror and agony, tears are streaming out of my eyes but I suddenly stop when I hear footsteps, coming down creaky stairs.

I take a look at the shadow walking toward me. I can not see a face until a single light comes on and it’s not much light but enough to see his face. I can see the little details as he steps forward, this man looks to be about 60 years old, maybe a little younger, but the white hair on his head and scruffy face make it hard to tell. His eyes are red shot with blood and are missing both his canine teeth. The man is stepping forward with a serrated knife in his hand and a syringe in the other, filled with light green liquid.

My eyes are wide open with fear, and my mind races with thoughts.

You can’t just sit here and let this happen to you. Do something!

He steps closer and my thoughts continue. *There’s no time! Do something! now!*

Panicking, I look frantically around the room and spot it. I grab a knife that was on the table next to me and jab it as hard as I can into his upper thigh. My attacker leans forward in suffering and drops the items. All at once, I can feel my arms get their strength back and my one leg that is still in function. Throwing myself off of the bed and into the floor, scrambling to the staircase, and one by one, each step by step, I hoist myself up. Halfway done I hear him; the man is wobbling his way up the stairs too. His footsteps grow louder, I pick up the pace but not by much, for I am still weak.

Just, one more stair. I think. As I am crawling on my hands and knees to the last stair, I feel it. A hand is grabbing at my leg to pull me back down. Screaming and shouting, I kick back at him, so much of my force and his uneasiness make him fall right back to the bottom. A thud and a crash follow but I don’t look back. I continue to pull myself up and out from below and right out the front door. When I get outside I notice that a lot of time has passed while I was down there, the bright orange leaves are nowhere in sight.

I hobble out to the long brick street and fall to my knees as a car speeds down the road towards me. I flail my arms around for dear life screaming, crying, and pleading for help.

“PLEASE! HELP! PLEASE HELP ME!!” I say, sobbing with tears enough to fill the ocean.

The car comes to a stop next to me and a tall, lanky man comes out to help me.

Motion is slow right now, maybe from all the blood I’ve lost or from all the trauma.

He grabs my arm and carries me into the car, all happening in slow time.

Should I feel at peace? Should I feel hopeful? No, I don’t, I feel more hopeless and afraid than before. And I know that I do not feel safe, not now, not ever.

COUGHLIN, BROOKLYNN**Brooklynn Coughlin**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Jefferson High School, Festus, MO

Educator: Nicole Boyer

Category: Poetry

And To Say She's A Pathetic Tragedy

Love
Branches in entirely
Different ways.
It leaves me
In both
Misery
And Grief.
It deranges me
entirely.
I fear to speak
For it is where
The communication
Is lacking.
Yet,
The thoughts whisper
Inside my ear
Until my mind is
Vulnerably numb.
Amid the sadness
That clings onto my skin.
My soul
Showing a faint scar
Of the love I used to try
To hold onto.
And to think,
I've tried to find so many
Empty promises,
Endless possibilities,
Certainties.
Only for the universe
To tell me
I am not good enough for answers.
I am not made for solutions.
I am put here
To reciprocate whatever
My lover feels.
To give more love
Than i'll ever receive
Is a tragedy.
I am made for drained possibilities.
I am made for empty leavings.
I am made for others pleasure.
Not love,

Not truth,
Not communication.
I am a pathetic tragedy,
Losing myself.
I
Am not
Good enough.

COUGHLIN, BROOKLYNN**Brooklynn Coughlin**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Jefferson High School, Festus, MO

Educator: Nicole Boyer

Category: Poetry

Suicide Prevention

Teen Suicide.
Something we never talk about enough.
Clasped in the hands of death,
we think our lives are just another scabbed
up end.
We claim these lives are a tragedy barely
worth retelling.
We are not attentive to these feelings
blanketing our health.
With the burning ache held in our throats,
we are desperate for someone to realize the
raw emotion we refuse to show.
Our lust-fogged eyes, roving over the
sharpest tools.
Romanticizing our pale white skin, bleeding a
beautiful red.
We put others on a pedestal, forgetting we
have our own selves to take care of.
Some being altruistic, others being
predictably pure.
It's as if this depression was a consignment,
given from a malevolent hand.
Forged into this sickening feeling,
why won't you people understand?
Perhaps, our undoing is what will prove to
your lost minds.
The prophecies are nothing more than a
manifested promise.
How much will it take for us to make a
change?
Your regret for losing another will soon cover
you like snow on the ground.
Suicide.
A euphemism for the sadness slowly taking
control.
Your hostility will come with destruction,
and you will soon realize;
We are defined by our trauma more than
we'd like,
we are human.
My feelings sit in the back of my throat,
weighing down my tongue.
May you have empathy for the ones who

struggle to stand by your maligned words.

COUGHLIN, BROOKLYNN**Brooklynn Coughlin**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Jefferson High School, Festus, MO

Educator: Nicole Boyer

Category: Poetry

Finding Beauty in a Hectic Moment

The lightning spikes through my curtains, and
the thunder whispers thoughts into my ear.
Who would've known that I'd still be here,
after all these years.
This chaotic feeling, given a reason to calm
down by the rain,
as if it's intent was to allow me a moment of
peace.
The clouds giggle,
keeping the moon hidden behind.
Rarely daring to let the beautiful beams wash
over the earth.
So soft, so bold.
A way of nature telling us to appreciate
things before they vanish.
As this storm will pass by just like every hard
moment in this hectic life of mine.
Sometimes, I'll sit and think in moments like
these.
It is often not enough tears, sunsets, or sleep
can fix a broken soul such as mine.
However,
between the cracks of the darkness,
and dawn after the storm,
I can rest once again.
This rain will provide company,
the sky will weep with me.
The thunderstorm that wakes young children,
scares the pets,
shuts the power off,
is the same one that calms me.

DILLON, MAKAYLA**Makayla Dillon**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

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

Educator: Marilyn Yung

Category: Poetry

Ode to Sweaters**Silence**

The sound of silence is loud
 the sound of silence is like a cold winter morning
 it is the soft strokes of the hairbrush after a warm shower
 or it's the first sweet sip of hot coffee
 the sound of silence is such a bittersweet sound
 it's the pause of a baby cry
 abs the stopping of the rushing chatter
 it comes at the worst times
 abs leaves at the best
 silence can be worth more
 than the thousands of words confessed
 the sound of silence is loud

Death Is a Silent Wonder (Inspired by Metaphor Dice)

Death is a once in a lifetime experience
 We cannot and will not ever know the true events that take place after death
 Many say there is a paradise
 Many say there is nothing
 It will always be unknown never more and never less
 The silence of death is a wonder in itself
Can they hear us?
 Why can't we hear them?
 When our lives come to an end
 It's only the beginning
 Death is a silent wonder.

My Apologies

I want to start this apology off with a thank you
 Thank you to myself for living each and every day up to this moment
 Dear Makayla,
 I am sorry to the little girl that had to be forced to grow up so quickly
 I hope you find it in yourself to forgive me
 Some will say it's not my fault
 And it's not
 That's exactly why I am so critically sorry for myself
 I make poor decisions without thinking of the consequences
 Sometimes I do
 Sometimes I just don't care
 Sometimes my mind is screaming at me yelling gasping
 "Why? Dont you listen to me?"

“I know I shouldn’t be doing this”
Why don’t I stop myself
Sometimes I feel like I’m not even making the decisions I make
I feel as though this body I call mine has a mind of its own
A mind not mine
And again I am truly sorry
I’m sorry
I am sorry
I am so sorry
please forgive me

Something You Should Know (Inspired by Clint Smith)

Something you should know
Is that as a kid, I would make fairy houses
I would find bugs so they would have a friend
Collect little tinkers and treasures to fill the home
I would so frantically check to see if they ate the berries I so specially picked for them
However, nothing ever moved
No fairies, no more bugs, untouched fruit lay in the tiny basket I weaved together from twigs and leaves
Which left me wondering “are fairies even real?”
“Do they even exist?”
Perhaps this is when I realized that they were never real
Just a make believe creature created to obtain happiness of children
Just a lie told to me.
Some things are told to us to keep us happy
Some people would even say its “protection”
What is there to protect me from? The truth?
That is why, growing up finding truth is so rare, that you actually start to believe in fairies.

Ode to Sweaters

Oh the colors and textures
the shapes and sizes
the warmth of it hugging your body
sweaters will never get old
even in the summer
they hide you and make you feel concealed
sweaters don’t have consciousness
but if they did
I bet they would love themselves
because who doesn’t?
My ode to sweaters

DULIN , KINZEY**Kinzey Dulin**

Age: 15, Grade: 10

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

Educator: Derek Yost

Category: Poetry

A Dreamer's Destination

What happens when
the road less traveled on
becomes the only traveled upon?

Down through the path of
caramelized sunshine
and curated plans.

One path diverges into two
crossroads.
A path of choices, options.

The traveler goes away from the
Village of Known Things
towards the Unexplored.

When the average become the ambitious
they pack,
back-track to a life full of something more.

Complacency becomes excellency
when the rule-followers bend their confines.
But only if they don't get caught.
Success is secretive.
Your uniqueness is not wanted here.
Stay in the box of what interesting should be.

In a new world where
the dissonance of power roars.
Audacity trumps authority.

Where do the failed-freedom seekers roam?
Where do the
damaged, drained
societal proclaimed
degenerates
go when their
river of drive runs dry?

Dashed dreams
crushed to a fine powder.
They breathe it in;

the sin of it, its power
draws them in.
Coats the tongue.
Embraces the mind.
Could this once again become what it was?

They return to the crossroads
and they choose the latter path
a desolate place deserted
by those who dared to dream.
And they rebuild.

Sowing the seeds
of yesteryear.
They grow.
Plant the seeds.
Reap the crops rewards.
What a fickle thing to garden;
the hopes of the lost dreamer.

A continuous cycle
of growth and rebirth.
Pushed by the thought
of something more.
Ambition doesn't kill the dreamer.
Reality is in fact the merciless one.

The path where the ordinary
becomes the extraordinary
simply because it allows
for the survival of ties.
And hope.
Always hope.
No matter how low the well runs.

EISENBERG, AJAY**Ajay Eisenberg**

Age: 16, Grade: 10

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Jason Lovera

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

A Losing Game

A Losing Game

My uncle slid the green cardboard lid off of the top of the ancient box. I watched in amazement as a plastic city unfolded. My mother became a real estate agent, my grandfather a banker, each preparing the cards yet to unfold. Finally, we were ready. A four-hour game of loyalty and betrayal, compassion and cruelty, generosity and greed: in a world of pawns, Monopoly remains king.

My younger cousin, the thimble, was the first to move, launching the dice towards the board. The dice smacked the center of the board, then bounced well off the table and onto the ground, releasing groans across the table. The thimble quickly clambered out of his chair to examine the dice.

"I rolled an eight!" he exclaimed, eagerly reaching to move his thimble eight squares ahead of the group, but when he reached his piece, his hand met our grandfather's.

"Not so fast," my grandfather warned. "You dropped the dice. You rolled a zero." The thimble's protests turned to whines, but they were dismissed as quickly as they arose. I greedily eyed the dice, hungry for my turn.

A roll of the dice sent my mother straight to jail as I eased down New York Avenue, but none were luckier than the thimble himself.

"One, two, three, four, five, six," the thimble counted gloatingly, as he reached to claim the coveted Park Place from my mother's hand. I reached for the dice, but he snatched them first.

"Not so fast," he snapped. "I rolled doubles, so I get to go again." The dice clicked in his clenched fist for what felt like an hour. He carefully released the fates, as the dice fell to the board. By the menacing, triumphant smile upon his face alone, it was clear he had rolled a two. The thimble marched his token to Boardwalk, unable to suppress a roar.

His older sister and I threw dozens of accusations at him: "He held the dice for a minute. He must have known how they would land," and "he didn't even roll, he just set the dice down," we protested. The adults would have none of it. My uncle sighed,

"Anyone can get lucky."

Despite the incessant claims of past victors, Monopoly is a game of luck. In *An Unnatural Act*, Philip Yancey explains how humans instinctively excuse their own shortcomings while attributing the successes of others to fate. Yancey writes,

"The instant I hit a bad golf shot, my subconscious marshals dozens of plausible excuses: The ground is too wet today; my club caught on a rock; that car horn distracted me" (Yancey). When discussing his reaction to his golf partner's less fortunate strokes, Yancey describes himself as "quick to assess blame" (Yancey). Yancey instinctively assumes his own golfing success is due to his prowess on the green, while the shortcomings of his partner are the result of inherent flaws (Yancey). Yancey's instinctual egotism reflects a tendency to ignore the feelings of others while bettering one's self. My cousins and I were far from immune to corruption. Too young for the greens of the golf course, the Monopoly board was our great battleground, and the thimble was plotting his first attack.

The thimble's shrill voice demanded, "I want 6 houses!"

My grandfather helped the thimble sort through his pile of cash, finally exchanging a significant wad of paper for 6 coveted green pieces of plastic. The thimble was all in: he spent all of his money and mortgaged his properties in the hopes that someone would visit one of his luxurious properties.

After a few trips around the board, the thimble's properties sat vacant.

"Ten! One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten," the thimble declared, pseudo confidently marching his piece from New York Avenue down to Marvin Gardens. The thimble's face fell, if only slightly, as he looked down at his collection of white and pink bills and mortgaged properties, then back up at his grandmother, the owner of the triple-housed yellow property he was visiting. Luckily for the thimble, my grandmother wasn't out for blood.

"I don't want to get stuck in jail," she explained. "Instead of money for rent, would you give me that get-out-of-jail-free-card?"

Unaware of the mercy just granted upon him, the thimble handed his grandmother a card as payment, as if *he* was doing *her* a favor.

It was my turn again. Staring down the dark blue corner from my current position on North Carolina Avenue, I nervously tossed the dice towards the board.

"One, two, three, four, five, six," I counted out, as a stone of despair settled in my stomach. I had landed on the thimble's Boardwalk, complete with three looming houses. I was doomed. The thimble exclaimed, "Boardwalk! Ha, that has to be like a thousand dollars." After consulting his cards, the thimble determined I owed him fourteen hundred dollars.

The first stage of grief is bargaining: I began negotiating with my assets.

"Six hundred here, seventy there, I can scrape something together," I assured myself.

The thimble, cackling at my misfortune, demanded that he be paid in full. After every mortgaging property and spending every bill I possessed, I presented all fourteen hundred dollars to the thimble. Using the money from my collapsed houses, the thimble built his hotels. The thimble had taken my money, properties, and dignity, but he had given me a purpose. I was no longer playing to win: I was playing to beat the thimble.

While praise is appreciated, hatred forms a more powerful incentive. "Revenge is a bonafide motivator," writes Caroline Cox in "Ever Wanted to Get Revenge? Try This Instead." Cox explains that successful individuals, including pop star Taylor Swift and Olympic figure skater Adam Rippon, attribute their successes to their "haters" (Cox). When the thimble robbed me mercilessly, he killed my fantasies of a pleasant victory. I didn't care about winning anymore: all I wanted was for the thimble to lose.

Just a few rolls after the thimble redistributed my wealth, fate changed my course once again: I landed on free parking, inheriting an uncountable wad of cash. I bought back my mortgaged properties, reestablishing my presence as a competitor. Then, I bought houses, railways, and utilities across the board. I monopolized. Upon the brink of ruin, fate saved me from destruction at the thimble's hands. Now, I possessed both the means and the desire to watch the thimble's empire burn.

"Five and five make ten! One, two, three, four..." I didn't need to count squares to know where the thimble was headed next. He was paying a visit to the Big Apple, where three of my looming houses awaited his arrival. The thimble looked up at me expectantly, but when he saw an evil grin spread across my face, he looked back down uneasily. The thimble was out of cash; he had just spent all of his money on upgrading his dark blue monopoly. He begrudgingly dipped into the reserves of his assets. Where two great hotels once stood, the board was now noticeably bare. I counted my money with glee, not noticing the tear sliding down his face.

The desire for retaliation may seem shallow, but the biological forces behind the desire to get even run deep. In "Revenge," Jim Thornton details how the dorsal striatum, the same part of the brain that is "activated by cocaine" triggers the longing for vengeance (Thornton 114). Thornton explains that our brains are wired to find revenge "sweet and seductive" (Thornton 114). Thornton reasons that a primal desire for vengeance may have helped our ancestors survive, offering an evolutionary explanation for the biological process of revenge (Thornton 114). Retribution may have helped prehistoric humans navigate daily life, but is a longing for blood still a favorable adaptation? Favorable or not, the seemingly vestigial revenge instinct influences human actions today, from murder to Monopoly.

The thimble avoided my eye as he offered me the dice, but I shook my head.

"You rolled doubles," my uncle reminded the thimble. With empty pockets and closed eyes, the thimble begrudgingly cast the once generous dice towards the board.

"Six" he half declared, half whimpered as fear polluted his hubris. He anxiously slid his thimble to the B & O Railroad. My railroad. The bankrupt thimble knew he was doomed.

"Please," the thimble begged, "I'll give you anything. You can have my properties. You can have my money, just take it!" as he thrust a few pathetic pieces of paper towards me in exchange for his salvation.

Despite an age gap of just three months, the thimble was undeniably the baby of the family. Revered by his parents and idolized by our grandparents, his praise knew no bounds. My parents often asked me, "Why can't you be more like him?" The thimble deserved to be put in his place, I assured myself, as I shook my head, denying his pleas for a loan in the name of forgiveness. The thimble's histrionics may have worked on my grandmother, but his appeal would not sway me.

"You lost, get over it," I instructed the weeping thimble.

Revenge, a natural instinct, often opposes human connections. In "An Unnatural Act," Philip Yancey describes how small disputes can ruin a marriage. Yancey explains, "Over such trivialities, lifelong relationships crack apart; only forgiveness can halt the widening fissures" (Yancey). In other words, relationships are directly at odds with the desire for retribution. In the name of righteousness and justice, friendships fail and families fracture. The more I

punished the thimble, the further I grew from my cousin.

I reached to claim all that remained of the thimble's once-great fortune, but suddenly, a disaster like no other struck the city of Monopoly. Time seemed to slow, as houses sank beneath the board. Cards rocketed upwards, then fluttered back down towards the living room floor. My fortune vanished beneath my nose and screams filled my ears, but my smile was as triumphant as ever. The sobbing thimble beat the table with a green square: what more could I ask for? I looked to the adults for vindication, but when I met my grandmother's disapproving eyes, my sense of triumph quickly faded into shame. I looked back at the screaming spectacle of a cousin before me, but I only felt pity. I had just won! Where was my glory?

FRONT, OWEN**Owen Front**

Age: 14, Grade: 9

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Andy Chen

Category: Poetry

The Tree**The Tree**

Frost climbs my trunk
faster than the children
from when the weather was warmer.
Winter air blows the memories of spring away,
my leaves,
fallen on the ground months ago,
forgotten.
Every year
brings a new ring
and along with it
spring,
summer,
fall
and winter.
The other trees are old,
forgetting their birthdays,
growing farther
and farther
away from
reminders of time.
While I'm still here,
counting each year,
each ring,
each spring,
summer,
fall
and winter.
But soon
I will grow up,
joining the others,
leaving behind my
marked,
straightforward life.
Soon
my memories will fade
one winter blending with the next.
And I'll know
it is time
to move on.
So I will say goodbye.

Goodbye rings,
goodbye springs,
summers,
falls
and winters.
Goodbye.
I may see you again,
but
you'll be smaller,
and to me,
less important.
A whisper
of a memory
from a long
time ago.
Goodbye.

FRONT, OWEN**Owen Front**

Age: 14, Grade: 9

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Andy Chen

Category: Poetry

Haphazard Collage*Haphazard Collage*

I see glimpses of you in different faces
In a strong, sharp jawline
In bright red lips as seductive as the apple Eve sank her teeth into
In laughing eyes that shine brighter than stars on a dark night in the middle of nowhere
In cracking voices, self-conscious yet strong
In pats on the shoulder and playful taps on my back asking if there's a deeper meaning
Yet I don't know who you are
Or why I'm looking for you

Many people have stolen parts of you
Your jaw,
Your lips,
Your eyes,
Your voice,
Your gestures
So piecing you together
Is a challenge that I don't know if I'm ready to face

Yet each and every day
I attempt it
Without trying
I collect bits and pieces of you
Not even knowing who I'll see
staring back
when I finish this haphazard collage

Yet maybe
When I finish
If I finish
There won't be a whole person
Looking up at me
But fragments
Of figments of my imagination
Mirages
That I thought
glinted off of the faces around me

Maybe you don't exist

Who knows

I search for answers
When I search for you
Not just answers
As to who you are
But as to who *I* am
As if piecing you together
Will somehow assemble
the broken shards of *me*
Till something clicks
And it all makes sense

Until then
I keep searching
Collecting the scraps
A genuine smile
A kind word
An answer
Among the fragments

GALLEN, ELLE**Elle Gallen**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Jason Lovera

Category: Critical Essay

Understanding the Universe

Elle Gallen

Ap Literature

Mr. Lovera

4 January, 2022

Understanding the Universe

My whole life, I've convinced myself not to look forward to things too much. Don't hold too much excitement for the future. Because realistically, I'll always be disappointed. Things will always go bad, for whatever reason. Maybe the universe hates me, or it's a karmic balance. Whatever it is, something will always go badly. This way of thinking started in the second grade when I learned that my best friend of five years was moving away to Delaware, an entire fourteen hours away. Learning this resulted in a massive breakdown and the loss of my positive outlook on the world for a few days. I remember wracking my little brain, wondering why this was happening. Yes, her father got a job as a principal for a phenomenal elementary school, but why was this happening *to me*. Did I do something wrong to cause this pain? I must have messed up somewhere along the line, and this was my punishment for that. There had to be a reason why my world was being turned over, and my happiness in the form of a person was leaving me.

The world has long tried to find deeper meanings behind events that have taken place. Beginning with the first peoples of the earth, religion has been an answer to many. Gods that controlled the ins and outs of the workings of the world were prevalent in ancient Greek mythology. Zeus was the king of the Gods, the Olympians as they were known, and controlled the skies. He had many children, who then became the gods and goddesses of their respective parts of the universe. Myths were created about the gods interacting with humans and causing both evil and good in the world, which gave background to disasters and events that took place. One particularly well-known myth was of King Oedipus, a man who committed parricide, prophesied by an oracle. Without awareness of his actions, he killed his father, then laid with and married his mother. After learning of his atrocious crimes, he stabbed his eyes out with a golden pin, and announced to the crowd, "Apollo, friends, Apollo--/he ordained my agonies-- these, my pains on pains" (Sophocles 1239-1240). Here he blames Apollo for the atrocious, painful actions he committed and tried to find an answer to the horrors that took place. While he later admits that he committed the actions with his own hands, he still blames Apollo for what he did. Although he did the crime himself and was just an event that occurred, he blamed a higher power and tried to find solace in that.

The searching for answers to the occurrences of life persisted throughout time and was reinvented through monotheistic religions. Christianity, beginning in the 1st century, featured new, different thoughts on the birth of humans, and how that related to a new idea: sin, the immoral acts considered as offenses against divine law. God created two humans, a man and a woman named Adam and Eve. He placed them in the *Garden of Eden*, a paradise-like home built just for them, and they began to live their life. There was only one catch, that they must not eat any apple growing from a tree named the *Tree of Knowledge*, or sin and death would be created. Well, the pair ended up eating the apple, so both sin and death were born. They were kicked out of paradise and lived the rest of their lives having to fend for themselves in the outside world. In an epic poem relating these events, this is stated as the pair leave the garden: "That ye may live, which will be many days,/ Both in one faith unanimous through sad,/ With cause for evils past, yet much more cheered,/ With meditation on the happy end" (Milton XIII, 602-605). In modern English, this means that they will live on for many days, which will be filled with faith in their God through grief. There will be cause for evil, yet much more will be good, and life will be more balanced towards good. Although the pair caused evil and death to occur in the world, it's shown here as a positive thing, due to the faith and happiness that occur along with the evil. People within the Christian faith and other religions see their God(s) as their answer, but I don't believe that this is the most effective way to live life. The faith in and belief that all sin and death were

created due to Adam and Eve is *an* answer but isn't attainable to all. Trusting and basing your life off of something with no physical evidence leads to more questions than answers, which I've experienced in my own life. My dog Roxy got sick when I was in sixth grade. She's a Shih-Tzu/Caton who was two at the time and is probably the cutest dog I know. It occurred around April, amidst the time of the annual standardized testing. She was in-and-out of the vet during the week, while I was in-and-out of the testing room, proving to the state my English, Mathematics, and Scientific knowledge. I didn't know what to do with myself. While I was taking tests, I was busy trying to understand why this was happening to my sweet dog. I looked to the universe and wondered if I did anything to cause this. Was I not nice enough to her, and was this is punishment for that? Or did a God above choose to do this, and if so, why would he do such a thing? As one may have predicted, I did not prove my knowledge well to Missouri that year. The questioning of Roxy's sickness continued, and it began to keep me awake at night. I looked to God and tried to pray. Praying was a rare occurrence for me, which I later blamed myself for it and found to probably be the reason my dog was sick. Miraculously, by the end of the week she got better. The vet gave her some meds with a new diet and sent her back home. Although Roxy was well, the high level of stress and guilt continued on my end; I continued to wrack my brain and blame myself for days. Having faith in a higher power does offer salvation for some, but I believe overall it does the opposite. I don't seek to deny that a higher power exists, just that the sole belief in it isn't beneficial. Roxy didn't become ill due to any poor actions of mine, or the payback of any God. She became ill because somewhere of an infection in her little body. During the week, I was focused on the causes of the situation and my faults, though Roxy's health was the most important thing. Questioning the reasons behind events occurring isn't attainable, and only raises anxiety levels.

Philosophers have long debated the thinking of believing in a higher power, or in finding meaning in places without any. This continues to manifest itself in the ideas of good and evil, and what constitutes itself as either. What events are to be considered good things, and what as evil, because every event affects everyone differently. For example, Person A getting fired from a job would feel evil to them, but to Person B who was later offered Person A's old job, it's would feel good. Questioning every nuance of the amount of good or evil in a situation is futile, as there are endless possibilities. Voltaire spoke about this in his book *Candide*. When summarizing his viewpoints, he said, "The question of good and evil remains an insoluble chaos for those who seek in good faith for an answer; it's a joke only for those who debate over it" (Voltaire, 89). Looking for the good or evil in a situation, or the why's about it, is a joke, as he said. It doesn't result in anything, and, as Voltaire stated, is *insoluble*, as there is no correct answer.

This way of thinking continues to be pondered with more recent philosophers and scholars. In his essay on evil, Lance Morrow speaks about a friend of his, who doesn't believe in the concept of evil: "to describe all that as evil gives evil too much power, too much status, that it confers on what is merely rotten and tragic the prestige of the absolute" (Morrow 49). He admits that tragedies happen, and doesn't deny the cruel events that occur in the world. He's arguing that even though these horrible events take place, calling the event evil only prolongs the suffering caused by the event. It takes what may be just a "series of accidents", and turns it into something seen as an all horrible *evil*, something bigger and more sinister than the reality of the situation. Thinking like this maintains the cycle of hurt, and causes overthinking as to why evil events have taken place. To add to this, philosopher Leibniz argued that *malum poenae*, or non-man-made suffering, "results from the workings of the laws of nature" (Kolakowski 19). Leibniz, a philosopher focused on the doings of God and his omnipotence, acknowledges that bad events are not caused by Him, or another higher power, but by the inner workings of nature. Events should be taken at face value, as that is all they truly are.

I've finally accepted this notion. Over the past few days, Covid-19 has woven its way into my life. The disease, something that has affected the entire world over the past couple of years, is currently at an all-time high. What started as a relaxing and fun break spent with my loved ones, became filled with absolutely nothing other than the four walls of my bedroom and lonesomeness. My required quarantine has allowed for a lot of time to think, with no escape out of it. On day one, I questioned my situation and tried to bargain with myself on the reasonings behind what I saw at the time to be a 'life ruiner'. Questions included but were not limited to: why is the Universe is doing this to me, what have I done wrong to spark this, and how is there possibly the existence of an omnipotent God who allowed my perfectly good break to be ruined. Things got pretty deep. On day two, I thought back on the previous day and my massive overreaction. To my newfound rational-thinking brain, none of these questions were valid or beneficial in the slightest. The reality was that Covid-19, as previously mentioned, was at an all-time high. Any higher power with any effect on me was not relevant because the situation boiled down to a science, as all situations do. While questioning the existence of a grand, otherworldly figure behind everything does help some, I believe that in the long run it isn't beneficial, and events should be taken at face value. As I move forward into a life without rumination and immense questioning, I leave you with a quote from Dr. Claude Lévi-Strauss, a professor of social anthropology: "I find it's perfectly possible to spend my life knowing that we will never explain the universe" (82).

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GELFMAN, KATE**Kate Gelfman**

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Category: Short Story

Rose Among the Thorns

Rose Among the Thorns

It hurts to have all of the power stripped away from you in a matter of seconds, held against your will, leaving you no control over your own movements. I know it does. I went through the same experience five years ago.

Ever since I was twelve years old, I've known I wanted to heal people. Both of my parents were doctors and I was on track to becoming a Pharmacist. When I was growing up, my mother would always tell me: "While it's important to take care of yourself, there are too few people in this world that are willing to heal others, and I hope you will be one of those people." My goal to ease people's pain was my greatest motivation, and I knew I couldn't succeed in life until I had fulfilled that goal.

I was in my freshman year at college in my "Pharmacology 101" class. My lab partner and I were observing the effects of mixing pentobarbital, a sedative, with different substances. I was bringing my pipette filled with hydrogen peroxide over the small white tablet in the petri dish. *Splat.*

"A lovely rose for a lovely lady," my lab partner said, extending a white rose, with an extravagant bow and a faux-posh accent. His brown hair flopped over his eyes.

"Jeez, you scared me. You almost made me spill my pipette," I'd told him, sighing as I clutched my heart. He stood back up and scratched at the back of his neck awkwardly.

"Whoops, my bad. Anyway, my frat is hosting a party this Friday and every member has to bring a guest. Wanna come?" he drawled, "It'll be fun." He presented the rose once more.

"I'll think about it," I said as I accepted the gift, lifting the flower to inhale the fresh scent. The drug fizzed in the background.

I ended up getting dragged to the party by my group of friends who had also been invited. It was hard to refuse four begging teenage girls who were all too eager to decompress after the difficult week of classes, so after I put on the black scoop-neck shirt and black skirt they had thrown at me, we left for the party. Once we walked into the house, I met the eyes of my lab partner and gave him a friendly smile and wave. He was wearing a baseball jersey and athletic shorts; his hair was already tousled, no doubt from the night's festivities.

"Hey, you made it! You look nice," he said once he made his way over to greet me.

"Begrudgingly, and thank you. You clean up nice when you're not in a lab coat and goggles," I replied with an amused smile. My friends exchanged quick glances and giddy smiles with each other before pushing me into him, making excuses about needing to be somewhere else. I glanced back at them nervously, mouthing "Don't go" and "What do I say?" only to be met by winks and a few rushed whispers of "You got this!" And suddenly, I was on my own. It was my first time at a party, and based on the amused breath he let out at my baffled state, I was sure my lab partner could tell.

"Here," he said, handing me a solo cup. "You look like you need to loosen up a bit." I accepted the cup hesitantly and took a sip.

"Yeuch. What is this?" I shuddered. My nose scrunched up and my tongue tried desperately to get rid of the rancid taste, my mouth growing dry.

"Don't worry, you'll get used to it after a bit," he said with a laugh.

"You drink this for fun?" I asked incredulously.

"Yeah yeah. At least I can handle my liquor."

"That's not necessarily something to be proud of. You have terrible taste."

"Are you calling yourself terrible?" At that I froze. My disgust instantly vanished and was replaced by an ever-growing blush.

We talked for around half an hour. I had gone through the cup he had given me when I first got there, so he left to

grab me another. I reached for the cup when he came back, but he hesitated giving it to me as he cautiously looked behind himself. I tried to find where he was looking, but his attention was back on me and he handed me the cup with a kind smile.

I wish I had known. I wish someone had taught me. I wish someone had warned me. I wish I hadn't gone.

"Whoa, are you ok?" I was struck with a dizzy spell and would've fallen had he not caught me.

"Yeah... I just got a little dizzy there for a second..."

When I stumbled again, he led me through the crowd, down to the basement where three more frat members already were, waiting for me—for anyone. When I asked for water only to be met by four smirking figures with no intention of moving, I knew. My mind sobered up, but my body didn't. I tried to run back upstairs, opting to crawl after falling twice, but found that the door had been locked. My arms bashed against the door with whatever strength I had left as I screamed for help, my pleas drowned out by the blaring music. In the next moment, I was restrained—my arms hooked between two much stronger ones—and dragged back down the stairs. I spat in one of the guys' faces. "She's a feisty one," he said as the rest of them laughed.

"Eh, it's useless to put up a fight, though I do admire your spirit." I knew that voice. "Wow. I knew you were cute when you're frustrated, but this? God, you're irresistible when you're helpless. In any case, you'll be too weak to fight back soon enough," a chill ran up my spine. "After all, you *do* know what mixing alcohol with pentobarbital does, don't you?"

They didn't even bother to muffle my mouth. "You can scream as loud as you want, sugar. No one's gonna hear you," one of them said. My body went limp.

The following weeks were a nightmare. During the days, I felt overwhelmed at school and began to isolate myself, while during the nights, I forced myself to stay awake to avoid the nightmares. Every night after the incident, I would have the same dream: I would be in a dark room—the only source of light being a dim glow from a small lamp—restrained in one of two chairs in the room; four men entered from a bright, white light behind the door while dragging a faceless young girl to the other chair; I was forced to watch the men do unspeakable things to the girl, forced to watch as their fingers fumbled with her top or dragged slowly up her leg, forced to watch as both a victim and an accomplice; two sounds came in succession—first the scuff of the door being caught by its frame, then the click of the latch. The white light would disappear and my body would jolt me awake.

After a month, I was diagnosed with insomnia and prescribed none other than pentobarbital. My lack of sleep and swelling anxiety had eroded everything I had accomplished as a student. I stopped going to my pharmacology class, fearful of having to see my perpetrator again, and my grades dropped. I tried reporting the incident to the Dean at one point, but had only gotten a response from his assistant who told me "He's super busy right now but he'll get back to you as soon as he can." At that point in time, my mental health had gotten so low that I had to drop out of school. It was too hard to avoid my lab partner and too hard to pay attention during my classes, constantly wondering who my unknown attackers were and if they were near me. If the school couldn't help me, and I couldn't help myself, I would be in too much trouble and would succumb to the pain. Every day the thought of dying loomed over me. I believed that death had to be better than going through this constant torment. I craved the sweet release. The only thing that kept me going was my goal to become a healer.

I walked into work at 6:30 a.m. to start my shift. I joined the police department about three-and-a-half years after I dropped out of college. I got a job working as a records clerk and have kept it ever since. I guess I joined to make myself feel as though I'm helping people who are going through what I went through. But it wasn't enough.

On my breaks, I liked to lock myself in the file room where all of the reports were and read whatever rape cases I could find. That's how, one day, I found her file. I pulled it from the cabinet and set it down on a small table. I sat down in a chair and began to read. The report described a young woman who, only twenty-four at the time of the offense, had been drugged and raped three years ago by someone whom she had met at a bar. Anger flushed into my veins as I read over her description of the attack, my fists clenched so tightly that my nails dug crescent marks into my palms. I wrote her address down on a scrap of paper, shoved it into my pocket, and walked out of the file room to resume my shift.

Later that week, I parked my car in front of a house diagonal to hers and watched her through the large windows that adorned her house. I did that for a few days—watched her routine. I liked to take my time studying the women I helped. One night, before leaving, I slipped my pamphlet into her mailbox, advertising a trauma therapist with a phone number posted at the top. I got the call three days later. She agreed on having our meeting at her own home so she could feel more comfortable.

At 5:00 p.m., I parked my car in her driveway and made my way up the stone path to her door and knocked. A few seconds later, the door opened to reveal a woman in her late twenties with a soft smile and her black hair in a low bun.

“Hi, I’m Dr. Williams,” I greeted her, extending my right hand in introduction, “You must be Ariaiah.”

“Yes, it’s nice to meet you,” she responded as she moved out of the way to let me inside, “Please, come in.” She led me to her living room. It was small and roomy in there—dark wooden floors contrasted with taupe walls, a light brown couch facing opposite two worn-in leather chairs complemented with a wooden table. She sat on the couch, so I chose to sit in the chair, setting my small, black bag on the floor next to me. She seemed anxious, but tried masking her jumpiness with a warm smile.

“I have to admit I’m a little nervous,” she stated.

“Why’s that?” I asked her, placing my clasped hands on top of my crossed legs with a head tilt.

“Well...I’ve never done something like this before. Trauma therapy, I mean,” she fidgeted with her hands.

“There’s a first for everything,” I told her. “Why don’t you start by explaining what happened.”

“Right. Well, it started when my friends and I decided to go out...” she bounced her leg and struggled to keep eye contact. Her voice began to sound strangled as she continued. It took a lot in me not to cry or show my anger. I had to remain objective; I had to be the healer.

She explained how she was trying to move on with her life, getting a job as an accountant and having a boyfriend of 8 months. Her face was splotchy and she was choking on her words. I offered to make us some tea while she took a moment in the bathroom to splash cold water on her face and grab some tissues. After showing me to the kitchen, she got out two white teacups with a blue trail around the rim from a cabinet, showed me where the kettle was, then left for the bathroom.

When the kettle whistled, I turned off the stovetop and poured the steaming water into the two cups, each housing a teabag she had chosen. I retrieved my vial of pentobarbital from one of the pockets of my trousers and extracted 8 milliliters—the amount that would help her—with the dropper attached to the lid. In the cup on the right, I added the drug—along with a pinch of sugar to mask the bitterness—and stirred the mixture before bringing the two cups out to the living room. I set her cup on a small plate on the table with a teaspoon, and sat down in my chair. I brought the cup to my lips and blew the steam away before taking a sip as I waited for her.

She came back to the living room about a minute later, her face blanched by the cold water. I asked if she was calmer as I extended her teacup towards her, and she nodded, expressing her gratitude as she made her way to the couch. Watching as she fiddled with the spoon in her hand, my eyes kept darting between her cup and eyes, yet she was too troubled to notice.

“Have some tea,” I told her. She nodded again and held the cup to her lips for a few moments before carefully blowing on the steam. I couldn’t tear my eyes away from her neck as she swallowed the hot liquid. She furrowed her eyebrows and cleared her throat.

“Sorry, it must have gone down the wrong pipe,” she said with a light chuckle. “Where was I...? Oh, right. It’s been so hard regaining trust in people...” She continued with her story, pausing to take small sips of her every now and then. After fifteen minutes, the drug kicked in.

She started coughing suddenly and lifted her hand to her forehead, her upright posture wobbling. After she grasped the arm of the couch, I set my cup down on the table and walked over to her. “Here, let me help you,” I said, carefully lowering her into a reclined position. I sat down on the cushion next to her on the couch as she furrowed her eyebrows and uttered confused words. After she closed her eyes, I rested her head on my chest and stroked her hair, humming and whispering, “Shhh, it’s alright. Let it happen. No more pain,” over and over again until she fell quiet. My silent tears fell delicately onto her face. Ten minutes later, I felt her arms go completely limp. I stood up and looked at her. Crouching over her, I repositioned her to lay horizontally across the couch, then placed a pillow under her head and rested her arms comfortably on her torso. I returned to my bag and retrieved a single white rose. Kneeling at her side, I watched her for a moment—looking as peaceful as she was meant to be—then placed the white rose on her chest. “There,” I said softly as I caressed her cheek, “now you can finally rest.” I took the teacups from the table and rinsed them out in the sink. Then, after I placed a gentle kiss on her forehead, I left.

It was not the first time I had helped a sad girl escape the pain of her trauma, but it was the last. Her boyfriend called the police to investigate when he found her. The police found the fake pamphlet in one of her drawers and traced the number to a burner phone I had recently bought. They were able to tie me to the other 6 ‘murders.’ When the police arrived at my house to arrest me, I went freely but with tears in my eyes. I knew they wouldn’t understand the pain of what those girls had gone through. What I had gone through. I wasn’t able to help more people after that.

I lay in my bed in my cell, still haunted by my trauma. The thought of my suffering, and knowing that there are more people still out there suffering, paralyzes me. But there is still one more person I can heal. Climbing out of bed, I tear the white sheet from my mattress and walk over to the small window. A tear streaks down my left cheek as I think of how many people I couldn’t save. Tying a noose in the sheet, I attach the end of the thin material to the cold, metal bars, and, from under my bed, retrieve the now dried-out white rose that started it all. I return to the

window, slip my head through the knot, and take my last breath of air. The flower slips from my hand, and I am finally free.

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Category: Short Story

Breaking Bondage

Breaking Bondage

There comes a point when a person snaps. You. Me. Anyone. A balloon can only hold so much helium before it bursts. Human emotion is a balloon. Penned anger builds. And builds. Years pass. Suddenly it explodes. You do something terrible. Something you regret. You tell yourself it was justified, but as you stand over your kitchen sink, washing blood off your hands, you question, and you doubt.

He now rests with the fish. Family and friends said he was a good man.

“You’re so lucky, Marie. He’s lovely.”

They didn’t know. He made everyone see him through a lens that he had masterfully tinted rose. To them, we were “it,” the duo every couple wished to be. But we were actors in a staged play—he the writer, director, producer, and the star; I the ‘lucky’ debutante feverishly trying to justify her selection, practicing the moves, wearing what has been ordered, trying to hit the high notes, memorizing the lines, and foolishly believing the script to be her real life.

He was the master of stories, lies flowing effortlessly out of his mouth. I believed him, too. The daily screaming was to get the best out of me. The bruises from his punches were to hone my make-up skills, to find foundation colors that would cover up the dark purple blotches on my skin. The sarcasm and the ridicule were to keep me humble, I the future prima donna. And I believed the script, pretending that he cared out about me, that this was a love story. I was the fiancée, the meek and loving girlfriend, who was to be raised from rags to riches, having caught the attention of a benevolent, sharp-eyed, powerful man.

Hah. Look at me, now. The meek, loving murderer.

I don’t know how it came to this. I never planned it. Our wedding was to be a big event, something to match his status in life and to contrast with mine. My only skills being secretarial, I had been making frantic visits to the tailor, the event manager, the chef, and the travel agent to ensure things were turning out in accordance with what I thought Alex would want. On the night before the event, my dress hung in my closet, ready to adorn me in its white, bejeweled silk. The matching pair of shoes sat under it, still in the box for fear of dirt and grime. The guests were on their way, on planes or in cars, from almost every state. I had spent the day running from the hair salon to the nail salon, from the mall to the travel agency. Exhausted but faintly excited about the big day and then the planned honeymoon in the Caribbean, I pulled in my Chevrolet Spark behind his Mercedes Maybach in our driveway. For that night, I was determined not to let in thoughts of how the Maybach was without dings and I bruised, Maybach counted and I discounted.

I used the front door. The air was thick with whiskey vapor and the floor was littered with beer bottles. He was slumped in his favorite leather chair in the living room—quite a cartoonish sight, really—a beer-bellied torso on which was stuck a sculpted face atop a thick neck, muscular arms dangling by the sides of the chair, thick flesh of large forearms showing, legs flexed at the knees and resting sideways on an oversized ottoman. His long, jet-black hair looked greasy, like he had forgotten to shower. His face was unshaven, and he was still in the clothes he wore the day before. He scowled as he saw me. Apparently, I had again not lived up to some expectation of his. Innuendo rose to accusation, then slur, and he soon was shouting, like he did most nights of the week in his drunken stupor. A stream of curses beginning in Fs and Bs started flying. Over the years I had developed a sort of coping mechanism for such moments—retreating into my shell, blocking out the noise, etc.—but that night he looked so comical and helpless: a raging, pot-bellied Popeye yearning for his spinach to enable him to escape the chair he was stuck in. A smile broke on my face. This enraged him. The decibel of screaming rose. I laughed. This gave him enough adrenaline to escape the prison of the chair. He was up in a flash and my throat was caught in iron grip of the oversized palm of his right hand.

“Bitch. You don’t even deserve to be my maid, let alone my wife.”

His oily face stuck directly in front of mine, a sickening odor of alcohol and unbrushed teeth in my nostrils, his thundering voice sending shudders through my skull to my brain, my stomach backflipping, the room spinning, he pushed me back from the living room into the kitchen. When my feet began to slip on the tiled floor of the kitchen, he held me up by the neck like a hunter would a dead game hen. He was talking continuously, but all was unintelligible to me at that point. He pushed me against the kitchen sink, bending me backwards over it. His grip was growing tighter on my throat. He was squeezing consciousness out of me as I felt around for something to grab on to. My right hand landed on the knife block next to the sink. What happened next was a decision my body took in self-preservation—what would be called a reflex. Consciousness did not have a role to play, simply because I hardly had any. My right hand grabbed the handle of the butcher's knife, my right arm swung precisely to land the cutting edge on the neck of the offender, severing his carotid or jugular or both. Shouts turned to croaks. The grip on the throat lightened. Croaks turned to splutters. The grip started to fall away. Then the heavy thud of a fleshy body landing on a hard floor, and the grip was gone. I was breathing. Consciousness was creeping back in.

I looked down at the scene. I had never seen that much blood in my life. There was a strange beauty to it. It was emancipation in art form. The white of the floor was my freedom and the red of the blood was the price it extracted. I looked at Alex, or what used to be him. His mouth was open in a frozen emotion of surprise, pain, and the sudden realization of the end. Yes, art was all around me: blood splattered on the white, square-tiled, marble floor—a Piet Mondrian; the limp, flattened Alex, mouth agape—a Salvador Dali.

Virtuous murderers are supposed to feel guilt, at least they do in all the movies and TV shows I had watched. I prepared myself for a flood of emotions, I was ready to sob on the kitchen floor and never forgive myself for what I had done. But the feeling never came. I had felt more guilt eating a double scoop of Häagen-Dazs.

I'm not sure how long it took me to move, but when I pulled myself out of my trance, I went to work. I dragged into the kitchen the living room rug he had bought just two days earlier and rolled my fiancé in it. I dragged the rug and its contents to Alex's truck. It was quite a chore. I cursed him for his obsession with muscle mass. Then I drove to the lake fifty miles away where my father used to take me on most Saturdays when I was a child. One summer, my father bought a boat and brought it with us. I was ecstatic. A real boat, just for me! I brought my most prized possession along for the ride, the doll my aunt had made for me when I was born. Her name was also Marie. She had long yellow hair made of yarn and buttons for eyes. She was my favorite friend and I wanted her to see my favorite place. The boat ride was lovely. The wind whipped my hair, the water stung my eyes, and I felt free. In the middle of the lake, we found a place to anchor, and my father brought out the picnic basket. He had filled it with all my favorites: jelly pastries, key lime pie, cheese sandwiches, apples, and at the bottom of the basket sat two perfect, pink-frosted cupcakes. We ate and watched the water dance around us. Just as we were taking the foil off our cupcakes, my father pointed to a swan that had landed close to our boat. I wanted to reach out and touch it. My father held me up and I, still carrying Little Marie, stretched out towards the swan. I'm not sure how it happened, but I lost my grip on Little Marie. I watched in horror as she fell from my hands and was swallowed by the dark waters below. Atop that very spot now arches a bridge, and that is from where I dropped Alex into the lake that night, having unrolled him from the carpet and having tied heavy rocks to his feet. A sense of déjà vu flooded me as I watched him disappear into the lake. I wondered if Alex would meet his final resting place next to Little Marie.

Cleaning up was the hardest part. When I got back home, I dumped the rug in the outdoor fireplace. Next, I went in and washed and scrubbed the kitchen floor clean. I did the same to the bed of the pickup I had carried his body in. I added everything I used to clean up and all the clothes that I was wearing at the time of the incident to the rug in the outdoor fireplace and set the whole pile afire. Then, I took a cold shower. I turned the knob as far right as it could and let the water run down my back. A thousand tiny needles of water came down at me, their impact painful, their cold electrifying me. It felt good.

Sleep never came easy to me in that house. No matter how hard I tried, I could never turn my brain off. That night, however, was different. Worries had died. He was gone. No more monsters under the bed. No more bogie man in the closet. The instant my head hit the pillow, I fell into the deepest sleep of my life.

I woke up better, too. The day of my wedding was to be first day of riddance. I got up and started to get ready for the day. My wedding party was scheduled to arrive at eleven 'o'clock. Alex, being the recluse he was, wasn't going to have anyone over that morning, not even his groomsmen. That meant no one would note his absence until the ceremony.

Laden with beauty products, my bridesmaids did arrive right at eleven and took to making me up. Alex never let me wear makeup, so I now let my friends have a free hand at it. The next few hours were about powder, paint, glitter, silk, jewelry, and tulle. My hair was done in a braided bun on the top of my head. Synthetic-diamond butterflies were clipped into the mound of golden locks. My cheeks were rosier, and my eyelids sported a striking shade of purple that beautifully contrasted my bleached blonde hair. Lastly, I received my grandmother's floor-length, white veil. I looked at myself in the mirror and for a second thought I was looking at a stranger.

That can't be me. That person's pretty.

And then we were at the wedding venue, the quaint, red barn on Greenfield Road that had been turned into a wedding hall by a clever businessperson. The wedding theme was flowers, and they were everywhere: daisies on the backs of chairs, lilies and violets strung around the altar, rose petals covering the floor. Guests started arriving right at 4 p.m. My bridal party escorted me to a one-room apartment by the barn that was the bridal suite to keep me out of sight until my big entrance. A small window allowed the outside view. I watched the guests as they milled about and then proceeded into the barn to find their seats. Everyone looked happy. It was strange to see all the smiling faces. I smiled at the thought that those smiles would vanish in an instant if they knew what I had done. The betrothal was to be a 5 p.m. Ten minutes prior to that, my bridesmaids, except my maid-of-honor Sarah, left me to go stand by the altar. I was expecting an SOS from them saying that the groom had not arrived. Sarah did receive a text from one of them and asked me to get up to make my entrance.

I was a little puzzled. "Is Alex there?"

"Of course, he must be. I just got a text from Michele to bring you."

The walk to the barn was excruciating. Suddenly, I bore the weight of all my actions of the past twenty-four hours. The bride was headed to an altar that could not have a groom, and everyone around me was acting so calm. I began to tremble, and sweat began to break out of my pores, threatening to ruin the makeup. The world was spinning, my sight distorted, the barn in front of me just a red blur. As we neared it, I heard Sarah ask if I was feeling ok.

"You look like you're about to puke" she said as she wrapped her arm around my shoulders.

"Just butterflies in the stomach," I said.

I stopped at the front door to collect myself. I took a few deep breaths and repeated in my head the story I had planned for my family.

"Where's Alex? Is he not here? He said he was having second thoughts, but I didn't think he'd actually abandon me!"

That was to be followed by hysterical sobbing, my damsel-in-distress act. I may not be the best actor, but I can make do. After all, I had been able to convince everyone I loved Alex and that I had been happy with him. Yeah, I could put on a convincing act and then have my happily-ever-after in which Alex did not feature.

I took another deep breath.

I opened the door.

I froze.

He was standing at the altar.

Alex was standing at the altar.

I clutched my chest and rubbed my eyes. The man who was dead and gone and sunk was standing there in front of me. My heart was beating rhythmically fast and loud, and I was afraid the guests were able to hear it. Air must have been sucked out of the room because my lungs couldn't get any. My arms and legs were thousand-pound appendages, numb and useless, simply pulling me to the ground, ground that seemed to be the only place that was safe. How I remained standing, I don't know, because I was overcome with dizziness and my head was ready to spin off my neck.

Sarah nudged me forwards. I looked down at my feet and saw them move, one leaden foot in front of the other, each step more agonizing than the last as I drew closer to him. Could I be wrong? Could this man not be Alex? I checked. Alex had a birthmark on his right collarbone, shaped like a little heart. This man did, too. Alex had one green eye and the other brown. This man did, too. Alex had a tiny scar under his green eye from a soccer injury as a kid. This man did, too. Alex had a terrifying way of looking down at me. This man did, too.

Alex was back. And I was not a person any longer. I was an automaton following the rituals of American weddings. Tremulous but still upright, pipe-organ music playing, two bridesmaids holding up the hem of my long dress, I made it up to the altar. But do what I may, I could not make eye contact with the man who stood in front of me. Out of my peripheral vision, I saw his hands reach out for mine.

Oh my God. Am I marrying a ghost? Did I really check that he was dead last night? I'm gonna be sick.

I swallowed the bile rising in my throat and extended my hands to grab his. They were cold and wet, but they were fleshy. The hands I was holding were real. They weren't ghostly and they weren't holograms. Alex was standing in front of me holding my hands after I had killed him and dumped him in a lake hours earlier.

Millions of thoughts were racing through my head. I did not know which one to hold on to. I tried to keep my expression neutral. Then I tried to smile. It was like cutting slits into my sealed lips—a painful smile, indeed.

Alex leaned forward and down, his mouth inching closer to mine until I got a sickening waft of alcohol and unbrushed teeth.

"Missed me?" he whispered.

HAYS, REGAN**Regan Hays**

Age: 14, Grade: 9

School Name: Blue Springs South High School, Blue Springs, MO

Educator: Kimberly Blevins

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Goodbye Home

This cannot be happening. We cannot move into this place. Anywhere but here. Please My mind pleaded with itself, always saying the things that could never come out of my mouth. Our house was like a song that's constantly stuck in your head. It was beautiful listening to the lyrics in our laughter, anger in our arguments, and the soundwaves of our sadness, all mixing like watercolors on a rainy day.

That house, that closet, they were my safe place. A place I could go to get away. Whenever the gates to my emotions opened there was no stopping them. The tears came pouring down larger than a thunderstorm, larger than a hurricane. A tsunami of emotion washes over me faster than lightning and there's no place high enough in the world that can stop it from drowning you. *Where am I gonna hide?? Where am I gonna feel safe if it's not in that house, in that closet??*

Moving from one place to another is difficult in more ways than one. You must pack, move, unpack, adjust to the new house, and for children, adjust to a new school as well. *What if I can't make any friends??* Thoughts pound against the walls of my brain making it swell.

Living in my grandparent's house is torture. It's constantly smelling like smoke and it's constantly changing my family's life. My mother feels like she's never good enough, my father uses any and every excuse to get away, my brother thinks he's a failure, and then there's me. I feel like there's constant pressure building up. It's building everywhere. It's building in my chest and in my arms. It's building in my hands and in my legs. It's too much and I might buckle. I feel this persistent need to be perfect. *Why?? I can't stop saying sorry and I can't stop these feelings!! Make it stop!!*

June 1st, I said goodbye. I said goodbye to the only home I've ever known, and the only place where I felt accepted. Letting go is a part of life. *Yeah well it sucks!*

Change and growth. These two things make up a person for one reason and one reason only. It's because we have to. Some get tired with the same old thing, but others need things to stay the same because it's "safe" for them. *Get out of your comfort zone they said.* Comfort zones are meant to be broken. How do I know this? Well it's simple. I was afraid to write stories because I thought they weren't ever good enough. That I wasn't ever good enough. Sitting there at my desk, I looked around my tiny blue room and realized I am good enough. I am talented enough to write. When people told me how good my stories were I played it off like they were just saying that to make me feel better, yet in reality, part of me knew they were right. I put off submitting this story till the last possible moment because I wanted to make sure it was amazing. Maybe even so amazing it'd win. The truth is, I'm not submitting this to win. I'm not submitting this story to prove something. I'm submitting it to get out of my comfort zone and tell myself, "I don't care what anyone thinks because I tried my hardest and I did this for myself. The feeling I get when I write is better than any feeling a couple of judges can give me."

My bedroom is where all of these ideas and stories come from. Now I'm going to have to make more memories, but just in another room. Life moves on, right? Returning to say goodbye one last time, I freed the tsunami. I let my emotions roll out of my eyes and onto the carpet one last time. I opened the closet door and shut it, making sure it contain one thing it didn't before. Curling my body into a ball made everything go away. All the fears I once had are in the back of my mind, *for now*, and I could breathe again. Taking in a shaky breath, I wrote something on the wall of that closet in neat tiny writing. I could hear my thoughts loud and clear, *It's time to let go now. Goodbye.*

Leaving my house, closet, and the note behind, I made peace knowing someone was going to use that closet the same way I once had.

Dear Newcomer,

This house is special, but not nearly as special as this closet is. Below the note you will see a

stuffed unicorn. Know this was my way of saying goodbye. Please take good care of it and hold it whenever you're sad. The unicorn will listen no matter how happy or sad you may be. I hope you find your voice in here just as I once did.

HEATH, HANNA**Hanna Heath**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Smithville High School, Smithville, MO

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Capture The Moment

Capture The Moment

Summer nights. Lake trips. Fall weekends. Homecoming. Snow days. Sunsets. Fresh Flowers. City Market. School Parking lot. Florida. Football games. Some of my favorite memories and all of it shot on a 35mm disposable camera. After fourth quarter of my freshman year being taken away due to Covid, I decided to never take for granted of things being “normal” ever again, and started capturing the small moments of high school on a \$13 camera. After missing out on part of the high school experience, I realized the easy part of high school was making unforgettable memories, the hard part was remembering them.

March 13, 2020, was the day that everything changed. Last day before spring break, of my freshman year. Little did we know that we would not be returning to school for the rest of the year due to a global pandemic. Everyone was devastated. The next couple months would consist of zoom calls, online school, and being stuck in the house. Eventually, things got a little better, the quarantine was lifted, and I was able to see my friends for the first time in what felt like forever. We soon realized that we were missing out on the last part of our first year of high school, and that was something that we will never get back. All of this sparked the idea of a purchase that would become such a big and fun part of the rest of our friends' and I's lives.

Something as simple as a disposable camera to capture all the fun and memorable moments of high school. Soon I found myself taking this camera with me everywhere. About 15 cameras, and 414 photos later, this hobby has shown to be pretty enjoyable. Catching the most off guard and candid pictures, to posed and cute, everyone loves getting these pictures back. The camera takes about a week to get developed, and to get the pictures back. At this point I'm on a first and last name basis at the Walgreens in Platte City. Everytime I go to pick up the pictures from Walgreens, it feels like Christmas. You're not quite sure of all the pictures on there, but you just know they're going to be good, just like on Christmas morning. I would say the most exciting part is seeing how happy everyone is after I send the pictures back to them. Their faces always light up and become so excited to see all the fun pictures that were taken. I think the reason these pictures are so special is because it's so much more unique than just your typical camera from the phone, a sense of reality is added to them.

20, or even 40 years from now I hope to look back on the pictures that me and my friends have taken, and I'm able to say those were some of the best years of my life. Because, this is the only time in our lives that we'll be in high school. After these four years everything changes, and I won't be able to drive just 15 minutes to the school, and meet up with my friends. Or get the chance to see my friends on an everyday basis. Or go out and spend every weekend with them. I want to be able to remember how much fun I had in high school, and I never want to take for granted another year of my life. I can confidently say that I am going to continue to capture the unforgettable memories of high school on a \$13 camera, because these are the days I never want to forget.

That's what isolation did. Made us rethink and put things into perspective. Me along with all of my friends soon realized how valuable the few years of high school we have, are. Spending our fourth quarter of freshman year in quarantine for 2 months meant being on our phones day in and day out. Screen time among young adults during the March-April lockdown increased to nearly 13.5 hours.(eyesafe.com) Although lock down has ended these habits have still transferred over into our everyday lives. Teens and young adults are on their phone more than any other generation, in fact 45% of teens say they are on their phone almost constantly. (pew research center) I do agree, our phones keep us connected with one another, and allow us to capture the moment with just the click of a button. As

convenient as this is, it's become a problem as well. Being able to see a photo right after snapping it, causes us to obsess over it. Obsessing over the photo, then soon causes us to miss out on the moment. Instant gratification. Exactly what our phones give us. In the blink of an eye, you can have a memory captured, but at the same time you miss out on the experience. Disposable cameras allow you to capture the moment, without getting caught up with what the picture itself looks like.

Delayed gratification. Presented in the form of a disposable camera. A disposable camera consists of 27 pictures, and after sending it in, takes about a week to develop. All of these factors create a build-up for the pictures. This build-up is something my friends and I compare to Christmas. Not knowing what you're going to receive, is an excitement like no other. Then after receiving the pictures you are able to look back on the memories captured, and are also able to recollect the experience itself, this being a form of delayed gratification. Delayed gratification in itself has numerous benefits. Long-term success, improved self-worth, and being able to experience true happiness instead of just immediate pleasure, not to mention being able to fully experience the moment captured in the photo, and not having to worry about what your hair, face or body looks like. Instead, you just snap a candid pic, and continue on with the moment.

Living in the moment is something that I have struggled with. I often find myself caught up worrying about the little things, or catch myself being on my phone way more than I should be, where instead, I should be soaking up the experience." Carpe diem." The Latin phrase that means to seize the day. This phrase alone has helped me to rethink the worrying, and to take a step back from my phone. When I think of this phrase the physical representation I see is a disposable camera. A disposable camera doesn't allow you to get caught up in the moment. It forces you to move on from that "bad pic" you think was just taken, and to continue on with what you're doing. The past is in the past, the future is tomorrow's problem, and all you have is now.

All we have is now, is something that hits close to home as someone who is getting close to the end of their high school career. My goal for the remaining time I have left in high school is to soak up everything. Live in the moment. Create memories that will last me a lifetime. Carpe diem. Take pictures, go out with friends, go make memories. The biggest lesson I've learned from high school so far is, you're only here once, so make the most of it. Put the phone down, and live the experience. Putting the phone down for me looks like picking up a disposable camera, and capturing the experience. Not only capturing the moments of my high school experience, but also the experience of my classmates. I want them to look back on these days, and remember the good, the bad, and the crazy, just as much as I want to.

Who knew something as simple as a disposable camera would be something that myself and many others find so meaningful and fun. Something that was having such an impact on my experience as a high schooler. A simple disposable camera creates the benefits of delayed gratification, and causes us to step away from the distractions of phones, and the need to look perfect all the time. To accept the memorable moments that are captured, and appreciate the experience that was made.

HEDGE CORTH, ANDREW**Andrew Hedgecorth**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Smithville High School, Smithville, MO

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Critical Essay

Rhetorical Analysis of Florence Kelley

In her speech at the 1905 National American Woman Suffrage Association in Philadelphia, Florence Kelley makes clear that labor laws and the work field full of children must change in order to free the children from toil. Kelley's speech is full of juxtaposition, rhetorical questions, pathos, and logos to sway the voters of America (men) to vote for her cause. She uses a tone of empowerment and urgency towards the audience present at the National American Woman Suffrage Association.

Kelley's use of juxtaposition is seen thoroughly through the speech in order to emphasize the laws and how terrible the workforce is. We see towards the beginning of the speech where she compares all the states and their rules on child labor laws. She does this to show us what every state is doing, and how even the best state is mistreating the children in the workforce. She makes this an emphasized point to set us up for the rest of her speech as she continues to argue against these unfair laws. Another example we see is when Kelley says, "...boys and girls, after their 14th birthday, enjoy the pitiful privilege of working all night long." This is when she is explaining a New Jersey law that was repealed in order to allow children to work through the nights. She describes it as a "long backward step." She also describes the work field as a "pitiful privilege" to the children who work all night long. Her use of juxtaposition in her quote helps her point stick into the heads of those listening. It helps put it into perspective for us to see how the children are dealt with the amazing privilege and opportunity to work, but the pitiful time of being stuck with hard, long, unfair nights every day of the week.

Another thing we see is Kelley's use of rhetorical questions in order to show us the steps that might need to be taken before the child labor laws can be changed/pushed to be changed. We see two examples of this. Her first rhetorical question is as follows, "If the mothers and the teachers in Georgia could vote, would the Georgia Legislature have refused at every session for the last three years to stop the work in the mills of children under twelve years of age?" This question's purpose is to call out the legislature (all men) for the terrible job they have done protecting the children from harsh work conditions. She makes a point at the beginning of the question about how the vote may have been different if the mothers and teachers (all women) were allowed to vote on this issue. This is her way of saying women should have the right to vote without being blunt about it. Her second question brings up another example of this in the state of New Jersey. Kelley's question states, "Would the New Jersey Legislature have passed that shameful repeal bill enabling girls of fourteen years to work all night if the mothers in New Jersey were enfranchised?" She emphasizes this point by asking these two questions back to back in her speech. She is implying the fact of how if women could vote, things might be different.

Kelley brings out the best of emotions and demonstrates pathos all throughout her speech in order to make us feel for the children and the situation they have been dragged into. One thing she says is, "A little girl, on her 13th birthday, could start away...and could work in the mill from six at night until six in the morning, without violating any law of the Commonwealth." This makes us feel terrible for those little girls who are stuck working all night long. Imagine the mothers who send their little girl away every night from the time they turn 13. But they have no say, so they have to just sit back and watch as their little kids suffer. Another example that makes our stomachs quench is, "Children braid straw for our hats, they spin and weave the silk and velvet wherewith we trim our hats. They stamp buckles and metal ornaments of all kinds, as well as pins and hat-pins. Under the sweating system, tiny children make artificial flowers and neckwear for us to buy. They carry bundles of garments from the factories to the tenements, little beasts of burden, robbed of school life that they may work for us." This whole paragraph makes you sit back and feel terrible about yourself. She puts the males in their place. She makes them feel terrible that they sit there and sleep all night while the poor children work all night to make all their wants and needs.

As Kelly brings out our emotions, she also brings facts to follow and presses the use of logos in order to back up all of the change she wants to push into the world. At the beginning of the speech she brings up state laws that are not good for the children, so she can set up her argument. She says, "North and South Carolina and Georgia place

no restriction upon the work of children at night.” This sounds terrible. Children at the age of 5 could work in the mills at night while the adult sits in bed and sleeps. This makes her argument even stronger by showing how little the law helps the children who are forced into the workforce. She also brings up how it is not just the south that has this issue. She makes it known that the Northern states also have the same issue. She states that “For Alabama limits the children's work at night to eight hours, while New Jersey permits it all night long. Last year 40 New Jersey took a long backward step. A good law was repealed.” She fully sets up a claim that the country's unfair laws are not protecting the children of America.

This speech does a great job using rhetorical devices in order to get behind her idea that the children need to be freed. She uses juxtaposition, rhetorical questions, pathos, and logos all throughout her paper to help support her idea and allow for change to be made.

HERZOG, GRACE**Grace Herzog**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Lindbergh High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Megan Roegner

Category: Journalism

The Model Minority Myth in High School: A Discussion with Asian American Students*Names of students are changed to protect their privacy.*

For many students, earning an A on a test results in celebration with teachers, friends and family members alike. For Sarah, academic success is expected.

The senior in high school is largely regarded as a genius, and her recent full ride to college has secured her reputation as such. The case is similar with Vincent, a junior who maintains a perfect GPA while taking all honors classes.

However, both Sarah and Vincent's success is often blown off by their peers. They both identify as Asian American, a group who make up roughly 4.7% of the study body at their school. While each individual puts in momentous effort to achieve, they are both classified to be the same: innately smart, as if their heritage is enough of an explanation. As Sarah put it, "sometimes students will look at my grades and say, 'oh, it's kind of expected of her to be academically successful.'"

Asian Americans are studious. Asian Americans are quiet. Asian Americans don't cause trouble. These widely held beliefs become stereotypes; stereotypes create standards and standards set for Asian Americans force them down the path of submissivity. Labeled as the model minority, the narrative pushed in the later half of the twentieth century praised Asian Americans for "assimilating to whites." Neglecting the complex history of racism towards Asians in the US, the public coined Asians as the minority group who didn't complain. As journalists like William Peterson worded it, Asian Americans' hard work and economic income propelled them to a status big enough to "overcome their discrimination."

In many regards, COVID-19 and the surge of Asian hate exposed the myth for the lies it upholds; yet the stereotypes it created remain ever present in the lives of Asian youth. The culture in schools across America categorizes Asian students into a certain mold and says that their success is valued differently. It expects them to achieve while simultaneously diminishing their achievements. It tells them that "smart" is their only option.

From an early age, Sarah recalls coming to terms with the unreasonable academic expectations others held of her. "It's this reality I had to face," she said. "For learning, Asians are held to a higher standard than other students."

How can we expect Asian youth to succeed when the only standard set for them is success? When we label achievement to a certain race, where is the room for individual effort? Vincent experiences these double standards firsthand when he's compared to his classmates. "I feel like my success doesn't carry the same weight as someone else's. If I do this well and someone does as well as me, they're doing better than me and they're succeeding more than I am because of the stereotypes Asians are held to," he said.

Social psychologist and Columbia professor Claude Steele argues that stereotypes, whether negative or positive, can subconsciously be a defining factor of one's identity. The model minority stereotype, as crisis counselor Dorothy Jiang adds, causes Asian American students to weave "being smart" into a piece of their identity. "Asian Americans are seen [by society] as perfect to the degree that they are robotic and emotionless," Jiang said. "So if you don't achieve this myth status then your Asian American identity is threatened and that belonging is disrupted."

This myth status and the demand to appease it burdens Asian American youth. During the studying process, Sarah becomes “easily agitated and easily angered,” and whenever she scores well on a test, her predominant feeling is “relief.” As Vincent said, “it’s kind of a pressure because you’re always seen as this person who does well, so it forces you to perform in a certain way.”

The fallout of not living up to societal expectations can be detrimental. Coupled with diminished success, the pressure to succeed provides a foundation for imposter syndrome in Asian American youth. The syndrome, first discussed by Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes, is defined as “a collection of feelings of inadequacy that persist despite evident success.” When researcher Afran Ahmed asked a group of students to agree or disagree with the statements linked to the syndrome, phrases like “I’m afraid people important to me may find out that I’m not as capable as they think I am” and “I feel bad and discouraged if I’m not the best” resonated with Asian American students nearly one point more than the other students surveyed. When these imposter feelings grew, burnout, anxiety and low self-esteem followed. As Vincent admitted, “I think I have a sense of imposter syndrome—I’m always seen as this smart person, but after so many years of trying to get good scores you become burnt out. You get a bad grade or something [and] you kind of feel bad about yourself. And one small error can make you feel stupid.”

One might look at the rise of imposter syndrome among Asian youth and blame a failing education system. They might credit the feelings of inadequacy to the so-called “tiger parenting” in Asian American families. They might dismiss the model minority concept entirely. Yet racism is so deeply woven into America it is both hard to notice and easy to dismiss. It’s how the model minority myth has continued to cause harm. For half a century, society told Asian Americans to persist and keep their mouths shut and it will be seen as a virtue. But there is nothing virtuous about Asian Americans suffering in silence. “Asian Americans might have ‘achieved,’ but at what cost?” asked Sarah. “We still face stereotypes just like any other group. We still have these expectations placed against us. We’re all struggling because of this one issue: racism.”

Sarah and Vincent will soon graduate high school and a new wave of Asian American students will enter. The model minority stereotype, however, will remain. “Sometimes it feels like it’s an issue that can’t really be solved,” Vincent said. “Because no matter what you do, there’s always going to be people that perpetuate the stereotype. There’s always going to be some people that don’t understand.”

Fostering an environment where no child feels confined to their racial expectation will face critics and backlash. Analyzing the “harmless” stereotypes within us will be revealing and uncomfortable. But we owe it to the past, present and future generations of Asian Americans to try.

HERZOG, GRACE**Grace Herzog**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Lindbergh High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Megan Roegner

Category: Humor

A Guide to Predicting the End of the World

Theorists studied the Mayan Calendar and assured that the world would end on December 21, 2012. William Miller predicted that he and his followers would transcend into heaven on October 22, 1844. In 1806, a domestic hen laid eggs inscribed with the message "Christ is coming." [1]

What came first—the chicken or the egg? Is there really life after death? What is the purpose and meaning of time? Is cereal a soup? Such questions have plagued humankind for centuries. Yet one question triumphs them all: when exactly will the world end? Knowing this information could make you the life [2] of the party. Maybe you're looking to impress your date, prepare humanity for its inevitable doom, or acquire more knowledge to understand your favorite apocalyptic television show. No matter your reasons, with the right behaviors and observations, you'll have everyone roaring with existential dread before you know it!

Step One: Catch Up on Your Religious Readings

Reading is important. Don't believe me? Believe Oprah Winfrey, a beloved American talk show host notoriously known for giving out multiple cars to her audience while screaming "You get a car! You get a car!" As Oprah once said, "Reading is a way to expand my mind, open my eyes, and fill up my heart." Luckily for you, [3] there are roughly 4,000 religions [4] in the world, each entailing their own religious texts. Studying prophetic books will deepen your understanding of the predicted end times. But the only way to utilize these readings is to take verses out of context. Only then will your predictions make logistical sense to others.

Step Two: Pick a Day...Or a Month...

You have 365 options for when the end of the world could be. Statistically speaking, that gives you a 0.0027% chance of picking the day the universe decides it's done with humanity's constant BS. [5] Add in what year the world will end and your odds get drastically lower. But have no fear! There is no rulebook to predicting the end of the world [6]—experts in the past have chosen a specific month or year based on the religious texts they've taken out of context. The world [7] is your oyster!

Step Three: Publish a Book

Publishing a book will enhance your credibility because a) people take published authors seriously; and b) books are always credible. If writing a book doesn't fit your forte, websites have been proven to have the same effect. Publishing an in depth Reddit post on r/futurology is impactful but not advised. [8]

Step Four: Thank Mother Nature

On the rare occasion that publishing a book doesn't establish your credibility, [9] look to the thing that will be most affected by the end of the world: the world itself. An earthquake happens? The earth is coming to an end soon. A category five hurricane wipes out all of the Caribbean? Get ready folks, Jesus [10] is about to plow through earth like someone committed all seven deadly sins at once and confessed it to their awfully judgemental priest.

Step Five: Say Goodbye to Your _____

When earth's inevitable deadline approaches on the monthly calendar, you and your cult-like followers may be asking yourselves: "Do I really need my \$8.99 monthly subscription to Netflix?" The answer is no, you don't. You and your cult-like followers may follow up with a question: "Well, what about Hulu?" I must tell you, once again, that the answer is no. [11] Worldly possessions have no meaning when there is no world to possess them on. Bid them farewell and trek onwards with the knowledge that you just saved yourself twenty dollars a month.

Step Six: Climb a Mountain[12]

Picture a vast landscape covered in greenery and roaming animals, resting beside a sunset so vibrant your eyes will never be the same again. Now picture you on the toilet. Which scenery would you want your last impression of earth to be?

Step Seven: Wait

...[13]

Step Eight: Extend the Deadline

So the world didn't disintegrate before your eyes on the expected day, month, or year. That's okay. Failure is a part of life. However, if you learn from past mistakes and develop a plan of action for the future, you can bounce back from almost any faulty end of the world prediction! As the old saying goes, if at first you don't succeed, try, try again. Keep trying to predict the end of the world; one day it will happen. [14] And when it does, you can be sure you get your recognition and fame in front of all the doubters just before the universe as we know it collapses.

[1] SPOILER ALERT: the world did not end in any of these scenarios.

[2] or death

[3] and Oprah

[4] Approximately 14.4927536232 times more than the number of cars Oprah has given out.

[5] BS stands for baloney sandwich, of course.

[6] Besides this one, obviously.

[7] or in this case, the end of the world

[8] Legally, at least.

[9] People these days are getting dumber and dumber so this step will most likely add the finishing touches to your apocalyptic instincts.

[10] or whatever respected religious savior you decide to go with

[11] The same goes for Disney Plus, Peacock TV, HBO Max, and the other hundred exploitative, money grabbing, soul sucking streaming services society has access to.

[12] If a mountain is unattainable, a tree will suffice.

[13] If the end of the world has not happened yet, proceed to Step Eight. If it has, you will never have the chance to read this. I congratulate you on a job well done.

[14] We are going off of the assumption you will still be alive to experience it.

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

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: John Pierson

Category: Critical Essay

A Study on Chris McCandless and the Nature of Individuality

A Study on Chris McCandless and the Nature of Individuality

Individuality is a complex concept, and an idea that will never have one settled definition. The Oxford Dictionary defines an individual as a “person considered separately rather than as part of a group,” and a definition in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines an individual as “an indivisible entity.” Merriam-Webster’s definition is rather straightforward—an individual has a cohesive identity. Oxford’s definition is a bit more intricate, and in my eyes, leaves out an important condition. While I believe that an individual is separate from a group, I also believe that an individual is not able to exist without the existence of a group, and without the responsibilities that the individual has to the group. As a result, in this essay I have defined an individual as a person who is able to be singularly and meaningfully autonomous, and using this definition, I will assert that one’s ability to happily be an individual is largely defined by responsibility to others. Furthermore, I will show that Chris McCandless’s own conflicts and relationships clearly reflect this assertion.

In his roughly two year journey, Chris McCandless was responsible mainly to himself. While his journey intersected with others and he seemingly made friends along the way, he felt very little responsibility to others. For example, in the Spring of 1992, when Wayne Westerberg, “both shorthanded and busy,” asked Chris to postpone his departure from Carthage to Alaska for “a week or two longer,” Chris “wouldn’t even consider it.” (67) Chris had been friends with Westerberg for almost two years, and yet he felt no obligation to help a friend who was clearly in need. In a similar fashion, when Ron Franz asked to adopt him, Chris “dodged the question” and “slipped...out of Ron Franz’s life.” Never mind the fact that Franz, a loner who’d lost his wife and child in a car accident, had driven him halfway across the country: Chris had a knack for “flitting out of [people’s] lives before anything was expected of him.” (55) Indeed, on his two year journey, McCandless repeatedly avoided obligations to others. However, despite McCandless’s loathing of responsibility for others, he by no means was an “indivisible entity,” or singularly autonomous. Indeed, dual identities completely contradicts the notion of “indivisibility,” and Chris was deeply conflicted, split in two by his Chris McCandless and alter-ego “Alex Supertramp” identities. Chris was the man willing to conform to society and its standards, while Alex was the adventurous man who had started the two year country-wide journey. These two identities fought within him constantly throughout the trip. In his journaling, he used his “Alex Supertramp” pseudonym and in third person dramatically detailed his adventures, such as losing his way on the Morelos Dam river. However, he used his real name briefly in his work as a McDonald’s employee in Bullhead City, Arizona. This stint in Bullhead was “an uncharacteristic break from his cover” (40) of rural living, and was in fact the only occasion he used his real name in his two year journey, until his deathbed letter, when his dream-like romanticism of nature had been erased by his gnawing hunger and devastation. The conflict between these two identities seemed to tire McCandless incessantly. He had to obey the constraints that the real world had created for him (money, travel, other humans) and yet at the same time he had to grapple with his untamed romanticism of nature. Because of these conflicting realities, it is not surprising that his most commonly used name on the trip was “Alex McCandless,” a combination of his two battling identities. Indeed, during his journey alone, Chris did not have an individual identity. While he was not responsible to others, he still was unable to be truly individual; McCandless’s warring names thoroughly kept him from being singularly and meaningfully autonomous.

Additionally, whether he was aware of it or not, Chris McCandless’s greatest moments of joy and fulfillment as an individual appear to be in the few moments in which he was sharing responsibility with others. For example, McCandless’s community which he had formed at Carthage absolutely delighted him. The “attachment McCandless felt for Carthage [was] powerful” and “before departing, he gave Westerberg a treasured 1942 edition of Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*.” (19) Chris also wrote some of his most heartfelt and joyful words in his letters to the people he’d met on his trip. Taking on the responsibility of keeping in touch, Chris sounds more fulfilled than ever, telling Franz

that he “really enjoy[ed] all the help [Franz had given him] and the times [they] spent together” (56) and imploring him to, like him, “adopt a helter-skelter style of life.” (57) In writing this to Franz, Chris is able to define himself more clearly as a “helter-skelter” individual, giving himself a true sense of autonomy and individualism. In what was his only letter to Franz, Chris was able to achieve a profound fulfillment and sense of self.

While Chris may not have realized the meaningful nature of his few moments of responsibility to others, he definitely understood the importance of those moments in the days leading up to his death. Just a few days before he wrote that he was “STARVING” in his journal, he annotated the text saying “an unshared happiness is not happiness” in *Doctor Zhivago* with his own “HAPPINESS ONLY REAL WHEN SHARED.” (189) Though we will never know why, Chris had suddenly come to the same realization as the one I assert: without a group, there are no parameters for defining an individual. Indeed, the only real way to meaningfully be an individual is to be responsible to others.

It is very important to note that we are missing a lot of key information about Chris McCandless’s life--most notably, his own testimony. His last writings suggest that he realized life meant nothing without others, and that one could not be an individual without others, but we don’t know what Chris was truly thinking when he annotated that book. All we know anecdotally about Chris was purely from others and their stories about him. Perhaps when he annotated that text he was thinking less broadly, and about a particular situation. Or perhaps he was in a philosophical mood in that particular moment on that particular day. Perhaps he was tired and hungry, and so he wrote anything that popped into his mind. The truth is, we do not know. We will never know.

Furthermore, this paper’s definition of “individual” was entirely subjective. With even a slightly different definition, a reassessment of McCandless’s role in individuality would be necessary. And my own experiences and biases have no doubt played a role in my own definition for an “individual” as well.

However, with the evidence we have, and through my eyes, Chris McCandless and his journey seem to very clearly reflect the fact that responsibility to others makes up the very fiber of being an “individual.”

IVATURI, KALIKA

Kalika Ivaturi

Age: 16, Grade: 12

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Eleanor DesPrez

Category: Short Story

Us Through the Seasons

Too much of water hast thou, poor Ophelia...

-Hamlet, Act IV

Hearing muffled sobs, I carefully peer through the door of the greenhouse. Who I find is none other than Caroline Jones sitting alone, probably trying to escape the 40 degree November bite. What could Caroline of all people have to cry about? She's perfect, at least that's what everyone says. With her caramel hair elegantly framing her face, her rich daddy and houses all over the country, and her flawless grades that everyone says she gets without even trying, it seems like she has no problems. Me on the other hand, I don't have half the things she has, yet here *I* am, about to go comfort *her*.

Quietly, I open the frost-covered doors as herbal aromas immediately hit my nostrils. Caroline's back is to me--she's hunched over, head in her hands. "Hey," I say a little awkwardly. She stands up and turns around, startled that anyone else is in the greenhouse.

"Hi, sorry," she responds as she starts packing up her things to leave.

"No no, it's all good," I say, lifting my hands up in surrender. "I just heard you from outside and wanted to make sure you were okay." Caroline stares at me, her emerald eyes wide. She opens her mouth a couple of times, but no words come out. As she sets her bag down on the bench, I can see her body slump slightly.

"Oh, um. You know, I don't actually think anyone at this school has ever asked me that," Caroline finally replies with a slight chuckle. My face contorts in confusion. I mean, I knew she spent most of her time alone and didn't really talk to anyone, but I just thought she chose to do that because she was rich and stuck up like everyone says. Right now, though, she doesn't seem like that at all.

"Well, if there's something on your mind, I'm all ears," I say with a shrug. "Sometimes it's easier to talk to a stranger." Caroline sifts through all the possible moves she could make right now as her face shifts from expression to expression. Wordlessly, she sits down again--back facing me--and looks over her shoulder, inviting me to come over to her.

Caroline's hand is warm to the touch. Blankets wrapped around us, we sit outside on her doorstep as the Christmas lights illuminate the shadowed sidewalk of Caroline's street. She leans her head on my shoulder, and I feel our bodies ease into each other. "My mom would always bake a pumpkin cream pie for Christmas," she whispers with a soft chuckle. "Hands down the best thing I've ever eaten." The tranquility of the black sky continues engulfing us when the sound of a small snuffle captures my attention. As I wrap my arm around Caroline, I see her shedding silent tears with a blank face, staring straight ahead. "I guess I just wish she didn't leave," she states monotonously. I nod, unsure of what to say. She has told me about her mom before, about how she never got close with any friends out of fear that they would leave her like her mom did. She has told me I'm an exception, the *only* exception she ever made since her mom left. I have no idea why Caroline made that for me, but I thank God every day that she did.

I hate when she cries, and I hate that no matter what I say I can never make her stop. Pulling her up so she is looking at me, I wipe the tears from her soft skin. As I look into her eyes, my chest erupts with anxiousness, but it's the good kind of anxiousness that you get when you are around someone like Caroline. I haven't told her yet, but I love her.

"Caroline, I'm never gonna leave you. You know that right?" She places her head back on my shoulder, eyes staring blankly into the street once again.

"Yeah, I know," she responds. Quiet consumes the spaces between us as the sinking feeling that she doesn't believe me at all grows in the pit of my stomach.

Springtime scents fill my nose as a light breeze flies through my sundress. I sit, waiting for Caroline at our usual after-school spot, but she hasn't responded to my messages or been at school the past couple of days.

Ever since the start of the new year, Caroline has been having episodes like this where she goes off the grid for a few days at a time. I've tried to get her to talk to me about them, but she always finds a way to evade my questions and change the subject completely. I have no clue as to what she does during her time away, but I can definitely imagine. Caroline is not one to ever utter a word in school, but she's an entirely different story once you get her out of there and alone. She's always belting out her favorite songs in her room or talking about whatever interesting news is happening around the world or thinking about crazy hypothetical situations and asking me what I would do if I was in them. I'll bet that right now she's reading up about some insane conspiracy theory or something and trying her absolute best to remember it all so she can recount it to me later.

Either that or she's trying to make some headway on the mural on her bedroom wall. Her mom started it for Caroline years ago, but it has remained unfinished since she left. Caroline used to tell me that maybe if she could finish it, her mom would want to come back and see it for herself. But I guess I can't be too sure of what she's feeling anymore since she's so absent nowadays. I miss her. A few weeks ago, I finally told her that I loved her, and all I want to do is tell her again. I'm crossing my fingers that she shows today.

The sweltering heat of June pounds down on me. "Aren't you hot?" I ask Caroline who is sitting in the seat next to me screaming the words to our favorite Frank Ocean song as I drive us around aimlessly. She has persisted with long sleeves despite the season changes, and I'd be lying if I said I didn't know why. Last week, Caroline was sleeping over, and while she was asleep, I pulled up her sleeves to see what was under them. That night, I cried harder than I have ever cried before. Images of her scarred and burned skin flood my mind day and night. Visions of her with blood from the cuts streaming down her arms and the brightness of a lighter reflecting in her eyes as she brings it down to her skin have brought me severe panic attacks. The more I try to get her to talk to me about what's really going on, the more she just laughs it off. Caroline laces her cool left hand into my right.

Smiling at me, she says simply, "Don't worry about me, I'll stop soon. I promise." I've tried everything I can to help her, but none of it is working. I love her--I'll never love anyone more than I love her, so I guess at a certain point I just have to trust her.

One week ago, I started the new school year with Caroline. Today, I'm standing in the front row of the crowd gathered at her gravesite getting ready to watch the love of my life be lowered into the ground. Closing my eyes, I fall back into my memory of the last time I was with her. She was beautiful as always, but she seemed tired, defeated. I dropped her off at her house and she told me, "I love you, Alina."

Immediately, I said, "I love you too." Before I could completely shut the door behind me to leave, she opened it back up and jumped on me, nearly tackling me to the ground.

"I'll miss you," she said. I laughed and told her it would be alright; tomorrow morning I would be back to pick her up. She just smiled at me and nodded, and then I walked away.

I didn't think that when she said she would stop soon this is what she meant. As I peer down at her, it strikes me that she has never looked more at peace than she does right now. The weight of her mom leaving, of her crippling loneliness--it all seems to have disappeared. But not because she dealt with the pain. Because she just found a way to take it all away. And I couldn't save her. The only person I've ever loved, the girl who is so much more than everyone thinks she is, the one I claimed I would do anything for--not only could I not save her, but I've lost her forever. I just want to hold her, to *feel* her again. With an uncontrollable trembling hand, I reach over to caress her fingers one last time. Caroline is cold to the touch.

IVATURI, KALIKA**Kalika Ivaturi**

Age: 16, Grade: 12

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Shannon Koropchak

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Making Sense of America: Reflections of an American-born Indian Woman on Her Place in America**Understanding the Average Asian Immigrant: The Immigrant Mentality**

So the other day I told my parents, “I don’t think I will ever live in the South. I am at my lowest in hot weather, and it gives me racist vibes.” And my dad responded, “Well you shouldn’t let that stop you!” Honestly, I was baffled. What does that even mean? I think this really perfectly demonstrates the major disconnect between the Asian immigrants and their children. Neither will ever truly understand the other. Of course, there’s going to be racist people everywhere. But I’m living a life in which I don’t have to actively put myself in those situations. You see, my dad doesn’t understand that because he had no other choice. His first job in Louisiana was the only option he had. I can go anywhere in this country I feel like going, his only other alternative was back across the Atlantic. He doesn’t get this because of the immigrant mentality: anywhere here is better than where they were before. Ever notice how most Asian immigrants will have the utmost patriotism for America no matter what is going on in the country? Yeah, that’s the immigrant mentality. But why are the immigrants pushing this mentality onto their children? Does it make them feel more American? It’s almost as if by forcing this mentality onto me and the other children of immigrants, the immigrants are solidifying their place in this country. It’s like they have a path here that was meant for them. Like they are the people that bravely put themselves in the middle of racism in the faint hope that they will be able to overcome it one day and live to tell their kids about it.

You see, neither my dad nor I really comprehend just how different our childhoods were. The people around us, the type of schooling we got, the things we faced growing up. I think I will always have a negative version of America based on my childhood, and he will always have a positive one because of his. Facing American exclusion while growing up has made me want to be different. But for my dad, American exclusion has made him want to stay even more because even American exclusion at its worst is better than anything that he might have faced growing up back in India. It’s almost as if all the racism he faced here was somehow worth it to leave that rough childhood behind, and he has now earned his place in America as a sort of reward for everything he overcame. This is, again, an example of the immigrant mentality. So, the racism I faced growing up, the Asian immigrants will see it as wrong, sure, but they also see it as something to just push through in order to get to a better life. But obviously, that’s totally backward. Racism is not a stepping stone you need to take to get across the river leading to your finally blissful future. It’s something that shouldn’t have been in the water to begin with.

A Woman, South-Asian Vice President. Whoop-dee-doo

One second, let me just jump around in circles and scream at the top of my lungs in celebration of this monumental occasion like, it seems, everyone else is doing. Finally, a woman as Vice President of the United States, but not President, of course; that would be an absurd proposition. And not only is Kamala Harris a woman, she is a woman of color: half Black, half Indian. I wasn’t really sure how I felt when I saw that it happened. Sure, it was pride-inducing to see someone that represented me in center stage for the first time ever, but I couldn’t help, and still can’t help, but feel weird about it. I hear so much, “Oh, we’ve come so far! Oh, she’s breaking down so many barriers!”, but pretty much every major world player has had a woman as the President before, including India. Why is it that we, the supposed most developed nation in the world, have had to “come so far” in the first place? This shouldn’t be a celebration in my opinion. This should just be the norm. I mean, I’m glad that America is progressing, sure. But the fact that America’s entire existence was supposedly founded on the tolerance of others yet this is the *first* time a WOC is in this kind of political position is disheartening to say the least. For years to come we’ll be saying, “The second Indian woman VP...The second Black woman VP...The first woman President...The first Latinx President...” and so on and so forth meaning that even years from now, we will still only have a few POC in high ranking government positions; America will still be on a round of firsts and seconds when in reality, we should have lost count by now. But WOC shouldn’t have to wait for society to become more accepting or more prepared for

them or whatever. We shouldn't have to cater to the needs of people who weren't ready for something like this, because the fact is that everyone should have been ready for this a really long time ago. I, along with all other WOC in America, don't have to be excited about Kamala Harris being the Vice President if we don't want to be. We don't have to feel grateful towards a white majority as if they somehow did us a favor by finally voting someone into office that looked like us because frankly, they didn't; this is not an exception worth cheering for, this is simply the expectation of America now. If the white majority gets frustrated by this kind of sentiment, then it is clear that voting Kamala Harris into office was never about lifting up minorities in the first place but rather about making themselves feel like they've done something to help us, and that I most definitely will not celebrate.

The Asian-American Experience: Appropriation

What is the deal with people and Asians? America claims to be this magical land where all people can come together despite their differences and accept one another for all that they are, and then they put a target on our backs. The other day, someone I used to go to school with posted a picture of him rollerblading and smoking around the Hindu temple. I swiped up and told him, this is so offensive, take it down. He told me that I shouldn't be getting mad over a joke. The word "joke" rang in my ears for the rest of the day. How could he say that, turn that simple word into such a weapon? He was trying to push this off on me, focusing on the fact that I shouldn't have gotten mad instead of the fact that what he said was wrong, but I was not in the wrong here, he was. What about Indians and Asians is a joke to you, I thought? To America? We don't just exist for appropriation or to be made fun of, so why does it constantly feel like we do?

Social media has no doubt enabled rampant cultural appropriation. When brown people congregate to practice their religion, be it Islam or anything else, the only thing they could possibly be doing is plotting a terrorist attack. But when white girls online steal aspects from those same Asian religions and present it as some new, profound idea, that is "spirituality" and is acceptable. Not once have I ever seen a white person who talks about spirituality credit the ancient Asian religions they undoubtedly got the ideas from; it really makes me feel like they don't want to learn, they just want to steal what they later will make fun of me for. When Indians are proud of their culture, including authentic dresses, jewelry, food, etc., it's weird and abnormal. But when Coachella rolls around, you can bet on white people stealing classic bindis, henna, nose rings, and more for their "aesthetic", whatever that means. There are countless more examples of this appropriation that exist in America, which Asians have been trying to stop for years but clearly still haven't succeeded in. So, why is this happening? I ask again, what is the deal with people and Asians? It seems that America actually benefits from Asians just like it benefits from anyone else who is a contributing member of society, so why are we treated like this?

America brings over-educated Asians to work for them and make money here. Of course, many Asian immigrants are not, but a lot of them are able to send their kids to good schools, and those kids get good grades and, later, high-paying jobs, and then the cycle continues on with their kids. But, Asians aren't like other Americans, you see. We are *immigrants*. It seems as though no matter what Asians do in America, we will always be seen as "other" and "foreign" because we don't fit into a box of Black or white--almost as if we are fake Americans. If we are not real Americans, it might then seem ok to people to make fun of us or our culture and not be afraid of facing consequences for it. If we are not real Americans, then suddenly insulting rhetoric becomes a joke, and I can't get mad about it because my culture and I never belonged here anyway. It's almost impossible for me not to think that everyone views me this way when all over the internet I see my culture being stolen or made fun of constantly with no remorse, and worse yet being told I shouldn't even be upset about it. I was born and raised here--I am an American through and through. So I ask, for long are people going to see me as a fake American when I know that I belong here just like any other white person in this country?

Understanding the Average Asian Immigrant: Patriotism

In America, everyone has at least a little bit of patriotism for their country, even if you absolutely hate it. But next to white rednecks, I've never seen more outward patriotism from anyone other than among Asian immigrants. The majority of Asian immigrants are Republican or Conservative, always have been and always will be. The majority of them take Fox News as gospel just because it reaffirms what they've been trying to convince themselves their entire lives: America is great, and I made the right choice.

Growing up in America, I think a lot of us first gens don't really understand how they could think like this. How could they so explicitly love a country that has never once loved them? A country that wants rich brown people to come to America and indulge in a capitalist society but then turns its back on all innocent brown men in the street as soon as any type of terrorist attack occurs? A country that teaches us, these immigrants' children, that we should be embarrassed by who we are? The immigrant mentality is strong here. My parents would have absolutely no idea about my experiences with racism in school growing up if I never told them; racism was never this known thing that they warned me about or even really acknowledged because they simply did not want to acknowledge it, whereas I

so desperately do. Acknowledging racism would have turned their rose-colored glasses view of America into something they had been trying so hard to avoid seeing--America doesn't love them the way they love it.

My dad says to me a lot, you may hate America, but you have no idea how things are in India, you are so lucky. And I think, wow, he's right. None of us really appreciate how good we have it here. But then I think, huh? If you're able to see the problems with India, how are you not seeing the problems with America? Why is this such a blind spot for him? I agree, *we* have it good. But so many people in this country don't, and collectively we could all have it way better. I feel like I choose to understand that, but I don't think a lot of immigrants want to. It seems as though recognizing America's faults comes at a cost for a lot of immigrants: the cost of feeling like they belong somewhere. You see, we were born here, so we feel a patriotic duty to help our country move forward because this is our home. But if immigrants accept that America is not this amazing land with rainbows and sunshine that they always dreamed it was and that it doesn't think as highly of them as they think of it, then will they feel like they have a home anymore?

JOHNSON, LEVI**Levi Johnson**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Smithville High School, Smithville, MO

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Short Story

Anything Like You

Levi Sebastain Johnson

Anything Like You

I step onto my front porch and watch my little brothers play basketball. There goes Kareem not taking it easy on Malik, even though I've told him eight times not to be too hard on him.

"Come inside. It's gonna rain pretty soon." I tell them.

"We'll be fine." Kareem says, trying to change my mind but I'm not convinced.

"Mmmmmkk. Malik I know you'll get sick though"

"Okay" He says, stumbling up the driveway, the sleeves of his oversized hoodie flop in every direction. I brush my hand on his coarse short hair, I need to get him a new barber. A line up doesn't mean take half the hairline away.

"Can I watch Nick?" He asks

"Go ahead. I have to finish up on some homework."

He runs through our nearly empty living room, onto the small red suede couch, he rips the blanket off from the top cushion onto him and flips on the thick box TV on the other side of the room, held up by an old shelf with red paint that's peeled off.

I walk into our kitchen, the plastic floor caves in under my feet. Another thing I need to fix. I grab an apple from the basket that hangs from the ceiling and take a bit from it. Sitting at my small round wood table and pull my college algebra textbook from the backpack propped up against the table, I think I'm getting better. I fly through my questions in only 20 minutes.

I go back into the living room and see a weird looking white guy on the screen twisting his body in all types of directions.

"What's wrong with him?" I ask sterning my eyebrows and tilting my head.

"That's Mister Crocker. He's crazy, he wants to steal Timmys Fairly Odd Parents"

"Ohhh." I realized "I thought they were secret."

"They are. He's the only one who knows about them. That's why people think he's crazy. I saw a theory on youtube that he used to have his own" Malik explains.

"You're on youtube too much little boy." I giggle and kiss the side of his head. Then sitting on the more uncomfortable grey couch by the red one.

Kareem walk's in later, His hair and clothes soaked. I watch him walk into the kitchen to drop off his ball and shoes and retrieve his backpack. He pulls out a Jordan box and hands it to me.

"Check these out Liyah"

"Some shattered backboard's huh?" I say brushing my thumb across the smooth leather. "You know I'll have to steal these right."

"I'm not gonna let you get the chance" He says sarcastically.

"What? making varsity have you feeling cocky now, freshie?"

"You know I can beat you at anything"

"Ok John Henry."

"Ok mom."

My heart stings a bit after he says that. I choose to end the banter.

Later that night the sound of three knocks over the tv gives me an uncomfortable familiarity. It's like a sixth sense. I

can feel his presence anytime he's close. I barely creek open the door.

"How'd you find me Terrance?"

"Don't disrespect your parent by calling them by their first name." His breath smells like coffee but there's only one drink I've ever seen him put his mouth on.

"Listen Aaliyah I know we've disagreed but I'm here to join my family now." He says pushing the door out of my control. He always does this. He says something nice but does something to undermine you at the same time.

"How's a kid get a place this nice? You better not be hoein around to get whatchu want" He smirks at me with his sleazy grin and unstable brown eyes, the same eyes I feel cursed to have.

"How dare you say that to me" I cut him off and get in his face.

"I work for what I have. Can you say the same?"

"You sound a lot like your mom did."

"If you really cared to look you'd see I'm not like her at all. She was a girl with no hope, who's only trait is talkin shit on people when they're not around. With no school, no self respect so she fakes it for a man like you-"

"Watch yourself"

"A tripped out, fuck head. That's obsessed with being the biggest and baddest everywhere he goes. but the second you get caught up in your own dumb shit you suck whatever you can get out of other peoples lives."

The sound of my voice is interrupted by smack that knocks me off my feet.

"I'll take the boys wit me then. Since you wanna act like you know everything."

I get up to my feet quickly. He's big but I train for this. I grab his right ankle and push my head on his back to drop him to the ground and put my hand over his mouth.

"The only thing you're taking is your drunk ass outta my house"

"Since you wanna act so ballsy I'll treat you like you have a pair." He elbows me in the gut and I feel the wind leave my lungs, then his paws grab hold of my hair and his knee takes over my vision. I feel my nose crack like an egg on the side of a pan.

I can't see anything but black dots and can only hear the sound of tornado sirens. Then I feel another punch hit my face, then my ribs, then my neck.

How could I let this happen again? Am I really no better? Was I just put here to be another sad story? Another example of failed potential?

Or is letting yourself believe that the whole reason it becomes a reality in the first place?

Somehow my arm grabs hold of the metal bat I hid behind the door and swing it against his narrow chin. Knocking his teeth out his mouth and his jaw out of place. He slumps over me now, two-hundred pounds of dead weight.

After I inch my way from under him I roughly drag him to the front of his car and tell his new girl of the week to pick him up. My legs quiver while I walk back into the house. I grab ice from the freezer and a bag to make an ice pack. Then breathe in the dark for a few minutes.

The light flickers on, and I see Kareem in the doorway with his hand on his stomach and his eyes half open.

"I threw up." he groans.

"take some ibuprofen. You can stay home tomorrow"

"Wait what happened to your face"

"I tripped on Malik's skateboard, don't worry about me. Get some sleep."

"Ok. I love you."

"I love you too."

My face hurts so bad. I can feel something crack every time I scrunch my nose. But I have to be strong for them, the opposite of what my parents are. Cause if I don't break the cycle, who will?

JONES, ANNA**Anna Jones**

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: Parkway West Middle School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Tracy Bouslog

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Like a House of Cards

Like a House of Cards

When it was time to get out of the car and walk up to my dance studio for Ensemble auditions, a nervous shiver ran down my spine. Dozens of unanswerable questions flew through my head.

What if I'm not flexible enough?

What if everyone else gets in except me?

Am I not good enough?

I've never felt like this when it came to dancing. I was... scared. Not even for ADT (the American Dance Troupe) auditions was I *this* flustered. They were really easy and just about everyone who auditioned got in. But for two years I had to muster up the courage and skill to audition for the competition group at my studio, and all of my work during the year before had gotten me to this point. I've been dancing since I was five, but I've never been in a group like Ensemble. They travel to weekend-long dance conventions and compete in those company's competitions. I badly wanted to travel with them, and during the days leading up to the auditions, I was pretty sure that I would be good enough to try out. However, during the audition, I knew that I didn't have the best flexibility and that I may not be as experienced as some of the other dancers in the room, but I've never doubted myself as much as I had that day. I was so nervous, I couldn't concentrate on anything other than the dubious thoughts running laps in my mind, psyching me out.

This is it.

There's no going back now.

I either get in or I don't.

Simple as that.

I quickly tried to replace those thoughts with positive ones as I walked into the building, but they still hung in the back of my mind, taunting me when they're given the chance. Though I did get distracted from these thoughts by my friend who also showed up. We both became giddy with excitement when we saw each other. We sat and talked for a few minutes, discussing how we thought the audition was going to go while we waited for others to walk in.

After about five grueling minutes of waiting, it was time for the audition to start.

The judges gathered everyone onto the floor and taught us a short excerpt from a lyrical piece that was being planned for one of the team's groups to perform. The combination was fairly simple, so it allowed me to add some creativity to the movements. After we went over the choreography a couple of times, we were split up into smaller groups to have more space. I was in the second group, and I patiently waited for my turn, propped up against the wall, flexing my hand nervously as I watched my friend perform with the first group. She did well, and I knew she was going to get in. That lowered my confidence slightly. My mind was like a warzone, doubt constantly battling my tenacity, turning into a vicious cycle that lasted for a while.

When group two was called, I took a deep breath and walked out onto the floor, closer to the wall in the back. I got into my pose, and when the music started playing, I ran the choreography through my head as I flowed through the movements. Luckily nothing was able to distract me. Not even the degrading thoughts that were running through my mind a minute earlier.

I did pretty well on the floor work, and nailed the double turn at the end, but missed one of the small jumps. It wasn't that noticeable, but my heart dropped to my feet with shame when I realized my mistake. I'm an extreme perfectionist, so I felt like I failed myself. I soon realized that I wasn't the only one who missed it, but I still felt bad about it afterward. The shady thoughts came back to run more laps in my mind as I stepped off the dance floor for the next group's turn. My thoughts were racing a mile a minute, as fast as a speeding train.

See? You can't dance.

Your feet weren't perfectly pointed.

*Your arms looked lazy.
You aren't good enough.
Your so-called confidence is pathetic.
Maybe next time.*

After everyone had performed the combination, we did kicks across the floor. We could do whatever arm positions we wanted, but I just kept it simple and focused on getting my legs high. I held my arms out strongly at shoulder level instead of doing other arm positions, so it looked cleaner. Some people did creative arm positions, while others were slightly off-beat. Then there were the pretty much perfect people who had both creative arm positions and great kicks. I desperately wanted to be them, but I didn't want to risk slipping up in front of the judges by looking lousy or messing up.

Shortly afterward, we did improv. I smiled excitedly under my mask at first, I love improv in lyrical class, but when I came to realize that it was jazz improv, my smile dropped. I'm not that enthused by sassy fast jazz. I still was able to show a little of my sassy side by doing generic fast turns and kicks, but I would've been much more original if I was doing floor work and slower movements like in lyrical instead. But I understood that they had to have some variety for the audition, so I wasn't in that bad of a mood. Some people had great improv and were fun to watch, and I tried to convince myself that I didn't do too bad compared to them, but I wasn't that convincing.

Finally, to conclude the audition, the head choreographer announces our last assignment.

"So, to finish off the audition, we would like you all to tell us why you want to be in Ensemble."

Okay, that's... Simple. I concluded in my mind. The task wasn't difficult, but I knew they weren't going to be impressed if I used a generic reason. When it was my turn, I nervously stood and faced the judges in front of me, briefly relaxing for a moment as I started to speak. "I want to be in Ensemble because not only do I want to compete and take classes with new choreographers, but I want to grow as a dancer by being challenged in a new environment that'll make me work harder than ever before." If they were impressed by my answer, their faces didn't show it. Then I sat back down, shoulders slumped slightly, and let out a quiet sigh of relief.

But then...

The thoughts came back.

Of course, they came back.

Other people had much better reasons.

You're not good enough.

Why are you even trying?

Maybe next year.

I tried to shove those thoughts out of my mind, but they were too strong. I started to question my chance of getting in more than ever before. I started to imagine all of my friends getting in except me, them showing the dances in various classes, and me sitting against the smooth, cold mirrored wall watching them, wishing to be them.

"Thank you for coming, you all did an amazing job. You should receive an email in about two weeks with your results, and we can't wait to see you at rehearsals!" The head choreographer's bubbly voice shook me out of my stupor, and I almost couldn't comprehend what she was saying, but I tried my best to concentrate on her words instead of my thoughts. I nodded blankly without thinking and then just like that, everyone was dismissed. All that anticipation for me to just doubt myself almost the entire time. Great.

While I was putting on my sneakers, I tried to act excited when talking to my friend, but I wasn't believable.

"What's wrong? Are you okay?" She asks me, her eyes clouding with concern.

"Yeah, it's just I'm wondering whether I'm going to get in or not," I responded hesitantly, tossing my jazz shoes into my duffel bag.

"Don't worry, you'll get in! You have to believe in yourself! You did great!" She answered brightly, hoisting her bag over her shoulder.

"Thanks, you too!" I replied, scrambling onto my feet, hoping that what she said would be true.

And then...

It hit me.

Why am I even doubting myself?

Why would I question my abilities, when I put in all of my effort to complete the tasks?

How am I supposed to believe that I'll get in if all I do is think I won't?

The only way I'm going to get in is if I believe I'm going to get in. If I want to get in.

And I do want to get in.

I am good enough.

I will get in.

And when the warm summer breeze hits my face as I exit the studio with a widening smile, I saw the situation in a brilliant new light.

KAPPAS, EVA**Eva Kappas**

Age: 16, Grade: 12

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Megan Zmudczynski

Category: Journalism

Race and Education Inequality in St. Louis**Race and Education Inequality in St. Louis**

At RISE STL, a youth-organized online event tackling education inequality within St. Louis, Ishmaiah Moore described her experience with ‘the question.’ A 2019 graduate from Hazelwood West, she wondered about the conclusions people may draw from her, solely based on her school name:

“I think in the North County community, people think of it as the ‘fancy one.’ Then whenever I branch out to South County schools, or students who go to Ladue or a Parkway district, they kind of look down upon Hazelwood West; [they think] that it’s like the ‘ghetto school.’”

“Where did you go to high school?”

In St. Louis, Missouri, we’ve all asked ‘the question,’ heard ‘the question,’ and named our school with a degree of humble pride, curiosity or even suspicion. But our feelings with ‘the question’ may be very different from someone who grew up just five miles north or south.

In a historically socially stratified city, no matter the response to ‘the question,’ religious, racial and socioeconomic associations flood our minds. Though we don’t like to admit it, this classic St. Louis question is popular because it provides context in which to see a new acquaintance, drawing what we think is a window into their life—but really just drawing them into a box.

In St. Louis especially, the quality of education varies greatly among both public and private institutions. Although it is well understood today that price determines quality, education wasn’t always a commodity to be bought and sold. The RISE STL summit attempted to explain the history of that shift.

In order to understand the origins of racially and economically segregated schools, we must go back to St. Louis in the 1900s. During the Great Migration, White residents of St. Louis were worried that the influx of Black residents would threaten their jobs and decrease their property value if low-income Black families moved into White neighborhoods. In 1916, St. Louisans had a referendum and passed an ordinance that prevented anyone from buying a home in a neighborhood more than 75% occupied by another race. After that policy was made illegal by a Supreme Court decision the following year, some neighborhoods employed racial covenants, asking every family on a block to sign a legal document promising never to sell to a Black person.

In the 1950s, when White families moved to the suburbs in “White flight,” residents in many historically Black neighborhoods in the city were evicted in order to build highways and “urban renewal” projects. “We removed so-called slum neighborhoods...We have spent enormous sums of public money to spatially reinforce human segregation patterns. And it’s been very frightening to see the result.” said Michael Allen, director of the Preservation Research Office, to STL Magazine.

STL Magazine relays that “Urban geographers describe St. Louis as a donut hole—empty in the middle and encircled by doughy counties.” Today, St. Louis remains one of the top ten most segregated cities, emphasized with the literal dividing line of Delmar Boulevard.

So how does this relate to education?

On the Zoom screen of the RISE STL Virtual Training, a slide reads in all caps: “The funding of public schools by property taxes ensures economic segregation due to redlining.”

Redlining, the policy of federal lenders to refuse loans to people living in and near Black neighborhoods on the premise that the loans were a “poor financial risk,” makes it nearly impossible to move out of those “empty” low-income neighborhoods. And because school districts are funded by property taxes, richer areas with higher property taxes have more money and therefore more resources for their school systems.

“We know that segregation in schools ended in 1964, however I’m sure we can tell that segregation in schools hasn’t ended just by looking at the makeup of schools that [you all] went to,” Sunny Lu, a Ladue senior and speaker at RISE STL, explains. “This has a lot to do with discriminatory housing policies. If you live in an area that’s predominately White and predominantly wealthy, then that’s what your school is going to look like.”

Desegregation bussing programs have attempted to combat racial segregation between schools by bussing students to schools within or outside their school districts. In St. Louis, the Voluntary Interdistrict Choice Corporation (VICC) provides St. Louis City students transportation to suburban schools, allowing them to receive a better education than otherwise available to them.

The VICC bussing program has allowed over 70,000 Black students from St. Louis City to attend schools in St. Louis County since 1981, and yet the program has started to phase out and will entirely stop admitting new applicants by 2024. Clayton school district already ended its bussing program this year. As to what will happen after the bussing program terminates, Eric Knost, Rockwood superintendent and VICC chairman for the 2017-2018 school year, tells the Riverfront Times: “We really haven’t even scratched the surface yet on what’s to come.”

And that’s not even taking private schools into consideration, which provide their own students an advantage over public school students through greater access to resources, smaller class sizes and college counseling services. After *Brown v. Board of Education*, many White families that opposed integration pulled their children from the public school system. They enrolled in newly created “segregation academies,” private schools with fees that effectively made the school only accessible to rich White students.

Lu says, “While not all private schools have explicitly racist or exclusionary foundations, the highest quality of public education simply cannot exist with rich parents being able to simply opt out of public education via private schools.”

So does education inequality really come down to the decision of rich, overwhelmingly White parents who want to give their child the best possible education, even at the expense of educational and racial equality?

Brianna Chandler, a RISE STL Organizer and student at Washington University in St. Louis, believes that “education equality definitely relies on dismantling capitalism and getting rid of private schools.”

On the opposite side, former Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos consistently supports school choice and privatization, increasing the quality of education for some through charter schools and school vouchers.

Smaller steps to improving public education could take the form of reallocating state funds to low-income school districts. By rearranging already collected money from state income taxes, families would have no tax increase, and students in low-income districts would benefit from more resources.

So what does all this mean for students currently *in* the school system, public or private?

Chandler says the best way students can break down the stereotypes furthered by questions like “Where did you go to high school?” is to meaningfully engage with their peers at other schools and “get involved with initiatives that bring students from different schools together...[such as] Youth Leadership St. Louis. It is also helpful in getting involved in your community, as well as social media... especially as people are talking more about politics now on social media, that can expose someone to views they wouldn’t have encountered before.”

She remains optimistic: “Education equality can be achieved within our lifetimes. It’s just going to take a lot of effort to get there and de-normalizing the idea that it’s okay for some people to receive a better education than others.”

KAPPAS, EVA**Eva Kappas**

Age: 16, Grade: 12

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Megan Zmudczynski

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

The Accident**The Accident**

A youngish man braces himself in a tree, pushing down with a chainsaw on the limb he is cutting. He calls down to his friends who stand with hands on their hips and heads tilted back. The leaves shiver, the air is warm and spring-humid, new petals are slick with past rain. My grandmother watches from below, holding the chain she'd come to deliver. The saw cuts well, shredding the soft wood. Then the branch hits a wire, wavering below like a snake, and electricity surges through its wet bark, through the chainsaw, coursing into the man in rivulets through his left palm that sear out through his feet. When he falls, he drops stiff as a board. His heart has stopped. He hits the ground with enough force to shake the roots of the tree and his heart jolts back to beating.

Half a block away, my mother, practicing her balance on the retaining wall in the front yard, hears a sound like a bass drum being slammed right next to her--the sound of the voltage arcing through her father's body.

In the car, two young girls strain to see out the window. They stare with wide eyes and simple faces. The younger of the two remarks, "Oh, dad's shoes came off."

...

"I remember thinking, 'Oh, Dad must've gotten tired and laid down.'" That's my Aunt Kelli. The apt shoe-noticer was my Aunt Becca, who was only two at the time of my grandfather, Papa Gary's, accident. What's odd is that both daughters remember going with my grandmother to deliver a replacement chain and thus being on-scene during the accident, yet my grandmother maintains that she only got there after, when "he was conscious;" she never saw the fall. But in the recording where I ask my grandmother to describe the accident, my mom interjects constantly from the front seat. It frustrates me that Gram Pat, carefully and soft-spoken, doesn't have space to elaborate.

Kelli was six at the time of the accident, and turned seven a week later at a party christened by two birthday cakes, a Mr. and a Mrs. Pacman cake, baked by a relative as if to stand-in for her parents--during the party, Gram Pat was at the hospital with Gary, who was in the intensive burn unit: chunks of flesh had been blown off his legs and feet by the explosion. It was only after his burns had been treated that the doctors realized that he had no feeling beneath his chest. My grandfather's spine had been broken. He would never walk again.

My mom didn't see her father from the time he left that morning to trim the tree until five months later, at the Veterans Hospital in St. Louis. It's a small difference of an hour and a 1/3 mile proximity to their father that her sisters gained by going on the errand to deliver the replacement chain, but I wonder if my mom ever regretted her decision to stay out in the spring air rather than accompany them. When Papa Gary left that morning, she didn't know that she wouldn't see him for another five months.

I had never heard about the months between the accident and Papa Gary's return until my grandmother mentioned it offhandedly. He was moved from St. Johns Hospital in Joplin to the Intensive Care Burn Unit at the University of Missouri Hospital in Columbia, and then to the Jefferson Barracks VA Hospital in St. Louis, a half year during which his daughters never saw him. This hole in the timeline shocked me, a void without a father, some liminal space of hoping and abandonment. How would I go on for six months not knowing what was happening to my father? My Aunt Kelli told me, "Our family really pulled together to make things as normal as possible for us. We still kept up with our activities, softball. We had really good family support, we spent a lot of time with our aunts and uncles and grandparents." Simple continuance of life was a common theme. "It was...it was just the way it was," my mom said. But she adds, "That summer I went to girl scout camp for two weeks and that felt like a relief. Because for those

two weeks I could pretend like everything was normal.”

...

Today, my grandmother walks around singing hymns under her breath. The last time I visited her, I didn't even have to ask about Papa Gary. She just came up to me in the kitchen, wringing her hands. "You know in a few days, it will have been 6 years since Gary...passed," she began, and told me the same story about how when my grandfather was paralyzed in the hospital bed, he begged and begged for someone to bring him a gun. "And I finally just said: 'Sweetie, we have three wonderful children who need you.' And at that time, he just turned it around and started fighting. And he didn't ask anyone to bring him a gun ever again."

"That didn't happen. He said stuff like that all the time. Seriously, ask my sisters," my mom says when I bring up Gram Pat's framing. "Because when my mother said that in the car, I was like, that's not...true at all. I think what she meant was that he never said that again while in the hospital. Only she would know, because we never saw him at that point."

"Probably the first ten years after he was injured were really hard on him. I think he was really angry and depressed. Obviously he eventually handled it well, better than I could have, but I don't think I understood how much it affected his life. I don't think I appreciated that as a kid." Becca adds.

I heard that story three times while I stayed at my grandmother's house over Thanksgiving break. Each time I nodded, said, "That takes a lot of strength," and hoped she remembered that she had already told it to me. My grandmother often finishes the story with, "But we just have to trust in God, trust that everything happens for a reason." She speaks reassurances of God's will in all things. One time I pressed her on it. "But why would God want that to happen to Papa Gary?" I asked. I couldn't tell if her eyes were full of tears or reflected light. "I have no idea why certain things happen. We just have to trust in God," she said. One tear slid down the edge of her eye. The sincerity of the moment felt so almost fake, like a movie scene, that I immediately wrote it down.

My grandmother is the most devout person I know. As a child, she woke early and walked two miles to church alone on Sundays, skinny from one biscuit for breakfast and beans and potatoes for lunch and dinner. My mom says that she thinks my grandmother's reliance on religion stems from her upbringing in a volatile household and was reinforced by the accident. "If she questioned the idea that everything's not controlled by God's will, I think it leaves a lot of gaping holes that she doesn't want to address. So it's easier to think that God controls everything." I clarify, "Gaping holes like, what, like that she'd have to suffer like that arbitrarily?" My mom continues: "Yes, then the question would be if it wasn't God's plan that my father was paralyzed for 30-plus years, then why did that happen? I think that would be uncomfortable for her. I think she finds comfort in the fact that she can say, 'Oh, that was God that did that.'" She adds, "To me it's problematic because then where does human will fit in?" I find that I agree with her. And to me, a God that would cause such pain is more frightening than the unknown.

In the recording of our conversation at this point there's a pause. I'm sitting on my stool in silence. "Sorry, I'm just thinking about Gram Pat. Because she just glides around." Non-confrontational and kind, she avoids conflict and does all tasks with a sort of martyrdom. After Papa Gary was paralyzed, already a stay-at-home mom, my grandmother took on the traditional roles of both father and mother, cooking, doing laundry, as well as yard work and repairs. "She is very much a caregiver, naturally," Becca says, "When I was in college she came to visit me once, maybe twice. She always felt like she had to be home to help him." But I wonder: "Do you think she's bitter at all?" My mom responds, "No, she can't be, because she thinks it's God's will."

God's will that he fell, God's will that he survived, God's will that he went on to raise his three daughters. But I think this robs Papa Gary of credit for gritting out every day. Before the accident, as my Aunt Kelli says, "He was always out running, he ran several miles a day. Most weekends he spent at the cabin, hunting and fishing and canoeing. He was very active." The accident confined him to the house and forced him into dependency. But it also pulled him back into the family. "He was at home much more, and really thrust into teaching us...He was the best teacher I ever had." She says this emphatically. "What would he teach you?" Kelli continues: "Oh, everything. He taught me how to drive a stickshift, even though he's in a wheelchair. He pitched to me every night in the backyard, for softball. And a couple times I hit line drives right back to him and almost knocked him out of his wheelchair. Just stuff like that that you normally wouldn't think a parapalegic could do, he did." Listening to the interview, what's interesting to me is the unprompted turn my aunt makes after this description. "I do think he lost a lot of faith for a while," she continues. "I remember him saying a lot, 'Why did this happen to me, God must hate me.' He said a lot that he wished he would've died that day, for a long time. And then, once time went on, it got better. And he came to

realize, I guess, that everything happens for a reason.”

Did the accident happen for a reason? Without it, my family members’ lives would have been radically different. “Dad had talked about how maybe one day we would’ve moved to Colorado, or all these different scenarios. If he hadn’t been injured, then all of our lives would be totally different. I would’ve never met my husband. And, I think too, growing up with dad being injured honestly shaped my career as a physical therapist,” discloses my Aunt Becca. If the accident never happened, my mom may have grown up somewhere else, never met my dad, and I could’ve never been born.

More so than the event itself, I’ve found the aftermath of the accident and my relatives’ ways of processing it to be interesting. I now understand why my grandmother tries to reconcile the event, and the idea of the countless different outcomes of my family members’ lives, all branching out from the moment where the tree limb hit the wire, is fascinating. But I don’t want to call randomness fate. Unlike my grandmother, I don’t agree that everything happens for a reason. Instead of trying to rectify the accident, I am content to just better understand the people whose lives it irreversibly altered.

KAPPAS, EVA**Eva Kappas**

Age: 16, Grade: 12

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Megan Zmudczynski

Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy

Wish Twisted**Wish Twisted**

*What if stars were made of wishes
Bundled into streaking snaps of light?
Covets, desires, near-misses
Shimmer webs across the night.*

In the beginning, a black void ruled the heavens at night. There was the leaf-rustle, invisible and imagined emerald-green in the dark; there was the rising stream of cicada chirps, the wearying hug of humidity and the wavering shafts of cool air; the insect skitters, branches snapping, and if you were there to tilt your head back, absolute opacity in the sky.

And then there was a human, from somewhere (I don't know where), and immediately, there was a pinprick in the sky, like they'd taken a needle and stabbed the fabric of the dark. It was a wish. A smallish wish, a wish-I-didn't-step-on-that-sharp-pebble, and it was the start.

As population swelled, wishes bloomed across the sky in a network, one for every person. *You have a star*; mothers whispered to their children, *watching over you*. Some, the dreamers and the complainers, fed their stars a steady stream of wishes. Others proceeded--they thought--more pragmatically through their lives, but sent snippets of suppressed hopes up to the sky just the same, unarticulated but visualized in their mind's eye.

The stars absorbed wishes, collected them as they shot across the sky; the stars *were* wishes, bleeding white-gold longing out into the dark sky through their light.

We traced patterns with our eyes, lying on our backs in the dark; we created myths, established zodiac signs, predicted the future, measured luminosities, measured distances, compared them, charted them, and inevitably...

LETTER TO ESTRELLA LLC

APPROVED: The US Federal Air and Space Commercialization Bureau hereby authorizes Estrella LLC to attach Cable 1 and Cable 2 to Star SD:10000 for the purpose of extracting up to one quintillion Hyperwatts of wish-energy. Estrella LLC is permitted to expand such operations to include any stars that come under their jurisdiction, by company appropriation or leasing. No restrictions or regulations apply.

Experiment 1: ESTRELLA KNOWLEDGE COMPANY, Production Building #4, Grid: Street 24, Cross-Street 24, Room 4, Cell 100200

“Okay, what you're gonna do is sit in that chair--” an assistant gestures to the tarnished stool, as if inviting her to take a seat at a gala-- “and go through all of the wishes in your head.”

Tessa walks over to the stool, trying to pull ahead of his guiding hand on her back, and stays standing. To her left and right stretch rows of identical sitters, bodies rendered inhuman lines in drab uniforms with ramrod posture.

He glances at her, then continues. “There's no wish too big or small. If you run out, look around you. Think of more.” He says all of this in a clear, monotone voice, and then quickly backs out and shuts the door. He seems new.

This is not the worst she's had, not even close. Tessa would happily sit in a cold chair and wish for 12 hours. She wasn't too sad to sign away the rights to her star--or rather, its energy output, but she knows it's all the same, her wish-power siphoned away to sear the wires of another's mansion. Stars have accumulated the wishes of generations now, been recycled over for newborns, and she feels no particular connection to hers. It's not like the stars *answer* wishes; they just hoard them, feed on them like a parasite.

When Tessa visualizes roast pig wrapped in bay leaves and dotted with cherries, cooked cinnamon apple slices in a ceramic bowl, it doesn't fall down from the heavens on top of her brother's cabbage. When she fantasizes about buying the soft, lavender-scented soap bar, wrapped in paper on the silver platter in the window of Harriet's Home Modifiers, and gifting it to her mother, the soap doesn't materialize in her hand.

Tessa can all but hear her mother's gentle intake of breath in surprise, can feel the callouses on her hands as she takes the soap--but for all the vividness of her wish, nothing ever changes. The soap leers from the window, she stays on the sidewalk, and her mother hunches five miles away, stitching until her fingers bleed under a fluorescent light.

Tessa's here to work, so work she will. If there's something sleazy about exploiting stars for energy--she has a vague sense of morality--well, it's not for her to protest by refusing to wish and getting fired. Her mother rarely wishes, saying it discourages taking action. She holds her hopes on a tight leash, only murmuring prayers for her children because she knows they want more. Tessa has no such qualms. She leans her elbows on the table, puts her head between her hands and wishes.

Experiment 1 Under Review: ESTRELLA LLC HEADQUARTERS, Prime Building, Floor 100, Grid: Street 1, Cross-Street 1, Office of Damion Keyes, CEO and CEO (Chief Experimental Officer.)

Damion's not a bad man. He wears a suit with a red pocket square and has a close-shaven, sharp beard. He's really just a cog in the machine, if you think about it. He likes simplicity, his square gold paperweight, his clean-faced Rolex. He could be an asshole like his buddy Ted, who drinks himself into oblivion and screams at his secretaries; or he could be far, far worse. Damion is composed. He does not want to be cruel. When you knock on the door to speak with him, he first swivels his chair to face the window so he appears statuesquely lost in thought.

Today, he's thinking about the sheet of results. Their participants--he prefers that over "hired workers," it feels more egalitarian--did less well than expected. Their wishes were stale, stagnant. Linear increases in star luminosity indicate they repeated the same mindless phrases. Sheep could've done better.

Damion has benchmarks to reach. He has one thousand PowerGrids to electrify. He has schools to endow, awards to receive, and a baby boy on the way, who he will gift golden baubles.

Maybe it's best to let creativity soar when it comes to wishes, he decides. Maybe no structure at all will give him the yield he's looking for.

Experiment 2: ESTRELLA KNOWLEDGE COMPANY, Production Building #4, Grid: Street 24, Cross-Street 24, Room 4, Cell 100200

Today the assistant says, "Alright, everyone, for today, don't think about anything in particular. Just look at your surroundings. It's a beautiful day out." He closes the door to the windowless warehouse. The irony isn't lost on her. Tessa sits on the rusted stool. It's convenient that she doesn't have to wish. Maybe they're giving everyone a break, so that wishes are stronger tomorrow. She'll use this bubble of mental free space to plan meals for the week.

Benji wants spaghetti, and she can maybe get some if she goes to the outdoor market, really early, when they're breaking the stale pasta from yesterday. Mama has tomatoes in their windowsill garden, and she can fill a jug at the spigot at the market in case their water turns off again, to make the sauce after work.

Four more hours until she can walk back home and lie on the floor of their living room draped with its colorful quilts, old tapestries and worn rugs. Tessa loves the apartment, its warmth and brightness, the hues that seem to float off the fabric and diffuse into the air when sun spears in through the window.

This morning, the sun had peeked in through the blinds with a surprising ferocity for February. The sun had sustained its shine as she'd walked to work, the air crisp on her cheeks. Tessa hates that the assistant did that intentionally, saying it's a beautiful day out, when she's trapped in this room.

If only she were outside. If only she were at home--she could play candyland hopscotch with Sadie. Remember that? The hop, skip, and colorful chalk. An acetone burn goes down Tessa's throat. It's been two years since she's played candyland hopscotch with her sister. Once a newborn novelty, Sadie had matured into a chore, and one that Tessa had unintentionally pushed to the side. Why hasn't she spent more time with her? Tessa works, but she sees

her friends at the market, she takes detours to meet up with people and returns home late. Sadie has sat alone all these afternoons, anxious for her siblings to return. Tessa feels sick.

Experiment 2 Under Review: ESTRELLA LLC HEADQUARTERS, Prime Building, Floor 100, Grid: Street 1, Cross-Street 1, Office of Damion Keyes, CEO and CEO (Chief Experimental Officer.)

In Damion's office, on the wall to the right of the large window, one hundred lightbulbs form a grid. A wire lattice runs beneath them, fastening them to the wall. Under each lightbulb sticks a small metal plaque bearing a name: Henry Abara. Tessa Maria Divine. Vitor Sousa. These are the special ones, he thinks, the feelers. They have the potential to catalyze this operation, to cleave open the minds and emotions of humans for scientific study. Their wishes shine intensely. If he pushes the right buttons, he can access their emotional reserves, get them to want so much and so hard that their star nearly explodes with energy. Tessa Maria, he thinks, that's a pretty name. During her time in the company, her lightbulb has stayed on, reflecting the luminosity increases of her star. What's been working? Hopes, yearnings, wishes that she'd done something differently? Whatever it is, she's possibly his best performer. All he needs is a little more. A formula, a way to replicate her strong reactions in the apathetic others. Then he'll be safe. Then he'll be forever golden. He presses a button on his desk. "Send Strongman 5 to the Divine residence," he says. Just something he's been thinking about. Nothing more is needed.

Experiment 3: DEVINE FAMILY RESIDENCE, Building CZ, Grid: Street 2000, Cross-Street 3151, Apartment 15A.

Tessa wrestles the door open and shoves it shut behind her, slipping off her shoes before darting into their small apartment bathroom. The soap in the dispenser-bottle spurts out squeakily, watered down to ineffectiveness. She closes her eyes and wreathes her hands in phantom lavender. *If only, if only the soap bar.* "Mama? I found some rice this morning!" She yells out. "Do you think I could use some of your tomatoes to make a sauce?" Her mother guards her tomatoes like gold from the birds on their windowsill and from tomato-monster Benji, watching over the fruit like a hawk as their green-pebble buds grow ripe to the point of bursting. Best to ask. Tessa exits the bathroom and pads down the narrow hallway. "Mama?" In the living room with its bright-patterned quilts, almost ghastly in the overexposing light, she holds her hand up to block the bright square of sun. Where is her mother? "Mama?" she calls. She walks forward, glances behind the couch. All the blood in Tessa's body sluices down to cower inside her feet. Her mother's black hair is splayed across the maroon sea of the carpet, face starkly plain like an egg. Tessa falls to her knees, cradling the body. As the sun dims through the window, the colors going silent, Tessa's keening gets quieter and quieter. She lies folded in half on top of her mother's cooling body. If she opens her swollen eyes, she'll see, through the window, one star winking at her, pulsing white-hot.

Take 3.5: ESTRELLA LLC HEADQUARTERS, Prime Building, Floor 100, Grid: Street 1, Cross-Street 1, Office of Damion Keyes, CEO and CEO (Chief Experimental Officer.)

On the metal grid on the wall, the wire over Tessa Maria's name goes red-hot. Her lightbulb flares, then shatters. Damion's face, staring at the grid as he has been for the last four hours, doesn't change. He lets out a small, almost sad sigh. It worked. There's a knock on the door. Undoubtedly it's his secretary, come to deliver the newest report; Damion can already see the high spike of wish-power, printed in thick black ink on the graph. He swivels to face the window, places his hand on his chin. "Come in."

KETCHAM, BENJAMIN**Benjamin Ketcham**

Age: 13, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Erin Tegtmeier

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Locked In**Locked In**

It's November of 2019 in Wuhan, China. A new virus has been discovered. The news is already talking about it. Stores in China are shutting down. Memes about it are getting viral. It's January 2020, and the virus is spreading around the world and hitting the United States.

February 11, 2020 - the virus has been named - Coronavirus, or COVID-19. March of 2020, COVID-19 hits Kansas. They tell us we have to go into quarantine for two weeks. Quarantine is basically just staying in your home for a period of time. It's already Spring Break so this is just an extended Spring Break for us, as students, which seems amazing at the time! But then they tell us to stay for another two weeks, then three weeks; then a month and more.

At this time, I don't worry about getting COVID-19 because I usually don't get sick. But then more people get infected. Thousands turn into millions. I'm super bored inside. They start to figure out the common symptoms of the virus - sore throat, loss of taste and/or smell, shortness of breath, headache, body aches, and fever/chills. Now every little symptom sends people over the edge, wondering, *Oh my gosh, do I have COVID??*

Soon we're doing online school. Our school did Zoom and there were tons of issues. Also, did I mention we have to wear masks...all the time? We only did online classes for a few weeks until summer break came. It is probably the best/worst summer break of my life. Why is it the worst? COVID is still a thing and we still have to wear masks. The best part of that summer? My dad bought us four wheelers. And I have a backyard swimming pool.

School starts back up, later than usual. They say I'm going to be doing hybrid school. I'm confused about what hybrid means. I get told what it means: I do online school for half of the week and go to in-person school for half of the week. It's based on your last name. If your last name is A-K, you go on Mondays and Thursdays; if you have the last name starting with L-Z, you go on Tuesdays and Fridays. Everyone is on Zoom each Wednesday; again, we have more separation.

A couple of weeks go by and it's getting difficult for me to adapt to this kind of way of doing school. Then a month later, COVID cases start to rise again. The school tells us that we are going full remote again - and we did that for the rest of the first semester. I finish with mostly A's and maybe like 1 or 2 B's. The next quarter, third quarter, we are starting to do hybrid again, but many kids are doing full in-person schooling. The particular reason for this is because they are struggling with school or the social/emotional aspect of being remote only. After a few months go by and it's time for the 4th quarter, and almost everybody is now fully in person. I finish the 2020-21 school year with all A's and my parents are super proud.

It's the summer of 2021, and COVID has been calming down. I find out about this Netflix series called Cobra Kai. It's about karate and this dojo that was abandoned for about a decade and is brought back by an old student who used to go there. People forget about masks in most stores, but restaurants, not so much. I'm sure it's because they don't want workers to be coughing on peoples' food and make people leave.

School year - Fall 2021: A few months go by and my mom has signed me and my brother up for a soccer referee class. It was about four hours long, but at least we get to be out and about doing "normal" activities again - well, whatever normal means these days. They told us we had to take an online course to complete the process of being a referee and receive our badge. I completed it and so did my brother. I started refereeing for soccer games, and it is enjoyable. In the present day of COVID, my grades are above average, I have a job I like, we are all back in school (albeit still in masks), but hey, it's better than a year ago, right? At least now I don't feel like I'm locked in anymore, but instead, I'm living again in our (new) normal.

KLEIN, KATE**Kate Klein**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Olathe Northwest High School, Olathe, KS

Educator: Joshua Trevino

Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy

The Waiting Room

There was an eerie feeling in the air stepping into the hallway, there were no pictures or anything on the walls.

Overall it was a very cold and unwelcoming atmosphere.

Just as Theodore was about to enter the waiting room a tall man in his late forties with a beard glanced at him with glazed eyes and a serious look. Glancing back for a second Theodore could tell there was something off about him but instead of investigating Theodore kept his distance.

Stepping into the room the same lack in decor seemed to resonate through it's very mundane gray walls, two TV's and some posters on the walls. There were a couple of other people in the room, all ranging in different ages but what they all had in common was the same thing he wanted: to be far away from a place like this.

Sitting down, Theodore's arm hit the side of the chair causing him to sit down ungracefully. A couple of people glanced over in his direction giving him sympathetic looks, but he didn't want their sympathy, not in a place like this. Security had been nothing for him, in fact it had almost become part of his daily routine by now everywhere he went. It was funny in a way, how airports always had so much security and to him at the time it didn't really seem important when he was younger.

But now everything had changed, information and skills meant power and in the world today surviving meant everything.

Clasping his arm in pain, he tried to massage the pain away which only made it spread. Breathing heavily it felt as if his muscles were being twisted, his skin felt like it was on fire and his arm felt like it was being stabbed.

"Those damn doctors," he muttered.

After getting through the typical security: the metal detectors and x-ray machines. He was then corralled into the doctor's room with a single doctor and a nurse. Most of what the nurse asked Theodore was no different from any other check up at the doctors office, blood pressure, heart rate, vision testing, hearing, and the weight scale. It was all pretty standard with one exception with one exception.

From what Theodore had heard before coming there, various rumors were floating around ranging from all sorts of crazy stories and conspiracy theories about what they were doing.

But what they all centered was that the injection was the worst part.

After prepping his work station the doctor picked up the long needle and started cleaning his arm. Meanwhile the nurse looked away, shaking a little.

For Theodore he had never been afraid of needles, in fact he barely even felt most of them but now actually doing this he was no longer afraid of the needle and instead he was more afraid of the serum inside.

The liquid inside had a bronze tint to it making it look unnatural under the pale fluorescent lights.

"You may feel dizziness or soreness in your arm which is perfectly normal."

Closing his eyes, that was the last he remembered of that painful memory before waking up several moments later being ushered to the waiting room.

Slowly lifting his hand off of his arm, it still hurt but the pain wasn't as bad as before. Taking in a deep breath he slowly relaxed letting the air and his worries go for a moment.

Taking a closer look at his surroundings, what didn't make sense to him was the other people in the room.

There was an elderly couple in the corner with the wife reading a book and the husband reading a paper. Another was a middle aged man about the same age as Theodore looking like he was late for something. There was also a younger lady in her late twenties.

They were an interesting collection of people each occupied in their own little world but what was throwing Theodore in a loop was the absence of children.

Stashed in the corner next to the elderly couple was a small table with a neat stack of coloring sheets, books and toy's. Overall the play area didn't really seem that sterile or kid friendly in general. The toys were still in their

storage, coloring sheets were still in a neat stack, and the crayons were hardly broken or dull.

Right on cue a tall woman entered the room, but before she could make it to a seat a small little girl was clinging to her leg like a ball and chain.

“Don’t go Mommy!”

“It’ll be okay sweetie, it’ll only be for a couple of minutes...”

Picking up her child she held her daughter in her arms rocking her back and forth calming her down. The little girl only wailed louder catching the attention of everyone else in the room.

“And once it’s all done, I’ll come straight home and we can keep playing but first you have to go home and wait.

Can you do that?”

Setting the girl back down she wiped off her tears using the sleeve of her shirt, lifting up her chin the mother wiped the girl’s nose smiling.

“Can you be brave for mommy? I know these men can be scary but you’ve got to be brave for me and I’ll be brave for you.”

The little girl cracked a smile as her mother began tickling her.

“Because if you aren’t brave then the tickle monster will have to take you away!”

The giggling eventually died down and with one last hug the girl left with her father waving back to her mother.

Waving back the mother wore a sad smile.

Theodore knew that smile very well, it was the kind of smile saying: This isn’t goodbye and at the same time it could very well be.

A few minutes after all the drama of tearing the little girl away from her parents, her father took up residence in the seat next to his wife holding her in his arms as she bawled onto her shoulder.

Meanwhile the same “damn” doctor that gave Theodore his shot called in the older gentlemen out of the waiting room. Standing up, his wife gave him a hug right before he entered the back.

His footsteps disappeared underneath the doorway echoing like a faint memory.

For Theodore the feeling had been mutual at one point in his life but now, there hadn’t been anyone to fill that chair for a while. The person who had once filled the chair had never been worthy in *their* eyes.

A couple of minutes later, the elderly lady in the corner who had been reading a book and the older gentlemen reading a paper were called in too, only making Theodore’s heart pump faster.

He knew there were a few people in front of him but the realization of what could happen to him was starting to sink in if he wasn’t good enough.

Other than the injection there were other rumors floating around about disappearances and people not being the same but just like all the rest they didn’t have a choice. They weren’t volunteers, they weren’t just pawns, and they all weren’t just expendable soldiers that could easily be replaced.

They were people all with their own jobs, families, and lives or at least most of them anyway.

Looking to the seat next to him his mind once again thought of the person who filled that chair.

Before everything went downhill, Theodore and his wife had always joked around if they were ever worthy what they would do to help the world. His wife would always talk about helping people get justice and help those who couldn’t be helped.

But now sitting in the waiting room Theodore realized that being worthy also meant being alone.

The door opened again and this time the middle aged man who was in a rush was called into the room.

Grabbing a magazine off the table beside him, Theodore began reading, desperate to take his mind off of what was going on.

On the front of the magazine was a large rocket blasting off into space with the heading: “Is space the answer to the human overpopulation?”

Glancing through the first page, it was mainly a long article talking about problems that came with human overpopulation: hunger, limiting resources, political instability, lots of poverty, water scarcity and finally environmental degradation.

None of it was really new to Theodore in fact he had been dealing with problems like these even before things had gone downhill. Somehow through all the chaos his remote job had managed to save his family from poverty and keep them afloat until his wife found a new job.

Flipping the page, the guy who was around Theodore’s age came racing back out eager to get out of the waiting room as fast as he could.

Theodore watched the whole time not daring to take his eyes off of the man, there was something different about him he just knew it. But before he could figure it out, the man was gone and out the door.

The doctor then called in the young lady in her late twenties into the back.

Going back to his magazine, Theodore was surprised to see an advertisement for some new houses in development.

It had to be some kind of joke, the world was in crisis now and yet the problems on spacing had been achieved somehow overnight. Something wasn't adding up.

Flipping to the next page there was an article talking about the space program that had recently taken place. Space could eventually be answered further down the line but overall it wasn't the best answer.

Now that the world's governments had banded together forming their own council, they had been taking care of things and apparently they had been doing a good job, almost too good of a job.

Going to the next page, there was another advertisement of new job openings for factory workers, teachers, farmers and just jobs in general. It was like a gold mine of possibilities and yet it seemed almost too good to be true.

How could there be new jobs and space when the world was struggling just to survive?

He had sacrificed so much just to still be standing and yet looking down at the magazine there was a young couple holding the keys to their new house smiling which only made him angry.

Putting the magazine back on the table, Theodore turned his attention to the TV for visual entertainment only to find it was off and there were no remotes anywhere.

Thinking back to the people around him he then tried to see what he had in common with them, perhaps appearance or age but neither seemed to match his theory. None of them were really recognizable but thinking about it now there was something about that guy who was in a rush that seemed vaguely familiar to him. But the question was where had he seen him before?

Interrupting his thoughts the mother saying goodbye earlier was called into the waiting room along with her husband leaving Theodore alone in the waiting room.

The mood of the room was eerie with the only noise coming from the back, it seemed distant, almost like a cry for help

But why should he help? This was a government facility and on top of it if problems were being like those magazines then why did the government need to see him? Why did the government need to give him an injection? Make him go through security? And even waste his time coming here?

He could've been accomplishing so much and yet he was waiting for something. Was he sick or being fired?

Getting his mind off of things he turned his attention to the only piece of decoration in the room: three posters each with their own motto but same graphics.

The first poster was about equality having three people standing on pedestals all wearing participation medals.

The second poster seemed to reflect the same thing but instead of it being equality the word at the top instead was survival. Showing a graphic of someone pushing their limits to finish a race.

The final poster was more recent with the words at the top: "Are you worthy enough to lead our world?"

Just like the first poster, this time there were three people standing on a normal pedestal for first, second and third.

The words: "Are you worthy enough?" echoed in his mind. The person standing on the 1st place pedestal reminded him of the man earlier who was in a rush.

Then it dawned on him where he had seen him before right as the door opened.

The doctor stepped out with his hands behind his back. He wore a dark smile as he took off his doctor's mask.

Letting his black hair fall.

"Theodore, would you please step into my office?"

Swallowing, Theodore got up narrowing his eyes which only made the doctor smile even more.

Opening the door, Theodore stepped inside a small office with a desk, a chair behind and in front of it.

Both men took their seats respectively.

"Tell me Theodore, why do you think you're here?"

Theodore was silent thinking about the right way to word his answer.

"I'm here because you forced me too." He said with a hint of anger.

Leaning back in his chair, the doctor smiled amusingly.

"You know Theodore I've seen a lot of people come in and out of this place but the reason why you're here is different than you think."

Taking out a folder, the doctor let it drop onto his table letting the dust settle.

"You're here because you're worthy, I've seen your test scores and what you've done for your company Theodore.

They wouldn't be able to survive without you."

Taking the file, Theodore glanced through all the statistics and charts.

"Your scores from the previous rounds of the test are impressive. In the science and math portion of the test you've scored in the top ten percent of your age group."

Flipping to the end of the file, Theodore saw the test scores but wasn't surprised.

Even in high school he knew how much of an advantage he had.

"But your reading and writing scores are lacking but it's enough to keep you afloat."

"Where are they?"

Looking up from his copy of Theodore's file the doctor's expression had changed from friendly to serious.

"The elderly couple and the young lady in her twenties. They never came back out of here."

"You always were perceptive Theodore I'll give you that, even through high school people could never fool you with their crap."

"Cut to the chase Caleb."

"You know what you had in common with those people?"

Taking a remote off his desk, the monitors behind him lit up showing the people who had been in the waiting room earlier.

"Our jobs."

"Precisely, not all of them were worthy enough to continue in your department.."

"What did you do to them Caleb?"

"The question you should be asking Theodore is what'll happen to you? I can't just let you walk out of here and tell everyone what you've witnessed..."

Taking out a small tool out of his desk Gabriel made sure he couldn't see it.

"You're definitely worthy Theodore, I'll give you that. But your problem is you were always too much of a family guy."

"Let them go Caleb, they didn't do anything wrong."

"Even if I wanted to I couldn't, besides their time was up anyways but unlike them you're very lucky."

"You sick monster..."

Taking out his tool he pressed a button activating the serum through his system. Which was the last thing Theodore remembered before losing consciousness.

Walking out the waiting room his eyes were glazed and he wore a serious look giving him looks from all the new people walking into the waiting room.

Going back to his desk, Caleb crossed out Theodore's name.

"Now then, who's next?"

KOTZMAN, JOHN**John Kotzman**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Lansing High School, Leavenworth, KS

Educator: Gabby Royal

Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy

The Midway Hotel

The Midway Hotel

The drive home would take hours. After a long day of unproductive meetings I felt frustrated and drained; I desperately needed some sleep. I cursed to myself as I sped along the lonely, country road as I wished I had just stayed in the city.

I had no idea where I was, and surprise surprise, there was no cell phone reception. There seemed to be nothing except empty corn fields all around. I hoped to see an interstate sign or gas station to get directions, but the road just kept going.

Finally, I saw an old rugged sign saying "Midway Hotel." Thank God, a sign of life in this backwater place. I was sure it would be a dump, but it was getting dark. After a day that exhausting, I would've been happy to sleep on a cactus with a beehive as my pillow.

I followed the wooden signs and saw the hotel. It was a plain, multi-storey, concrete building that looked out of place in the grass prairie; it lacked any country charm. I parked, grabbed my bag and walked towards the grey, concrete steps. The hotel didn't have windows, but the walls seemed to glisten against the bright stars; the wind gently brushed my face. I felt nervous, but couldn't explain why. It was completely silent outside except for some chirping crickets and a distant cicada. I grabbed the cold metal railing and trudged up the steps to a sliding glass door that opened automatically.

I stumbled into a large, open lobby that had shiny, marble walls and high vaulted ceilings. It was very minimalistic and had no decor except for one red couch against a wall opposite a large old-fashioned wooden reception desk. There was a young woman and a small boy sitting on the red couch, they both looked fast asleep. It didn't feel like a hotel, it was more like a modern art museum with no exhibits. I walked slowly to the desk and felt self-conscious about my footsteps clicking on the tiled floor, since they were the only sound in this vacuous place. At the reception, I peered over the desk and saw an old lady sitting and staring at a computer. She was wearing a gray dress, glasses and had her white hair tied up in a neat bun. I thought her customer service skills needed work because she didn't greet me or even smile.

"Hi, I got a bit lost leaving the city and saw your hotel sign. Do you have a room for the night?" She paid no attention to me, her eyes were glued to the computer monitor at the corner of her desk. I watched the different colored lights of whatever she was watching reflect off her face. A few seconds ticked by. Feeling frustrated, I announced in a louder voice, "Excuse me, I hate to interrupt you, but can I get a room?"

The old lady stood up while gripping the arms of her chair and gave me a small nod. In a quiet, monotone voice, she said, "I will get your room key Mr. Stevens."

Mr. Stevens? How- How does she know my name? I didn't tell her my name. I was holding my credit card ready to pay for my room, so I figured she must have eagle eyes and saw my name on it.

A few seconds later, she returned from the back office and said, "No payment is necessary at this time," she was devoid of any personality and didn't even make eye contact with me. I stared at her and felt eerie, her small blank face had no emotion, and her brown wrinkled eyes gave an empty stare like a robot.

I leaned forward to take the room key and caught a glimpse of the monitor. My entire body stopped in shock.

"Ma'am... What is that on your computer, a security camera or something? Can I see?"

She sighed and turned the screen off. "It's nothing, just something for my work."

I hesitantly took my key and walked towards the elevator. I couldn't shake the creepy feeling. I thought I saw myself on the monitor, I was sure of it, but it was probably just security cameras. Inside the elevator, I looked at the buttons and became even more confused. There were no numbers, only two buttons, one white button for up and one black button for down.

“You don’t need that elevator, your room’s on this floor.” The old lady quietly instructed. She pointed to the hallway.

I walked out of the elevator still puzzled that there were only two buttons. I headed towards the long hallway next to the reception desk, it was a bright, elongated tunnel with doors either side. There was a woman there studying the room doors. She walked towards me.

“Isn’t it bizarre?” She spoke. “Every single room has the guest’s name and no numbers. That’s amazing personal service, don’t you think?”

The woman looked disorientated and her hair and clothes were dirty and ruffled as if she had just got out of bed.

“Huh?” I looked at my room key and there was no number, just my name, Mark Stevens. I stepped to the left to move around the lady and saw my name on a door. This place was extremely odd. How could a nameplate with my name be manufactured so fast? I felt so overwhelmed and tired from work that my brain just couldn’t handle deciphering the situation with this disheveled woman, so I smiled politely and started to enter my room trying to escape the conversation.

“I’m Monica Stewart. It was nice meeting you.” She gave a slight wave, and I gave a slight wave back as I watched her walk awkwardly down the hall, her eyes still glued to the doors.

I stepped into my room. It was simple decor with a bed covered in white, crisp sheets and a small bedside table and lamp. I was glad it was only for one night. I hated that it didn’t have a window, but it was dark outside anyway. I collapsed on the bed and tried to call my wife, but there was still no cell phone service and there wasn’t a phone in the room. I sighed knowing that would mean yet another argument and more accusations when I got home. I wanted to complain about the lack of WiFi, but felt too tired. I would deal with it after a nap.

I must have slept for a short while, but something woke me up. I tried to get back to sleep, but I couldn’t relax, my mind was racing with thoughts and questions. I needed to call my wife and the eeriness of the night bothered me.

This hotel was weird, the strange old lady was hiding something. I know I saw something on that computer monitor, plus my name on my room door didn’t make any sense. Also, what hotel room has no phone? If I was going to get any sleep I’d have to get to the bottom of this. I slowly opened my door and crept down the hall. I peeked around the corner, and there she was. The old lady at the reception desk was watching the computer monitor. I quietly crept towards the reception desk hoping to get a glimpse of what she was watching. I saw the woman and small boy still sitting on the red couch, but luckily they were both still asleep. I crouched behind the large wooden desk and popped my head over to see the screen. It looked like home video footage of a family. At the bottom of the screen, there was a bar, it kind of looked like a health bar from a video game, except the left half of the bar was black with a percentage written on it and the right side of the bar was white. Towards the middle of the bar was a small icon of a woman’s face. I knew that face, “Monica Stewart.” It was that woman I met in the hall! The family in the video was arguing. I was certain I was looking at a younger Monica. She was arguing with her parents about going to some school dance. She picked up a blue vase and threw it against the wall. It was then that something peculiar happened. Monica’s little face icon at the bottom of the screen moved towards the black side of the bar. The movie footage changed to a new scene, a slightly older Monica driving her car at night. She pulled over and offered to help an old couple whose car had broken down. This time, Monica’s face icon at the bottom of the screen moved slightly towards the white side of the bar. What on earth was going on? I thought to myself, maybe the old lady was a relative and that was why she had the footage, but what was the face icon and video game percentage bar all about? At that moment, the old lady started to stand up. My heart started to race; I crouched down and held my breath. I couldn’t understand why an old lady would freak me out so much, but she did. I heard her footsteps tapping into the distance followed by a door closing. I popped my head up and she was gone. There was a sign that read, “On Break, Back in 30 minutes.” This was my chance. I jumped over the reception desk. I believed that maybe if I fast-forwarded the movie footage to the end, I’d have a clue to what this was all about. I pushed play and in the last clip, there was a house fire and firefighters were outside. They were trying to revive a woman. It was Monica! I felt my heart beating out of my chest, I came to the horrific realization that this event looked real. I watched a firefighter push down on her chest over and over again, trying to save her, until eventually, he stopped. The firefighter backed away. She wasn’t moving. After the last piece of footage, Monica’s face icon had made it on the white side of the percentage bar. I felt my entire body sink as I saw the following words appear on the screen, “HEAVEN SELECTED.” I heard the elevator ping, and suddenly, out of nowhere, Monica Stewart walked from the hall and headed towards the elevator. She smiled and gave me a slight wave as she walked into the elevator, all without saying a word. The door closed and up she went. I was so confused, was I dreaming? I ran to the elevator, but it was empty. I pounded at buttons, but nothing was happening.

I ran back to the reception desk and tried to use the telephone to call the police, but there was no dial tone. I frantically searched through the drawers and then I found it. A drawer filled with hundreds of USBs, each containing someone’s name. They were organised in alphabetical order, with terror, I went to the S’s and there I was. A USB with my name on it, Mark Stevens. I removed Monica’s USB, and shoved my own into the computer. I took deep

breaths to calm myself. I couldn't believe my eyes. I saw my childhood, the highlights, and the lowlights of my life. I saw my first day at school sharing my treats, the first time I got bullied and the fights with my parents over bad grades. The times I was angry, happy and sad. The footage showed me meeting my wife, getting married, and having our daughter Penny. It was hard not to get emotional watching Penny grow older. The tape reached the part of my life when I got the promotion. I watched Penny alone in her room upset that I was away on business. I always arrived home after she had fallen asleep. Being on the road to get the next big deal had hurt my family and taken its toll on me too. I couldn't take the pressure and had started drinking too much. The footage flickered to one of the many nights I had too much to drink, a night that ended with me cheating on my wife. I felt horribly guilty; I decided I would never drink again, but I did. I drank all the time and continued to cheat and ignore my family. My face icon was now further in the black zone of the bar than Monica's icon ever was. I was so ashamed when I heard Penny say, "He's a drunk loser mom. The only thing he cares about is his stupid job. I don't care if I see him again." I felt sick to my stomach, my little girl was so upset. All I wanted to do was go home and hug her and apologize. I was terrified, I couldn't watch anymore. I panicked and needed to find a way home. I needed to say sorry and make things right. I had to fix this, tell them I loved them. I would do anything to make things right. I ran for the hotel exit door, opened it and saw nothing except darkness. My car wasn't there, the sky wasn't there, the grass wasn't there, just a pitch black void. Pure nothingness. I hesitantly placed my toe out the door. For whatever strange reason, I could walk on the black. I started to run away from the hotel as fast as I could, hoping to find anything but darkness. Finally, in the distance, I saw a structure. Bursting with adrenaline, I ran towards it huffing and puffing with all my might. When I reached it, my jaw dropped because I was right in front of the hotel again, despite running in the opposite direction. This time, I ran left through the black void. I ran and I ran and I ran. Finally, I saw another building. I ran through the darkness praying for an escape, but there it was, the same hotel again. There was no escape. I hesitantly stepped back inside the hotel.

The old lady was still not at the reception desk. I decided to face my fate and started to watch the end of the video footage. It was today. I felt sick as I saw myself leaving the bar this morning. I watched myself stumble to my car, I witnessed my erratic driving and I knew in my gut what was going to happen next. My face icon was deep in the black zone. I couldn't watch, I couldn't witness my own death. Suddenly, I had an idea, the old woman wasn't back yet, she hadn't watched the whole tape. Maybe, there was a chance to change my destiny. I pushed a few buttons and started to erase the bad parts of my life on the tape. It was working, every time I erased something I did wrong, my icon moved towards the white. I started to feel relieved as I was getting deeper into the white territory and all the shameful events in my life were being erased. I took out the USB, and placed it back in the drawer where I had found it. I ran back to my hotel room because I didn't want the old woman to have any suspicion of what I had done.

I paced the room, anxiously thinking I was saved from whatever purgatory hell this was. It seemed like hours, but only 10 minutes had passed and I couldn't wait anymore. I needed to see the old lady and get this strange experience sorted out. I walked with purpose and determination to the lobby. I noticed the young woman and little boy on the red couch were finally awake. I was going to stop and tell her all about this weird hotel, but I wanted to see the old lady first.

At the reception, the old lady was watching the computer monitor intently. She ignored my presence, I was seething and said, "Now look here, I don't know what's going on, but I want to know the truth!" Without averting her gaze from the monitor, the old lady said calmly, "Sorry for the delay Mr. Stevens, there was not enough information for us to determine your next destination, but further assessments are being done." I leaned over the desk and whispered in an angry voice, "What are you talking about? I know about the videos and the black void outside. I don't know if this is real or if I'm in purgatory, a coma, or a nightmare, but watch my footage. There's nothing bad. I'm a good man, I didn't do anything to hurt anyone. I want to be out of here!" Suddenly, there was a ping. I turned and saw the elevator doors open and the young woman and the little boy finally got up from the red couch and walked into the elevator. The elevator went up. "Hey, how come they left?"

The old woman turned the computer monitor towards me and said, "Mr. Stevens the verdict is in."

I watched the screen and realized it was not my videotape, it was a tape of the young woman and her little boy in a car singing and laughing as they drove along. I watched in horror as I saw my car swerving to the opposite side of the highway heading straight for them. Both of our cars collided and exploded. I said nothing as I felt my body being sucked into the elevator, there was nothing I could do to stop it. The doors closed and the black down button illuminated.

KOTZMAN, JOHN**John Kotzman**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Lansing High School, Leavenworth, KS

Educator: Gabby Royal

Category: Poetry

The Test

The Test

Today's the day, the day of the test,
No need to worry, I'll do my best,
I studied, studied and studied some more,
Filled with confidence I burst through the door.
I sit, I stretch, I whip out my pen,
I look at my test, this is the end,
Gone. Poof. Goodbye hours I spent revising and reading,
Unable to think, I feel my brain cells conceding,
I don't see a question, just a bombardment of letters,
I envision the future, I can see the news header.
Local loser gets a negative twelve,
How is that possible? Ask him yourself!
My mind is frozen, my gaze is dead,
I wish I was home curled up in bed.
I look at the choices, guess and move on,
Question two can't be worse! Boy was I wrong.
I don't even know what the first question stated,
But this one was somehow extra complicated,
I completely zone out, and I think to myself,
Boy oh boy that is one awesome bookshelf!
I jam in my head to the Spice Girls song "Wannabe,"
I hear a page flip, I'm snapped back to reality,
Panic overwhelms me, oh God what do I do?
My brain then suggests, just look at the key words dude.
I go back to question one, and almost facepalm,
This question is easy! I start to feel calm.
I finished the test and I scored pretty well.
I've now got two weeks before another hell.
So that is what taking tests is normally like for me,
But next time won't be hard, because I swiped the answer key.

KOTZMAN, JOHN**John Kotzman**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Lansing High School, Leavenworth, KS

Educator: Gabby Royal

Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy

Perfect Flaws

Perfect Flaws

Today's the day. I watch the drone land on my doorstep with the envelope. I grab it and run to my room. I had been waiting for years and now the price was lower, I could afford it. I stood in front of my bedroom mirror to get one last look of everything I hate. My freckles, my acne, my red curly hair, my stomach, my wobbly thighs, all the reasons he didn't want me. All the reasons I hated myself.

I gazed up and down at my reflection as if saying goodbye to an old friend, and then shoved the pill down my throat.

Growing up I knew I wasn't good enough, the internet, advertising, social media, everywhere I looked fed me the images of what beauty was, and it wasn't me.

The past few years, you couldn't go anywhere without seeing an ad for the miracle. People like me dreamed of the opportunity to get their hands on it and now it was available to the masses. Falling asleep that night was impossible. I kept waking up during the night all giddy, running to the mirror to see if anything had changed, but nothing. I woke up the next morning, hesitantly tip-toeing to the mirror. This is it. This is it.

I stared at myself, speechless. I couldn't believe it! I was a goddess! A tall, thin, gleaming sapphire eyed goddess! With long flowing, golden, brown hair and perfect, glowing skin! I looked exactly like the girl in the TV commercial! The miracle pill had worked. It changed my DNA and genes to make me the perfect woman. How could he resist me now?

I got dressed and left the house quickly. Rushing across town to his office, I felt alive, beautiful and full of confidence. I kept thinking of how things had ended between us. I loved him and wanted to marry him more than anything, he was handsome, funny and kind. I knew everyone wondered why he was with me though. Other women looked at us together and I knew they thought he could do better than me, it drove me crazy. It was no surprise the day he walked out.

I stepped off the elevator of his building. I walked through the corridor as if I was on a catwalk and entered the bustling office. I felt like a million bucks and expected the room to gasp at my beauty. Instead, no-one took any notice. As I looked around the room, I realized why. Almost every woman looked exactly like me and identical to the woman on the TV commercial. It was freaky. I looked out the huge windows of the office overlooking the city and saw hundreds of drones zooming through the sky, delivering envelopes to the masses.

I didn't know what to do; my heart started beating out of my chest again. I walked to his office, knocked and walked in.

I saw him at his desk and he looked up. He looked like a movie star with twinkling eyes and sleek dark hair swept back wearing an amazing suit.

I started to panic as I realized the insane situation I was in.

"So, who are you? Jeanette? Mary? Jenny? Nicole?"

I looked at the man I loved and quietly said "Tom, it's me Amber."

"Oh hey Amber! This is weird! You took the pill too?" he replied.

Tom studied my face like it was some sort of ancient artifact. "Amber, why did you do it? You were already so beautiful."

"Beautiful," I replied agitated. "If I was so beautiful, why did you leave me? I took the miracle pill for you Tom, so you would want me again. I wanted to get rid of my flaws and be perfect for you because I always knew you could do better than me."

"Amber, your looks were never the problem, your so-called flaws were what made you beautiful to me. It was your insecurity and jealousy that drove me away. You never thought you were good enough, it was exhausting. I got sick of reassuring you and dealing with your paranoia. It was like having to water a plant 24/7!"

“What.....” “I froze. I didn’t say anything for what felt like hours, but couldn’t have been more than a few seconds. “But, now, I’m confident and happy, I could make you happy! We could be together! I don’t want to be the ugly, ginger girl I used to be!”

“Oh Amber, here you go again. You haven’t changed at all.”

“I did change! Look at me!

“Well now you’re just like everyone else! Look. I’m sorry Amber, but I met someone else, someone who makes me happy, my soulmate.”

My heart felt like a knife had cut through it. I was frozen. I didn’t know what to say. Barely able to move my mouth I just barely muttered the word, “Okay.”

I left the office awkwardly, feeling empty and confused. The interaction didn’t go how I wanted it to at all. As soon as the door was shut I burst into tears. I turned my head and saw my reflection in the mirror. You know what? No! I thought to myself. I shouldn’t be crying. I’m beautiful now! I’m sure I’ll find it way easier to find love than if I looked like my old self! I’m glad I look nothing like the disgusting, short, chubby, ginger haired girl I used to! No one would ever love HER! I heard heels stepping down the hallway, I turned my head and saw a woman that didn’t look like the others, or me. She was petite with red curly hair and freckles. She looked a lot like how I used to. “Excuse me Miss. You’re blocking the door.” She said politely.

I stepped aside. The girl walked into Tom’s office with excitement exclaiming, “HEY BABE! HAPPY ANNIVERSARY!”

LEHMAN, ELLA**Ella Lehman**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Smithville High School, Smithville, MO

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Critical Essay

Moo = End of the World

Picture this: Years into the future, oxygen is considered a rare material because there is not enough greenery to produce enough for us to breathe. Spending time in nature doesn't happen anymore, forests and rivers and lakes and oceans are simply fairy tales from a time where people and nature were balanced. That future is closer than we think—especially since fighting for the betterment of our environment has become political. Our air is suffocated, our forests are trampled, our oceans and rivers and lakes are crystal clear no more, our arctic poles are practically tropical resorts. Earth is bleeding from the wounds humankind has inflicted upon it, and it's a bigger issue than we think. Most of the blame for climate change has been placed on fossil fuels, but no one mentions one of the largest contributors. The agriculture and livestock industry. If people eat less meat and dairy products, it would greatly help the environment because the agriculture industry emits large quantities of methane and other harmful gases, uses an excessive amount of water, and causes major deforestation.

First and foremost, the agriculture industry harms the environment by emitting a large amount of methane into the atmosphere. Methane is harmful because it's a strong greenhouse gas—even stronger than carbon dioxide—and greenhouse gases trap heat in the atmosphere, which is what causes climate change. "Cows put out an enormous amount of methane, causing almost 10 percent of anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions and contributing to climate change," Aaron Carroll states in a *New York Times* article. This article reiterates the point that it would be greatly beneficial if everyone avoided meat and dairy products as much as possible, but since that won't happen anytime soon, not much of an impact will be made (*The New York Times*). Another way cows emit methane is from their manure. When manure decomposes, it releases methane ammonia and carbon dioxide (*Clean Water Action*). It may be easy to look over this topic since it doesn't seem as drastic as large factories pumping out visible fumes, but when you think about the number of cows in the world—987.5 million—it paints a different picture. Further, people eat *tremendous* amounts of meat, and it's driving up the supply and demand for it. "The U.S.'s consumption of beef is the largest in the world, and drives an \$88 billion industry, according to the USDA," *ScienceLine* says.

In addition, the agriculture industry impacts the environment by using and polluting water. It takes 2,400 gallons of water to just manufacture one pound of beef, yet only 25 gallons for one pound of wheat. And what's crazy, not eating a pound of meat is equivalent to not showering for six months (*PETA*)! Additionally, manure is usually stored in open lagoons, which typically overflows because of leakage or during flooding. The issue with this is: "It releases harmful substances like antibiotics, bacteria, pesticides, and heavy metals into the surrounding environment," *Clean Water Action* says. Not only is the agriculture industry using up considerable amounts of water, but it's polluting it too.

Lastly, the agriculture industry hurts the environment by causing deforestation. In order to create pastures for livestock, an unimaginable number of forests are being cut down—including an enormous portion of the Amazon Rainforest: home to many endangered species, but most importantly, one of the largest sources of oxygen emissions (*NASA*). "The single biggest direct cause of tropical deforestation is conversion to cropland and pasture, mostly for subsistence, which is growing crops or raising livestock to meet daily needs," *NASA* says. Moreover, the development of roads leads to a large portion of deforestation because those roads are made after some woodland has been cleared, then that road leads to untouched forests being logged, the mostly clear land leaves room for 'settlers' to come in and use up the rest of the resources, and finally, those settlers use the land for farms and pastures (*NASA*). So, yes, the agriculture industry does affect the climate because many forests are being plowed down to make pastures for animals, which slims down the percentage of carbon dioxide being taken in by plants, thus

leading to the greenhouse gas effect.

Climate change won't immediately be resolved if you stop eating meat, of course; there are many other factors that play into it, but it will cause an impact if a large number of people stop eating meat. The demand for meat and dairy products will decline, so then the industry will slim down too. Fewer cows will be bred, which means less methane is emitted from manure and burps. Limited pastures (for cows) and crops (to feed cows) will be needed, which means less forests will be cut down. It may take a while, but doing this will start a domino effect. Now picture *this*: Seeing lush greenery is a common occurrence, no matter the location. The skies are always bright blue. Pastures and farms are few and far between, as hardly anyone eats meat anymore—causing many ecosystems to return to their natural glory. Earth is beautiful in every corner and crevice because, finally, humankind and nature are in tune with each other. That is the future everyone should aim for, which can be claimed if everyone eats less meat and dairy products. Or, at the very minimum, stop eating beef. Your actions aren't nonconsequential if it means you're one person closer to knocking down that first mighty domino—the black-and-white block that'll start a chain reaction of a climate change revolution.

LI, GARRETT**Garrett Li**

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: California Trail Middle School, Olathe, KS

Educator: Leslie Brown

Category: Journalism

Flight 11

It was a normal day for air traffic controller Jessica Lewis. She oversaw the routine departure of American Airlines Flight 77 from the Washington Dulles International Airport, set to fly to Los Angeles, California. She had no idea that among the 81 boarding the flight, 5 of the passengers had their sights set on doing harm.

Flight 11 slowly ascended into the airspace and was soon transferred from one air traffic control center to another. In just a couple of minutes, the airliner had climbed up into Thomas Nielsen's radar. This was where the troubles began. Thomas radioed the pilot of Flight 11 to make a slight turn to stay on course, but the pilot didn't respond. Nielsen wasn't too concerned. Perhaps the pilots weren't paying attention, or the radio frequency was off a notch. He continued to follow procedure, radioing them again and again; also using the emergency frequency to try and grab their attention. Still, there was no response. Other air traffic controllers began to pitch in, trying to create a safe zone around the rogue plane to prevent other planes from nearing it. Yet it was clear that something was wrong. The transponder for the plane had been shut off, which cut off all information except for its location and speed.

By now, the plane was flying southwards at 600 miles per hour, a far cry from its designated speed of 450 miles per hour. It made its way into Jake King's airspace.

With no transponder information, King reached out to a separate plane which had departed only 14 minutes after Flight 11 did – United Flight 175 – to see if it could spot Flight 11. It could.

“Well, turn 30 degrees to the right. I wanna make sure I keep you away from this guy.” King radioed. With Flight 175 safely on track, King handed it off to the New York area en route center. However, the troubles began once more. Flight 11 disappeared off of the center's radar; a few moments later, Flight 175 disappeared as well. Although there was no proof of it, it seemed to the air traffic controllers that the two disappearances were connected.

As Flight 11 veered off course and headed down the Hudson River Valley, Connor Jameson was called to alert the military. Skipping all the formal procedures, he instead directly notified three nearby military bases. In just a couple of minutes, he made multiple calls asking for jet-fighter support from the Northeast Air Defense Sector. At 8:37, he finally broke through to NEAD headquarters. His was the first alert to the US military that any planes had been hijacked.

153 miles away from NYC, F-16 fighter jets set off from Otis Air Force base. They were 7 minutes late for the first attack and Flight 11 was able to crash into floors 93-99 of the North Twin Tower of the World Trade Center. The air defense was not notified of any other hijacked planes, and 10 minutes later, United Airlines Flight 175 hit the South Twin Tower. Ultimately, the fighter jets made no difference.

Back at the Dulles tower, airport controllers were on high alert due to the two crashes. However, they hadn't realized that one of their own planes was off course: Flight 77. Just as Jessica Lewis returned to her station and began coordinating the different flights, she noticed an unidentified plane moving at 500 miles per hour. It was headed straight towards restricted airspace 56 - the restricted air space covering the White House. Her heart dropped as the plane kept moving closer. It turned into a countdown: 10 miles away, 9 miles away. Her supervisor notified the White House, and the White House went into lockdown; although the president was in Florida, the Vice President was rushed into a special basement bunker. The plane grew closer and closer, shortening the distance – however, the plane, now reidentified as Flight 77, made a sharp right, veering away from the Capital. (It is widely believed that the team of terrorists did not see the White House as it was hidden by trees.) The team lost all radar contact. Finally, the speakers came on.

“Dulles, hold all of our inbound traffic. The Pentagon's been hit.”

Jessica's tears would come only after the ordeal was over.

At 10:03, the fourth plane, Flight 93, crashed in a Pennsylvania field 125 miles away from the Capital. Even though this was the last plane, air traffic control had no way of knowing if there were other hijacked planes. The order came through to land every plane. In just 2 hours, almost 5000 planes landed. The harrowing attacks of 9/11

were over, with 2996 casualties including the plane's passengers and the victims of the crashes.

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LI, ROGER**Roger Li**

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: Lakewood Middle School, Overland Park, KS

Educator: Jennifer Tavernaro

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

A Conversation with Mr. Anderson

When I first watched Wes Anderson's "Fantastic Mr. Fox" as a kid, I didn't know why Mr. Fox teared up when he saw a wild wolf standing on a rock, howling before disappearing into the wilderness. Rather, I was totally absorbed by the action: the raids, hunts, escapes, the final full-blown war between the "BBB" farmers and their animal neighbors. As such, if I could spend the day with someone, I would like to have a conversation with filmmaker Wes Anderson because of his unique and profound way of storytelling.

I want to share with him how I felt about the film when I rewatched it recently. As Mr. Fox's idyllic domestic life was doomed by "the last raid", I was reminded that my own carefree days were abruptly interrupted by the pandemic. The loss was heartfelt and painful. But Mr. Fox, along with his family and friends, rebuilt their life and community from the rubble, and so, I too, with the help of my family and friends, have found a way to refocus and rebuild, physically and mentally. I discovered that physical excursions could magically quiet the noise and bring clarity to my mind. I began running on my own during the day and working out in my room at night. By the time I was allowed to go back to school in person, I had grown a lot taller, fitter, and happier than I was before the pandemic.

I also want to share with Mr. Anderson the details of his movie that I was before oblivious to but have now meaningful, such as the private struggles of Mr. Fox's adolescent son Ash and his cousin Kristofferson. Over and over, Ash struggles to gain confirmation in the eyes of his parents and peers, and therefore, becomes willing to risk his life to retrieve his father's tail lost in an escape. I also resonate with the awkwardness of Kristofferson, who eventually sheds his defensive pretenses when facing an existential crisis. I laughed as hard as I used to as a kid, but I was also deeply touched by their heroic actions. As I navigate through a similar time in my life, I need their reminder and encouragement that things will turn out okay. One day I too will wear my lost tail as my badge of honor.

I want to tell Mr. Anderson I found an eerie similarity between the fictional conflict of "BBB" and their animal neighbors and our pandemic reality, where a record wealth is accumulated among a small group of super-rich and the ordinary Joes struggle to get by everyday. The fiction of finding an escape to a fully stocked supermarket is both hilarious and heart-breaking.

Though most of all, I want to learn the Wes Anderson Way of synthesizing "animal" behaviors, emotions, and ideas with stunning stop-motion animation into a hilarious tale. I want to shadow him in his creative process of turning pages of words into a fantastic movie so that I could supercharge my imaginations, channeling these inspirations into my own emotions and expressions.

LIANG, BRYSON**Bryson Liang**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

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

Educator: Janet Duckham

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Journey to My Root

Journey to My Root

A cacophony of cricket chirps surrounded me as I passed through the centuries-old gate. This was my ancestral home, or Lao Jia in Mandarin Chinese. My father and I had come to rebuild where there once stood a beautiful country house in the Northern-China countryside. The lot had been vacant for over half a century and had become overrun by nature. Thick emerald green vines curled up over all the remnants of the old house while tall swaying grass covered the rest of the property.

My father came from China to the U.S. to pursue graduate studies when he was 26. He met my mother and started a family. I was born in the U.S., where I call home. This time was only my second trip to China since nine years ago when I was seven.

My father always talked about Lao Jia. My grandfather passed away suddenly at the early age of sixty-six due to an unexpected heart attack. That was a day before the Chinese Lunar New Year. My father planned to fly to China to join my grandparents for Lunar New Year for the first time since he came to the U.S. five years ago. Instead, he rushed home to China to bury his father while entire China was celebrating the Lunar New Year. My father was in deep sorrow for a long time.

Since I could understand things, my father often talked about Lao Jia, with great details of the people, life, and fun memories. When I was older, he told me that he would bring me to Lao Jia and build a house there. It was my grandfather's last wish.

The journey to Lao Jia was smoother than I expected. My family (parents, my younger brother, and myself) flew 16 hours from the U.S. to Beijing. The super-speed bullet train took just one hour to shoot us from Beijing to the capital city of Hebei province, where our relatives were awaiting, and drove us two hours to the village. My father, who had not been back for over 40 years, said it used to take two days to travel from Beijing to Lao Jia.

I was finally here, a place that I had heard about so many times from my father. My grandfather grew up in Lao Jia. As the best student in the village, he was able to leave to attend college in Beijing when he was 18. It was a huge deal, and the entire village was in celebration for him as it was rare for a country boy to go to the capital Beijing. My grandfather stayed to work there after college.

As our car entered the village gate, a strange but certainly familiar-in-my-head view expanded in front of me. The long and pencil-straight hard-pressed mud road, sky-high poplar trees standing on both sides, a few hundred houses in the distance with cooking smoke gracefully snaking out of the chimneys in the late afternoon reddish sunlight...my father had described this scene many times to me. I turned around in excitement, but only to see tears gliding down his cheek. I knew he was missing my grandfather and all the happy times in the old days. I put my hand in his. My relative exclaimed loudly, "Welcome to Lao Jia. This is your family home".

Our car passed a large warehouse-looking building, and I knew this was the village's grain grinding facility in the past. I told our relative to turn right, and our Lao Jia would be the first one on the side of the village square. He was shocked, "how do you know? You have never been here." My father started smiling and patted me on the shoulder. Everyone laughed.

Our Lao Jia lot has been vacant since my great grandfather passed away over 50 years ago. The once beautiful country house collapsed long ago. But I could still see from the ruins that it must be a nice place before. Part of the tall yard wall made with oversized grey bricks still stood there. My father told me the bricks were a few hundred years old; our Lao Jia area was known for brick making. He pointed to a few tall trees and told me my grandfather planted them after my great grandfather died, as a traditional way of remembering him. The trees are over half a century old, reminding me of the tall trees in our city park.

My father was born in Tianjin city, where my grandfather later worked. Grandfather often brought him and family to spend Chinese Lunar New Year in the winter with my great grandfather in Lao Jia. I told our relatives that the entire village shared a freshly butchered hog for the Lunar New Year, and it was in itself a big celebration as the people then were very poor, and it was rare to have so much meat. I was really proud when my relatives joyfully said to my father, “you had passed on our Lao Jia life stories to the next generation.”

We stayed with the relatives for the night. The next day, I followed my father and other relatives to Lao Jia to explore the property and assess the work needed to build an old-style house. While they were measuring and discussing, I was able to truly feel the place. I carefully examined the large grey bricks from hundreds of years ago and wondered who had also put their hands on these bricks before, maybe my great-great-grandfather? It was a strange but warm thought. My relatives told me that the elders in the village said my family has been on this land for over 400 years. My grandfather was the first generation to leave the village for the big city.

Before my trip this time, I had tried to picture what Lao Jia was like many times. Now I was here, my first time in such countryside in China, everything looked foreign yet felt strangely familiar, just like what my father had described to me many times. I was surprised that I was not overwhelmed by the reality that I was standing on the same land where generations of my family lived. Instead, I felt a wave of tranquility and calmness like I had never before.

The adults were now measuring the house lot. The entire west wing of the house used to be the kitchen. My father recalled helping his grandmother prepare a Chinese Lunar New Year feast in the kitchen using a traditional wood-burning stove. The smell of home food, the dancing flames under the stove, all stayed in my father’s head for his entire life.

The rest of the house was divided into living rooms and bedrooms, each bedroom with its own Kang bed. Kang beds were unique Northern-China countryside beds, they were connected to the kitchen stove. Kang was made with mud bricks, an air duct running from the stove to the underside of the Kang beds allowed the warm air generated from cooking to warm the Kang beds during the winter. During the summer, the vents would be closed off with sliding doors to redirect the warm air to keep the Kang beds cool.

Several village heads showed up to greet us, and my father warmly welcomed them. I started to wonder around; I could not understand most of their local dialects. China is a big country with numerous local dialects, so different that two connecting provinces don’t understand each other’s dialect sometimes. I noticed an electric scooter sitting in the corner; it belonged to a family friend. The seat of the scooter was an old couch cushion that had been strapped to the vehicle with some plastic wire. I had never driven a scooter before. I decided to give it a shot.

I cruised out of the gate into the village. It was pretty easy to drive an electric scooter, just like on my bike, without having to pedal. As I rode along the small village road, the elderly village women lounging on their porches and sipping hot tea turned to stare at me, probably wondering about who I was, a boy dressed in American fashion style that was very different. The houses that I passed by were similar to my old house, each having a gate with lion-head shape door knockers and an engraved carving of their family name.

Suddenly, a light warm summer rain began to drizzle as I was riding all the way out of the entrance of the village. I tapped the driving peddle to dash onto the wider country rode. Endless fields of corn appeared. It is the tradition that the people lived inside the village's gates, and all the cornfields were outside.

The big noise from cicadas and crickets from the fields reminded me of the stories my father shared with me. He spent many summer breaks here. He talked to me a lot about his childhood here, swimming in the river at the back of the village, catching dragonflies in the fields, chasing birds on the rooftops....it all sounded so fancy to me, as kids these days in America spend a lot of time on video games. The past was a different world here in Lao Jia.

Just as it came, the rain stopped without any warning as I turned to ride back. My father and relatives had finished planning works. We started to head out to join a larger family banquet with many relatives.

Lao Jia was like a time capsule, a remnant of a past. My father had not been back to Lao Jia for nearly 40 years, yet he was able to immediately recognize the roads and buildings. Little had changed. The roads were still primarily hard mud roads, which would turn really muddy in the rain. People still used centuries-old style wood-burning stoves to cook. The villager continued to support themselves through traditional farming.

But I also learned that more and more of the young generation began to move to bigger cities, pursuing a college education and job opportunities. Will the village be the same after another 20 or 40 years?

After five days, we had to leave. I had seen the drawing of the new house. It seemed to be in the same style as traditional houses, but with modern materials. On the bullet train back to Beijing, I started to think more about the trip. The house will be finished by next summer when we come again. Throughout the entire journey to Lao Jia, I noticed the big smiles on my father's face when talking about the new house. It was my grandfather's last wish. My father did not get to see him before his sudden passing away. My grandfather only got to come back to Lao Jia occasionally after he left for big cities. He missed his home and family deeply. My father said my grandfather always talked about Lao Jia to him. Just like my father to me. I knew it was my father's greatest desire to fulfill my grandfather's wish.

My father had finally come to peace with himself after deep sorrow and pain for these past many years. My grandfather was a role model for him. I knew how much my father missed him.

Before we left Lao Jia, my father picked three pieces of thick ancient grey bricks. My father gave a piece to each of my two aunts (his older sisters). We ended up bringing back one piece to our home in the U.S. The brick found a prominent spot with other delicate China sets in our Ethan Ellen glass cabinet. It had become an amazing chatting subject when friends came to our house. I was always so proud to show friends pictures of Lao Jia on my iPhone and talk about the hundreds-years old brick. I felt great, knowing I had a place where I could go and stay in the same land as my ancestors. Even more, I felt happy for my father. He fulfilled his promise to his father and built a new home at his childhood place.

LIESMAN, JENNA**Jenna Liesman**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Fort Zumwalt South, St. Peters , MO

Educator: Amanda Bramley

Category: Poetry

Beautiful heaven reborn

“Beautiful heaven reborn.”

That’s my name,

My highland title.

In finer detail.

It doesn’t feel to match.

Not that champagne translation;

Just the plaid singularity,

The one it shies behind.

Now Meribel

Has a vivacity about its way,

A hierarchy,

A regal royalty pen-flair

It’s also an adagio

A tremolo that fits the definition

“Beautiful heaven reborn.”

Yes?

It isn’t stagnant, is it?

Indeed no;

It’s a time-tested yew,

A bounce-back willow

Layer after compiled layer

Subdued within,

But beauteous upon sight.

Yes.

That feels like home again.

I dress in magnolias

And bear an alabaster wing

Feathered, but

Crippled,

But evermore present,

A soft sea of sugared heaven.

I’ve been plucked in places.

Sometimes singed blots

Ink out the awfulest thoughts in my soul

Where my unworthiness resides,

An unrequited villain of a houseguest
Whom I would wish to evict
But I remember my name and
I find I can sigh again in peace.

My roses are entwined
With pale enough a visage
To be dubbed cadaverous, but
Victorian whimsy beckons me
In ivory whispers
A siren soliloquy
Calling forth the Sovereign in me

I quite like my tongue, but
On occasion it proves my Iscariot.
But my Cherished,
My truest of companions,
They know my heavenward intentions

Eagles and
Hawks and
Falcons may set sights on these pinions
Turn their draconic
Demonic talons
Mark me with gashes
And boast
But in the end
They'll never claim a triumph

“Beautiful heaven reborn.”
Further untouchable a swan
There ne'er has ever been,
Not these peony elegies.

Incomprehensible lies my epithet snug
In its silvery seabed
Who ever claimed blemishes were
Bound to souls? I ask,
Adrift,
Star-speckled iris eyes
Drowning in a quiet cacophony,
Accepting myself.

A “Beautiful heaven reborn.”

LIN, JENNA**Jenna Lin**

Age: 14, Grade: 8

School Name: John Warner Middle School, Columbia, MO

Educator: Beth Winton

Category: Flash Fiction

A Brief Life*Nai-nai: Chinese for grandmother*

These days Nai-nai is loath to even leave her bed. The pain in her back, she says, becomes excruciating the second she puts more weight on it. On good days, she used to plant her feet on the floor, crossing the room unsteadily before settling back into her sheets. On bad days, she would lay still for hours and not say a word. Now, the nurses look at her like they are waiting. Like they are counting down the hours. Their silent pity washes over us in waves. Every time, I pretend I don't understand it and clutch her hand tighter.

Today she is quiet next to me, her milky gaze never leaving the TV, her chest rising and falling in stutters. Even in the relative peace of the hospital room, I can tell that her body is betraying her. That her spine is weakening and crumbling as black and white characters gasp in surprise, her fragile lumbar collapsing and folding into neat pleats when they laugh. Her back pain is crushing her now, as the heroine dazzles, as the men in suits tip their hats and smile charmingly.

"Where will I go after I die?" she asks me at last, a croaky murmur just audible over the movie. For a moment I don't respond, too surprised that she has spoken at all.

"... Don't say that," I tell her, stricken. But she continues as if she hasn't heard me.

"Maybe I will be a bird in my next life." She rests her head against the pillows, her hair splaying like wires on the sheets. Her mouth pulls into a pained grin. Black specks dot her molars. "Maybe I will fly."

She laughs, the crackly sound echoing around the room. For that small, fleeting second, her eyes are lit. The lines in her face stretch and deepen. Her chapped lips strain against her teeth, elated. And it is then, in that hospital room, that I truly believe she was young once: that there was a point when her agony belonged only to stories and dreams, that she had been suffering for a while but there was a time when she was not.

Nai-nai continues to smile, her eyes formed in half-moon crescents. Her breathing slows. For the first time since I've entered the room, she turns to look at me.

"Almost there," she says.

LIU, ALICE**Alice Liu**

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Marquette High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Lauren Ann Williams

Category: Critical Essay

The Case for Women's Pockets

The Case for Women's Pockets

You pull another pair of pants from the rack and try them on. They're a nice smooth heavy-weight twill, but they're a little short on you. "Eh, they're okay", you think to yourself. But before you put them back on the rack, you slide your hands to the sides of the pants. A wide grin appears on your face as you realize that your pants - although a little short and a little shabby for your taste - have pockets!

If you've ever shopped for women's clothes before, the exchange above is probably very familiar to you. If you've never shopped for women's clothes before, you might be a little surprised. How can something so small as pockets change a person's view on a garment? The answer is that pockets add so much versatility that can sometimes be taken for granted. They can be used to hold a phone, secure some keys, and warm your hands. Even an awkward moment between you and your boss can be mitigated - just casually slide your hands into the pockets of your pants or dress, and voila! The silence is broken as you strike a casual, yet professional pose. Perfectly placed pockets also add to the character of clothing, providing the neat nerdiness that can wonderfully accentuate the features of an outfit.

Pockets, as you can see, are amazing. Their versatility, security, and comfort far outweigh the costs of - gasp! - a 5x5 inch square of fabric. So why do many women's clothes lack them? It certainly isn't for a lack of interest in women's pockets. In a poll conducted by YouGov, 81% of women preferred trousers with pockets. As a self-proclaimed women's-pants-shopper myself, trying on a nice pair of pants and then finding out they have no pockets sours my mood. And finding fake pockets (pockets that are sewed shut) on a garment feels even worse; there are simply no more excuses ("they won't fit!", "they don't look good!", "people won't buy them!") when the pockets exist but are purposefully unfunctional.

One possible explanation could be mass-interests, all looking toward profit. The handbag and purse industry, which is heavily marketed toward women, was nearing \$50 billion in 2020 (Fortune Business Insights). Purses and backpacks are so inconvenient that pockets would quickly supersede them as my storage method of choice. They feel nice - and add a little bit of adventurous sophistication - in the first 10 minutes. But after 20 minutes, purses or backpacks get a little heavy, and after 30 minutes, they feel like a leaden weight. Even light backpacks reduce mobility traversing through city streets. Pockets, however, remove all of these concerns. It's no surprise that I, and many others out there, would quickly replace purses with pockets.

And wouldn't it feel so freeing not to be tied down to your chunk of leather? To finally feel like you don't have to stand up to cultural or gender stereotypes? No, I'm not advocating to get rid of all your cute pink purses, but to have the option to leave the house with keys and your phone and just explore the world. In the same way owning tennis shoes and heels allow you to go comfy or assertive, pockets on your clothes would allow you to be both utilitarian and swanky.

So the next time you find yourself buried in the aisles of nylon yoga pants and pleated skirts, consider sending a message to those pesky clothing companies of the world. Or maybe just consider the convenience of not being attached to a bulky handbag. Change in the clothing industry can be made, and that pair of twill pants is proof of it.

LIU, ANYA**Anya Liu**

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Joy Gebhardt

Category: Poetry

Departure

You told me once, when we were young, that you hoped to be a river-merchant like your father and grandfather had been. It was a humid summer day and we were shin-deep in the marsh, mosquitos nipping at our cheeks and sweat beading down our necks. I had laughed, and you had smiled fondly. *When we were young* Isn't that funny? We're still young, really. The only difference now is that you are gone and I am here.

I wept dreadfully the day you left. My eyes, blurry and swollen, could not see to tell whether or not you were as distraught as I. You were already halfway down the riverbank as if you could not leave fast enough; the night air ruffling your freshly shorn locks, your silhouette fading into the mist. The cicadas began their evening song just like every night before, as if you were going to reappear and lay with me if I just waited late enough into the night.

You have always wanted this. Who am I to tether you here?

It was a beautiful day, to step past the low wooden threshold of our shared home alone. To see the glistening marshes under the rising sun, to hear the chirp of cicadas fade with the dusky night, and realize you are not coming home.

LOCHHEAD, ANNA**anna Lochhead**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

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

Educator: Tex Tourais

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

A Violent Storm

It was a warm summer day in Colorado. With a few lazy clouds in the sky; the sunlight penetrated into the glassy river to illuminate the rocks stuck to the bottom of the river floor in an array of browns and, every so often, a red or white. The only shadows dimming the space between the water's surface and the rocky bottom were cast by our canoes. We rode in a yellow one: A bright, dandelion sort of yellow. The top of the canoe was lined with a light wood trim, and the inside was a light grey color. There were two seats: one in the very back and one in the front. The seats were crafted from the same wood as the trim with a little patch of woven fibrous fabric for a seat, characterized with holes from the countless hours this canoe had taken someone from one destination to another.

My dad and I shared a canoe. I was positioned in the front where I had little influence on the direction of the canoe but was still able to help. My dad was in the stern, using his paddle to decide our route; at times, he would let us switch and allow me to direct the canoe. Seeing myself doing the same things he did growing up makes him proud, and making my dad proud gives me a sense of purpose and happiness. My dad is around 6 foot 2 with short dark brown hair which, most of the time, is covered by a hat. He often had a mustache which he took pride in, but my mother was never too fond of it. He's worn the same sunglasses his entire life which are attached to a cloth strap which looped around his neck to spare his hands from having to hold them. At times, these sunglasses dangle from his neck, but for the most part, he had them perched on the bridge of his nose. He wore a long sleeve shirt that had an opening in the back which occasionally filled up his shirt with air, making him look about 40 pounds heavier. He paired this with khaki shorts that had a camo pattern or were just plain khaki. This fabulous outfit was accompanied by a pair of Chacos which had a black soul perfectly molded to the bottom of his foot and straps made of a rope-like material which wrapped around his foot and was fastened by a buckle.

The canoe sank into the water only a couple inches. If the canoe were not there, only our feet would be submerged in the chilly water. I could feel the sun kissing my skin so that I would wake up the next morning with a rosy complexion. The smell in the air was clean and crisp: I could smell the fish and algae and grass and rocks and trees. I could hear the gentle sound of each paddle stroking the water elegantly, sending the water rushing past the side of the canoe, creating a mini whirlpool. The width of the river changed from wide to thin as we paddled along. At times, the river required us to do all of the work; although, it was always moving with us, just slower. Other times the river moved faster than us, allowing us to paddle with minimal effort. Later that day, the sun was slowly setting, painting the clouds and sky with brilliant pinks, yellows, and reds. If you looked close enough, you could see the sun inching down, and the sky dimming right before your eyes. Amidst the sunset, we scoured the shoreline, which was filled with tall grasses and looming trees, for a rocky opening where we would be able to pull off the river, eat dinner, and set up camp for the night. Before we could find a spot along the river which would become our home for the night, the sun's reflection illuminated the surface of the river and gave the world its last bit of warmth before settling behind the rocky tree line. The sky slowly darkened as the time passed. A darker shade of blue took over the sky as each minute passed until the sky was the color of coal. The stars shone brightly and took over the sky like a mirror shattered into a million pieces, scattered across the night sky. The croak of hundreds of frogs hiding in the short brush filled our ears with nature's symphony. Finally, we spotted a small area of rocks on the shore, just big enough to pull our canoes onto, build a fire, and fit all 4 of our tents for the night.

Night fell, and it grew cold. It was dark by the time we hauled our canoes onto the shore far enough so they would not get swept away by the fast-moving currents surrounding our small patch of land. Unloading all of our equipment onto the shore, we began to unpack our supplies, first taking out the food and finally our tents. The first thing we did after coming to shore was build a fire. We all set out on a mission to gather sticks of all sizes. Little ones, for

kindling to start the fire, medium size sticks about the size of a rolling pin, and finally logs. Starting with the twigs, we ignited the fire. Helping build the fire was another way for me to make my dad proud; he was the one who taught me how. The orange, red, yellow, and occasional blue flame danced around the logs. Once the fire was burning sustainably, we pitched our tents. My Aunt Rita, Uncle George, and their daughters, Sage, Amelia, and Britt, shared one tent. My Aunt Kathy, Uncle Tim, and their son John, and Daughter Elizabeth shared one as well. My grandmother, whom we called Moi, and my grandfather, who we called grandpa, pitched a tent together as well. Finally, there was me and my dad with our little tent just big enough for the both of us.

My dad had three older siblings: Susan, Kathy, and George. He and his oldest sister Susan were 13 years apart. The sibling closest in age with him, George, was eight years older. My dad enjoyed nature. He pretty much spent his entire life outdoors. Almost every weekend of his childhood his family would go on a float trip. They also moved around a lot. At one point, my grandpa decided it would be a good idea to move out to a farm in Arkansas. It was a 100-year-old house where they lived for two years with no electricity or running water. One night it was struck by lightning and burned down, but thankfully, no one was home. It is a running joke to this day that my grandmother set the house on fire so she wouldn't have to live there anymore, and she has never once denied it. When they returned to their home, they sifted through the ashes and found globs of metals where the kitchen used to be. These metals were from my dad's grandmother's silverware. Out of these metals, my grandfather made several keychains and belts. The belt buckle my grandfather crafted is worn by my dad every single day along with a keychain which is attached to his keys. The belt buckle spells out AWDIDO. The word AWDIWO was coined by my grandfather. My dad's dad. *Anything worth doing is worth overdoing* This saying is now our family motto.

After setting up our tents, we headed back to sit down by the fire to enjoy the beautiful Colorado night. Every one of us sat upon a log turned vertically as if we had cut a tree from its roots and sat upon them. The front of my body was warm, but the back, neglected by the kind warmth of the fire, was cold. In an attempt to warm up, I moved closer, but my face got too hot as if the fire had made its way into my face through my eyes where its reflection had convinced my brain that the fire had traveled within me. My dad offered me his jacket to protect me from the harsh elements; even though, I know he was chilly as well. Each time the fire would burn out a little, Aunt Kathy would strategically pile on at least a dozen too many logs on the fire which sent sparks flying upwards like a million fireflies dancing above us as it shifted the bones of the fire. It was windy that night, the rustling of the trees sent chills down my 7-year-old spine as I tried my best to stay warm wrapped up in a jacket and blanket. Everyone was accounted for; everyone was weary from our long day of paddling; everyone present except for my cousin John, who was sitting in his tent peacefully reading a book. Before anyone could make the announcement to "hit the sack," a gust of wind violently rushed through our campsite. If this gust of wind were made of water, it would have been considered a tsunami, and there was no high ground to run to. Chaos enveloped our small plot of land. It was nature's way of warding us off. Dust replaced the air, filled my eyes, and filled my lungs. The feeling of sandpaper replaced my eyelids, and my lungs sent the polluted air rushing back out in the form of a cough attack. The structure of the fire began to disassemble, and our tents took to the sky. Each family member moved their legs as fast as possible to grab hold of their respective tent as they tumbled towards the rushing water. Our tents housed the only supplies and clothing available for the 7-day long adventure. The yell of my terrified Aunt Kathy pierced my ears as she saw her tent, and within it, her son, go flying backwards in harmony with every object the wind was able to grasp. Amidst all of this madness, the only thought that crossed my mind was my Bear.

Bear came into my life when I was two years old. My dad got him for me for Valentine's day. He has soft white fur which has been matted into a sort of grey color from years of love and travel. His ears are small half circles, and his eyes are made from two solid black marbles. Tied around his neck is a small red ribbon which over the years has gained a silly band as well as a little red heart that came on a little skewer in a drink I got on the airplane coming back from this exact trip in Colorado. On his chest, there is a big red heart that reads, "I love you." Around the heart, where it connects to his chest, are several bracelets I put on there as a kid and still have not taken off. He wears a pink shirt with white trim and white Hawaiian flowers on it. This is a pajama shirt of mine that I used to wear when I was little but is a little oversized on Bear. I never went anywhere without this bear. Not a single sleepover or road trip was taken without him.

My bear was sitting within our little tent which fell victim to the wrath of the wind. As I watched our tent barrel at what seemed like 100 miles an hour towards the dark, cold, river, I began to panic. The thought of Bear getting swept away by the currents of the river where I would lose him forever to Mother Nature sent me into a tantrum. That he would be locked within the thin nylon walls of the tent forever was terrifying. My focus is shifted but not broken when my dad goes hurdling after our little blue tent. It seemed as if he were traveling in slow motion as I

watched him attempt to grab onto the tent before it flew into the river. Managing to take hold of it, he pulled it down and grounded it. Defeated the wind. My dad was a hero for taming the tent in the violent storm and saving Bear from the cold fast-moving river. In my eyes, he was the strongest bravest person on the float trip and nonetheless my hero. I sprinted over to the tent and unzipped the two zippers locking together the fabric which stood between me and Bear. When the wind finally settled, we were left in shock. Silence overtook the campsite other than the persistent sound of the frogs who sang on as if nothing had happened, as if these deadly winds simply brushed over the back of their bumpy gray green skin. The sky was the same charcoal black color and the stars, hundreds of light years away, still shown just as brightly, somehow ignoring the catastrophic event that took over our campsite. Still surprised that the entire gravel bar was not uprooted in the storm, I walked back towards what was left of the fire where my Aunts, Uncles, Cousins, and Grandparents stood. It was decided that everyone would then head to bed so we could wake up early the next morning and continue our float. I said goodnight to everyone and heard those words reverberating through the air as everyone departed. The sound of soles on gravel filled the air as we walked only several yards to our little tent. We climbed inside, changed into our pajamas, and crawled into our sleeping bags, where we were encompassed with warmth. Before saying goodnight, my dad ensured that I was warm enough and that I had everything I needed. He always did this. Every night before bed, no matter how late, he would ask how I was doing and if I needed anything. At the end of each day, this was my dad's way of telling me how much he loved and cared for me. I was tucked in by a superhero that night. I clutched Bear within my arms and as I lay there the sound of frogs and distant voices began to fade. The calming sound of the river rushing over its bed of rocks added weight to my eye lids. Soon, my mind gave into my body's demand for rest. And so, I fell asleep.

This at least, is how the story went in my 7-year-old brain. If I were to ask someone who was on that float about that night, I'm sure the story might have gone differently but I don't want to know.

LONG, JULIANNE**Julianne Long**

Age: 14, Grade: 9

School Name: Southern Boone High School, Ashland, MO

Educator: Abby Long

Category: Short Story

Up From the Rubble

The door slammed behind me as my mother thrust me outside. Stumbling and clenching the straps of my backpack, I reminded myself that the pain I was feeling was temporary. The bruises on my forearms wouldn't last forever. All I had to do was make sure no one at school noticed them.

"Run!" my mother screeched from behind the door, startling me. I leaped across the front porch and ran to the old sidewalk in front of my house, right as the school bus arrived.

I dragged myself up to the door and clambered up the steps, keeping my nose down and my body moving. But, in my mother's hurry to get me out the door, my shoelaces were untied and I tripped on the last step. Only one person bothered to help me: a boy in my grade whose name was Declan. He stood up out of his seat in the second row and asked if I was okay, which I was. Then he grabbed my forearms to help pull me up. I visibly winced.

"Are you sure you're okay?", Declan asked with concern. I nodded, but then I realized that when he helped me stand, my sleeves were rolled up. He let out a slight gasp when he saw them; those ugly, purple bruises. We made eye contact, but before he could say a word, I had turned around and strolled calmly down the aisle. The bus began driving again.

Claiming the window seat of the eleventh row, it was a good feeling to watch my house fade into the distance, although I knew I would have to see it again after school. I was trapped in the cycle of school and home, school and home, over and over. Trapped in this painful cycle with no way out.

...

The owls continued to hoot, echoing through the valley, which provided a strange sort of comfort from the nearby rustling of the creatures of the night, as well as my nervous thoughts. My mind was on high power but I knew that my body needed to rest. I could feel flakes of bark caught in my hair, but being up there in that tree was better than sleeping on the ground. Already my back was beginning to ache. *Maybe I'd be more comfortable if I jumped down*, I thought until an ominous rustling from below reminded me why I was up so high in the first place.

A breeze wafted past me, which sent chills up my spine and along my arms and legs. Curling myself up, I pulled my shirt over my knees, which provided me warmth on that cool night. Another owl distantly called, which reminded me of how many hours it had already been dark. *How long have I been lying up here?* My eyelids were beginning to get heavy, and I could tell that my adrenaline had decreased from that morning.

Maybe I could finally get some rest. After all, my biggest troubles were buried underneath feet of debris. I pulled my legs out of my shirt, stretching them out to their full length. I would never have to deal with bruises anymore. My muscles relaxed and my breathing slowed. The darkness was calming to my achy body. Then I heard the *CRACK*.

...

The ceiling split down its center as a beam of the building snapped. I could hear chunks of it sprinkle on the floor. Someone in front of me shouted, but I didn't know who it was because I had my eyes tightly closed. The area of the country I lived in had earthquakes fairly often, but never of this scale. Although I tried to calm myself, my heart was thrashing in my chest defiantly. Everything shook, and I couldn't tell which chills were coming from the quake because of how panicked I was.

A heavy object hit the top of a desk somewhere to my right and someone shrieked in alarm. My lungs were filled with dust because of another sudden tremble. I clenched my eyes together because there was an unexpected light shining on me. Wondering where it came from, I opened my eyes only to be temporarily blinded.

...

I woke up and the sun was shining right on my face, so I used my hand as a shield and sat up. It took a moment to process that I wasn't hiding under my desk at school, but I was sitting in a large tree in the middle of the woods.

I sighed and grabbed the branch above me for stability. My heart began to beat faster as I thought of all the "what ifs". *What if they find me here? Will I have to go back to my parents? How much trouble will I be in?*

I didn't have to worry about that anymore, though, because my life was in my control now. Not my parents. I had been given an opportunity when that earthquake hit to get away from all of my pain.

I thought back to when it happened; when I first noticed that a part of the wall had collapsed beside me. Quickly, I formed an escape plan in my head. And it had worked. All that had to happen now was forming a plan of what to do next. *Change my name? Live out here forever? Leave the country?* There was a lot to think about, but I had nothing but time.

...

An opportunity. A wonderful, glorious, opportunity, worth seizing. Beneath the crumbling and waste, there was a chance. A chance worth taking. So I did. I stood up from beneath my dusty desk prison, rising from the rubble. I dodged remnants of lumber and drywall, ignoring pleas and shouts. I had second thoughts when I crouched beside a gap in the drywall.

Save them, my brain said. Save everyone. They are trapped and you can help them.

No! I can't! I have to get away; I have to get away from everything! I thought back to every time that I wanted to run away. Every time my mother and father were angry and took it out on me. *I've had enough.*

The ground jolted again beneath me as I crawled through the gap and stepped outside. I had an opportunity to escape and I had to take it.

I began to run off, but a quiet voice behind me stopped me from continuing. Kneeling and looking back, I made eye contact with a classmate. Not any classmate; it was Declan from the bus! His eyes were filled with dust and fear, but just the same, he whispered, "run". My heart ached. He and the others were so filled with desperation, sitting there trapped underneath their school's desks. Some were crying. But I just couldn't risk losing my dream, I decided, and that was when the ceiling collapsed.

So I ran. And I didn't stop, not for a long, long time. Through fields and past neighborhoods because everything was a blur; my mind was full of such conflicting emotions that there was nothing else I could do. I ran to the woods on the other side of town, and then, I did not stop. The power of my guilt and freedom and passion fueled my body until I simply could not run any longer. Finally, I collapsed under an old-looking tree and lay there, alone in the forest, until my fear of the growing darkness exceeded my exhaustion. That's when I started to climb the tree. Each foot that I climbed, the safer and more secure I felt, and the deeper into my mind I dived. It was better this way. Everyone was better off thinking I was crushed underneath that school.

My parent's angry shouts and door slams were never lulling in the night. Both of them were constantly blaming me for their problems: financial, emotional, physical, whatever.

Why am I getting punished? I would think, sitting there in the eerie darkness with fresh bruises blooming on my arms and legs. I'd always hated the night. The coldness and the looming feeling that someone will get you. It was especially cold out there in the wilderness, where I didn't have a blanket.

But maybe it wasn't so bad out there, darkness and all. I didn't have such a horrible looming feeling, which made me wonder if it was the darkness I was always so afraid of. There was a peacefulness out there I'd never felt before and couldn't put my finger on. I guess, despite everything else, I could get used to that. Still, creatures were prowling everywhere. Creatures I couldn't see because it was pitch black. The silence made my ears keen to the smallest of rustles. *What if they're hungry?* I thought. I was thankful to be in the tree. An owl hooted and I thought about Declan's desperate face.

His blood is on your hands, a voice in my head told me.

No. He wanted me to go. He... he sacrificed himself so I could be free.

An owl hooted nearby as I thought about all of the ways that I could live my life.

...

"Dec! Bud! Time to go!" I shouted up the stairs. My son came running down, backpack in hand, as I heard the bus pull up outside. "Have a good day at school! I love you!" I shouted to him as he smiled and swung open the front door. His backpack bounced behind him as he hopped outside and skipped down the sidewalk. Opening the door, I watched him get on the bus and sit down in his normal row: the second one. He scooped down to the window and waved to me with a grin on his face. I waved back. And I was also smiling.

My life had become so similar to the life I'd had before, and yet, was so different. The entire household was filled with love and joy, smiles and chuckles, peace and satisfaction. It was perfect. It made me feel... happy. And that was enough.

LU, SOPHIA**Sophia Lu**

Age: 16, Grade: 10

Home School, St. Louis, MO

Educator: Lan Yang

Category: Poetry

An Ode to America

Dearest America,

I am happy here,
For when stay silent
No one cares enough to reprimand me.

I am free here.
For when I dress up in white
I seem to blend into with the scenery.

I am living here,
Thanks to the vows of freedom,
The tales of a better life you made to me,
Before I sailed across the seven seas for you.

But America, where is the home you promised me?

What is the life you created?
Because here, life isn't valued much at all.
My siblings learn to accept slaughter
In their sanctuary of knowledge.
Red and white stripes become
White hands stained red with the lifeblood of
your children.
It's not living if I'm living in fear.

Where is the liberty you boast about?
Because a congregation of men in blue suits
Just damned my sister into becoming a vessel
For a life that was forced into her.
Soldiers in blue shove my people to the ground.
Do you enjoy watching us beg for mercy?

How do I find the happiness you dream of?
Because happiness it seems, has prerequisites.
I do not deserve happiness
Unless I work for it, but
I have no chance for success
Unless I am born with it.

You've shown your true colors,
And it's solely shades of white.
Your stars are sharp enough to sever generational bonds.

And you dare tell us that *we're* in the wrong?

Another halfhearted apology won't bring back the dead.

Your anthem is a cacophony in my ears, America.
When I stand, I pretend that your saccharine song
Is an elixir to my assaulted hands.
Your promises are gilded America,
Fool's gold for an unassuming miner.

Oh, how you taunt me America.
You boast of my warriors heart as you send me into a minefield.
Your whispers of emancipation must feel so convincing on your tongue,
To the point where I fear you've even deluded yourself.

But I too, America, will put on a performance for you.
I too, America, will serenade you with sugar-coated lies.

But unlike you, America, I was never a great actress.

MAGARIAN, MOLLY**Molly Magarian**

Age: 14, Grade: 9

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educators: Andy Chen, James Lewis

Category: Poetry

Songbird

I wish you understood
Your own heart
And how it sings to us
Through the thick fabric you wrap around it
Songbird of joy
Though you feel none of it
Just keep preaching
Sing, sing, sing
Sing around the knife
Your shove down your throat

The tears come silently
Too invisible for us
The sobs come all alone
Head ringing, mind racing
No more singing, only pacing
And pacing
And hands
Am I enough
So I try
A smile here, a joke there
Just a simple touch
Or a thousand
If you'll have me
Maybe if I held you
You could verbalize
The knives
Maybe if somebody held you
And meant it
So I try

I know it's just a start
I know the day will come
The snap of a delicate neck
Your heart breaks
Into a thousand jagged flowers
Ripped from the ground
Softened to perfection
Only to be sharpened
And discarded
I know now
And yet I silently mourn for you in advance
Because I know

I know the tears will grow more silent
The smiles will stop
Your eyes will turn grey
And your hands will shake
And you'll retreat into the dark corner
Of your mind
That is constantly trying
To track you down
You'll stop running
As wall after wall comes up
We try to scream
Try to run for you
To hold you
To hold
But the walls are iron
And your face is like stone
And just like that you're going
Going
Gone

And what will we do then?

So for now I try
And I hope it's enough
To take the music of your heart
To your ears
And let it carry through
Please believe it's true
Please believe it's you
Please scream
Or cry
Or do something
Anything
To let us know that you're still here
Just a sound
Let us in
Throw down the key and don't change the locks
We want to come in

We want to come in

Sing for us again, songbird
Even if the notes were only tears
It would be music to my ears

MASON, PATRICK**Patrick Mason**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

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

Educator: Andrew Cox

Category: Humor

Master of Wit

There is a fine line between being a source of distraction and a master of wit. This was a lesson I learned in fourth grade when, for whatever reason, I thought it would be amusing to stick my head through one of the plastic chairs in my classroom. I do not recall why I did it. Maybe it was because I missed out on securing one of the highly-coveted bean bags during reading time. Maybe I was trying to get my friend's attention. Whatever the reason, I decided to squeeze my head through the roughly cranium-sized hole of a classroom chair. My enjoyment quickly faded when I realized I was stuck.

My immediate reaction was to scurry under a table. The resulting clamor only managed to attract unwanted attention: fingers pointed in my direction, and laughter erupted from my jeering classmates. Then, to my horror, the fire alarm began blaring as if the school itself was cackling at my misfortune. Now, not only was my teacher tasked with evacuating 20 fourth graders in proper fire-code fashion, but she also had to deal with extricating my head from the chair. While gently guiding me by one of the four chair legs sprouting from my neck, she escorted the class through the doors, down a narrow staircase, and onto the playground. The entire elementary school was staring at me with looks ranging from bewilderment to hysterical laughter. I was mortified, engulfed in feelings of absolute humiliation. It took an inhuman amount of Vaseline, but eventually I got out. Still, for years after, I was stuck being called "chair kid." At that vulnerable age, I couldn't get over the embarrassment. I was afraid to speak up in class, relentlessly bothered by the thought of becoming a joke to others. Though I wanted to escape from this self-critical identity, I didn't know how.

An unexpected assignment from my favorite 8th-grade teacher created an avenue to liberate me from these classroom insecurities. He asked us to write an essay to read in front of my classmates and their parents. Rather than check my humor at the door, he urged me to harness it as a vehicle for compelling storytelling. He convinced me that taking a risk in my writing was precisely what I needed to do. When it finally came time to read the essay, I remember laughter erupting from the audience as I relayed my misfortune with the chair. Now, instead of the object of the joke, I was its master. I walked away from the experience learning that my writing is better when I put my personality front and center.

I have come a long way from the nine-year-old boy who had to have his head lubricated out of a classroom chair. I know there is a time and place for seriousness. Whether as a camp counselor helping to console a homesick child or as a starter on my state-championship-winning high school soccer team, I understand when to focus and do the serious work necessary to achieve success. But that doesn't mean I put my sense of humor away, even in the most momentous of circumstances. I've learned that humor – even the self-effacing kind – is a way to connect with others rather than a source of shame.

Now that I have discovered my passion for storytelling, I want to spend my life mastering the craft. It took putting my head in a chair to learn the effect my writing has on the people around me. I want to spend the rest of my life, perhaps at a standing desk, developing into the writer I know I can be.

MCCLAIN, KOLBY**Kolby McClain**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Smithville High School, Smithville, MO

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Critical Essay

The American Dream: Sacrificed Morals For False Happiness

Cumulatively, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Jennifer Price's argument on pink flamingos both argue the reality of American culture is one that is not mindful or moral, but always has the same reasoning. To "chase" the American Dream is the nature of Americans throughout the 20th and 21st century. Americans chase a sense of elegance in life in all aspects, disregarding practicality or morals at times. F. Scott Fitzgerald eloquently characterizes the essence of the American Dream in his novel, *The Great Gatsby* by enlightening his audience in the marvels of New York City's affluent during the roaring twenties as a striving young man from the midwest emerges himself in the chaos of West and East Egg. He does an incredible job of utilizing juxtaposing colors to communicate themes and personify the most minute details to encapsulate all of the twisted and complex details in the book. Fitzgerald writes with lots of rhetorical devices to further his message and demand attention from his audience. Jennifer Price dives into the spectacle of pink flamingos; their popularity, symbolism, drive, and why an animal hunted to extinction in North America became a symbol of prosperity throughout the country. She also extensively applies a multitude of rhetorical devices such as juxtaposition, anaphora, asyndeton, etc. to convey the psychology of the American people when following trends such as the pink flamingo. The reasoning behind Americans flocking to the symbol of the pink flamingo or the lying, cheating, and stealing that encompasses the plot of *The Great Gatsby* are all driven by this "chase" for the American dream: a sense of superiority.

Jennifer Price's passage about the history of pink flamingos in American culture is written with asyndeton to exaggerate the importance and plurality of situations. She wrote, ".tangerine, broiling magenta, livid pink, incarnadine, fuschia, demure, cango ruby, methyl green." This phrase exaggerates the plethora of bold colors flooding the culture during the given time period. This furthers her claim that the palate of the pink flamingo fit into this shift or even caused it. By showing the shift's extensive roster of colors becoming more popular, which leads her audience to assume the shift's magnitude in popularity was proportionally extensive to the list.

Price utilizes anaphora to demand attention to her depiction of her personification of the flamingo's. An example of this is the phrase, "semiotic sprouts," which does an exemplary job of forcing the audience to give their attention to this image of the flamingo's exponential growth. This is also very well thought out, as it uses anaphora to call attention, but also uses the visual of sprouts to relate to lawns, where plastic pink flamingos call home throughout the country. The use of anaphora here allows Price to minimize her words while maximizing her message. Once again this essay contains anaphora to illustrate the flamingo's resounding popularity in the phrase, "the subtropical species stood." To provide context, it is referring to the symbolic presence of the bird prior to its domination of post-great depression America, as well as juxtaposing their native habitat to their places of cultural significance geographically.

Furthermore, Price uses juxtaposition in her writing to draw contrast between actuality and sensibility when arguing that the American dream lacks sensibility. The author mentions that flamingos no longer live in the United States because they were hunted to extinction, yet they are still idolized and incredibly popular symbols for prosperity and a care-free life. This juxtaposition is similar to the juxtaposition in *The Great Gatsby* of American culture in reality versus what is sensible and moral.

Similar to that of Price, Fitzgerald creates a characterization of American society that extensively chases this illusion of success and superiority. The oligarch type characters in *The Great Gatsby* are the ones who have the deepest unrest and lowest level of true freedom. Gatsby seems to be the envy of the city, but in reality he hates his life; whereas Myrtle seems to be the scum of the city, but in reality she seems to enjoy life more than anyone else. Although Myrtle's early demise and conflicts are not ideal, they are symbolic of the brutality of society and the harshness of life. This is similar to Price's characterization of American society because the flamingo is symbolic of affluence, prosperity, and happiness; but in reality flamingos are extinct and an overused symbol without true resonance.

Furthermore, F. Scott Fitzgerald elaborately characterizes the spirit of America as unsettling. Never satisfied, Americans tend to be drawn to the next best thing. In the case of Jennifer Price's Argument, this means being drawn to flamingos because of their obscurity and trendiness. In *The Great Gatsby*, it translates to sketchy business, relationships, luxury goods, etc. This greed for more is the driving factor behind the chase that both pieces allude to; the never-subsiding desire for more that haunts American culture.

Both *The Great Gatsby* and Price's discussion on the popularity of Flamingos illustrate American culture as an ever evolving search for false happiness and the need to make others believe that one is successful. Price uses the trend of flamingos, whereas Fitzgeralds uses money and people; but both arrive at the same conclusion on the American Dream. They characterize American culture as striving to be seen: seen as successful, seen as happy, seen as better than those around them. The way our society sees success at its core is flawed and Fitzgerald and Price both hoped to warn us of this misconception. After the analysis of both of these pieces, I have drawn the conclusion that, while lacking mindfulness of morality, the American Dream is simply to chase the feeling of superiority rather than the commonly thought of "happiness," or "success."

MILLER, DAVID**David Miller**

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Jason Lovera

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

A Journey to Understanding Divorce

A Journey to Understanding Divorce

My Dad said, "Well..."

"your dad and I," interrupted my mother, "are getting a divorce."

The crisp Fall air and morning dew sure does smell good this morning I thought. We just got back from our camping trip, and I could remember talking to my dad about the apple orchard we saw camping. I was just going to ask my mom if we could see a movie that weekend.

They tried to explain that my father was packing away his stuff into a moving truck and was going to move to a new house. *But how could we see the movie together?* I thought. *How could I see it without my dad?* Still overcome with confusion my mind raced in fear, *divorce, divorce, divorce, divorce, divorce.* I had thought about it but those fears were fleeting. My mind was now resonating with these words. I tried to muffle them. I began to think of the beautiful apple trees; I could almost taste the fruit and feel the crisp air once again. The sweetness was short-lived as it turned to ash in my mouth as fear inundated my mind. My mind was vacillating between fear and ignorance in a painful hysteria.

Suddenly, now drowning in fear, I exclaimed "Will I see Dad again?"

My mom warmly said "Of course," hearteningly explaining that everything was going to be just like it was except with "two houses and two thanksgivings and two Christmases, which means twice as many presents".

Beguiled by these words my composure was patched together once again; Somehow I was able to tell myself that everything was going to be just fine. My parents' warm words continued for the rest of that unfortunate day, assuaging reality's ugly head. Their facade continued to lull me into a state of warmth and ignorance, which was short-lived. That warmth turned cold, as night overcame my house and my parent's sweet words began to rot. The next day after school, my dad picked me up and brought cookies; a rare sight for a kid who was used to only vegetables and kale. My mind previously racing with questions crumbled under sugar's spell, and sweet optimism overcame me. As night fell over my house, I was getting ready for bed. I overheard my dad talking to my mom as I walked downstairs still entranced; I was hoping for one more taste of the forbidden fruit. Just as I was grabbing a cookie, my dad grabbed the cookie and threw it to the ground cracking it, yelling that it was too late and that I had to go to bed.

"What?" I snapped, confused by my dad's sudden change in attitude. I ran back upstairs, yelling that "mom would let me have one," and headed to bed bitter.

My sweet optimism began to crumble like the cookie; all I could think about was my life and how it had been ruined; that short-lived bliss was just a dream and my eyes were finally opening. My mind was still shattered and I was confused. These thoughts of unfairness and anger crept into my mind as confusion and fear turned into loathsomeness as my parents' sinuous coil of lies began to unravel.

Every other week for the next few weeks, each of my parents still tried to console me at each house, but my anger and confusion prevailed and grew. For the next few weeks, as Fall break neared, I thought about how my life had changed from that day. *I liked my old house. I liked being driven to school every morning. I liked my old life.* For the next few weeks, all I could think about was how they had wronged me. These different houses served as an everlasting symbol of their betrayal and what had been stolen from me. Every time my parents would pick me up and bring gifts like cookies or presents to console me the more confusing it all became. *My parents had no right to try to make me feel better when they were the ones who wronged me.* I was annoyed. I still wanted to enjoy apple orchards and cookies but I couldn't. They betrayed me and *they think that buying me cookies will redeem them, No way.*

Around four months passed by, but my annoyance and confusion were embedded in me now more than ever. During

this time I remember at school, we were doing a project on family life and what had been affecting us. I was unnaturally excited and eager to write about my life. My mind digressed as sweet fantastical words empowered my hand. I wrote about an amazing soccer game. I described the familiar crisp air and morning dew that I wanted more than anything again. I wrote about me scoring a goal, and wrote about my parents cheering me on. The story described me righteously overtaking the other team in a battle of wits. I wrote about my parents cheering me on and how through their support I was able to win the game. The story was perfect. Although almost none of the story was true. I was writing about a delusional experience, and I knew it. I did not want to write about the divorce and how it was affecting me. I thought about this lie that I concocted. My mind shifted. Dismay transposed my previous bliss and flooded me with thoughts of how my life had changed. My mind was now once again overwhelmed with emotion. My mind wondered and I blamed my parents for their empty words. *I want this to be my life* I thought, *I deserve that perfect, happy childhood.* I began to convince myself that the reason for my broken dreams was my parents. *They stole my perfect soccer game* This despair was their fault. *Why does no one else have to feel this too?*

My regretful journey started to take root after that Fall break ended and continued for four more years. As time passed and uncertainty and dejection sunk in I began to drift away from my parents. I would talk to my parents less at dinner and stopped talking about how my day had been. The only words I spoke were ones of wrath. I wanted to purposely create a rift in my relationship with my father and mother using my outrage. Every time I ignored my parents' wishes I thought about them shattering my life of innocence and joy. I did not want my parents to think that everything was good because it wasn't. My woe had become vengeful anger.

Every time I would yell at my parents raring to quell this anger that wanted revenge, I spoke out "I hate you," or "Get out!"

Not just did I drift away from them, but I would yell and curse and get angry instinctively all the time when I got annoyed and even more so when they consoled me. Phillip Yancey the author of "An Unnatural Act" explains "Many guys try to dissipate anger through cathartic acts, like swearing. Save your breath. Bushman says indulging your aggression will fuel the vengeful fire inside" (Thorton 8). I thought getting angry and yelling and cursing would help me get over the problem, but this never helped my feelings dissipate. I never stopped yelling or getting angry because it never quelled my vengeful fire. The less successful my attempts became the more vengeful and angry I became. My vengeance was festering and growing each time I struck a nerve in my parents and watched them try to hold together a now shattered family. The more my emotions rose, the more I mindlessly craved my justice. In another article called "Ever Wanted Revenge Try This Instead," the author Caroline Cox described a situation, "you feel hurt and angry- maybe you want payback, sometimes those negative feelings dissipate over time, other times they fester and become an obsession"(Cox 21). When facing the smallest inconveniences, I felt the need for revenge. When my parents would leave the door open I would yell, and slam the door or when they turned on a light in my room I would get angry. These feelings were festering and growing, my erratic anger only grew with each curse yelled. Another 4 more months dragged by, when I came home from school as I walked inside my Dad's house I heard my parents were in the kitchen yelling about their divorce. When I slammed the door shut, I heard my parents yelling to "leave."

I saw my dad stomp up into his bedroom without saying a word, and watched as my mom walked outside and got into her car. As my mom was parked in the driveway just sitting I should have been wondering why my parents were so unhappy and angry, but I wasn't. My mind was still clouded by feelings and I was still angry. My parents were suffering but I did not see anything. Instead of feeling sorry, I too ran up to my room and angrily closed my door. In one article called "Ever Wanted to Get Revenge Try this Instead," the author Caroline Cox offers an explanation and says that "revenge can cloud the mind"(Cox, 22), and explains even more so that "Revenge can keep you tethered to the past"(Cox, 22). All I could think about was how my parents had wronged me. In the back of my head, all I could hear were the words *divorce, divorce, divorce* like it was the same night and my mind was shattered. I felt like I needed some form of revenge to make my parents understand the pain they had caused me, but my mind was overflowing and I was clouded by these feelings. My mind had been carelessly glued back by hollow words from my parents and meaningless cookies. My mind was disfigured and deluged with anger and confusion, which autonomously dictated my curses and comprehensively my thoughts altogether. These were my parents, but my anger had absorbed everything. I meaninglessly lashed out against my parents, blind to everything but vengeance. My bliss was gone and I thought my mouth would never taste true sweetness again. Every year that passed, my feelings slowly faded, but they still chained me down; I did not let myself mature and understand the situation. My distaste and vendetta against my parents stole what I really wanted. For too long I felt as if they had stripped me of the sweet life that everyone seemed to have except me, but in reality, I had stripped it away by myself.

My parents did not want to see me suffer and get angry. Even so, I drifted away from them, stopped talking to them like I used to, and got angry at them. These were the same parents who took me to soccer games and brought me camping. At one point I remember I refused to even speak to them after I got angry. Because of my feelings of anger, I thought it was my prerogative to make my parents feel guilty for what they had done and to show them that I

was suffering and that I had not forgiven them. In one article called the “Unnatural Act,” the author Phillip Yancy explains that guilt can eat away at the perpetrator and that “forgiveness loosens the stronghold of guilt on an individual”(Yancy14). I did not truly understand the power of guilt and the power of forgiveness. I disrespected and ignored them. I thought that guilt devouring my parents, the same parents who took me to the apple orchards, would quell my vengeance and longing for childish bliss like I had before my journey of pain began. Before my life changed and my journey commenced, I watched all kinds of movies like Quentin Tarantino movies. I read books and comics like Batman, like most kids. “In novels and movies, revenge turns out to be this great cleansing moment of someone who’s been abused to triumph”(Yancy 13). As a child, I never thought that revenge was bad. I allowed my Hammurabi-like view of revenge to seep into my mind. I did not understand what I was doing to my parents or how to resolve it. I did not value understanding of my feelings, and I did not understand the effort it would take. I saw forgiveness and revenge every day, but still, I was almost blind to my dealings with these feelings. I did not understand what I had done by not forgiving my parents and letting them move on. I grew up watching movies like Batman and hearing about the story of Adam and Eve eating the forbidden apple and being cast down to earth. I imagined my parents' serpents, who stole my paradise and cast me down into a world of pain. I went on vacation around four years ago to Florida. I can hardly remember anything except the happy young couples at the beach laying down reading a book and enjoying life. The air was warm as the sun blazed down on the dry sand, but their presence brought an overwhelming air of optimism and hope. After my parent’s divorce had fully resolved, and my chaotic confusion turned into monotonous repetition, my life once filled with adventure left me with no despair, but also none of the sweet zeal I once had. There was a crying kid whose sandcastle had been crushed by the turbulent waves. I helped the sweet kid rebuild the castle. He smiled so much when we were done that day, and it filled me with a rare warmth and happiness. As I played in the sand I watched the happy couples again; as my warmth faded I felt regret and guilt. I remember thinking about my parents and how those couples must have been just like them. I realized how hard it must have been to just lose all that. Not just being able to enjoy the beach but the time. *How many years had gone into their marriage?* I realized that that could never happen again for them. As I sat there with my family and friends, I remembered the moments when my parents were first separating and I remembered how I had got home early from school that one day. I wished I would have acted differently and realized things sooner. I was childish, my anger had created a rift between my parents and me. I had plunged my sweet dreams of soccer games and apple orchards into a turbulent storm of my own making. After feeling this hope in the air at the beach; I wanted only to make amends to my parents. My parents had given me a bountiful orchard of zeal, and at the smallest inconvenience, I threw their kindness and my joy away to rot. I thought, *My life is no parable or fairytale and I am a fool who threw away my happiness for the fleeting feeling of vengeance.* As I sat on the sand my parents’ stranglehold of guilt became my own and I wished that I could absolve my pointless vengeance.

In another article called “Revenge,” the author Jim Thornton says “To outside observers revenge often today looks pointlessly destructive, acknowledges psychologist Michael McClelland, PhD., the director of the Evolution of Human Behavior Laboratory at the University of Miami. But the desire to seek revenge is as natural to human beings as grief, happiness, fear, and hunger”(Thornton 7). I could not understand my obsession with vengeance because I was a child; I failed to see my obsession was in vain even after years of struggle. Revenge is built into a human's brain so everyone feels its pull, but children’s minds are clouded by it even more because they are not unsullied by pain. One section in “The Unnatural Act,” explains the author Phillip Yancy’s experience listening to a story from the Bible. He explained that “when I was a child listening to the story in Sunday School, I could not understand the loops and twists in the account of Joseph’s reconciliation with his brother”(Yancy 11). Yancy explained that he did not understand why Joseph forgave his brother even though he treated him so harshly. He explained that “I now see that story as a straightforward saga depicting the unnatural act of forgiveness”(Yancy 13). As a child, it is hard to understand the point of forgiveness and the problems with revenge. Because like Yancey described, forgiveness is not natural and revenge is as natural as anything for humans. As I matured like Phillip Yancey, I understood the point of forgiveness and understood that revenge is pointlessly destructive the more I inexperienced it. As a child, I felt completely driven by my natural instincts of Revenge or Forgiveness, so understanding those feelings took effort and commitment.

Revenge is built into our brains, but forgiveness is not. As a child, I was facing these senses daily but I did not understand either. Revenge can cloud the mind and make it hard to make good decisions, and understand feelings like vengeance and forgiveness which are already hard to process for a child. Vengeance and anger are natural, but looking back I barely understood them. In the article called, “Ever wanted to get revenge? Try this Instead,” the author Carline Cox explains “We can't control our toxic emotions only how we deal with them”(Cox 23). One great way that I dealt with my anger and toxic emotions was through counseling, which Cox even says “people come to therapy, especially for something like anger”(Cox 24). After my parent’s divorce, my parents brought me to a counselor who helped me understand my emotions of revenge and channel them into productive ways. Expressing my

true self, and my imperfect family life took effort and will, but it helped me to understand my emotions and the situation that I was in. It helped me to come to a realization about my emotions and my parent's divorce, and to understand not only that my parents were suffering, but also how amazing they were.

From when they brought me cookies in the car or brought me to counseling, even though my parents were facing all this stress and hardship they were still trying to help me. Every day I went to counseling, the same thing resonated in me, *I was being selfish*. After the vacation, and once I fully overcame my guilt by dealing with my toxic emotions, I made it my duty to relieve my parents' guilt and let them know that I had forgiven them. This purpose gave way to that feeling of warmth. I was truly sure that life would be what I made it. After I set out to make amends I felt true happiness, not just a fleeting mirage. The more I worked to be kind the more my once shattered mind began to mend, and I was left with comforting optimism.

A few months ago for Mothers Day, I remember writing this card up for my mom and her day, which I had been doing for years. Without a doubt, my view on Revenge and Forgiveness changed. I extended small gestures like writing cards because I wanted my parents both to forgive me and know that I forgave them. I wrote each word in my card with the utmost care remembering all of the things I did and should have done. Instead of empty emotions like pain or vengeance, I was left with a feeling of zeal and hope. I had written so many cards and each one felt like an adventure because I was doing it to recompense my betrayal of my family, which brought me hope and pride. Each word I put down was a sign of my forgiveness and made me feel free. In the article "Ever Wanted Revenge? Try This Instead," Caroline Cox says that "letting go of toxic feelings can give you the bonus of feeling powerful"(Cox 23). Letting go of these feelings and working to forgive my parents allowed my pain and vengeance to wither which was liberating. Before my tedious journey began, when I was younger I did not understand my emotions nor how to deal with them. There were countless kids at my school who had divorced parents and many of them were weighed down by the same guilt and hardship. I had experienced so much meaningless hardship, I remember thinking *Children everywhere need to know how to channel their emotions and understand them* now understood that facing feelings of revenge and forgiveness is difficult but vital to avoid a long journey of guilt and pain, *like mine which stole my whole childhood* thought. I should have realized my mistake early on, confronted my emotions, and liberated myself of them. Dealing with the aftermath of my divorce was difficult because that is what one entails. As I folded my card and etched colors into the card, it only took me a minute to write the card. I thought, *but how long had it taken me to write my first card, and how long would it take kids who are just beginning a painful journey of divorce. Why didn't I do this before? How much time had I wasted on this?* I was not alone in my ignorance though, other kids at my school I had found out also had divorced parents. My mind now wondered after writing so many cards, I thought *Countless kids today are growing up in these situations and how long will it take them to write their parents cards again?* As a child, I was ignorant and did not want to understand my emotions or how to control them. I wasted years of my life disliking my parents; Looking back, if I *could only have had the knowledge of my journey and state of mind I have today, I would have faced less regret and more joy, like a childhood should entail.*

A few weeks ago I remember getting annoyed that I had left my charger for my phone at my mom's house. No longer did my mind shift to anger. I began to think about *how angry I would have been*. These trivial matters like leaving my door open, or a charger made me realize how much I had changed and further fueled my urge to improve. This feeling was a friendly reminder of my progress and my belated now revived satisfied self.

Understanding that bad things happen to everyone, and everyone feels the need to express their negative emotions from these things were important for me. Further, understanding that there were better outlets to express emotions, like counseling, or just talking with a friend, helped me understand my feelings of revenge and forgiveness. When I finally changed my attitude toward my parents and forgave them, I was not just empowered but felt better overall after overcoming the power of revenge which so desperately "tethered me to the past"(Cox 23) and did not let me mature.

"Only humans can perform that most unnatural act, and by doing so only they can develop relationships that transcend the relentless laws of nature"(Yancey 23) By liberating myself from my ignorance and negative feelings I was able to succeed and move on with my life overall and express my journey through revenge and forgiveness.

MO, ZIJIA**Zijia Mo**

Age: 13, Grade: 8

Home School, Hartville, MO

Educator: Kevin Zhen

Category: Humor

Pokémon No

Mulch crunches as pale green crocs slam against the ground. Foam cracks, displacing dirt and soil to make way for my 9 year-old footsteps. The Niantic logo does a spin, as the black bar at the bottom of the screen jumps from 25% to 50% to 90% before finally resting comfortably at 100%. A plethora of wild Pokémon lay awaiting. If only I could swirl the Pokéball at the perfect angle and catch them once and for all.

Back then, the catch rates were unjustified. They made no sense. One could even argue they were unbelievably *broken*. Even Ultra Balls caught nothing, and Razz Berries were wasted on the maws of Totodiles and Charmanders alike. Oftentimes I'd catch myself desperately tossing Great Ball after Great Ball just to capture even the very weakest of pokemon, while other times it would take just one measly Pokéball to secure a Mewtwo. A Mewtwo people!

That one measly Pokeball could've been there since the beginning. I remember at the start of the game, Professor Willow handed people a starter Pokémon as well as 5 measly Pokéballs. It was possible for one to waste all 5 of their Pokeballs and start the game without a pokemon. When something of that magnitude would happen, the only choice was to make an entirely new account but the frustration of not even being able to progress normally was enough to make droves of people quit on the spot. What kind of madman designed this onboarding?

Anyways. The last Pokestop within a 2 mile radius of my neighborhood rested at the lower spine of Wellington Village Park. Granted, it was a walk through nature, and beautifully maintained with spots of greenery resting atop lily-pads and birds squatting on tree branches. It kind of looked like a movie. But I wasn't there for the aesthetics. I was there for the water, and not because the water held crocodiles, fish, ducks, and frogs, but because water meant Water-type pokemon. Both incredibly rare and incredibly powerful, many people sought after the crested Gyrados, which could only be caught through tedious hours of collecting hundreds of Magikarps. In real life, that translated to like 10 hours of work. Truly outrageous (it's a pun people, one of Gyrados' most powerful moves is Outrage). Another cogent, almighty Pokemon born from the swamp was the coveted Lapras, which held one of the most versatile movesets in the game, since it was able to defend gyms well while also performing fairly decently in one on one battles. Both Ice Beam and Surf were amongst strongest Ice and Water moves, respectively. Indeed, Lapras' stamina is only rivaled by a handful of legendary pokemon including Giratina, created when Arceus, creator of the entire universe was born. But I'm getting a bit off track here.

In all honesty, I found the game rather boring and I only played it so I could give myself an excuse to "exercise." It was repetitive, taxing on my mental health, and it was getting to the point where my best Pokemon was one that I spent months grinding, only for someone who bought a \$15 incense to attract waaaaay better pokemon. The hard work I had put in was counter-acted seamlessly by a person with a Sam's Club Plus card??? Seriously, Niantic? You know what, now that I think about it, every aspect of the game was oriented to make money. You wanted Pokéballs? A dollar fifteen. The shop menu was similar to Morshu from Zelda. It had everything you could possibly want or need to have a great time playing Pokemon Go... for your credit card number and the CSC. Anything you wanted could be bought with cold hard cash. The best berries, the best Pokeballs, I'm *talking* great balls, ultra balls, even *master balls*. The only thing one *you couldn't* buy, the one thing *you had* to work for was hatching eggs, but I uninstalled the app when I saw my 28-year old neighbor hacking the system by driving around on his moped to hatch his egg faster. The worst part? The next day he was driving a golf cart.

Over the years, Niantic has added droves of newer pokemon: Darkrai, Giratina, and Genesect. They changed the GUI (graphic user interface), when it used to be blocky and more cluttered than a garage sale. PVP used to be messy and rather boring, but they have implemented charged attacks and better rewards for winning, which endows players with a false sense of purpose in addition to an alluring ranking on a leaderboard. I've noticed the common Pokemon have changed too. Whenever I walk around the park, trudging slowly over wet mulch, disrupting ants and leaves alike, I now see Rhyhorns and Gastlys instead of Pidgeys and Rattatas.

Niantic is trying to do better. But you know what? It's too little, too late. I'm never going back.
Maybe.

MOORE, GABRIELLE**Gabrielle Moore**

Age: 14, Grade: 9

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Sarah Hasselman

Category: Short Story

What the Wind Stole**I. Regrets**

The dull chatter emitting from the Pepsi Cola commercial soon becomes a distant whir, melting into a woman urging me to call the number below NOW to register for life insurance that costs only a few pennies a day. I roll my eyes, tearing my attention away from the TV.

“Momma, I’m bored. Let go.” I demand, pushing against Momma’s arm, which was tightly wound around my shoulder. At first, she laughs, her arm tightening around mine under the belief that my sudden irritation was a joke. This only angered me more; my stubborn attempt to flail myself free growing in intensity. Finally, my mission succeeds, resulting in Momma’s arm being thrown into her lap. She gasps, her eyes widening with hurt as I shun her touch.

I stomp upstairs, waiting for Momma to follow after me, pleading to finish the show with her, in which I would then begrudgingly succumb, secretly being pleased she was asking me to do so. But Momma just cried.

II. The Beginning

Momma’s brain began to decay long before she was buried. Here and there she would forget where she put her wedding ring, or a family member’s birthday would happen to slip her mind, always ending in me rushing to Walmart to buy a mug and card, asking Momma to “sign here.” Despite my family’s frequent visits, I was the only one who seemed to recognize an absence. There was a chunk of Momma I knew was missing, yet lingered around each breath I took. Momma began wilting away; her eyes glossed over when she saw me, scanning me up and down in an attempt that always failed to recognize the figure that stood in her home.

Each night, after completing my routine of marching around the house three times to scan for candles left burning, ovens left running, or doors left unlocked, my eyes would glow a veiny red as I settled into bed, anticipating the grief that would once again overwhelm me the moment I stepped into Momma’s room.

III. The End

After a particularly long night of arguing with Momma’s insurance provider, piles of wrinkled Kleenex, and a single Google search of “hospices near me,” I discovered Momma huddling in her bedroom, her aged hands clutching a single sheet of paper while the other glided across it with a ballpoint pen. Just astray of her hips sat a small binder holding a pile of papers that appeared softened and wrinkled. I stood next to the door frame, peaking my head through the wooden door. A couple minutes later, Momma sighs as she sets the paper and binder next to her lamp. Her eyes find mine, tightening, while her wrinkles compress into a smile.

“Hey, baby. What you doin’ all the way over there? I missed you... you can come on over next to me. I won’t bite.” She laughs, outstretching her arms, the top of each one sagging along with the tips of her eyelids.

I disappeared behind the door, hoping the stranger who sat in Momma’s bed would be gone by the time I looked back. Was that Momma? The Momma I had gotten to know for the last 7 years didn’t smile, move, or recognize anyone who walked in this room. Instead, the woman who sat waiting for me to walk into her arms was the Momma I had grieved the loss of for most of my adult life—the woman who dropped me off at school every morning, the woman who sat and listened as I told her about my day, the woman who spent hours on my hair every week perfecting my polished look. This was Momma. And for the first time in years, I was her baby again.

I had dreamed of this moment thousands of times. Yet, I couldn’t decide if the dreams were fantasies or nightmares. Each time, I buried the notion in the depths of my brain, convincing myself Momma was too far gone for her body to one day become animated with coherence. No one just gets better. No one. And this was no exception. Her sudden lucidity wasn’t a miracle, only a devilish attempt at Momma’s last goodbye.

Careful not to disrupt so much as the ant skittering across the floorboards, I walk over to Momma. The

moment I near her cool body, I collapse into her arms, an occurrence that had become an unfamiliar motion. I quickly shift my weight, expecting Momma to wilt at my touch. But her hands are steady on my back while I embrace her. My heart sags as I remember resisting the same hold years ago.

“Momma?” I ask, speaking into her neck. Her hand runs over my hair, braided into tight plaits.

“I was just writing. I used to write all the time, you know. Right up until your brother was born.” She pauses, struggling to find her breath. “And then I taught him how to write. And then I taught your sister how to write. And then I taught you how to write. And I never got back into it.” She clutches me tighter, her bones no longer providing the warmth it did so many years before. “And I figured I should do it now, right? Add one last page to that old binder. Better late than never.”

I nod. My eyes burn, the shoulder of Momma’s nightgown dampening. I turn to face her. Momma.

She doesn’t seem to notice the absence of a response. Her hollowed cheeks shrink with each blink I take. “It’s just a little something.” Another pause. A bulge fights its way down her throat. Momma’s eyes once again find mine. I search them for a hint of unfamiliarity, but her gaze remains steady. Just like she did so many years before, Momma holds me. “Make sure you read it, okay? When I’m not around.” She speaks in a mutter, the undertones of her voice blending with the hum of the air conditioner, her sagging eyelids shutting close.

“When I leave the room?” My hands quiver as I reach for my phone, my fingers fumbling for the right buttons; I hold back a sob that begins to work its way up my throat.

Just like so many years before, a faint chatter from the TV in the living room demands that I call the number below NOW to submit an application for health insurance before it’s too late. Just like so many years before, Momma gasps. Just like so many years before, our embrace is broken.

This time, I wish I could do anything but let Momma go.

One day, when I was young enough to still believe in fairies running alongside me, I sat underneath a tree that seemed particularly mundane at first glance. Despite this, my then youthful imagination saw the decrepit tree as a fairy dwelling. I held hands with the wind as I twirled around the tree, hoping the ruckus would draw the magical beings out of hiding. As my bare feet performed for hours on the warm grass, I quietly sang under my breath. After I pranced home, convinced the fairies would appear at midnight, the song was always in the back of my mind for years to come. The same wind that once danced with me under the magical tree has stolen my words, leaving nothing but a hollowed woman in their place.

Blue and red lights illuminate the sky, blurring with the sounds of sirens in my ear.
Momma.

MOORE, MADISON**Madison Moore**

Age: 14, Grade: 9

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Megan Zmudczynski

Category: Flash Fiction

The Towns We See

There exists a type of town that's sprinkled across America, the type that makes us clench our steering wheels, push the gas pedal a little harder, and glance at the rearview mirror a little longer. Some of these towns are big, some are small, some are hidden behind trees, others stand out like a skyscraper in a prairie; but when we see them, we recognize them. We pass through them enough- on our way to work or school- to notice their features. Along the roads, lengthy stone pillars hold up white houses occupied by people of the same porcelain shade. Sharpened white hoods lie lazily on the clotheslines that sit in every houses' backyard, only noticeable if you crane your neck. Red flags marked with a blue and white, star-studded X wave from every porch, daring us to pass through this town at our own risk.

In each town, a cloud touches the ground forming a thick layer of mist that blankets it. Every window is blindfolded by the fog, even those of the cars that drive by. The people of the towns never bother to wipe away the clouds that reside on their windshields; instead, they sit. Perhaps that's why they never travel outside of their towns, too afraid to navigate the unfamiliar roads with the fog that obscures their windshields. The people don't want to travel anyways. They're content with their town; it has all of the things they'd want. Stores containing rows of foods and clothing, guarded by workers who trail behind outsiders of a darker shade who dare to visit. Laundromats that promise to erase the black off of laundry and transform them into shiny white garments. They even have their own form of entertainment: outdoor history museums with two walls to support the roof that protects the rows of polished, white stone statues.

The towns' most recognizable feature, the one that immediately indicates that we've come across one of them, is the white picket fence that surrounds each one, serving as the only way in or out, further dividing them from the outside world. When we drive through the towns, the townspeople stare at us from their houses' windows; some glower as they wrap their pale knuckles around their curtains, others stare with stuttering closed mouth smiles, or bark hostile phrases muffled by the thick glass panes. When we finally escape their harrowing glares, only then can we exhale.

The people who came before those who now reside there built the towns, and the ones who now call those towns home believe that they were the ones who destroyed them. Their clotheslines, their stores, their laundromats? *Those are long gone- we got rid of them; no use in speaking of them* Their museums? *We renovated those after we noticed a few missing pieces here and there... patched 'em right up.* The fog? *That cloud has long evaporated.* And the picket fence? *It was demolished years ago; no use in speaking of it. None of it. None of it is worth speaking of anymore. They're all long gone.* But we see it. We see their towns. Everything they say has been destroyed, still stands. And no matter how many pictures we snap, how many times we tell them that we can see their clotheslines or that their half-built museums they call "outdoor" weren't meant to be outdoor- that they're missing more than a few pieces; they have the same answer. *None of it is worth speaking of anymore.* They walk through their towns, unaware of the fog, denying the existence of their surroundings. But they stare when we pass. They stare and they know it.

MORLEY, ALEXANDRIA**Alexandria Morley**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

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

Educator: Jennifer Staed

Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy

The White Rabbit

General Lindsey Field stood alone on the battlefield. Her soldiers retreated behind her, and the outlanders in front of her were fast approaching. The ground was covered in the dead and dying, their moans a song in the pre-dawn rain. The general limped towards the safety of the gate, knowing she would never make it. The rain fell like mist, soaking everything in the forsaken wasteland. The morning sun was barely peeking over the ridges of the far off mountains. She changed her mind, and turned to face her adversaries. She would not be like those lying in the mud, crying out for mercy from the enemy. She would fight and die, sword in hand to buy her soldiers more time. Lindsey saw the outlanders change their course and head towards her. They were not here to win this battle. They yelled and swung their weapons about wildly, their almost human faces smiling. General Lindsey started backing away, heading away from the castle. She tried to maintain balance on her injured leg, but it wasn't easy and she was light headed from fatigue. They were almost upon her. Out of the corner of her eye she saw the only thing untouched by the slaughter. A silver tree, leafless in the winter morning, stood pale against the reddening sky of dawn. In the mist of the morning it appeared that the tree was glowing. Lindsey backed towards its outstretched limbs. She remembered playing and reading under that tree. She stopped that train of thought, and turned her attention to the enemy.

One outlander charged. She tried to duck under his swing, but stumbled on her injured leg. She felt the blade slash open her cheek. Regaining her balance she swung and sliced off his head. The others paused, but only for a moment. Then, another came. Lindsey deflected its attack, and drove her sword into the outlander's chest. The general continued heading towards the tree, though she did not know why. Her breaths were labored and the pain in her leg and cheek made it hard for her to think. Lindsey tripped and as soon as she hit the ground they were upon her. Slashing and jabbing with the wild crazed joy, that the kingdom's people were so afraid of. The general rolled and felt something cut into her shoulder. She tried to stand, to fight, to do anything but cry out and alert her soldiers. Her few remaining soldiers had to make it back safe. They had to. In vain she flung up her arms above her head, as a child would do. The swords and knives cut into her arms and legs. General Lindsey thought she saw something hopping towards her, but she couldn't be sure if it was there, or why it held significance to her. She was blinded by a sudden flash. The cries of joy coming from the outlanders turned into panic. Confused, Lindsey opened her eyes. Spots appeared to be dancing in front of her and her vision was fading in and out. She saw a lady standing in front of her dresses in flowing white silk. Her skin was as pale as ivory and her hair was light gold. She wielded a spear. Its shaft was made of an elegantly carved silver wood, with a silver spear head. The outlanders fell back tearing through each other to get away from the strange girl who attacked them without mercy. She turned to face Lindsey, her dress flowing about ankles like white smoke. Lindsey looked at the girl and realized that she had rabbit ears.

"I'm dead," Lindsey tried to say, "Why, does it hurt so much being dead?"

"No, no you're not dead," The girl knelt at Lindsey's side and gently cupped her chin. General Lindsey didn't know why the girl's green eyes seemed so familiar, "I'll help you. Remember? I promised," The girl traced her thumb along the cut in Lindsey's shoulder and warmth spread from where the girl had touched the cut.

"Why? What do you mean?"

"Hush," The girl said, "Rest," The girl covered Lindsey's eyes with one hand and Lindsey felt herself drifting off to sleep.

It had been a warm day in late autumn over ten years ago, and Lindsey was playing in her family's corn field. She ran around the wheat fields pretending that she was one of the flying horses her father kept. Then, she heard her mom calling her to come back for dinner. She whirled around and started back, her arms spread out like wings. Lindsey was almost back when she heard something off to her right. She paused and listened. It sounded like crying. Concerned, Lindsey turned and followed the sound. She peeked through of the some shrubbery and saw a rabbit, with a long scratch along its haunch and the fur was matted with dry blood and mud. Lindsey stifled a sob and bent

to pick it up. The rabbit tried feebly to get away.

"I won't hurt you," Lindsey said. The rabbit seemed to understand and let Lindsey pick up the rabbit. She cradled it in her arms and brought it back to the house. Telling it all the way that it would be okay.

"We should put it down," Her mom said when Lindsey showed her the rabbit. Lindsey burst into tears. Her mom sighed, "Honey, the thing won't make it through the night." Lindsey continued to cry. "It can't survive outside, Lindsey."

"I could keep it. I'll take care of it. I promise." Lindsey sobbed. Her mom shook her head, "but I promised it that it would be okay,"

"No, it's a wild animal. It's barely breathing. The best thing to do would be to put it to sleep." Her mom said, reaching out to take the rabbit.

"No!" Lindsey yelled.

"Now what is all this racked about?" Lindsey's father walked into the room taking off his coat and hat and hanging them by the door, "I thought we were going to have dinner."

"Lindsey found an injured rabbit while playing in the field." Her mom said.

"Well let me see it," Her father knelt to be eye level with her. "That is a pretty nasty cut." he paused, "Tell you what, why don't we clean it up, feed and and see what the morning."

"Hareld," Her mother said.

"If it lives you can take care of it 'till it gets better, but you can't keep it." He patted her head, "It's a wild animal." He stood up and turned to Lindsey's mother, "It'll be okay, she can take care of a rabbit for a few days. Besides" Her father went to a table, "It's a sin to kill a white rabbit." her mother rolled her eyes, "It's true. Didn't I tell you about my uncle Jerry?"

"Uncle Jerry killed a rabbit," Lindsey said, squeezing the injured rabbit tighter. It tried to wriggle out of her grasp.

Her father nodded, "He was in a hunting party about five years back. Saw something moving in the bushes and fired his bow. They found the white rabbit with an arrow in its neck, but they didn't see any other prey. He hasn't been hunting since." Lindsey looked confused, "Have you ever heard of the white rabbit?" He asked, Lindsey shook her head. "Well it is said that if a white rabbit comes into a town it will bring prosperity and health to the whole village, and if you follow the white rabbit while hunting it will lead you to prey. However, if you kill a white rabbit, beware, for your arrows will be mis-guided, and you will be plagued with poor health, for you have killed its brother." Lindsey whimpered and stroked the rabbit in her arms.

"Is it true?" She asked.

"I believe it, Uncle Jerry believes it too,"

"Stop it! You're frightening her," Lindsey's mom cut in, and she went to go get a blanket for the rabbit. "Here it can lay on this and you can bathe it after dinner, now wash your hands." Lindsey did what she was told. After dinner Lindsey carefully bathed the rabbit. All the while it looked at her with curious green eyes. She did not understand why the rabbits' green eyes unsettled her so. It looked, at least to her, as if they were almost human, and were wondering if it should trust her or not. Lindsey did not want to be cursed by an angry bunny rabbit. She placed the rabbit on a pillow, and went to get food for it. She tried to feed it by hand but it refused to take food from her, so she left a bowl near the pillow. It was still alive the following morning and had eaten most of the food; Lindsey happily brought it some more.

For the week following Lindsey took care of the rabbit, and even brought it to school. She enjoyed brushing its fur and would often tell it about her day. They would play together, or what she thought of as playing together, she was still young enough to believe that she could talk to animals. They would explore for hours, finding hidden treasures in the nearby fields and forests. One day, early in the morning they stumbled upon a new field that she had never seen before. The sun was still rising and the dawn light made it look as if it was a field made of gold. In the field stood a single silver tree. They spent the whole morning exploring the field.

Then, came the day she had to release the rabbit. She took it out in the corn field, to the spot where she had found it. As she walked she felt a lump forming in her throat. She gave it one final hug and then started back for her house. She climbed the stairs and turned to see if she could spot the rabbit. She looked down at her feet, missing her friend, and saw, to her surprise, the white rabbit sitting there.

"You came back,"

"Lindsey, we told you to take the rabbit back to the field where you found it," She heard her father say from behind her.

"I did take Bunny back," Lindsey said, "She followed me,"

"Lindsey, don't lie,"

"I'm not lying,"

"Come on, I'll say goodbye with you," He came outside and walked down the stairs and waited for her. Lindsey

picked up Bunny and started back to the spot. She put the rabbit down.

“Goodbye, Bunny,” Her father said.

“Goodbye,” Lindsey echoed. She walked back with her father and looked at the sky. The sun was setting and the sky was shimmering gold and orange. About half way back Lindsey looked over her shoulder.

“Look,” she pointed. Her father turned and saw the rabbit bounding after them. “Bunny wants to stay with us,” She pouted at her father. He looked astonished at the rabbit as it walked up to his daughter and put its paws on her little legs. Seeing this Lindsey asked, “Do you want up?” She then proceeded to lean down with her arms outstretched. The rabbit jumped into her arms. “Bunny!” She exclaimed. She turned pleading eyes on her father. He just stared at her. She started skipping ahead, telling the rabbit all about the fun they would have.

Lindsey kept the rabbit for the next five years, frequently visiting the silver tree as she called it. Even though she was over ten years old, she kept the belief that her rabbit was special and could understand her. It did seem to, her parents thought, whenever she called it, it would come and it seemed to follow her about when she was doing chores. One evening, when Lindsey was sitting on the porch, it darted off into the field. Lindsey stood up alarmed and called out to it.

It paused and seemed to look back regretfully at her, then it darted off through the fields. Lindsey followed it, chasing it through the fields and forest; calling out to it to stop. She then came upon the ridge which looked down into the field. There was an awful sight. Tears sprang to her eyes at the sight before her. The field was littered with the bodies of fallen soldiers. Lindsey caught the smell of blood on the wind and heard the dying's cries, but the silver tree seemed untouched by the massacre around it. At the edge of the forest at the base of the cliff she saw her rabbit sitting up looking out over the field. She called out to it and started down the cliff. It turned to her and seemed to be waiting.

“Bunny, come back. Let's go home,” She called out as she reached the base of the cliff. She bent to pick it up but it hopped away from her, “Bunny what's wrong?” She choked out. It started to hop out into the field but stopped when it realized Lindsey was following. It slowly approached her. “Bunny, why are we here? I want to go home,”

“Then leave,” It replied. Lindsey stood frozen mouth agape. The rabbit bounded over to her and gently rubbed it's head on her leg, “I have to go now, but I promise to see you again. I'll take care of you like you took care of me,”

“You're not coming home?” Lindsey asked.

“No, I am not going home with you,” It seemed as if the rabbit gave a sad little smile

“Why?”

“It's not where I belong,” the rabbit's green eyes looked sad. Lindsey stood there not sure what to do. “I promise to see you again.” It paused, “Go home, Lindsey. Go home”

“Lindsey?”

“Lindsey!” Lindsey's eyes snapped open, and she saw dark brown eyes staring back into her own. They were red and puffy, and the person was shaking.

“Millie?” She croaked.

“Lindsey,” The girl sobbed and wrapped her arms tightly around Lindsey lifting her off the ground. “We thought you were dead.”

“General! General, is that you?” Another voice shouted from somewhere off to the left.

“Yeah!” General Lindsey managed to shout back. She tried to stand up and would have fallen over if Millie hadn't caught her.

“Take it easy,” Millie said, as she supported Lindsey. Lindsey gave her a grateful smile.

“What happened while I was away,” She asked.

“Oh nothing much, just you know, *your entire legion grieving*,” Millie said weakly and sniffed. Lindsey laughed.

“What happened to you and how are you alive?” Millie asked. Lindsey looked at her and she hurried on, “Not that I want you dead,” She hurried on, “just well, their were at least a dozen outlanders,” her voice trailed off

“Would it suffice to say I made friends with a rabbit?” Millie looked at her, completely confused. Lindsey sighed and shook her head, then saw something out of the corner of her eye. A flash of white. She turned and saw familiar green eyes peering at her, from behind the silver tree. Lindsey knelt, and held out her hand. The rabbit hopped slowly to her and nuzzled her hand. “It was you, wasn't it?” The rabbit paused and seemed to look at Millie for a moment.

Then it nodded. “Thank you,” Lindsey stroked it head as she had done as a child. It seemed to smile. Then it sat up, scratched it's ear and bounded off into the forest.

“A white rabbit,” Lindsey heard Millie say in an astonished voice.

Lindsey smiled at her, “Come on Millie, let's go home,”

MURPHY, KATIE**Katie Murphy**

Age: 16, Grade: 10

School Name: Shawnee Mission East High School, Prairie Village, KS

Educator: Dow Tate

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Not Your Punchline

I sat at the “Asian table.”

The two other Asian students in my eighth grade geometry class made up the remainder of our table in the corner of the room. A coincidence in a seating chart led to daily snickers and snide comments about our Asian-ness, making me stand out more than usual at an 82% white middle school — a number far exceeding the average 47% in schools across the U.S.

“Ching chong,” some of the white students would taunt us from across the room.

I’m not even Chinese — my mom is from Vietnam.

Math also happened to be my lunch period. I grew accustomed to hearing the “Did you eat dog for lunch?” line in the hallways on the way back to class — it was a good day if I didn’t.

On top of the jokes, the “Asian table” was always expected to get the best grades. Our classmates would come back to our table first to ask the three of us for help and then gloat if they out-scored us on tests. Outsmarting the kids with academia in their blood? Quite an astonishing feat.

At the time, my middle-school social skills left me with one option when faced with demeaning commentary — awkwardly laugh it off.

I’ve heard and seen all the stereotypes since then — ni hao, pulling eyes back, bad driver. People saying they look “Asian” in bad pictures of themselves. White students counting the number of Asians in the room, then ranking us from “least” to “most” Asian-looking or acting. Throw COVID-19 into it and add the “eating bat” comments and virus jokes.

Academic success is an expectation for my race. Cramming Calculus theorems past midnight, filling in pages worth of bubbles on ACT practice tests, canceling dinner plans to stay home and study — all efforts that are invalidated because of where my mom was born. I’d prefer if people would acknowledge my hard work instead of writing me off with the “smart Asian” stereotype.

Now that I’m more socially aware, I have two options when being stereotyped: laugh along or call it out. If I play along, I’m left uncomfortable and feeling like I can’t stand up for myself. If I call someone out, they’re uncomfortable and may deflect by calling me sensitive. It’s a lose-lose situation.

Even with society’s increased awareness of racism and discrimination today, similar comments continue to float around the East community. Immature middle schoolers have turned into slightly more mature high schoolers who still make the same dumb Asian jokes.

I don’t understand why people make comments about my race in the first place. Asian “jokes” aren’t funny to begin with — who hasn’t heard them before — and it’s not like there’s a shortage of comedic material in subjects that don’t involve my ethnicity.

I've never wanted to be that person who can't take a joke and blows little things out of proportion. But as I get older, I'm realizing that Asian stereotyping shouldn't be as common as it is. It feels more socially unacceptable to confront someone about making a racist joke than to make one in the first place.

I'm not saying that we need social justice warriors marching to save the day here. I'm just asking that we denormalize making Asian jokes. And if jokes are made, simply stop laughing along.

Don't get me wrong — most of the time I feel comfortable and respected at East, but it's these little moments and conversations that can leave me feeling like more of an outsider.

Not to mention, I'm struggling to completely embrace my heritage in the first place. Sometimes I feel "too Asian" for East and "too white" for my grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. It's degrading to smile through a snarky comment about the shape of my eyes as the only not-fully-white person in the room — like I'm letting half of my family down.

Unfortunately, conversations with my half and fully Asian friends at East have revealed that I'm not alone in feeling out of place at times. Only 2% of our student body is fully Asian while less than 5% has mixed Asian heritage. Most have their own share of uncomfortable stories. No one wants to be put in awkward situations or feel singled out during passing period.

As only half Vietnamese, my experiences may be more toned down than others. Other races are placed into their own box of expectations and face stereotyping around East as well. I understand my experiences are not even close to the worst thing in the world, but that doesn't make them less unfair and uncalled for.

I'm tired of people thinking they can get away with stereotyping Asians. I don't care if you're my best friend or my least favorite person — don't make my race your punchline. There are no exceptions.

NEWTON, SYDNEY**Sydney Newton**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Shawnee Mission East High School, Prairie Village, KS

Educator: Dow Tate

Category: Journalism

Scanning for Scammers: Fake IDs have become normalized among teenagers, despite the possible legal consequences

As the weekend approached, senior Ava Nelson* had one goal in mind — buying one bottle of Mango Rum and one bottle of Pink Whitney.

After shuffling through the student ID and drivers license in her wallet, Nelson reached for her fake ID, double checking it featured her 1999 birthdate. Taking one last glance around her car to make sure her Lancer spirit wear couldn't be seen from the window, she headed into the liquor store.

Noticing an employee following her, she immediately grabbed the cheapest bottles she could find and hurriedly walked to the front counter, keeping her head down and repeating her fake birthday and address in her head. Sliding her fake ID across the counter, the worker realized her young age from her small eyes and instantly took her ID — she was caught. She left immediately, knowing she still had her second fake to use.

“I wasn't expecting to get caught,” Nelson said. “It was a really good fake. I had used it so many times. Honestly, I'm still not scared about getting caught, but I just don't want to have to buy another fake because it takes a while to come in and it's expensive.”

As spring break and college approach, Nelson has noticed an increase people getting fakes at East. In a poll of 291 Instagram votes, 33% stated they had used a fake ID before. In another poll of 290 votes, 72% stated they don't think people consider the consequences when buying a fake ID.

Nelson feels people aren't scared of getting caught because of how foolproof teenagers believe fake IDs have become — most look almost identical to a real ID. With technology that allows fake IDs to scan, Nelson thinks most places can't catch them. She just had an unlucky experience.

However, these “unlucky experiences” can lead to legal consequences. In Kansas, minors caught using a fake ID to illegally obtain alcohol are charged with a Class B misdemeanor — the second lowest level misdemeanor — which can include penalties of up to 100 hours of community service and a fine between \$200 and \$500, which goes on your permanent record if you're over 18. If the fake ID uses a fake name, it additionally classifies as identity theft, and penalties can include a jail sentence between seven to 23 months and fines up to \$100,000. The Prairie Village Police Department did not have a record of the number of fake IDs cases reported in the area.

SRO Seth Meyer, who's worked with the Prairie Village police department for 16 years, has seen how little students care about the consequences since most bars and liquor stores only confiscate the IDs themselves, leaving the police uninvolved.

“There's fake IDs everywhere,” Meyer said. “You know it, and I know it. [Students] just don't care, honestly. Their ultimate goal of getting a fake ID is to go to bars or go hang out at clubs or go buy alcohol. They know that they're less likely to get caught.”

Senior Rachel Smith*, who has purchased group orders of fake IDs in the past through a website, believes the influx in fake IDs is due to lack of fear of the consequences, since most people, like Nelson, receive minor punishment. Now 18, Smith doesn't believe the legal risk of placing orders is worth it anymore, but still gets asked if she is at

east three times a month — a number that has significantly increased in the last month because of college and senior spring break approaching.

According to a study done by Alcohol Rehab Guide, 80% of college students consume alcohol to some degree, with 50% of students engaging in binge drinking. Having a fake ID is common for college students, according to Meyer, so they can get into bars with age limits of 21 and buy alcohol. A large portion of East seniors have one or plan on purchasing one, according to Smith, who gets asked to purchase fakes for college.

College is the biggest drinking period in your life, according to Smith, and getting into bars is a large part of that. Smith and her friends feel it's easier to get a fake ID in high school so they can go into college ready to go out. And without a fake ID, she's heard it's harder to have a night out, especially at schools that revolve around bars.

“A fake is kind of an essential for college,” Smith said. “It's easier for people who have fakes to get alcohol or go out and drink, go to the bars. I think people fear being [left out of] a group of people on a night out if they don't have one.”

Since the new international CDC travel guidelines require a negative COVID test to re-enter the United States plus a week-long quarantine, most seniors are traveling within the U.S. for spring break. The drinking age is 18 in places like Mexico and the Bahamas, so a fake is needed to drink during spring break this year. This makes obtaining a fake ID more common this year than before, according to senior Gracie Andrews*, who plans to get a fake in the spring for her Florida spring break trip.

“Right now is the perfect time to get one,” Andrews said. “It's right around that time where everybody's not going to be relying on you to get [alcohol], but it's just enough time where you can use it a few times and practice before you go to college. It won't be an old picture. Everybody knows how to do it, what websites and what people go through now. There's more people who know what they're talking about.”

East parent and criminal defense attorney Lindsey Erickson has seen cases involving fake IDs with charges ranging from diversion — a system of doing community service to get charges off your record — to several years of jail time. According to Erickson, the severity of the charges can depend on the person's age, criminal history, the number of charges associated with the case and the jurisdiction of the case.

Erickson feels the use of fake IDs has become prevalent, and minors don't realize how easy it is to get caught. The ways of getting caught range from undercover cops in liquor stores to car searches, and she thinks getting charged is more common and frequent than people realize.

“A lot of minors are pretty cavalier about it, and think it's no big deal,” Erickson said. “People are fixated on ‘Everybody does it. It's no big deal.’ And the thing is, everybody doesn't do it. And it is a huge deal if you get caught. So you have to decide, is it worth the risk?”

Not only have high schoolers become casual about having a fake, but Smith thinks that having one has become a normal part of having fun on the weekends, especially for seniors.

“We do more stuff revolving around having fakes than we do not having fakes,” Smith said. “It's been a huge part of our senior year, especially with this weird situation going, that everyone has been thinking about other distractions and what they can do to have fun. A fake gets them excited for college and relaxed when going out.”

The presence of fakes comes long before senior year, according to Andrews. She believes the presence of fake IDs has increased in every grade because of how common underage drinking has become.

“Slowly but surely, the age when people start doing illegal things has been going down,” Andrews said. “When we were in middle school, the big thing was vaping, and that was the only thing that was going on. Now, middle schoolers are getting wasted on the weekends.”

Sophomore Parker Ross* got her fake when she was 15 — making her seven years younger than the age on her ID and one of the first in her grade to get one. She's used to getting comments like ‘You look so young’ and ‘How old are you’ from the store workers, normally bringing a friend in her car to the liquor store to warn her if an adult she

knows is outside the store.

Using it around once a week, Ross worries about facing severe consequences if someone finds her wallet or the police walk in, but has gotten used to the routine of using her fake. For her, the benefits of getting a fake at such a young age outweighed the risks of getting caught because of the security of buying her own drinks and not having to rely on other people for alcohol.

“Knowing that I could see what I was getting for myself was important,” Ross said. “Who knows if people were putting things in my drinks? I don't know, just little things as simple as that made it worth it. There wasn't really any huge factors other than just I thought it'd be more convenient.”

After getting stopped by a cop when buying alcohol at a concert, senior Noah Gray* saw a glimpse into these consequences. Not expecting to get caught because of how well-made his fake was, Gray feels lucky that his fake only got taken away rather than facing legal consequences, and thinks it was a learning experience.

Even though he purchased another fake a few months later, Gray decided to stop using it because he didn't want to make the same mistake again — the risk wasn't worth it. With a majority of his friends having a fake ID, Gray thinks people aren't worried about the consequences because only a cop can tell the difference, but believes people should be more careful.

“No matter how invincible you think you are or however much you don't think you will get in trouble, you still can always get in trouble no matter what,” Gray said. “It's important to remember that.”

Smith feels people consider the consequences when first getting a fake, but disregard them after using it because of how easy and simple the process of using it becomes — some people even become “regulars” at liquor and vape stores, where the workers know them by name.

“At the start, you're scared that there's undercover cops in the store or the restaurant, you're scared that the waitress is gonna take it away,” Smith said. “There's always those risks. But I feel like more and more once you keep using it at certain places, certain restaurants, you'll get more and more comfortable with it and you won't really consider the risks that you did at the beginning. Even though they're literally still the same risks you still have.”

The risks can be more long-term than legal. Several job and college applications ask for prior criminal history, even down to a speeding ticket, according to Erickson. Having a fake ID or identity theft charge against you puts you at a disadvantage, making it harder to get a job in the future.

“The decisions you make today can haunt you for a lifetime,” Erickson said. “When you're 16 or 17 or 18, you're just thinking, ‘I just want to get some beer for tonight.’ I don't think you're thinking about fast forwarding to five or six or 10 years later when you're filling out an application. It's a concern about instant gratification, about how am I going to have fun tonight, rather than thinking forward.”

NEWTON, SYDNEY**Sydney Newton**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Shawnee Mission East High School, Prairie Village, KS
Educator: Dow Tate

Category: Journalism

A Living Wage?: Many students who work part-time jobs receive minimum wage, making it hard to afford their day-to-day expenses

It was Mother's Day. Then-sophomore Sasha Malik was four hours into an seven-hour shift during her first job at Cafferteria in Prairie Village. The system for receiving orders was delayed, which meant long wait times and switch-ups with several meals. Malik was used to customers yelling at her, but today was especially bad. Serving four tables at once, Malik heard insults from four families in a row about how she ruined their Mother's Day or how she was bad at her job. She walked into the back and immediately broke down in tears. Malik couldn't take it anymore — she was only 15.

The onslaught of insults continued all day as customers blamed Malik for errors with their meals or demanded a refund. The worst part about it? After the eight-hour shift, written at the bottom of her paycheck was a two-digit number: \$64.

She placed her two-week notice the next day. Her sanity wasn't worth \$64.

"I was so upset because when multiple people tell you that you're responsible for everything that's going wrong in their life, you start to believe it," Malik said. "It's emotionally distressing. And I was barely being paid, so it just didn't make sense."

Malik isn't alone in feeling like she isn't paid enough. Currently, the Kansas minimum wage stands at \$7.25 — the same as the federal minimum wage — and hasn't changed since 2009. In a Instagram poll of 267 students, 63% said they had worked or are working a minimum wage job. And in another Instagram poll of 270 students, 58% stated that they think minimum wage isn't sustainable for students' day-to-day expenses. Along with Malik, numerous students at East struggle to pay basic expenses with their jobs and agree the minimum wage should be raised because it's not sufficient enough to cover their necessary costs.

According to University of Kansas economics professor Donna Ginter, the problem with the minimum wage rate is that it doesn't increase with inflation. When the minimum wage of \$7.25 was created over 10 years ago, it was consistent with how much money was needed to pay for basic expenses. However, the prices of goods have seen small rises in inflation each year, and a 5% rise in inflation from 2020 to 2021 — with a 27.9% increase in prices since 2009 — which Ginter believes is due to the decreased supply and increased demand of goods.

"Inflation prices have gone up, but the wage hasn't," Ginter said. "So if you're earning the minimum wage, it doesn't buy much anymore. That \$7.25 doesn't go very far."

With the increase in prices, a new type of wage has risen in economics: a living wage, according to University of Missouri-Kansas City economics professor Erik Olsen, who agrees that the minimum wage no longer matches inflation levels. Right now, the "living wage" — how much a person needs to pay their bills and expenses — is around \$15.41 an hour, according to CNBC, which is almost double the minimum wage.

Junior Samantha Robinson's problem with — and reason for quitting — her minimum wage job at Chill in the Village was her meager paycheck. Robinson worked around 4-5 times a week for a total of 12 hours, with paychecks of only \$200 every two weeks. Responsible for refilling her \$40 gas tank, paying for \$80-a-month workout classes and other daily expenses, she was left with less than \$40 for her savings.

“The money I was making just wasn’t sustainable,” Robinson said. “It felt like I couldn’t do anything. It was school and work. I didn’t have time to hang out with people, and if I did, it was always somewhat money-involved. The money I was making wasn’t enough for everything I needed to pay for, and I’m not sure how it would be enough for anyone working a minimum wage job.”

Facing the same issue of low pay while working at Chick-fil-A 25 hours a week as a training coordinator, junior Gianna Sorce didn’t feel she received enough compensation for her labor. With less than half the normal staff, Sorce said she essentially does double the work and isn’t allowed to look at her phone or even sit down. Since her store averages 2,100 customers a day, Sorce feels they should pay their workers more because of the exhausting shifts they work, serving countless customers each hour and even risking injuries such as burns from frying the food.

Sorce has recently had several conversations with her manager about raising the rate of pay for employees, trainers and managers, arguing that people earn more at the Target across the parking lot, and that Chick-Fil-A’s work environment is more high stress than others. She believes that raising the starting worker wage is the best solution, as their paychecks aren’t enough for students like herself who pay for their car, gas and various other expenses.

“The job is hard,” Sorce said. “But our biggest thing that we’ve tried to realize is that we can complain about it all day long and say all the things that are wrong, but we also have to think about how we would fix it. That’s what we’re doing now.”

Another problem with the minimum wage for both Robinson and Sorce is that it didn’t provide them with enough money to save for college. Both being in school, they feel it’s hard to work enough hours to earn adequate money to save for higher education.

East counselor Susan Barr thinks that with the standing high price of tuition, room and board for universities, it’s nearly impossible for a student to save enough money to cover the full cost while working for minimum wage. It’s hard to balance working that many hours with being successful in high school or college, so Barr encourages students to utilize their summer and winter breaks to work, but still doesn’t feel the money earned is enough to cover college tuition.

“There are probably not any students at all who can attend college full-time and work to fund that,” Barr said. “In general, even if students are making even a little more than the minimum wage, it doesn’t really go very far to cover the price of basic expenses, and especially not that of a college or university.”

Ginter agrees that the minimum should be raised, but not all at once. She thinks the best solution to raising the minimum wage is raising it incrementally until it’s closer to a living wage, to prevent harsh economic impacts. However, these impacts could still be inevitable with a wage change, according to Olsen. When minimum wage is raised in a state, the economic theory is that unemployment rates will rise, or people in surrounding areas will flood to that state for work. Even with these risks, Olsen believes the minimum wage now isn’t sustainable, and taking action would help low-wage workers be able to pay for expenses.

“[Minimum wage] is a pretty complicated question,” Olsen said. “The cons are that business owners will see higher wages, which means they’ll be less profitable. But it would improve the incomes of low-wage workers and low income workers, and that has a beneficial impact on people’s lives.”

NEWTON, SYDNEY**Sydney Newton**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Shawnee Mission East High School, Prairie Village, KS
Educator: Dow Tate

Category: Journalism

Joining the Nation-Wide Movement: Shawnee Mission School District joined the multi district lawsuit against JUUL for advertising directed towards middle and high school students

The Shawnee Mission School Board announced that they are joining the country-wide lawsuit seeking a ban against JUUL's allegedly teen-directed marketing strategies at their board meeting on Oct. 14.

The lawsuit is centered around JUUL's marketing and advertising, which was largely spread throughout Snapchat and Instagram by advertisements and hired influencers. The main claim is that advertising was intentionally directed toward teenagers, according to East parent and lawyer Tom Cartmell, a partner in Wagstaff and Cartmell LLC who will represent SMSD and several other districts in the lawsuit.

"We believe that [JUUL] took a page out of the tobacco playbook as far as advertising in order to reach teenagers," Cartmell said. "We're claiming that [the school districts] have a lot of kids addicted to nicotine as a result of that."

During the board meeting, SMSD Health Director Shelby Rebek gave a presentation about the effects of vaping, including lung disease and the 29 vaping related deaths in the US. Following the presentation, the board decided to move forward with the lawsuit after a 6-0 vote.

SMSD was the fifth school district in Kansas to join the lawsuit, following the Goddard, Blue Valley, Olathe and De Soto school districts, according to Cartmell, who will represent the schools along with lawyers Brad Honnold and Kirk Goza.

Cartmell will also represent schools in Arizona, New York and Missouri. These are a few of the other districts around the country who have joined the lawsuit, represented by lawyers across the country.

"I think [the school districts] have decided to take a stand," Cartmell said. "They want to do what they can to try to band together to try to change JUUL's marketing practice and protect the kids. Part of the problem has been that the vaping crisis has continued to escalate, and I think schools feel like they need to take a stand now to protect the kids."

The lawsuit claims "injunctive relief," a legal remedy that requests a court order to stop the actions of the defendant. The petition will be asking the court to declare that JUUL cancel all marketing strategies allegedly targeting teens, including social media advertising and use of influencers.

The lawsuit will also ask JUUL to compensate school districts for the costs of implementing devices such as cameras and detectors to prevent students from vaping in schools. This is the end goal of the suit for the districts, SMSD Chief Communications Officer David Smith said.

Aside from cameras and detectors, some districts have hired staff to educate students on the effects of nicotine, and others to monitor the halls at all hours of the day. A few districts have reconstructed their bathrooms to make it less easy to hide in, and some have paid for medical help for some of their students, according to Cartmell.

SMSD is currently deciding what to implement, with hopes to acquire funds from the lawsuit to cover whatever they choose.

Teacher Steven Appier believes that the funds from the lawsuit will help reduce teen vaping in school.

“I understand what they’re doing because it’s a problem in this school,” Appier said. “It will mean less time wasted on trying to enforce our rules for smoking and things like that. We don’t have to worry about people in the bathrooms, leaving class, blowing into their hoodie. It’s not going to stop it, but maybe it will reduce it.”

The lawsuit also claims that JUUL contributed to the rise in teen vaping, which has been considered an epidemic by former FDA Commissioner Scott Gottlieb.

According to CNBC, teen vaping has surged to one in four high school students, with 27.5% of students in the US having used an e-cigarette in the last 30 days — a 15.8 % increase from 2017.

Principal Scott Sherman believes that vaping has led to addiction and distraction in school.

“In some cases, kids are more focused on seeing when they can sneak out of class, skipping school, maybe going to a park,” Sherman said. “They are missing out on educational opportunities because they’re hooked on the JUUL product.”

According to Smith, the policies enacted to stop JUUL use in schools are costly, placing a financial burden on the school districts.

“The lawsuit is designed to recover those problems,” Smith said. “It is specifically the industry that has caused those problems, and they need to pay for them.”

Each individual district case will be filed individually, and then consolidated in front of one federal court. The Judicial Panel on Multidistrict Litigation decided on Sept. 26 that all cases will be consolidated in the northern district of California. If there is a trial, it is expected to happen in two to three years, according to Cartmell.

In the meantime, the lawyers will go through discovery — the pre-trial work leading up to the case. They will also seek expert witnesses to testify on their behalf, discussing issues such as the loss of resources that schools have suffered and the need for money to fill those gaps, giving support for their case, with the end goal of winning the lawsuit.

“If we win, [SMSD] will have the resources that we need to take care of our kids to mitigate the impact of vaping,” Smith said.

NEWTON, SYDNEY**Sydney Newton**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Shawnee Mission East High School, Prairie Village, KS

Educator: Dow Tate

Category: Journalism

A Custodian that Cares: Custodian Price Wright uses his passion for carpentry to help students at East

Custodian Price Wright had been at East for six years when the social skills teacher in 2014 approached him with an idea: building an East coffee shop on the fourth floor. She had the perfect spot — the room in between the math and social skills classrooms. Price is always happy to help with random odd jobs around the school, so she knew he was the perfect man for the job.

Price's response?

“Man, that's a storage closet you guys got.”

But he said yes. In two weeks and with no allotted money from the school, Price cleaned out the closet, called an electrician to install lights and smoothed out the walls. He chose a black paint — white seemed too risky with coffee stains — and built the coffee counter with scrap wood. It took him 50 hours — and all he ever received in return was a \$25 dollar Outback Steakhouse coupon from the office.

Why did he do it? That answer is easy: for the students. Building the coffee shop was ultimately worth it because of the joy he knew it would bring to students — he even still helps repair it today. It wasn't a part of his job. But Price doesn't do things to help students because it's his job. He just enjoys the ways the school lets him utilize his passion and background in carpentry to help students and faculty.

“I just like to see the kids going in and you can see the happy expression on their faces,” Price said. “You can see the freshmen coming up like, ‘Man we got a coffee shop, what's up with that man?’ I'm like ‘Yeah, all that coffee for you!’ I'm happy to see the kids happy.”

Price's background in carpentry comes long before he built the coffee shop, and began helping with various carpentry projects throughout the school. He can't remember a time in his life where he didn't have sawdust stuck to his work clothes. His grandpa was a carpenter. His dad was a carpenter. Even his three sons are all carpenters. Price spent his high school summers working for his dad, so when he turned 19, signing up for carpentry school was an easy choice.

Even now, Price still thinks of his father when he's dusting off the top of the East coffee shop counter. But Price wouldn't have imagined that it's a skill that not just helps him, but also allows him to help others.

“It's a skill that God gave me, and I just need it,” Price said. “And I love it. I love cutting that wood. I love the smell of the wood.”

As the first licensed carpenter ever in the district, Price knew it was something he wanted to continue. But now, he's found a new use for it: encouraging others to pursue it.

Price teaches carpentry twice a month at Penn Valley community college. And at East, his favorite place in the school is the woodshop room, which he visits at least every other day to sand wood for various places in the school such as the coffee shop, check out the machines and motivate the students in the class. Even if he's simply standing there, it's his favorite environment to be in.

“I’ve told [woodshop teacher Sheban] Scott, ‘Man, if you wasn’t here, I’d probably apply for this job,’” Price said. “The kids here are working on some nice projects. It’s good because it gives them a second education that they need. I just kind of like to encourage them on things that they are doing.”

Most of Price’s work for the school is done behind the scenes, according to coffee shop coordinator Amanda Doane. He comes in every day to check in on the shop, repairing the locks on the fridge or touching up chipped paint, along with checking in on different broken parts within the school. Just last month, he built a second coffee cart for students to bring coffee to teachers around the school.

“I don’t know how we would function without him,” Doane said. “He does so much. We would have broken items. I have no idea how we could repair things. It just wouldn’t be as nice.”

Associate Principal Dr. Susan Leonard sees it too. Leonard thinks that Price’s impact comes down to the little things. She sees his ability to listen and actually help people, from fixing jammed lockers to painting a wall in her office to checking in with students he’s connected with — all of which he does not for the recognition, but to be a helping hand.

“He embodies the culture of East,” Leonard said. “He’s friendly. He’s approachable. He could just do his job and not really interact with students. But instead, he wants to know about kids. His approachability is what makes him special.”

Price has had several jobs, from an elementary teacher to daycare worker — East is the first place he’s stayed at for longer than five years. At each one, he’s found a way to continue carpentry, remodeling kitchens on the side or making cabinets for his company. Each job has been different, but they all share one theme: all have involved kids.

Price feels grateful that the coffee shop has not only given kids the opportunity to have a place to go in the morning, but has also left its workers with skills they’ll use in the real world. Price thinks kids have impressionable minds, so he likes being able to put the good lessons in their heads.

“I try to leave a lesson to the kids that you can do whatever you want with this world,” Price said. “Whatever you want in this world, you can do it. I hope I leave students with that legacy.”

NEWTON, SYDNEY**Sydney Newton**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Shawnee Mission East High School, Prairie Village, KS

Educator: Dow Tate

Category: Journalism

Democratic Discussions: Schools shouldn't discourage students from talking about politics and should instead educate them so they can discuss peacefully and form their own opinion

You're sitting in your English class while your teacher explains Chapter 3 of "The Glass Castle," listing key points before posing an open discussion question to the class about welfare distribution. But before anyone can do so much as raise their hand, your teacher recites that same longstanding phrase — "Don't get political."

Many schools think the best way to address politics is to avoid discussion of it — but that logic doesn't prepare students for the political climate as they grow older. Politics is one of our nation's most heated topics, and students deserve to express their opinions in a non-judgemental environment where they can gain respect for other perspectives and make their opinion known without getting hate. Discouraging students from developing their opinions through classroom discussion only hurts them — and our country — in the long run because it doesn't allow students to hear other points of view or participate in peaceful discussions.

SMSD's policy states that teachers can't merge their political beliefs with the things they teach, try to persuade students to believe a certain way or directly support one politician or party over the other within the classroom. The teacher wants to avoid creating arguments about criminal justice reform in the classroom that may lead to upset students, or straying away from the genetics lesson that they have planned as students debate an off topic (but likely important) issue.

Teachers may think that stopping political discussions is helping their students, that the way to avoid political discussion is to not even discuss it in the first place.

But encouraging political discussion in a classroom environment could lead to more respect towards other people's opinions and a better understanding of opposing views. If students are able to have respectful debates in a classroom environment, it would help teach them that it's okay to have different opinions on political parties, and it's not something to end relationships or create fights over.

Talking about politics in a classroom creates standards of respect that would otherwise be learned in a public setting. If a student says something offensive or politically incorrect in a classroom, it's a better learning environment to understand than a public setting in which more people may be offended and there won't be someone to help them understand what they did wrong.

Sure, AP Government allows for discussions of the last presidential debate, but the class is only available for seniors to take. If freshmen are being impacted by political policies, they should be able to express their opinions, and hear what others have to say.

Politics amongst teens has become not only controversial, but divisional. Students' Instagram stories making declarations like, "If you support Trump, don't talk to me" and, "If you don't agree with me, you can't be my friend" create a sense of fear in students about expressing how they feel politically. And this doesn't gather any more support for either person's views, it merely shuts out discussion and furthers the division between the two.

Classrooms are a good setting for teachers to bridge the gap between students with different views, where they are able to act as mediators. This gives students the opportunity to discuss peacefully, rather than yell at each other saying things like, "You're wrong" and, "How can you vote for him!" in the hostile way that has become so common.

We already give differing interpretations of passages involving pride and prejudice, causing the same heated discussion, so schools shouldn't shy away from applying those analytical skills to politics and global issues.

With the upcoming election, these political and global issues should be talked about because they apply to students. Any senior in high school born before Nov. 3 is legally able to vote, and they should be educated about each candidate's policies before entering the ballot stall. If properly utilized, classrooms can be a vital root of political exposure — hearing other students' perspectives opens their eyes to more than just their parents' ideas and what they learned from their Instagram feed that day.

According to Time Magazine, almost 80% of Americans live under a one-party roof. The country is more politically divided now than ever, making it more important that students learn how to calmly discuss their views, without being worried about what other people will say or think.

When most students talk about politics, they sound like a copy-and-paste version of a CNN blog or Fox podcast. When asked follow-up questions, many go silent — are they supposed to know the answer to a political question that their parents haven't told them about?

With the lack of political education schools provide, many students take on the same beliefs as their parents. They haven't done their own research and don't know where to start because they're discouraged to in school so they stick with what's the easiest — following the same political morals that they've heard their whole life. Students need to fully understand both sides and form their own opinion, and it's up to schools to encourage them to do so.

If teachers used even a bit of their class time to educate their students about policies such as the death penalty and immigration, and what it truly means to be “left” or “right,” students would be able to form opinions through a variety of sources — not just their family and go-to morning news channel. Topics like gun control and abortion take research to understand, so it's important for students to have the opportunity to research and discuss it in a neutral setting.

In a poll by Harvard University, 75% of young Americans feel the results of this year's presidential election will make a large impact on their lives. Bans on abortion affect every woman, and changes to the education system affect students. So, schools should take more steps to educate them on each side and allow them to form opinions by asking political questions to encourage dialogue. Class discussions are supposed to equip students with the proper ways to build and share different ideas, so this should be applied to politics.

Some could argue that not all students need to be educated because they can't vote. But even if they can't vote, they still have a voice. High school students can volunteer as poll workers and speak out through social media. It's important that they know what they are actually speaking out about, and this extra class time can allow them to be informed.

So the next time racial inequality comes up while discussing “To Kill a Mockingbird,” instead of immediately shutting down the discussion, teachers should foster a safe environment to educate students on the topic.

NEWTON, SYDNEY**Sydney Newton**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Shawnee Mission East High School, Prairie Village, KS

Educator: Dow Tate

Category: Journalism

Brace for Impact: December is Drunk Driving Awareness month — these are some stories of students and adults in the East area who have experienced the faults of drunk drivers, or have been the driver themselves

Then-junior Vinnie Evans* grabbed a handle of Tito's vodka from his parents' liquor cabinet and took his keys off the hook on the wall before leaving to grab slushies with a friend. Sitting in the back of the dark Sonic parking lot, Evans downed eight shot-sized swigs of vodka during his weekly Friday-night pregame — all in the span of 15 minutes.

I'm fine, he thought, hand shaking as he turned on the ignition *It's fine*.

As he placed his hand on the gear shift, Evans recalled warnings from friends and parents not to drink and drive, but they only fueled him even more — he'd convinced himself he was able to do it. So inhaling sharply, Evans pressed on the gas and blasted rap music to sober up, making the 15-minute drive to his friend's house. This wasn't his first time driving drunk, so he figured he could do it again.

It wasn't until he arrived at the house that Evans realized he wasn't fine. Never having consumed hard alcohol before, He felt like he'd been punched in the stomach the second he stumbled out of the car. Evans could barely stand — he feels lucky that he made it.

"It's scary looking back at that night," Evans said. "I felt invincible. [I] was at a point where I felt like the stuff that you see in the news couldn't happen to me. I thought nothing bad could ever happen. It was like a power trip."

Evans's story isn't far from the all-too-familiar stories of East students who chose not to find another ride and instead get home from house parties by driving under the influence. In a poll of 303 Instagram votes, 71% stated they had witnessed someone get behind the wheel after consuming some form of alcohol. The voters had seen those people lie about how much they drank, swerve in the lane, drive 10 or more miles an hour under the speed limit from paranoia and continually claim they were "fine."

In Kansas, 1,046 people were killed in crashes involving an alcohol-impaired driver from 2009-2018, as reported by the CDC. Nationally, in 2019, there were 10,142 drunk driving deaths and 24% of teen drivers killed in car crashes had a blood alcohol content of 0.01 or higher, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

While there were 568 less drunk-driving-related deaths in 2018 and low numbers of DUI cases during the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of drunk drivers is rising again, according to DUI attorney Russell Powell. Now, students who have chosen to drink and drive are working to pay DUI fines, apologizing to their friends for putting them in danger or feeling thankful that they didn't die. With Drunk Driving Prevention Month beginning Dec. 1, these students and other members of the community hope that their peers don't make the same mistake of driving under the influence.

Now a senior, Evans knows that he never considered the consequences of driving drunk or felt that he was in danger that night — he truly thought he had it under control. However, after his friends had several interventions with him, even going so far as taking his keys at parties, he finally understands the ignorance of his actions and now encourages other students to not make the same mistake.

“I’ve put people in dangerous positions; I’ve put myself in dangerous positions,” Evans said. “I’m just lucky that nothing happened to me, but I absolutely should not have been doing that. It’s not worth it. There’s always, always a different way. You can always figure out a ride or something. [Driving yourself] should never be a last resort.”

Beyond a teen putting themselves and others in deadly situations, drunk driving has clear legal consequences. The Kansas DUI laws state that on the first conviction, someone charged with a DUI will receive 48 hours in prison, a fine between \$500-\$1,000 and a 30-day license suspension. On a second charge, the driver will receive 90 days to one year of imprisonment, a fine of \$1,000 to \$1,500 and a license suspension of one year. The third DUI charge results in a felony.

These charges apply when BAC levels are above 0.08, but for those under 21, the minimum BAC is 0.02, making it even more likely for those underage to be convicted, according to East officer Tony Woolen, who believes these charges are inevitable for those who choose to drive after drinking.

“If you get stopped by a law enforcement officer in Johnson County, the DUI laws are very clear,” Wollen said. “Everything’s recorded, and there’s no pushing away. You’re gonna get charged, you’re gonna get hit with fines, jail, you’re gonna pay a whole bunch of money and your testimony is gonna be that [you] made a horrible decision.”

According to Powell, who deals with around 100-150 DUI cases a year, the costs of these DUI charges are countless, with fees or fines for bail, towed vehicles, an attorney and the reinstatement of a driver’s license, among many more. These costs can quickly reach \$10,000 — Powell’s slogan is even “Uber is cheap. Russell is not.”

Junior Dylan Johnson* saw these high costs when he received a DUI last year. After blacking out at a party, Johnson remembers only waking up in the hospital. Once he was discharged, Johnson’s license was revoked for 30 days and he was placed on diversion for 15 months, where he was required to take monthly drug and alcohol tests. The entire process cost over \$10,000, which Johnson has paid for by working the past year and a half — and is just now paying it off.

“It feels like an endless climb out of a hole,” Johnson said. “I work all the time. And I still have school and stuff to worry about. It feels like there is no end to the amount of money that I owe. It still hangs over my head even though it’s supposed to be behind me now.”

As for senior Jackson Clark*, the first time he drove while drunk was sophomore year when he couldn’t find a ride home. It quickly turned into a habit, until Clark found himself drunk driving almost every weekend, becoming used to the feeling of getting home OK. It wasn’t until Johnson received his DUI that Clark realized he could be prevented from future jobs if he got pulled over, so he started taking Ubers home rather than driving. Looking back, Clark feels lucky that nothing life-ruining happened to him or the others in his car.

“It’s so unexpected what can happen at any time,” Clark said. “It could ruin my future. The consequences are just not worth it at all. You can get a \$10 Uber instead of risking your life.”

Johnson believes the first step to putting a stop to drunk driving at East is educating students more thoroughly. Johnson doesn’t remember any information about DUIs during his Driver’s Education course, and had no knowledge of how immense the consequences were prior to his accident. He thinks having assemblies or informational sessions at East to teach students on the legal risks of alcohol-impaired driving would’ve benefited him — and will help prevent others from making the same mistake in the future.

Associate principal Susan Leonard agrees that education on the risks of drunk driving is important to combat the issue. Right now, the only DUI education that exists at East is in the Health elective that students are required to take for one semester, which most students take freshman year or online. In the past, topics like DUIs were covered in advisory, but with COVID-19, seminar and advisory isn’t used as effectively to help educate students, according to Leonard. Moving forward, Leonard hopes to have more education on drunk driving through assemblies, advisory or even during sports events to increase DUI awareness.

“The reality is young people have a sense of invincibility,” Leonard said. “And then you add alcohol to that, which affects your judgment. [DUIs] are something that we should continually talk about with kids and keep in the forefront of our minds.”

SRO Seth Meyer believes this education is important to show students that drunk driving can not only end your life, but also injure or end the lives of others, especially since drivers aged 16 to 20 are 17 times more likely to die in a crash with a BAC of above 0.08, according to the CDC.

Sophomore Caitlin Connelly was injured in an accident with a drunk driver when her mom was driving her and her twin sister home from a CrossFIT workout in 2016. Driving down State Line Road, a driver with a BAC level of 0.42 — over five times the legal limit — ran a stop sign, hitting the passenger side of the car. Connelly's memory went black. The car rolled over three times and the next thing she remembers is waking up upside down.

Connelly was able to open her door and crawl out of the car as someone called an ambulance. Sitting on the curb, she watched her sister get wheeled out on a stretcher and her mom scream for help. All three were diagnosed with concussions. Connelly feels lucky to be alive — she was only 11.

Now 15, Connelly and her family still feel the effects of the crash — her mom experiences symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder every time other cars drive close to her car or make abrupt stops. Connelly's seen first-hand how life-altering a car crash involving a drunk driver can be, so she pleads for people choosing to drive after consuming alcohol to think about how they could hurt others.

“My dad was obviously so scared,” Connelly said. “My brothers were obviously so scared. Everyone was so worried. No one should have to go through that. There's truly no real reason that you should drink and drive. There's always a sober person, like your neighbor or your parents or your friends, or Uber or Lyft. It just puts everyone at risk.”

As for Meyer, he thinks that students should think about the basic rights they lose when they get a DUI. After the first charges, those charged can receive a restricted license for up to a year, preventing them from driving any place other than work, school and religious establishments. In severe cases, people are required to have an ignition interlock device, which requires them to blow into a breathalyzer each time they want to drive their car. With several other options for rides home such as Uber and Lyft, Meyer hopes drivers think about the detrimental changes in your life a DUI will cause before getting behind the wheel drunk.

“[Getting a DUI] jeopardizes someone's freedoms,” Meyer said. “I don't know about you, but I like having the freedom to do what I want, to go out to eat or hang with friends or spend my money how I please. But once you start getting in trouble with things like this, it starts eating away at your freedoms, and it starts eating away at your pocketbook. So, all these things that you had hoped for and wished for and the things you want to do start to disappear really, really quickly.”

Powell also acknowledges that there are hard costs associated with DUIs, but thinks there are also hidden ones. Certain applications ask about criminal history, so students will be required to disclose a DUI charge, which can affect their chances of getting a job or into college — getting a DUI can legitimately change the trajectory of a student's future.

“It happens fast,” Powell said. “You're driving down the street with your friends, you feel fine, you've had a few drinks and think you're OK and then you get stopped. It could be a minor violation, like not using your blinker or speeding. And then all of a sudden you find yourself in a DUI investigation. If you're going to drink, pre-arrange a ride. It's certainly not worth it.”

NGUYEN, KATHERINE**Katherine Nguyen**

Age: 13, Grade: 8

Home School, Clayton, MO

Educator: Sarah LaPierre

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Visiting Childhood

All in one sweeping gust, my childhood memories came flooding back to me: innocent laughter of children, careless messes scattered around, and rosy sunburnt cheeks after spending hours outside. It was all so clear, the illusion projected right in front of me, almost tangible. Yet, the fond mirage faded away as I wandered through what used to be my home. Instead of radiating the expected joy and sunshine, the house was overtaken by strange spiderwebs, the stench of mold, and a dreary aura.

The shocking thing was how we left everything exactly as it was in my memories. All the objects were in the same place, though, nothing really felt the same. Maybe it was the way that the cold and dust put the house under a spell, an eerie chill terminating any source of comfort. Or maybe it was the fact that the soul of the house sat dormant. A soul that depended on the hectic lives of family affairs, unfortunately, that family left many years ago. All that remained were the artifacts of history.

In the master closet, I witnessed the embodiment of my old, forgotten, and replaced mom: the layers of her that were shedded and disregarded. My favorite room– the playroom– reunited me with my old friend's blanky and lamb-lamb. I was beyond thankful to be reminded of our great times together, but that joy quickly turned into a suffocating pain of nostalgia. A feeling of being homesick– longing for a home that was six years in the past. My throat tightened as soon as I realized that until time-traveling was invented, I'll never reach that home again.

As the night approached, the moon's light cast a shadow through the halls– a symbol for the daily ritual of bedtime. Honestly, I wanted nothing more than to just leave consciousness behind and engulf myself in the warmth of bed. The same bed that my siblings and I would have occasional sleepovers on. Us kids would always fuss over shared blankets and mattress space, always reconciling at the end. This time, it was just me. I hid in the blankets, curled myself in a fetal position, and squeezed my eyes as tight as they would go. Perhaps that way I could shield myself from the reality waiting outside.

Insomnia, or maybe woe, kept me awake at night. My mind constantly replayed the few memories of childhood I had, each a feeble attempt to cling to my youth. No matter how true or good those memories were, nothing could stop them from feeling distant. The memories of some person that wasn't and wouldn't be me anymore. I lay in my house as a stranger, someone too changed to identify with their past anymore. Is that growing up?

When the silent sobs inside my blankets turned into hot moist suffocating air. I let my head slip out carefully, my eyes sliding open just to make sure I was still alive. I was comforted to find the same crib sitting in the corner, the same stack of Bob's books, and the same toddler-sized clothes scattered across the floor. These were things of the past, these were *my* things. No matter what, this house would always be my home: memories, objects, and emotions belonging to a piece of me that'll always hold onto. Childhood. Nonetheless, it was time to say goodbye. Whether it was a “see you again” or a “farewell”, I am yet to find out.

NGUYEN, SOPHIA

Sophia Nguyen

Age: 15, Grade: 11

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

Educator: Christopher Reuscher

Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy

I Am You

I

“Director, if you’ll excuse my language... This is some top-tier shit we’re in.”

“You’ll have to specify. There are at least eight world-ending crises in this office at any time, and ‘top tier shit’ is an acceptable way to describe any of them.”

“Remind me why I signed up for this job again?”

“The pension plan, tax benefits, and sparkling personalities, I’d imagine. What is it?”

“President Hewes called in. Says he needs a plan by tomorrow’s briefing. He’s grasping at straws, sir. He’ll take anything, he says. Apparently, the fire in Miami shook him up something fierce; over 740,000 corpses out of one Blaze is quite the barbecue, huh?” A light laugh.

“Do we know if that Blaze was government-sanctioned yet?”

“That seems unlikely. Last I heard from those poor bastards over at Population Control, they were planning on lighting up San Antonio. Plus, 740,000 is a lot, even for them. It’s more likely that some idiot let the cooking fire run wild.”

“Hm. Our Commander in Chief’s conscience has a limit after all. I do believe that the Blazes are becoming too much for his delicate sensibilities, so he’s turning to his more subtle batch of tax-funded butchers for a quieter solution. As it turns out, I made the plan already. Look over this.”

The soft rustling of papers is all that can be heard for some time.

Then: “This is genius, sir. Genius.”

II

The announcement was played on every radio station. It was printed in every newspaper and magazine, painted on the end of every alley, shown at the end of each movie, and screamed out from leaflets poured down from the sky. Portions of its contents were repeated in slurred speeches on the tables of dirty bars and in harried whispers in the corners of the most splendid of parties. Parent told child and neighbor told neighbor, and the country was forever changed.

It read as follows:

“Citizens of the American Republic, your government is delivering you a very important message and our most sincere regrets. Several decades ago, we began our research on the replication of DNA. Precisely 50 years ago to this day, we created the first clone. Though the eggs were created in a lab, they were unknowingly fertilized in pre-selected women.

Understanding the controversy surrounding such a new science, your government has kept this a secret. However, considering the nation’s current population crisis, we see fit to revoke clones’ rights and allow our Truebloods their fair compensation for stolen DNA. We will be providing the necessary equipment. God bless America.”

At the end of the month, guns began arriving on doorsteps.

III

I stare down the barrel of the gun at my mirror image. *It’s a rather nice gun*, I think off-handedly. Old Blackjack would have approved. Probably would have tried to steal it, if he were still here. My lips curve into a grin.

“Something funny, freak?”

I give him a bland look. “Course not. Carry on.”

“You’re disgusting.” He spits in my face. “You never should have existed.”

Wiping at my face, I take him in. Tan skin and chestnut brown hair, laugh lines and olive green eyes. The dying sunlight filters in through the splintered barn doors in soft red-orange tones, outlining him in the fiery glow of an avenging angel. *This fine fellow is the government’s caricature of a Trueblood* my mind muses before helpfully

adding, *We're going to be dead soon.*

He's larger than I am, not just in height but in sheer bulk. His voice is different too, low and pondering, and the smattering of freckles on my face is missing from his. His forehead is taller, his eyes more squinty. The government's cloning science seems a rather imperfect thing. *Or a lie.* That's what Blackjack had always said. In the end, though, it hardly matters.

His goons are spread out around the vast, decrepit barn. Three lounge in a pile of hay while the fourth crouches in front of an overturned apple crate and systematically reassembles her gun. The mood ranges from slight interest to downright indifference for all but one man. His portly stomach and prim suit speak to a life of opulence and worldly comfort, a background that should make him confident in any setting. But his back is ramrod straight and his eyes peer at the gun to my head nervously. At the crack of a gunshot across the street, he jumps, then cringes. The woman by the crate rolls her eyes.

My carbon copy — introduced to me as Trystan with a slap across the face and another hack of spit for good measure — either doesn't notice his lackey's nerves or doesn't care. He grabs me by the front of my tattered t-shirt and shoves the gun up under my chin. His breath comes out in short pants and sweat dapples his forehead, whether in elation or fury it's impossible to tell.

"Last words, lab rat. Last words, that's all the mercy I'll be giving you," Trystan rasps.

But what to say? I've watched this scene play out too many times, each in a new way.

Each with the same ending.

I close my eyes and see them again. I see Blackjack's pink, twisted grin, his burned flesh charred and smoking. "Catch you in hell," he had sneered before the bullet blew a hole through his skull. I see Thea's white, unseeing eyes cast upwards to a light she had never known, hands clawing desperately at the spreading bloom of red across her chest. (She had no words to say.) Leo and Vera, Marilyn and the Jester. Friends born only of dire circumstance, but friends mourned all the same.

I am suddenly overcome with the hope that they are waiting in whatever place awaits me. *At the very least, let us face judgment together.*

The click of the safety lock snaps me out of reverie. *Right. Impending demise.* Trystan is heaving out every breath from between clenched teeth, and his free hand comes up to wipe the sweat from his face. But he moves to pull the trigger nonetheless.

And is cut off by a bullet through his chest.

The hapless rich man is not all that he appears, it would seem.

Trystan's body falls forward, caging me underneath, and it's from this vantage point that I watch the ensuing chaos. The woman by the crate is tackled to the ground in an instant, her reassembled gun quickly in the man's hand and pointed, with the second towards the Truebloods laying paralyzed with fear in the haystack. It takes only a warning shot to the hayloft to send them scattering out the barn doors, barking a stream of curses.

The man steps over the unconscious woman by his feet and in a single heave pulls the still-warm corpse off from my body. Kneeling next to me, he smiles, extends a hand, and says, "Call me Midas."

IV

Briefings with the President were the worst part of the job, without a question. It was a monumental waste of his time, for one thing. (Hewes could easily read typed reports like everybody else and yet insisted upon hearing it from "the horse's mouth".) For another, the President had a penchant for roses and made it a point to always keep fresh bouquets in his office; each trip there left him sneezing up a storm for days.

The back of his throat was already itching as he accepted a glass of water and set down his folders. President Hewes is settled on the couch across from him, drumming his fingers on a pillow, watching him with a patronizing smile.

"Well, Director, I can't say I know how you run things back at your H.Q. but in my office, I like to keep things brief. Let's get this show on the road, huh?"

He takes a sip of his water before replying, "Of course, though there's nothing much to report. The population is steadily declining as planned, and more importantly, no leaks or suspicion."

"None?" The President stands up and strides over to gaze out a window. "To be honest, I've always been a little shocked with the success of this little plan of yours, Director. Pitting doppelgangers against each other was brilliant, but there's only so far it should be able to go, yes? I wonder... do they really not see the subtle differences?"

"Of course there are flaws, President Hewes. There aren't really clones after all, and the sum of money we had to pay for those lawsuits against the women feeling upset with our supposed tampering of eggs during the designer baby fad was exorbitant."

He smiles. "But more than anything else, this plan, this gamble of ours, was based on the fundamental observation I made of human nature: any chance at superiority will be latched onto, the mind supplying the reasoning and

explanations we did not. Our so-called Truebloods couldn't care less about the *why* of their elevated status, only that it *is*."

The Director sighs, leaning back in his chair with a sigh and studying the office. The windows are tinted as always, though the afternoon sun still manages to cast a faint glow across the room. The furniture is sleek and metallic, all in the same shade of steely blue. Medals, plaques, trinkets, and the accursed roses are neatly arranged on small levitating platforms throughout the room, bobbing up and down ever so slightly in the air conditioning. *Bland*, he thinks. *I'll have to redecorate.*

V

The whistling of the battered tin kettle turns me away from the television. I pour the tea into two cracked mugs, smiling back at the little brown bear printed in the middle of mine. ("Eat your veggies!", it says in garish pink letters. I always take extra caution with this cup, so as to preserve my bear's long life.) Midas sits on our couch, absent-mindedly tugging at a loose thread of the chintz print as he watches the live broadcast. It was the only thing on right now after interrupting our afternoon cartoons with a loud, blaring anthem.

The President enters the camera frame and takes his place behind the podium, an even smile on his face. Midas scoffs.

"Mandy did a number on him with that concealer today. Can't see the wrinkles at all, eh?"

I huff a chuckle into my cup. Midas has long since explained to me that he served in the President's own home as an engineer before being denounced as a clone. The only thing that had saved him from being another victim had been the clothes Midas stole from the President's own closet, allowing him to masquerade as yet another political aide and walk free from the presidential compound without the metal collar that marked other clones.

After a brief shuffling of papers, the President begins. "People of the American Republic, this national broadcast marks the five-year anniversary of the Genetic Integrity Decree. As we celebrate this milestone in our cultural history, let us reflect on the successes of the past years."

He grins at the camera, and I imagine blood staining his teeth, running down his temples, covering his hands in crimson gloves. If looks could kill? No, if looks could *show*, if the inside became the out. I set down my cup with a sharp clink and lean against the counter. My hands are shaking, so I shove them in my pockets.

The President continues, "By my team's estimates, the number of clones successfully eliminated through this initiative total at--"

A gunshot shatters the air, and the President sags forward, collapsing against the podium. There are shouts and cries of confusion coming from on-screen, but all I can hear are Midas's hearty laughs. People garbed all in black march out, masked and stiff. A man steps forward from among them, presumably the leader. He nudges the President's body off the podium, ignoring the soft thud, and leans forward to the microphone.

"Morris Hewes has been eliminated per the allowances of the Genetic Integrity Decree and will be succeeded by Director Watts of the Sentinel Task Force." *Was that a little huff of amusement?* "We apologize for the inconvenience."

The broadcast is cut out moments later, and abruptly the eagle of the presidency is regarding us haughtily. "Please wait!" declares a blue ribbon trailing across the screen. "The broadcast will resume shortly!"

Midas and I lock eyes, and I smile drily. "I don't suppose we'll be figuring out that total death count."

As sirens begin wailing in the distance, Midas grins. "Don't suppose we will."

NOEL, MALIA**Malia Noel**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Savannah High School, Savannah, MO

Educator: Carole Bunse

Category: Poetry

the things i will never admit aloudthe things i will never admit aloud:*dear diary:*

i've been told before, that time heals all wounds.
 i'm not sure I agree.
 the wounds remain.
 over time, the wounds scab and scar over,
 but they are never truly gone.
 the pain may lessen, but it is still there.

i will *never* admit to anyone i've ever known and met,
 how desperately i crave and yearn to be loved for,
 i don't think i could utter the words.

i will never admit how much i want someone to hold my wrists,
 and kiss my palms and smile at me—

to *want* me.

i want to be wanted—i want to be loved—
 and i'm not sure how long songs and soft poetry,
 can keep these thoughts at length . . .

“abuse can feel like love,” my therapist told me, sitting in her chair.

(i blinked. silence. tick. tock. tick. tock. went the clock.)

“abuse can feel like love,” i breathed, staring into the air.

“yes,” she murmurs, “for starving people will eat anything . . .”

(i remained so still i wasn't sure i was breathing. the words hung in the air.)

“why?” i whisper, voice taut.

“because, my darling, we accept the love we think we deserve,” my therapist told me, sitting in her chair . . .

and it hurts.
 it hurts because there's a hole too large and too bloody,
 to cover with bandaids.
 so I'll just have to grit my teeth and sew it closed.

NOEL, MALIA**Malia Noel**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Savannah High School, Savannah, MO

Educator: Carole Bunse

Category: Poetry

a poem to the moon from the dark side of the sun.a poem to the moon from the dark side of the sun.

tell me the story of how the Sun loved the Moon so much,
she died every night to let her breathe.

once the Sun asked the Moon for a hug
and the World named it an eclipse.

tell me the story of how the Moon loved a Star so much,
she lit the sky for him.

once the Star asked the Moon for a hug
and the World named it the milky way.

the Sun overheard the Moon's love for the Star
and her light dimmed.

the Moon told the Sun she was far too different
too different from her and it would never work.

for the darkness of the Moon
could never love the brightness of the Sun.

the Moon's love is reserved
for the darkest Star in the night sky.

the Sun's light darkens as stormy Clouds of despair form in the air,
shedding fat tears as Rain.

the Sun is forced to watch
as the Moon and Star fall in love.

tell me a story of unrequited love as tragic as
the Moon and the Sun.

OPINSKY, SAMUEL**Samuel Opinsky**

Age: 18, Grade: 11

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Jason Lovera

Category: Critical Essay

Is it Our Fault?

“Who can explain this?” my teacher asked, looking around a room full of teenagers who should be asleep at 8 AM, not looking at FBI crime statistics.

“Come on guys, it’s not that hard, why are more crimes committed in the summer?” A few kids had already raised their hands and threw out various answers, like longer days, no school, more free time, but none of them really stuck.

“It’s ‘cause it’s hot and people don’t know how to act” he finally announced to the class.

Packing day is never an easy day. When you have nine ten-year-old boys to take care of, you want to do everything humanly possible to make your life easier, because they are already making it as difficult as it can be. But on packing day, everything is hard. All of their parents pack in these massive duffel bags and fill them with what seems to be all of their earthly possessions. They are only sending their children away for a month, but the duffel bags would make you think they’re going away for a year. By the time the third or fourth kid had come up to me, on the verge of tears, whining that not everything was going to fit in their bag, I had to make an announcement.

“Boys!” I yelled, just as I had done every day for the last month, to get their attention. “First of all, you do not need to fold everything. Just shove it in the bag. Second of all, you need to buddy up. One of you is going to sit on the bag while the other one zips it closed. That’s the only way some of you are going to be able to close these.” My body slowly turned away from them, but I whipped back around when I thought of one more piece of information I forgot to tell them. “Guys, I promise your mom will be okay if you forget something. I know she told you not to lose anything at camp, but I promise she’ll understand.” One kid stopped frantically searching through cubbies when I made that announcement.

“But she told me not to lose my flashlight and I lost it!” He began to wail, but I cut him off before he could induce panic into the remaining children.

“Leo, I promise it’ll be fine, she won’t be mad. If she is, tell her to call me and I’ll tell her how hard you looked, okay?”

“Okay. . .” he sighed and went back to his bed.

Eventually, their packing slowed and it was time to move their bags. This meant it was time to move from emotional trauma to manual labor. Also, I have two co-counselors who are supposed to help during all of this. One of them was my best friend, Jacob, who did everything a counselor is supposed to do and more. The other one didn’t do much of anything. So there were really only two people that were responsible for carrying nine, very large, bags, around camp. By the end of it, everyone, including the kids, was drenched in sweat and the sun felt like it was boiling us alive. Then, we all heard the familiar rumble of a golf cart, the primary method of transportation around Camp Sabra as it slowed to a stop outside our cabin.

“Hey B3,” our Unit-head yelled from outside, “who wants soda?” Soda is a special treat at camp and nothing feels better than a cold soda on a hot day. So as our Unit-head drove away and we sat and drank our soda, I thought we were going to have a calm, relaxing, couple of hours. I thought we were going to enjoy our last 18 hours at camp together. I thought everything was going to be normal. I thought wrong.

Earlier in the session, there was an issue with one of my campers and hand-sanitizer bottles. He found it incredibly amusing to thoroughly clean small hand-sanitizer bottles, fill them with water, and then drink out of them. He gave about seven other staff members heart attacks because they were unaware of his meticulous cleaning process before I sat him down and had a talk about it, and I thought he had stopped. But, all the kids were sitting in the middle of the cabin and this one kid, Jimmy, was sitting on his bed. His bed was near mine and Jacob’s bed, so we could easily see what he was doing. We were all relaxing, drinking our sodas when I heard a squirting noise. I look up and I see Jimmy, sitting on his bed, squirting a brown liquid from a hand-sanitizer bottle into his mouth.

“Jimmy” I yell, “stop that right now, put that down.” He gently placed the hand sanitizer bottle on his bed and

looked at me, puzzled.

“What?” he asked innocently, “it’s just rootbeer. It’s okay because it’s just rootbeer and I cleaned the bottle out.”

“Jimmy, we had a talk about this and you know it’s not okay. Give Jacob the bottle.” In my head, I thought that he was going to hand over the bottle and then we’d go get him a new soda. It was the last day, after all, and I didn’t want to make him upset right before he left.

“No!” he yelled back and clutched the bottle tightly in his arms. “You’re not taking this away from me,” he said as tears rolled down his cheeks. Now that crying had started, I knew that this was going to be a much bigger issue.

“Jimmy,” I repeated, growing more frustrated, “just give it to us.” Jacob stood up and held out his hand for the bottle, “just give it to Jacob.”

“NO,” he screamed and launched the bottle at Jacob’s head. Jacob’s hand flew up to his face and barely deflected it away from his head, knocking the bottle to the ground and spilling it all over the floor. This situation had just escalated to a new level.

“Clean that up right now,” I said sternly. “Go walk to the bathhouse, get a bunch of toilet paper, and clean that up.”

“No, I don’t want to,” he screamed amid ceaseless sobs.

“You don’t have a choice.”

“The human mind romances the idea of evil. It likes the doomed defiance” (Morrow 51). Maybe that’s why he sat there in his bed, crying, instead of cleaning up the mess. Could there have been something in his mind that compelled him to throw that bottle? When the human brain is forced to mix choices of logic and choices of emotion “we may make irrational decisions” (Kluger 58). This all began with a very logical decision: to listen to your counselor or not. It is a decision that he had been making for the last four weeks and although he more frequently chose the wrong option, compared to some other kids, he usually listened. But it was a hot day and I was going to take away his soda, and in that moment, his soda was everything, and that little contraption that shot root beer into his mouth out of a hand sanitizer bottle might as well have been his life’s work. He was obviously emotional, a point well underscored by his tear-stained cheeks, so he made an irrational choice. Is it reasonable to hold him accountable for a mental error he made in a frenzied state, a state that is scientifically proven to cause irrational decisions?

Eventually, Jimmy climbed down from the bed and sullenly walked to the bathhouse. He had stopped crying and I could see him slowly walk back, the scorching sun reflecting off of the tear and sweat concoction that was forming on his face. The door slowly creaked open and all of the kids inside went quiet. They stopped their conversations and card games and looked at him, waiting for his next move. The counselors were all doing the same thing, we had no idea what he was going to do. He walked over to the spill, most of which had dried already and left an even stickier mess on the floor, sat down, and continued to cry. But this crying wasn’t like before, this was the hardest I have ever seen a kid cry. He was slowly rocking, his knees pressed against his chest, and then he started screaming. Maybe screaming isn’t the right word, it was like he was wailing at the top of his lungs and he had the lung capacity of a blue whale, but it was so high-pitched that screeching might be more applicable. But he showed no signs of stopping, so we, me and the other counselors, tried to talk to him.

“Jimmy, you’ve got to clean this up,” I gently said to him, trying not to upset him any more. “Jimmy, we have nothing to do today, either you can stop crying and clean this up right now or you can keep crying as long as you want and clean this up when you’re done. It really doesn’t make a difference to me.”

“No,” he shrieked in return, “I want soda!” Now he had all the kids full attention. I looked at them and delivered a subtle nod, letting them know that it was going to be alright, so they went back to their games.

“Okay, then keep crying, we’ll be here waiting whenever you decide you’re done,” Jacob interjected from the bed next to me. But nothing could stop his crying. Jimmy had his difficult moments throughout the summer, but nothing like this. We just wanted to help him but we couldn’t understand why he was so upset.

“I want another soda! Give me a new soda!” He was getting progressively louder and my frustration was building.

“No, clean up your mess, you’re not getting another soda just because you threw a fit” I said back to him.

“I’m not doing anything until. . . until you give me another soda!” He said the second half of this with special emphasis, as if he was onstage and this was the grand finale to his spectacular performance. I was done playing his games.

“You know what, Jimmy, we were going to give you another soda. Honestly, we were. But then, instead of handing it to Jacob like we asked, you threw it at his head. And when we asked you to clean it up, you refused and threw a temper tantrum. Why did you throw it at him?”

“He’s a counselor he was fine.” Jimmy softly replied. “It didn’t hit anyone because he’s just a counselor so its okay.” Jeffrey Kluger says that “the deepest foundation on which morality is built is the phenomenon of empathy, the understanding that what hurts me would feel the same way to you” (Kluger 56). Kluger goes on to discuss delinquent boys, all of whom agreed it would be acceptable to mug the “chinese delivery guy” but not an “elderly woman,” because “[t]he old lady is someone they could empathize with. The Chinese delivery guy is alien, literally and

figuratively, to them” (Kluger 60). Maybe Jimmy could not empathize with the counselors because we were different than him. He was a scared little kid and, to him, we were adults. A few weeks prior he even told me that he thought I was 24, and I couldn’t remember if I had bothered to correct him. If he sees Jacob as some invincible adult that he cannot possibly harm, then throwing it would be the same as handing it to him. In his eyes, he was still giving it to Jacob, just like we asked him to, even if he threw it instead.

“I thought he knew how to catch,” Jimmy interjected before he went back to crying. If, for a moment, we theorize that Jacob did indeed catch the bottle, then a very different scenario occurred. If Jacob caught it, then it never would have spilled, everyone would have been fine, and Jimmy probably would have gotten his new soda. Did Jimmy have foreknowledge that Jacob would be unable to catch the bottle or the events that would ensue if Jacob ultimately dropped it?

When discussing a crack addict that killed her children during the Saturday morning cartoons, Lance Morrow ponders her moral responsibility for the killing. “She did smoke the crack, but presumably the effect she anticipated was a euphoric high, not the death of her children,” which, in his opinion, removes some of the responsibility off of the mother (Morrow 50). The mother had no way of knowing that smoking crack would lead to the death of her children, so she would be responsible for the act of smoking crack itself, but not responsible for the murders that ensued. Although this is a very different scenario than Jimmy’s, the same logic can be applied. He had no way of knowing the fallout from simply throwing the bottle, which he thought would be caught by the counselor. So he can be blamed for initially throwing the bottle, but not for the spill or any of the chaos that occurred as a result of the spill, making him not fully responsible.

But, the counselors and all of the kids were growing impatient and tired of the screaming and crying. As a counselor, when a kid is crying, you have two options: consolation or punishment. I can either try to make him feel better or threaten punishment to get him to stop crying. I had already tried to punish him, by making him clean up his mess. So, I decided to go over to him and try and talk it out. He was my camper, after all, and I wanted to see what I could do to help him. I glanced down at my watch and saw it was time for the other kids to leave for swimming. They were all already wearing their swimsuits and carrying full water bottles, so I sent them on their way with Bacon. Once they were all out of the cabin, I slowly approached Jimmy. “Hey buddy,” I softly said as I placed my hand on his back. “Are you doing a little better?”

“No, because I still want soda,” he stated. This time, however, he was no longer crying. “I’m upset because I still want soda and you won’t give me any.”

“We won’t give you any because you threw it at Jacob, you know that,” I gently replied. “Why’d you throw it?”

“Because I was mad. I got so mad at him for trying to take my soda that I just threw it at him because you wouldn’t give me another one.”

“We were going to give you another one until you decided to throw it, I told you that.” I was really starting to feel bad for him. He was just a confused little kid that made a mistake and I really did want to help him. “What do you do when you get this angry at home?” I asked, trying to help him work through his emotions.

“This doesn’t happen at home,” he sharply answered.

“Why not?”

“Because at home I have my medicine. . .” he trailed off and began to lean into me, resuming to cry. Now it all made sense. I knew he had ADHD, but I didn’t realize how much it was affecting him. Some parents send their kids to camp without their medicine because they think their kids deserve a “break.” But the parents don’t see their kid during this time so they have no idea how it is really affecting them. This poor kid didn’t know how to understand his own emotions because of his change in medicine. Now I really felt bad. My heart began to sink in my chest as I realized what I had done. I had just yelled at a scared, upset, little kid, who made a mistake because he wasn’t on his medication. He still had some fault, though. He still made the initial mistake of pouring the rootbeer into the hand sanitizer bottle. In addition, he had been off his medicine for four weeks up to this point, and I had still held him responsible for all of those times, so why should this be any different?

In *Paradise Lost*, Milton portrays Adam and Eve’s punishment after they eat the forbidden fruit. When Adam eats the fruit, Milton says he was “fondly overcome with female charm” and Adam previously told Raphael that “all higher knowledge in her presence falls” (Milton 9.998-999, 7.551). But, the Son of God does not take that into consideration when punishing him, telling Adam “[a]nd eaten of the tree concerning which/ I charged thee, saying, ‘Thou shalt not eat thereof,’/ Cursed is the ground for thy sake” (Milton 10.199-201). According to Milton, a lack of higher knowledge does not mean all responsibility is absolved. This means that Jimmy, even though he is not fully responsible, is not completely innocent either. He still deserves part of the blame for his actions, just not all of it.

After I talked to him a little longer, he agreed to stand up and clean the sticky root beer puddle off of the floor. That few hours with him made me think about discipline differently. I realized that lots of people, even kids as young as my campers, had issues of their own, and it was unfair to solely blame them for their actions until you know the whole story. I’ll never know what made him decide to throw that bottle, or refuse to clean it up, or throw a fit, or

even fill the hand sanitizer bottle up in the first place. Maybe it was the medicine, maybe his morality was skewed, maybe it was irrational, or maybe it was just a hot day and he didn't know how to act.

PATTERSON, EDIE**Edie Patterson**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Bishop Seabury Academy, Lawrence, KS
Educator: Matt Patterson

Category: Flash Fiction

Every Greener Summer

At fourteen, we started wearing cheap pink lipgloss and making empty promises in Ulta parking lot crosswalks beneath suburban blue skies. I came back from private school to my porch with its peeling paint and long-legged brown spiders in the corners. At the county fair in August, fourteen, I sit at a splintery picnic table in between the broken primary-color skin of balloons and a blur of noise and neon lights and rollercoasters. I am old enough to be here and to be everywhere, so why is it still like this?

Summers grow more green with songbirds and a preemptive hold in clenched fingers. We wander through lush rows of greenhouses in September, explosions of flower stems and fleshy leaves of succulents in black plastic pots on metal grids. We are looking for tulip bulbs that will sprout next spring. I worry that this moment right now won't last long enough, and it doesn't.

Every summer, my family takes a road trip to California. We spend eleven hours a day in our stuffy car driving from our little northeastern Kansas college town, a forest that grows into sparse wheatfields as we keep driving west. The car is hot and angry. The fields are full of highway exits and little towns with plastic palm trees and shopping centers and *abortion hurts* and *thank your mom for choosing life* signs strung onto barbed wire fences. In Fort Riley, close enough that the GPS app on our phones still sends alerts saying one hour 30 minutes to home, there is a fossil gray cannon sitting in the greenery on a hill against the hazy white morning.

At fifteen, we jump up and down on my hardwood floors playing the bad pop music they play at our high school dances with their sequined dresses and pinching high heels and ballroom flooded with purple light where we hold hands not to lose each other. We look into my bathroom mirror next to tubes of concealer and mascara and our tired faces in distorted reflections, staring too hard. Fifteen is a cliché. I walk out of a movie theater, velvety seats and buttered popcorn in waxy white paper bags, through double doors into a December night. I walk through static summers and lap lines at the public pool, air heavy with the smell of chlorine.

On summer mornings, I start learning to drive in the cemetery across town. I watch the soft corners of my face in the rigid plastic right angles of the rearview mirror. Do you believe in ghosts? my brother asks from the backseat. The cemetery is full of living things: gnarled oak trees, a patch of surprise lilies growing next to a dilapidated headstone from the 19th century, a flock of crows. Sharpened wings fly above our car. I hold the steering wheel like talons clutching a branch. In parking lots, I turn through the yellow lines of parking spaces. I drive through streets in the suburbs while houses gaze at each other through the clear sheen of washed windows. When can I do this on my own?

Fifteen, we go back to the same place in California, a soft sand beach with driftwood tree trunks where somewhere I had carved my initials with my parents' house keys and my clumsy seven-year-old fingers. I never look for them. I am consumed by other things. I am older, old enough to be consumed by other things. The town we go to is too small to show up on the creased blue and green map my parents keep in the glove compartment. I study it, tracing my fingers along the curves of highways. We drive through Marin County hills, yellow and rough like a lion's hide. I sit in the backseat of a car, between roaring metal, locked doors, headlights, mirrors.

The beauty store is far away now and we remember unfamiliar faces in their compact mirrors. I look into rearview mirrors and a million different faces stare back at me. I hold on tight to everything and every greener summer, an empty preparation.

PATTERSON, EDIE**Edie Patterson**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Bishop Seabury Academy, Lawrence, KS

Educator: Matt Patterson

Category: Poetry

Taxidermy

The oak trees stand heavy and gold. I am looking for nature and finding
only desiccated phlox. I pace through marble galleries, loud with
footsteps and muffled rain. Animal teeth glisten behind glass,
formaldehyde full and nearly lifelike.
I watch their faces droop beneath glass eyes.

Winter lingers still as sculpture outside storm windows.
I watch the wind, only seeing my white clouds of breath.
The moon stares at me with crater eyes and indistinct features,
brighter than the blinking traffic lights, consistent. I wonder
what it is telling me in its silence.

The spring blooms like ink in developer. I count vultures,
circling between the photo-paper frame of white trees.
I press flowers inside the stiff pages and hardback spines of books.
At night I search for the unblinking eyes of owls in budding elm trees.
Flocks of birds arrive, loud with gunshots.

PATTERSON, EDIE**Edie Patterson**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Bishop Seabury Academy, Lawrence, KS

Educator: Matt Patterson

Category: Flash Fiction

Nothing the Wind Might Sting

1.

The bird flies in through an open window on the first story of the hotel. It flies through a patch of dead zinnia stems in a splintery wooden window box where the cat sits sometimes in the nice weather, his shiny fur full of the dust that is disintegrating flower petals and spider legs and dirt. In the summer, he lies there to watch the glimmering translucence of cicada wings and white moths, his green eyes filled with daylight and flower petals and spider legs. The hotel is busy on the day the bird flies in. It's early spring, a warm day, and the cat is lying in some pool of sunlight far away; there are guests there and one of them spots the bird and yells something indistinct. It's a startle and it flits around in a panic, a whirl of wings and the tame talons that sit on bird feeders in backyards. But still it is wild, angry, shrieking and frenzied and mottled wings and beady eyes too far away to see.

2.

Fall sinks into winter, flocks of geese into the fanned-out sparrow wings that dart between skeleton branches in the snow, a mess of heartbeats and birdsong. Our days are penciled in planners and guestbooks, colored by memories in organic shapes. We slip in and out of consciousness, dreaming of soft ice cream and chlorine blue beneath our atlas of oak trees.

One day, the heater breaks in the hotel, and everyone sits inside piled in coats and blankets until there is nothing left showing, nothing the wind might sting. Except our eyes, filled with anticipation and glass windows. We are afraid to close them.

Today is winter and cold and the sky is so heavy with gray it's snagged on the naked limbs of elms. Today, we hold our breath, which is a hazy cloud that drifts upwards to join the sky, an organic shape.

3.

The hotel is full of houseplants, six feet tall from the brims of their ceramic pots, explosions of green on trellises and hooks and nails. People with backpacks and suitcases stand in butter-yellow sunlight confined in neat rectangles on the hardwood floor. We've shed our puffy winter coats and patterned wool hats and started to open our windows. We weigh ourselves down with suitcases and we hold room keys and pamphlets and exhaustion. We ask about the weather and tourist spots and where to eat dinner. We carry our belongings in tidy stacks inside bags, heavy and self-important.

Everyone stops when the bird flies in. It's scared at first, fluttering around with sharp wings full of dust. Then it stops for a moment and sits on a railing of an upstairs hallway that overlooks the lobby. It sits there in the sun so we can see the blue-green iridescence of its feathers and the scared clutch of pink claws on our polished railings and the point of its beak. We are scared of it and its unpredictability. It is scared of us and ours. So we wait, and in a minute, we watch its wings awaken and some impulse leads it out a different open window where it disappears, unhurt and wild, into an organic shape in a white sky.

4.

In the spring, two barred owls nest in an alley three blocks away from the hotel and stare at us through budding branches and golden hour light and glassy unfazed eyes. We release our breathing and the world instead holds its breath. We think of underground rivers and owl feathers. We float as organic shapes on the steady syllables of our words, held captive by the hope between the lines of tree branches that begin to fill in with letters and viridian greens.

The last time we see the owls is in May. One of them is perched on a telephone wire across the street from the hotel. The hotel manager comes inside and we hear the echo of the door slamming from inside the enclosed right angles of white walls of our rooms. Outside is the beginning of night and the end of evening and a sliver of yellow moon suspended in an inky dusk.

Months shift from breath and memories and leaves. May is a planner page, pencil lines. The breath is still there,

exhaling with moon and stars and birdsong.

“There’s an owl outside, a barred owl,” we hear faintly from behind our closed doors.

So we congregate on the lawn, green grass peppered with blooming clovers, a celestial mirror.

We stand in the middle of an asphalt street, barefoot between yellow lamplight and tar on the cracks in the street, staring at the sky and the trees, a collective gaze. It feels like watching the world spin, or watching a flower open.

We can barely make out two owl eyes on the telephone wire. There’s a shroud over the owl, a branch of a tree and its tendrils. They stretch out in vibrant shades of green through a dense darkness. We glance back at the hotel building, its neon sign and stacked bricks and mortar square corners. We feel heavy placed here on the asphalt beneath these trees. We watch the world spin. The owl flies away, hidden by the brown blur of its wings. We watch a flock of birds on the darkening blue horizon. We watch the world spin, barefoot on asphalt. We watch the iridescence of starling wings, too far away to see.

PESTANO, NOLAN**Nolan Pestano**

Age: 14, Grade: 10

School Name: Smithville High School, Smithville, MO

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

On Absurdism*1-800-662-HELP (4357) - mental health services available 24/7*

I have thought about suicide. I have thought about climbing that bridge. I have thought about all of my existence hitting the sidewalk.

Death is something that everyone has to accept. To reject death though is to find meaning. Anytime I have thought about finding “meaning” to life, I only learn the fleeting ideas of life, and purposes, eerily disappointed. Being raised under the idea that “the bad” will get what they deserve, and “the good” will get what they earned. Then why do hard things happen? The world makes no sense.

Late at night, I question the stars. “Why did these things happen? Why do I? Why does anything happen?” I’m met with silence.

No one cares. Why should I? What is life worth?

“Don’t go! Everyone loves you!” “You’re worth so much more.” I expected to hear those cliché statements as I stood on top of that bridge. I would take that one gracious step, and my being reduced to mere obituaries, epitaphs, and eulogies.

Albert Camus was a French author. He loved cigarettes, he loved women, he loved life. Yet there is probably not a human more agreeable in the utter futility of the world. Hell, Camus even came up with a word to describe it.

Absurdity. Not in the idea that the world is a fleeting place, but the realization of conflicts between existence, reality, and perception.

Humans try to negate these truths, outlets such as religion and philosophy, but they never seem to completely work out. Both fail short in the idea that the world is absurd. The world doesn’t fall out under those truths. If the world wasn’t absurd, evil wouldn’t exist, hard workers would get rewarded. But we live in an absurd world.

Some of the hardest parts about absurdity is to accept that, simply we will never understand. It is frustrating to try to make sense of the universe, only to realize that nothing really matters, ending more confused and lost. But isn’t that existentialism? Nihilism? If anything and everything never really matters and will never matter, why should I care?

While absurdity is based on the idea of nihilism, that school of thought expects that we just accept that. However, that is simply latent. It is necessary for us to revolt against that idea.

Rather than accept that life has to have a meaning (or a lack thereof), absurdism encourages the idea of accepting that nothing will ever make sense, and living life to the fullest. Essentially out of spite. Rebelling against the meaning of life, is the key concept of Absurd and therefore, happiness.

“There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest -- whether or not the world has three dimensions, whether the mind has nine or twelve categories -- comes afterward. These are games; one must first answer.” (Camus 1) These words precede Camus’s novel, *The Myth of Sisyphus*. This book goes on further to accept the idea that, as Camus states it, suicide is the confession that life is too much for you, that you don’t understand, merely that “it is not worth the trouble.”

I think it is hard to visualize the power that humans hold. The only known life species, formed over billions of years of stars colliding. We are the byproducts of eons of time, just to exist on this statistically impossible plane. While death is inevitable, yes, to end one’s life early is to admit defeat. The small complexities of the world on a universal scale, is simply just a waste of potential, to not live life to the fullest. The brief time able to be spent on this planet... this, unimaginably complex world, shouldn’t be wasted.

Human beings exist in an effectively purposeless, chaotic world. Why spend any moment not living in that mindset? To exist is to be meaningless, and to find purpose is to rebel against that idea. The ultimate act of rebellion against an

unresponsive, hostile universe is to live in spite of it.

While even Camus agrees that outlets such as religion creates meaning, that still doesn't answer the fundamental question of "*why are we here?*"

And the simple answer to that is, "We'll never know."

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Sisyphus is a Greek mythological human most known for his cheating of death, twice. Because of his inherent trickery, Ares sentenced Sisyphus to the punishment of rolling a boulder up a hill for all eternity, only for gravity to force the ball down the hill anytime he neared the top. Camus's essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus* explores this concept heavily.

To Camus, Sisyphus is the happiest human alive.

Rather than complain and wallow in the sadness, Sisyphus revolts by doing exactly his job, *pushing a boulder up a hill for eternity*. The essay ends with the famous line of, "The struggle itself ... is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy."(Camus)

To live is to revolt. Camus would argue tooth and nail over cheap french wine to this idea, and his mindset is what keeps me going, living every fleeting day as if my spiteful god were to end my life the next day..

Anytime I consider taking that jump, the one final step, that ends my meaningless life, I remember that to commit suicide is to accept defeat. Rebelling against this thought creates the basis of the ideas of absurdism, and it is a mindset I am happy to adopt. Even if it is hard to fully define, I live day to day knowing that the world is absurd, and that is fine with me.

PLACE, ELIZABETH**Elizabeth Place**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

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Category: Critical Essay

**WATERS OF THE UNITED STATES: COMPLICATED HISTORY,
UNCERTAIN FUTURE****WATERS OF THE UNITED STATES: COMPLICATED HISTORY, UNCERTAIN FUTURE**

Most Americans are acquainted with the acronyms POTUS (President of the U.S.), FLOTUS (First Lady of the U.S.), and even SCOTUS (Supreme Court of the U.S.). However, there is one more similar acronym, unfamiliar to many people, but just as important as the others: WOTUS. WOTUS stands for “waters of the United States.” This term originates in our 1972 Clean Water Act, as a shorthand to describe which federal waters are protected under the Act’s jurisdiction. As straightforward as the acronym may seem, WOTUS has been a controversial and ever-evolving term, and many have struggled to define its scope in law. “Waters of the United States” has a complicated history, a large impact both at the local and global levels, and ultimately an uncertain future.

The Clean Water Act (CWA) became law in 1972 to regulate pollutants in our waters and to provide federal government protection and standards (EPA, *Summary of the Clean Water Act*). This piece of legislation defines waters protected under it as “Waters of the United States,” but gives no further clarification of what that term means, and what it includes or excludes. The lack of definition gives discretion to agencies enforcing the CWA (the U.S. Army Corps and the Environmental Protection Agency, or EPA) to determine which waters are to be protected. Both agencies originally concluded that WOTUS meant “navigable waterways” (EPA, *About Waters*). However, this definition led to more confusion (and ultimately to three important Supreme Court cases), because there are many ways to define “navigable waterways.” For example, does the idea of “navigable waterways” include wetlands? In 1985, *United States v. Riverside Bayview Homes, Inc.* became the first U.S. Supreme Court case to address this issue. The Court “deferred to the Corps’ assertion of jurisdiction over wetlands adjacent to a traditional navigable water, stating that adjacent wetlands may be regulated as waters of the United States because they are ‘inseparably bound up’ with navigable waters and ‘in the majority of cases’ have ‘significant effects on water quality and the aquatic ecosystem’ in those waters” (EPA, *About Waters*). Pushing for an even broader interpretation of WOTUS in 2001, *Solid Waste Agency of Northern Cook County v. U.S. Army Corps of Engineers* argued that non-navigable waters are in fact protected under the CWA. The Supreme Court again defaulted to agency definitions stating that waters must be navigable and that “the use of “isolated” non-navigable intrastate ponds by migratory birds was not by itself a sufficient basis for the exercise of federal regulatory authority under the Clean Water Act” (EPA, *About Waters*). Finally, the Supreme Court’s most ambiguous ruling on WOTUS is its most recent, arriving with a plurality (Justices Scalia, Thomas, Alito, and Chief Justice Roberts), a concurring opinion (Justice Kennedy), and a four-Justice dissent (Justices Stevens, Souter, Bader Ginsburg, and Breyer) in the 2006 case *Rapanos v. United States* (EPA, *About Waters*). Administratively, in 2015 the U.S. Army Corps and EPA changed their definition of WOTUS in the *Clean Water Rule: Definition of “Waters of the United States”* with the goal of carrying out Justice Anthony Kennedy’s “significant nexus” test from his concurring opinion in *Rapanos* (EPA, *About Waters*). However, this change was never implemented, because two U.S. District Courts intervened and found the change inconsistent. The 2015 definition was then replaced with the 2019 rule, which returned the definition to the original 1980s definition (EPA, *About Waters*). This definition was then replaced by *Navigable Waters Protection Rule* in 2020 (EPA, *About Waters*). These constant repeals and replacements of definitions, along with less-clear Supreme Court rulings, have combined to make “WOTUS” an ambiguous term, with less legislative power than originally intended.

The local and global impacts of WOTUS are larger than they may seem at first glance. Wetlands, a seemingly pesky landform, making it impossible to develop an the area, are actually a key feature for surrounding ecosystems.

Wetlands destroy harmful bacteria, nutrient pollution, and sediment overloads, but they only function properly when healthy. Wetlands also sequester carbon from our atmosphere and help cool local temperatures. However, because they trap gases that cause warming, attempting to remove wetlands to make way for development results in massive warming: “Wetlands sequester some of the largest stores of carbon on the planet, but when disturbed or warmed, they release the three major heat-trapping greenhouse gases (GHGs), carbon dioxide (CO₂), methane (CH₄) and nitrous oxide (N₂O) (Moomaw). Under the 2020 *Navigable Water Protection Rule*, these wetlands were not protected, allowing developers to destroy them. And even with a 2020 Presidential election and a new administration, whose EPA is currently functioning under a definition that protects wetlands, the “new” definition is being challenged in court, and multiple developers continue to destroy wetlands. The constant changes in WOTUS definitions, based on presidential administrations and their goals, mean that wetlands are never fully protected. The only way to ensure lasting stability is through a clear ruling from the U.S. Supreme Court: “The Court needs to review the issue and provide some clarity on *Rapanos*. Otherwise...EPA’s rules will continue to whipsaw between Republican and Democratic administrations” (Earnhart and Friesen). Along with the many local impacts of WOTUS, there is also a more global impact on our Environmental Protection Agency as a whole. The EPA is a world leader when it comes to environmental protection, but failure to base decisions, like the definition of WOTUS, on scientific evidence harms the EPA’s credibility as a world leader: “The new definition for WOTUS is contrary to well-established science. Science is the backbone of the EPA’s decision-making. The Agency’s ability to pursue its mission to protect human health and the environment depends upon the integrity of the science on which it relies” (Bennett). Even though President Biden’s EPA is taking many steps to improve climate and environmental initiatives, those initiatives will not be successful globally if the EPA is not seen as a credible actor. Both the direct, local environmental impact, and the impact on the EPA’s credibility, have rippling affects worldwide that should not be taken lightly.

The concept of “WOTUS” may seem straightforward and simple, but in reality, it is legally complex and its various understandings change the meaning of the largest and most sweeping environmental legislation in our nation’s history. Specific definitions of this term have been debated and argued seemingly endlessly over the last half-century, yet still no clear and binding definition exists today. This lack of clarity will result in minimum protections for wetlands and other “adjacent” waters, and ultimately in the destruction of EPA credibility. Only clear action by the U.S. Supreme Court will ensure that this less-known “OTUS” is as familiar, and as protected, as POTUS.

PRUITT, NYLA**Nyla Pruitt**

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Educator: Joy Gebhardt

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

One ‘t’ or two ‘t’s’? That Is the Question!

One ‘t’ or two ‘t’s’? That Is the Question!

“Your word is ‘heartthrob.’”

My chest heaves, daring to snap my ribs. I rub my sweaty palms together and try to think.

Oh my god? What does that even mean? They got a new list of words and this is the one that I get.

I look down at my white tights stretched across my thighs and the scuff on my black Mary Janes, hoping that somehow the word will appear in the fibers of the cotton or the dirt on the toe of the shoe. I toy with the hem of my uniform black skirt trying to buy time.

Okay. h-e-a-r-t...what’s after that? ‘Throb’ is t-h-r-o-b. Would there need to be two t’s? Maybe there are two t’s....but no, that wouldn’t make sense. Why waste space with two t’s?

A baby wails in the crowd, my head jerks up. I look to the spectators, searching for a ‘t’ maybe two, only to be met with glowing eyes and crossed legs, waiting for an answer that I cannot give. I inspect the follicles of their hair searching for a pattern, when I inspect some strands that look far too familiar. My eyes lock with my mother. She meets my gaze with soft eyes and a warm smile. I stare deep into her soul, trying to communicate with her telepathically; maybe she can hear my cries of help, “*Mom, is it one ‘t’ or two? Help! Blink twice if you can hear me.*”

My lip curls and my eyebrows furrow as she throws me a quick thumbs up and mouths, “You got it!”

I don’t have it.

“May I have the definition, please?”

Sitting behind the small table, the three Spelling Bee proctors glance up, Mrs. Fuqua’s fro bobs up and down with the movement. She stretches her arm out reaching for the sheet of paper that was long forgotten at the end of the table, the gold bracelets on her wrist clanging as they jostle with the movement.

“Of course,” she raises the sheet to her face, “Heartthrob: a male celebrity who is known for his good looks.” I feel Thomas shift uncomfortably to my right and hear the colorful plastic accessories in Kayla’s hair bobble as she leans over him to peer at me. I raise my eyes back to the spectators and my classmates who didn’t make it this far, all waiting, not-so-patiently, for me to answer. I’m sure that they can see the beads of sweat that cascade down my brow.

Okay, that didn’t help at all. A double ‘t’ wouldn’t make sense, right? Why repeat a letter if it’s already there? Okay. Okay, only one ‘t’! Yes, I’ll go with that.

I try to will the words out of my throat, coaxing the letters from my tightened jaw. My arms lock to my sides, my hands resting my thighs, as I slowly rock back and forth. I begin tapping away at my leg, reciting the word in my mind, seeing if there are any last-minute changes.

“Heartthrob. H *tap* E *tap* A *tap* R *tap* T *tap* H *tap* R *tap* O *tap* B *tap*. Heartthrob.”

A high-pitched ringing sounds in my ear. Goosebumps rise on my skin, the air has gone cold. I look to the faces of those in the crowd and they reveal nothing. They all sit unmoving waiting for Mrs. Fuqua’s verdict.

“Incorrect. Heartthrob, H-E-A-R-T-T-H-R-O-B, Heartthrob. Thank you, please exit the stage.” I can see the hands of the audience move to clap for me but I hear none of it. Figures and shadows flew by me, the scene was suddenly changing. My legs carry me out of the auditorium without my command. My feet slam against the white tile of the bathroom and my arm flings the door of the cramped stall open.

I crumble to the ground in a saddened heap and begin to sob uncontrollably, my lungs lurch and heave with the strength of it. Time escapes me as I wallow in self-pity, the cold-stained tile the only thing keeping me company.

“Nia, are you in here?”

I hear the soft padding of footsteps as they reach the stall that I’m confined in. The door slowly creaks open, allowing the dull yellow light of the bathroom to flood in. My mom enters the stall holding something, but my tear-filled eyes cannot see it.

“Nia, here’s your trophy. You still got third place, don’t beat yourself up over it, okay? I didn’t know how to spell that either, you got closer than I ever could’ve. You did the *very best* you could. You were amazing, come on.”

Witnesses of the “Stillman Academy 2011 Spelling Bee” may have forgotten what took place, but I have not. Those who happen to remember the small elementary school spelling contest may recognize it as, “That one time Nia was a finalist at her first-grade spelling bee,” whereas up until a little while ago, I saw it as one of the biggest losses.

While the outcome of this competition may have been extremely humiliating at the time, it taught me that making mistakes is okay, and encouraged. Holding myself to unrealistically high expectations not only limits my achievements, but makes even the most momentous accomplishments seem minuscule. I was sobbing on the ground when I was awarded my trophy, blinded by shame, unable to recognize the feat I’d conquered. In hindsight, I can say that I did the best that I could. I was rewarded for the fruits of my labor, for the endless hours that I spent reciting word after word in my kitchen, for the number of times that I watched *Akeelah and the Bee* in preparation, for the late nights I spent swimming in the bottomless pit of flashcards that pooled in my room.

I did my *very best*.

QUINN, SIERRA**Sierra Quinn**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Smithville High School, Smithville, MO

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

One Less Letter "S"

The letter "s" changed my life. It is, after all, the first letter of my name, and a name in itself already has the power to alter one's entire future. I was never totally happy with my name beginning with an "s" since it makes it difficult to say any plural word before referring to me. Though, despite my name sounding eerily similar to "zero" or "Siri" and the inevitable confusion ensuing (my mom has tried to ask me a question and set off my phone's Siri on multiple occasions), I never particularly minded my name when I was younger; it was simply one of those things I was largely indifferent about. However, as I grew older I started to realize that my name wasn't the only thing the letter "s" affected. It slowly became apparent to me, mostly in smaller ways at first. While other kids had siblings, I had a sibling. I would go out with my friend, and everyone else would go out with their friends. In essence, the letter "s" can change the entire meaning of a word, the entire course of one's life. It can give humanity everything, like books and choices and hugs, or it can take things away, turning lives into a life and words into a word and tries into a try. The weight of this single letter made its biggest impact on me, though, when it took my parents from me. After the letter "s," I no longer had parents. I had a parent.

My dad was the one who started everything; he had always been a ticking time bomb in almost every aspect. The day he sat me, my mom, and my sister down and announced to us that he was leaving was single-handedly, without a doubt, no questions asked, the worst day of my life. His little pity party sent me straight back up to my room, crying, feeling my entire world crumbling around me in that specific way where you can almost see and hear and *feel* everything coming undone. The strange thing, though, was that it wasn't the fact that I was losing my dad that hurt me most. He had always been so mean and hateful to my family and me, so obviously it would be pretty hard to miss him. I was almost glad he was gone in the moment, and looking back I'm most definitely glad he's gone. What scared me the most was everything I would have to face only having a mom; everything I would have to face with one less "s" in my life.

My mom is nothing short of a wonderful person in all shapes and forms. She is my hero and I can't even begin to imagine what my life would be like without her. My grandma often calls her Wonder Woman because it's hard for us all to comprehend how she takes care of my sister and me, works, maintains a whole house and 20 acres of land, and still has time to take trips and do fun activities with us. She's always prepared for everything; my dad leaving, though, caught even my superhero mom off-guard. It was suddenly just her and her two daughters alone. It was hard for all of us. Not only was my mom forced to turn her entire life around just to make sure my sister and I had everything we needed from one paycheck instead of two, but I also had to adapt to only having one parent there for me. One parent sitting in the front row of the school musical to watch me perform. One parent in the car with me on the way to my piano recital. One parent sleeping in the room below mine in the earliest hours of the morning when everything is supposed to be calm and complete and whole. While everyone else in my life had two happy parents who *both* loved them, I didn't. I was left with a half-empty master bedroom and enough broken promises to fill a lifetime, while everyone else got family vacations and unconditional love from not one but *two* parents. No pain was worse than watching others prosper because of something I would never have again.

On one of the first days of French II class, our assignment was to interview classmates in French. We were to answer the questions beforehand so we would know what our responses would be when we were inevitably asked the questions by another classmate, so I was quickly and quietly scribbling my answers down on the back of my paper: "Je m'appelle Sierra," "J'ai 16 ans," "J'habite à Smithville." I ended up interviewing a girl a year younger than me, and we went down the list of questions, doing our best to understand the foreign words spilling out of each of our mouths. She then asked me how many people were in my family (in French, of course) and I told her that there were three people in my family.

"Oh, so you're an only child?"

The wound left by the separation of my family, the disloyalty of my dad, the crumbling of the one thing that was

most familiar to me, the wound that had *almost* completely healed, reopened. At that moment, I became frustrated. I was angry and sad and hurt and offended by the plain disrespect of the assumption of anything about my family. I managed to contain my emotions long enough to say “No, my dad doesn’t live with us anymore” and try to continue the assignment, but I still think about the occurrence almost daily. This one simple fact about me, this one sentence I said during French class one day, redefined me to anyone who heard it. Kids with divorced parents aren’t normal. Even with increasing divorce rates and known relevant information, a person whose parents are separated is still viewed as different in the eyes of their peers. It’s important to not generalize or assume things about one’s family, but it’s even more important to realize that, while kids caught in the middle of a divorce battlefield may not have the same home life as someone with happy parents, they are still normal and entitled to as much of a completed home life as everyone else.

Despite victims of divorce having one less parent at home, they’re often treated like they’re different or somehow strange by their peers. However, this is, in most cases, the complete opposite of what a child with divorced parents needs. When parents separate, their kids can often be left feeling like they’re not enough, or could even sometimes feel like they were the cause of the divorce, especially if the kids are in their later developmental or early teenage years. If this blame carries over into their school life, the damage and suffocating feeling of not being good enough will only be multiplied and magnified, doing extensive damage to self-esteem. Becoming an outcast by both their family and their peers can hurt a child of divorce so permanently that they carry with them the burden of being different, or even worse, carry the blame of their parents’ separation throughout the rest of their lives.

I was always an outcast. My parents separated when I was in middle school, and as everyone knows, middle school isn’t exactly a judgment-free zone. When I was in my preteen to early teen years, I was vastly concerned about what others thought of me--so much so that I almost never told anyone that I wasn’t coming home to two parents at the end of the day, like all of my other friends were. However, when I ended up telling my friends what had been going on and explaining to them that I didn’t want to see my dad anymore, one of my closest friends at the time wasn’t having it. After lunch one day, as my classmates and I were sitting back down in 7th-grade geography class, my then-friend sat down next to me in a spot that wasn’t her assigned one. Out of absolutely nowhere, she then proceeded to talk me through why exactly I was wrong for trying to refuse visitation with my dad and restating the details of my parents’ divorce mainly to me but loud enough that everyone around could hear. I started crying, which was obviously embarrassing enough, but the real cherry on top was knowing that everyone in my class had just eavesdropped on the pain I kept closest to me. It was middle school, so I knew it was going to spread fast. I could especially tell by the looks on the faces of my classmates: fake sympathy, disgust, confusion, judgment. It was truly traumatizing, having my deepest secret spilled to the entire class, and by extension the entire school. The absolute pain and scrutiny I felt have only caused me to want to hold this secret--the dirty, awful, disgusting secret--closer to me. When you’re a child of divorce, fallen victim to the letter "s," there is no more trust. You can only hope that your peers see you the same after the discussion as they did before.

Having your parents taken away is something I wouldn’t wish on even the people I hate most in this life. It’s tough facing judgment, but it’s even tougher going through it because of something everyone else gets to have. Victims of one less letter "s" in their lives deserve a little bit of grace; the pain of losing something you rely on in the blink of an eye is far worse than one who hasn’t experienced it can even begin to imagine. It changes your whole perspective, your whole outlook on life. It can make you a better and stronger person by the time you come out of it, but the long process of strange looks and pity glances and two-faced words of encouragement is a difficult one, and its effects are lifelong. Kids and people deserve to be treated kindly regardless of their parent's marital status or their home life in general. All it takes is turning a word into words, a try into tries, a purpose into purposes, and hope into hopes. Once we incorporate the letter "s" into our vocabulary, the world becomes a much safer and more welcoming place, even with only one parent to go back home to.

QUINN, SIERRA**Sierra Quinn**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

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Category: Critical Essay

Rhetorical Strategies in Florence Kelley's National American Woman Suffrage Association Speech

In her 1905 speech to the National American Woman Suffrage Association in Philadelphia, Florence Kelley argues that the general public of America needs to care more about the young children working and the problems this causes. Kelley uses anaphora and epistrophe, polysyndeton, juxtaposition, rhetorical questions, connotations, ethos, pathos, and logos in order to convince voters, especially men since women could not yet vote, to fight for change in order to help the struggling women and children. She uses a sarcastic and urgent tone to display to her audience of the National Woman Suffrage Association the importance of allowing women to vote and helping the children in the workforce that are treated unfairly.

In 1905, women could not vote. In fact, they were not awarded this right until 1920, another 15 years after Florence Kelley delivered her speech to the National American Woman Suffrage Association. Despite the majority of her speech expressing the unfairness of the terrible treatment of children in the workforce, she acknowledges that, if women were to be able to vote, these terrible things would not be happening in the first place. Because of the credibility of being a woman in this time period, Kelley uses ethos to strengthen her argument against child labor laws. In paragraph eight, Kelley emphasizes the fact that these laws would not be in place if women could vote and asks the rhetorical question of "...would the Georgia Legislature have refused at every session for the last three years to stop the work in the mills of children under twelve years of age?" to encourage the public to recognize how much female voters could help the issue. While Kelley is not a politician or involved with the government or lawmaking at all, she establishes credibility as a woman living in America's current circumstances. She implies that the women, or the "mothers and teachers," could easily push for better child labor laws and change the minds of numerous congresspeople if they could vote, which gives her reliability in her argument based on these values and the maternal nature shared by most of the American women during this time.

Additionally, Kelley uses extensive pathos to strengthen her argument and bring awareness to the unfair labor laws almost every child in America was facing. She uses a variety of imagery to describe the materials or objects that the working children were making, and she establishes that these children are only working because of the public demand for what they are making, such as "weaving cotton and wool, silks and ribbons for us to buy" and how they knit stockings, weave underwear, make shoes, braid straw hats, stamp buckles, and make artificial flowers and neckwear, all for other people to purchase. This appeals to the audience using emotion because few people think about where their products actually come from and the fact they have to come from somewhere. Furthermore, this idea still applies to life today; there are many children in other countries working in factories and intolerable working conditions, and this only happens because of demand for a product. Kelley also uses pathos when describing how the construction of materials happens "while we sleep," further enforcing the idea that many Americans do not pause to think about their products and where they might be coming from. This forces the audience to think more about their own actions and feel empathetic towards working children with the knowledge that they themselves are part of the cause.

Since this piece was originally a spoken work as opposed to a written one, Kelley includes several natural-sounding speaking patterns, which greatly strengthens her message. Kelley mainly uses many forms of repetition, namely epistrophe and anaphora, to impact the audience and emphasize her point more effectively. For example, Kelley talks about the wage-earning class in paragraph two and mentions that the biggest increase in wage between decades was the category of young girls from fourteen to twenty years old, not only implying that children, especially female children, are the backbone of the workforce, but she also shows the decreasing quality in working conditions by showing the increase in wage. She mentions that "Men increase, women increase, youth increase, boys increase in the ranks of the breadwinners..." eventually continuing on to drive home her previous point that "no contingent so doubles from census period to census period (both by percent and by a count of heads), as does the contingent of

girls between twelve and twenty years of age.” This repetition at the beginning of the paragraph not only shows the problem with having so many young girls stabilizing the commercialization of America, but it also shows Kelley’s passion for the issue and conveys to her audience that children should not be working as frequently as they are, and especially not in the conditions that they often have to face. She emphasizes the word “increase” to show her point of the unfair gain the rest of America is benefitting and living off of.

Furthermore, also in paragraph two, Kelley uses anaphora to further her use of repetition and therefore her impact on the audience. She explains that children, especially the group of females fourteen to twenty, are working everywhere, saying “They are in commerce, in offices, in manufacturing.” This repetition of the word “in” shows the true extent to how heavily the country relies on its children to function and serve the upper class. Additionally, the places that the children are or the places in which they are working are completely unfair and unfit for a child. This anaphora impacts the audience because, when Kelley says the children are working somewhere, she contradicts their jobs with locations such as offices and business types, such as manufacturing. This specific repetition exists to emphasize the fact that children do not belong in factories or offices, especially when doing difficult and dangerous jobs that are meant for adults and particularly when the working conditions are so poor.

Kelley also largely gets her point across in the final two paragraphs of the piece, when she points out that these children in the workforce are just that: children. Here, Kelley is appealing to the emotions of her audience (using pathos) and convincing them that the children needed to be saved from these unjust conditions one way or another. She mentions “freeing the children from toil” and in what ways those who can currently vote can “free the children” and that labor organizations need to work more efficiently towards “the freeing of the children.” She drives her point home, in a sense, with this final use of repetition, showing the importance of not only getting children out of the workforce and out of their unfair treatment, but she also once again mentions the workingmen voters. This final point also explains further that this likely would not be happening if women and children did not have to beg and persuade men to cast their vote in their favor. Not only do the children need to be saved in this context, but women need to be given the opportunity to vote and have a say in the things that are important to them, which could therefore change the outcome of these situations for the better.

Similarly, with repetition, there are a plethora of voice and personality choices implemented into the piece that appeal to the audience much more because it replicates a natural speaking voice or conversation, making others more likely to pay attention. Kelley’s tone choices, such as the sarcasm she uses, catches the audience’s attention and gives them a reason to take what she has to say into account because it is so unlike any other formal speech pattern. For example, in paragraph nine, Kelley asks a rhetorical question: “Would the New Jersey Legislature have passed that shameful repeal bill enabling girls of fourteen years to work all night, if the mothers in New Jersey were enfranchised?” This rhetorical question tells the audience that she, as well as they themselves, already know the answer to this question. It is apparent that if women and mothers could vote, they would vote against their children going to work at places that are not fit for them to work. This, in turn, would eliminate the problem from the point of origin. The sarcastic tone Kelley takes on throughout the piece almost forces others to listen to her, and her use of rhetorical questions, or questions and phrases that state the obvious, is a more effective call to action and makes the audience truly think about the cause that she is fighting for.

While Florence Kelley was a strong advocate for women's suffrage, her even bigger and more significant message lies in her fight for fair child labor laws. Kelley emphasizes the fact that changing these labor laws would be much easier when taking into consideration the voices of not only the men of the country, but the voices of the women as well. Furthermore, she highlights how important it is to “free the children” and make sure they can still exist as regular children without spending eleven hours overnight working to create products that the upper class creates demand for. Through her usage of rhetorical appeals, her countless examples of repetition, and her sarcastic yet urgent tone, Florence Kelley is able to strongly advocate for not only fair rights for women, but fair lives for children as well.

RAYANI, UMA**Uma Rayani**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: James Lewis

Category: Poetry

Lolita's lament

this journey started with yielding
sorrow- fitted permanently to her unsophisticated figure
just a child- already kneeling-
the nymphet of despair

she stopped believing in God- that day
as she begged someone to-
get
 him
 off-

that day- she learned-
dehydrated - hungry pig men
love gagging- dying- little girls

at school- she learned-
how to feign happiness
how to apologize
how to fade

later- when the gashes of childhood-
have faded into faint scars
she will shed tears-
for that trusting little girl
who was left alone to pick up the fragments of the world

sterilize her- pluck-
the feathers from her goose-bumped skin
so that she may seem clean-

tomorrow she will not melt at the sight
of her parents' agony - Hidden in flesh

REDICK, CLAIRE**Claire Redick**

Age: 16, Grade: 12

School Name: Barstow School, Kansas City, MO

Educator: Mark Luce

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Highway 150**Highway 150**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

REDICK, CLAIRE**Claire Redick**

Age: 16, Grade: 12

School Name: Barstow School, Kansas City, MO

Educator: Robert Kohler

Category: Dramatic Script

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

WILSON (cont.): Coins.

On AUGUST — "oh!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

ROSS: Which one did she say opens the rooms?

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

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

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

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

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

WILSON: To who? Human resources?

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

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

WILSON: He's got the suggestions box.

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

ROSS stoops to open the next machine.

ROSS: It's empty.

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

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

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

WILSON makes a face, ROSS snorts.

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

WILSON: Dunno, I sleep in the truck mostly.

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

WILSON nods solemnly.

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

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

ROSS: Well. It works, at least.

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

ROSS: Jesus, that's morbid.

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

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

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

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

ROSS: Should I knock?

WILSON: It says Do Not Disturb.

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

Wilson shrugs.

WILSON: It says Do Not Disturb.

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

ROSS: I'm gonna ask her.

ROSS jogs down the hall back to the front desk.

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

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

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

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

ROSS: But we need to collect.

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

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

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

ROSS: Well how's he making money?

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

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

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

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

AUGUST (cont.): I dunno, unsettling?

ROSS: Unsettling?

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

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

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

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

WILSON taps the Do Not Disturb sign.

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

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

ROSS: What the hell?

WILSON: What's he building in there?

ROSS: Building?

WILSON: Yeah. Sounds like a hammer to me.

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

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

WILSON: Or maybe he's busting it open.

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

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

[END]

ROBISON, CAMAY**Camay Robison**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Blue Springs South High School, Blue Springs, MO

Educator: Daniel Mathis

Category: Short Story

A Witch's Mistake

My family was never superstitious – we pet any black cat that crossed our path, didn't walk under ladders (because who does that? That's just asking for a head injury) and we always kinda scoffed at how paranoid people could be about old traditions that their religion would once burn others at the stake for.

I, like all teenagers at some point, went through a rebellious phase and began to try and push the limits of what my parents tolerated as far as religions (spoiler alert: they supported me in everything I was interested in, only warning me to be cautious when partaking in some of these rituals).

Now my grandmother on the other hand was extremely superstitious – I'm talkin' put your face down on the ground if you heard war drums in Hawai'i and always leave a coin amount totaling how many people were entering a cemetery with you to appease the spirits. She'd constantly be telling us about the things she did and saw when she was younger, and how she was friends with other women that, quote on quote, "dabbled in the dark arts".

She also did think I was 3 years older than I really was, so I'm not really sure she's all there, y'know?

The last time I visited her before she was put in a nursing home was when I was slowly phasing out of my hardcore religion search. We talked about the many things I had learned as a young, um, for lack of better terms, *witch*, and what I thought I'd continue to keep.

"I like the aspects of wicca," I had mentioned to her at some point while we sat in front of a tv that played a movie with subtitles that took up the entire screen. "I like that there's so many different idols that all represent different features of the world, and you don't really have to stick to a specific idol. And there's so many interesting spells you can do as far as better luck in the kitchen or constantly blooming flowers."

"Mhm." Now, my grandmother hadn't really cared for wicca or paganism, saying that a slight detour in them became some random branch of the Catholic church and she was very against the church for some reason. Not that I blame her.

"I recently picked up a grimoire from a thrift store that mentioned some pagan rituals that seemed cool."

"Hm."

"And there's some fun games in there with spirits."

This woman was roughly 85, weighed down with arthritis and hadn't walked without assistance for years, and I've never seen this woman move faster in my entire life. She shot off the back of the couch and grabbed me by my shoulders, thin fingers clenched so tightly that she left bruises and stared into my eyes like she was seeing my past mistakes.

"Do *not* mess with spirits," she commanded, I too caught off guard to object. "Under no circumstances will you ever speak to them or invite them into your dwelling. They can kill you. Do you understand?"

When I didn't respond she only grabbed my shoulders tighter.

"*Do you understand, child?*"

"Ye-yes grandma," I whispered and when she was satisfied with the knowledge she had put in me, she leaned back in her seat and sighed, all her energy for the month put into making sure I knew not to mess with the spirits of the world.

When she passed away and I paid my cent fee on the cemetery gate, I kept her words in the back of my head as I watched her grave be wept upon by devastated younger cousins and aunts. I declined to make a speech, still too caught up in her wisdom that she deemed so important that she needed to tell me with energy that was most likely all that kept her going.

I didn't touch the grimoire for months after her death, scribbling a quick note of *Don't play the spirit games – a witches' grandma* on a page full of other scrawls and markings. I made a shrine for her, lit candles to honor her memory, left offerings for her and followed other rituals that were detailed in books I had picked up in place of the seemingly cursed book I had brought upon myself.

When I moved out of the suburbs in the small town I was born in about 5 years later, I relocated to the outskirts of a city. The house was small, the kitchen/dining room being the main feature of the place, but it had a nice garden area already laid out in the back, as well as large windows that streamed early morning light right into my mugs of coffee. It was then that I opened the grimoire again.

I had read it in the past to mostly brush up on upcoming holidays and what phase of the moon I should be casting certain spells, but anytime I had happened to flip to the beginning page of the spirit games, I always slammed the book shut – out of fear that I’d fall into temptation and fear of my grandmother coming back alive to beat me up as a ghost, mostly because my last memory of the old woman was her terrifying me into not sleeping for a week.

But I eventually got bored. And curious; another woman in a local coven had retold a similar story of her mother branding that same warning into her mind as a little girl. It’d been about 5 or 6 years since my grandmother passed, and I was old enough to live on my own, let alone have a sip from the old bottle of whiskey gifted to me as a housewarming gift. So, one night when I had nothing else to do and the late night comedy show hosts had wrapped up their cheesy skits, I busted out the old black book and flipped it to the back. The ink of the dying blue pen I had written my warning in all those years ago still stood out strong on the thick page and I felt a small tang of sadness as I flipped the page to the first game.

It wasn’t a game, per say, but more of a cautionary thing.

To see a spirit, all you had to do was find a door that had an outdoor light next to it. Then, you’d look out the window and shut the light off. You were supposed to see a spirit standing there and to break the eye contact, all you had to do was turn the light back on and they’d go away, leaving you alone forever.

There was a note at the bottom of the page in dark red ink, no other scribbles or marks touching it at all. The handwriting was clear, and it was simple in its message: “*You can’t look away.*” Another note below it was like the first one, only smaller, messier, and written in pencil, a terrified aura in the “*it’s gone*”.

I, like an idiot, called the past author’s bluff and shut the book, determined to finally play with a spirit once in my life, grandma’s warning be damned. My back door had a vintage outdoor light that came with the house and I bought a cheap sheet from the store and fixed it to be a type of curtain that covered the window on my back door. The light was already on from me trying to make sure the deer weren’t screwing with my herbs, so my job was simple. I didn’t look out the window before I turned the light off and once I saw the glow go away from behind my thin shield, I pulled it back.

The eyes were so red.

God, it was like somebody had gouged their eyes out and I was staring into the sockets of a mad man.

And the glow was so bright I thought I’d lose my mind if I stared into them for any longer.

Even worse was the way I couldn’t move my eyes from theirs – almost as if they were magnetized to *thb*ing on the other side of the window, mere inches from me.

Slapping my hand to the wall on my left, I tried to flip the light switch, desperately smacking and grabbing for that little stupid switch that I once took for granted. My struggle only got worse when I realized it was just a little too far from me.

As if it was entirely gone.

The glow seemed to get brighter as I realized that I was stuck.

That goddamned *glow*.

RODRIGUES, IRA**Ira Rodrigues**

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: Ladue Middle School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Natalie Zook

Category: Short Story

The Waiting Room**The Waiting Room**

I'm stretched out on a bench, wrapped in a coat and still shivering. Mom sits next to me, head buried in her hands and muttering something under her breath. A prayer.

Weakly, I survey my surroundings. People are spread out all over, hands grasping others, chapped lips moving silently. Most are adults- who am I kidding. Nearly everyone is an adult. I'm the only child here.

A woman enters the Waiting Room, sits down a bench away; a newcomer. A gust of chilly air freezes my cheeks before the hospital door slams shut again.

The woman's coat isn't yet dirty with dust and rumpled from sitting for too long. She has rosy cheeks from the cold and a scarf that covers half of her face.

I drag my own scarf higher up on my skin and breathe in the musky smell of cloth.

The woman unscrews a cap on a bottle, squeezing a generous amount of liquid on her hands. The scent of sanitizer fills the air. Then she wipes down the bench she was sitting on and fixes her scarf so the only thing I can see is her eyes.

Who is this woman? What is her story? What brought her to this hospital Waiting Room?

I am as keen-eyed as a hawk, noticing every move she makes. The woman shifts and fidgets, constantly glancing at the door. But I cannot judge her on this, because everyone else is doing the same. Even me.

I think of the reason I'm in this Waiting Room. My sister.

When we found out she was sick, it was too late. My memories of that night are fragmented. I was asleep when it happened, so I had to get the story from Mom.

Mom was the one who found my sister. Choking in her sleep, her veins black and straining against her skin, her skin blue, and then Mom screamed, and then I woke up.

Flashing lights. The shriek of an ambulance. My sister, loaded into the back. My tired brain can't make the connection between Mia and the too-still body on the stretcher. All of it happens too quickly for me to do anything but stand there, dumb in shock.

Acid bile rises in my throat, just as it has whenever I think about that night, and as always, I force it back down.

I stare at a poster about keeping up morale and try not to notice the eyes boring into my back. As a child, I'm probably the most exciting thing in this room right now. I shift a centimeter and hum quietly, a tune that is only 6 notes long and repeats after a brief chorus.

There's a soft knock on the door, and a nurse enters the room. She's decked out head to toe in a white uniform and a surgical mask covers her mouth. I wonder at this. Is she trying to protect herself from the disease, too? She doesn't have anything to be afraid of. She's an adult, and her chances of getting sick- even mildly- are next to nothing.

We all straighten. The air is tense with fear and hope. Mom's knuckles are turning white from squeezing.

The nurse reads off a clipboard a name, which I barely hear. A slight woman stands, shorter than my mother. Her frizzy blonde hair is revealed when she takes off her winter hat. We can all hear her heavy breathing.

"Right this way, ma'am," the nurse says, hurrying the woman along. As soon as the door swings shut, there's a slight exhale of breath and a collective slumping of shoulders. My mother prays harder than ever.

I try not to move at all, which is easier said than done. If I even swing my legs, all eyes fix on me. So I stay as still as possible and wait.

I watch the clock while I wait, tapping my fingers with each tick.

Mom keeps praying.

Finally, finally, the nurse calls on us. I stand so fast, Mom floating up in a daze, and we follow her.

As soon as the door shuts behind her, the nurse says to my mother, "Right this way, ma'am." Then she gives me a

hard look. “Ma’am... are you sure you want to bring your child in this hospital? It’s very dangerous.”

“I’m sure,” Mom replies, but her hands are twisting like she does when she’s nervous.

The nurse seems to think this is a very bad decision, because she keeps dropping hints as she leads us through the hospital. Her voice fades in and out. “Ma’am, you do realize that... fatality rates... it’s much more deadly to children...” Eventually I block her out.

The hospital reeks of disease and lemony cleaner failing to cover it up. Doors are shut everywhere, and uniformed staff move silently through the hallways without making a noise.

The nurse’s eyes are crinkled into what I think looks like a smile. Smiling should be outlawed in a hospital. It’s so out of place with the emotions I’m feeling. When was the last time I smiled? The muscles of my face cannot and will not move into any expression at all.

I have been awake for longer than I care to admit, and I am exhausted. It is only pure adrenaline carrying me through this hospital.

I steal a glance at Mom, wondering if she’s feeling anything like I am. She seems so much smaller than she used to be, wringing her hands nervously. I think that the Waiting Room has changed us both, irrevocably.

We keep going, and then we stop at a shut door.



My sister is propped up on a pillow, her frail body supported by the metal railing on the side. She is pale and bony, her face sharply angular instead of healthy roundness. Her arms and legs are like toothpicks. She doesn’t look strong enough to stand on her own two feet. But she is alive.

After the initial shock of seeing my sister on the hospital bed fades out, I am flooded with emotions. Surprise, relief, grief, frustration, and inexplicably, anger, which fades as quickly as it comes. Mom immediately gets hysterical.

The doctor is cool and collected. Clearly he has seen this kind of reaction before and is used to it by now. He says something about my sister’s medical condition that he thinks is comforting, but neither of us understand nor care.

Mom asks question after question, constantly reaching out to touch my sister’s arm, or stroke her hair, or look at her with eyes full of love. Meanwhile I stand awkwardly, not knowing what to do with myself, thinking that this is a bond I should not interrupt.

After waiting for a while, the doctor speaks. “I’m sorry to interrupt, but have you considered taking the treatment plan we talked about earlier?”

“What?” I swivel to my mother. “What plan?”

The doctor looks uncomfortable. When Mom doesn’t jump in to explain, he says, “I’m afraid your sister, Mia is very sick. It’s unusual how severe her case is. There are two options left for your family to take.” He pauses. “You can take the experimental treatment we’ve created—”

“No.” This from Mom, whose eyes are bright and shiny. “I don’t know much about what it does. It hasn’t even been tested yet! And I’ve heard that the side effects are irreversible.”

The doctor protests, “It could cure your daughter completely.”

“Or it could kill her,” I interject. Both Mom and the doctor look at me like they have forgotten I’m there.

“That’s a very slim chance,” the doctor continues after a beat of silence.

“I won’t have Mia get sicker than she already is. Tell me the other option.”

Instead of answering, the doctor takes off his glasses and polishes them nervously. Then he says, “We have a fast-working drug that will kill the disease that has taken control of Mia’s body.”

“We’ll take that,” my mother says, her voice full of new hope. But I already know what the doctor is going to say next.

“There is an unfortunate side effect,” he warns. “By killing the disease, the drug will also stop Mia’s heart. It will be a peaceful passing, if you so choose.”

A beat of shocked silence, and then Mom gasps. “*That’s* the other option? What kind of hospital is this? I want my daughter saved, not killed!”

“I’m sorry, ma’am. If you had taken the vaccine, it’s possible that the disease could work its way out of her system.”

I think of when the vaccine became available, a year ago. My parents wanted to get it, and they tried, even though it was rumored to be extremely unhelpful when dealing with the disease. But slots filled, doses got used up, and they were all gone by the time our family was eligible.

It’s not Mom’s fault, but I know she’s crushed by this remark. If she had been able to get the shots for Mia, would things be different?

Noticing the tension in the air, the doctor says, “I’ll leave you two alone to make your decision.”



When the disease first made itself known, my parents didn’t believe it. “A virus that only affects children?”

Ridiculous,” Dad dismissed. “It’ll blow over in a few weeks.”

But it only grew. When children started dying all over the world, my parents started to get nervous. Still, they comforted themselves with the fact that the virus hadn’t reached our city.

And then it did. My parents took the necessary precautions, but even when they did all they could, they couldn’t protect our family from the disease. They couldn’t do anything.

★

“Chloe. She is taking that experimental treatment,” Mom says firmly, getting straight to the point.

“There has to be some other way... you know how painful it is.” I say, pacing, but I know there is no other option.

“Face reality, Chloe! The disease will kill her if she doesn’t take it!” Mom snaps angrily. I know she’s just stressed out of her mind, but the words hit me like a slap in the face.

“That treatment could kill her too! Do you *want* her to die?”

“That treatment is our best chance!”

Anger floods me. “She told me she would rather *die* than take it!”

Tense silence settles over the hospital.

Mom’s voice is unusually quiet when she says, “When did she tell you this?”

I take a deep breath. “Two days ago. I came to the hospital with Dad, remember? Mia was awake then, and she was afraid of it. She was scared she wouldn’t survive it.” I pause. “Mom, don’t let her get the experimental treatment. We can figure out some other way. Maybe she’ll recover on her own.”

Mom collapses into a chair, looking exhausted.

The doctor comes back in. He doesn’t even flinch at the scene in front of him, saying, “Have you made your decision?”

“We...” Mom begins. She looks at me, then starts again. “I’ve decided that we should give Mia the experimental treatment.”

I gasp out loud.

“That’s a great decision!” The doctor says. “With luck, Mia will be fully recovered. You have made the right choice, ma’am.”

I can’t believe this is happening, but when I protest no one seems to hear me. The doctor continues on with the plan of recovery they will take, and what bills my parents will have to pay, all of it meaningless to me. “But, Mom! You can’t let them do this.”

My mother massages her temples and doesn’t look at me. “Chloe, not now, okay? I can’t deal with this right now.”

The weariness in her voice makes me want to cry.

Eventually, the doctor winds to a close with his speech. He tells us that he’ll have somebody call with further details and just like that, we’re out the door.

Mom’s face is drained of color. She looks like she’s aged ten years in the span of half an hour.

We’re shooed out of the hospital’s main corridors and back into the Waiting Room. The other people in the room look up, see how broken we are, and varying expressions pass over their faces. Sympathy wins out, but I see a majority of people whose faces are relieved for the quickest of seconds. Relief they didn’t have to make a horrible choice, relief that whoever they’re here for has more time. It’s fleeting, but I understand. I would feel the same way.

★

When we return home, I am restless. I move from room to room like someone possessed. I am not like my dad, who shuts himself in his office and does not come out, because I can’t seem to stay still.

The phone is my one constant. I start hovering near it, taking it with me, orbiting around it like a center of gravity. Surely now, Mom will call and tell me that everything’s okay. Surely something has changed in my sister’s situation?

What are they doing now? Could an emergency be going on? Maybe I’m overreacting, but in this state of mind it’s hard for me to tell.

What if my sister’s situation is worse, and I’m not there to support Mom? Wouldn’t they call me? Why aren’t they calling?

This thought sends me spiraling down into what ifs, a whole chain of possibilities. Most of them are extraneous, but all of them terrify me.

I’m in the Waiting Room all over again.

SHI, JASON**Jason Shi**

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: Ladue Middle School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Velma Valadez

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

The Bird

The sound of the bell darts through hallways and bounces off doors, walls, windows, echoing, fading, dying. Hurrying out the classroom, I pass doors, students, teachers, brick after brick after brick blurring together as I slam open double doors and emerge into the school lawn. Flashes of sunlight illuminate metal keychains, yellow grass, the shadowed building behind me. A hand shoots out and clutches my arm. I jump and turn around.

“Let me go, Alvin!” I glare at my little brother.

“Come on, I see mom!” he says, pointing at a blue Subaru Forester nestled at the back of the maze of cars. As we walk, orange, red, and yellow leaves drift and flutter down, each one plucked off by a gust of wind before carpeting the ground, leaving the tree branches bare, empty, skeletal. I brush some off my shoulder. Pearls of water gather on blades of grass that shimmer and drip, spraying in all directions as Alvin jogs to the side of the car, wrenches the door open, and climbs in. Then stops.

“Hey!” he points down. “What’s that?” He cocks his head. On the asphalt, a lump with short, sodden grey feathers rests on a red leaf, its yellow beak blemished with a small dirt stain. Its little chest rises and falls, rises and falls.

Mom steps out of the car.

“Why aren’t you guys coming in?”

“There’s something under my door. I think it’s a bird,” Alvin says. “We need to save it!”

“Come on, Alvin, you’ve got to be kidding me. We’re gonna get bird flu or something,” I say.

“Well, I read in a book that there are fewer than 1000 cases per year in the US.”

“Well, yeah, because less than 1000 people have tried to save baby birds!”

“Whatever. Help me look for something to put the bird in.” Alvin leans over the backseat and rummages around.

“There’s a Chinese takeout container.” He gives the inside an experimental sniff. “Smells like orange chicken. Will it fit?”

I look at him. A golden dragon embellishes the front of his paper box, its color already fading into white. “Yes, Alvin. It’ll fit.”

He hops down from the car, careful not to step on the bird, then crouches down, scooping it up and laying it down on the bottom of the cup. Fluttering its wings, the bird squawks and scrabbles at the container as it tries to stand.

I roll my eyes. “See, look! It doesn’t want to go into the cup.”

“Well, that’s only because it doesn’t know what’s good for it!” He glares at me.

“But th—”

Alvin sticks his tongue out at me and climbs back into the car. “Whatever. Let’s go!”

On our drive back, Alvin and I sit in the back seat to either side of the bird. It pecks at the cup, using its wing to push, drag, slide itself along the bottom. Feathers cling to the base. Red and yellow foliage plaster the windows before spiraling away behind us. Droplets of water migrate up our windshield, left behind by the fluttering leaves.

As soon as Mom pulls into our driveway and puts the car in park, Alvin sprints into the house. “Bring the box, we’ll need to give it some water!” Leaving the door ajar, he rushes about, rifling through cabinets, turning on the sink.

Mom walks in too, throwing her jacket onto a wooden hook. “Don’t spend too much time outside, boys. It looks like it’s going to start raining in a few minutes.”

I peer down at the box, at the bird inside. “I think it should stay in the garage.”

Footsteps echo across the floorboards. Alvin darts back as I deposit the box on a workbench, a syringe clutched in his right hand and a glass of water in the other. “I got the water!” Behind him, a trail of droplets glisten and gleam on the floor, quivering and melting together.

“Alvin, *where* did you get--”

“Sink. Medicine cabinet.” Without looking up, Alvin plunges the syringe into the glass of water, fills it, then presses the flat end. A bead of water emerges. Surface shimmering, he ushers it into the beak of the bird.

The bird squawks. Its wings twitch. A grey feather flutters to the ground.

“Do you know what kind of bird this is?” Alvin asks. “I read that some birds need different sized cages than--”

I gape at him. “We are absolutely not keeping this thing as a pet.”

“But it’s so cute!”

The bird’s beak opens and closes, and it squawks again, a weak, ululating sound. Alvin rushes over, rubs specks of dirt off its beak, feeds it another drop of water. The bird’s chest rises and falls, rises and falls, the movement growing slower and slower.

I wince. “Alvin, I think you should go inside and do your homework or something.”

“Why?” He asks, still gazing at the bird.

“Uhh...” I hesitate for a moment. “You can always come to look at the bird later.”

“Why can’t I just do my homework later?” he says.

“Mom said to do it now,” I mumble.

“What?”

“That’s just what she said.” I shrug.

He gives the bird one final look, then trudges back inside the house.

I tramp over to the box and stare down at the bird. It heaves in a shuddering breath.

“Come on, little dude, I’m sure you can make it,” I mumble, prodding it with the tip of my syringe. The bird brushes it aside; falls back onto the table.

“Maybe you need... some water?” I plunge the syringe into Alvin’s glass of water and fill it, then shoot it at the bird. The water splashes across its body, dousing its feathers and getting into its eye before wetting the inside of the box.

“Oh, sorry about that...” The bird lifts its head to look at me. Reaching out with a finger, I stroke its beak. It turns away. Then closes its eyes. And lays still.

I sigh, gazing down at the little limp body framed inside the box. Plodding outside, I gather a small shovel from a rack affixed to the wall.

Overhead, darkened clouds bulge as they race across the sky. Setting the box on the ground, I start to dig, stabbing the ground; each jab making the hole wider, deeper. A mound of dirt grows beside a small pit; crumbling, and dry, encrusted with grass. Picking up the box, I settle it into the hole. Wiping my eyes with the back of my hand, it comes away wet, moisture sinking into my skin.

Sniffing, I start to shovel dirt back onto the box. The golden dragon emblazoned on it seems to dance with the wind, scales blending together before becoming obscured. Turning away, I retrace my steps back to the house.

SINGH, ADITYA**Aditya Singh**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

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Educator: Jason Lovera

Category: Critical Essay

Taking A Position - The Role of Evil

Evil. A word that evokes images of terrible monsters, and ominous shadows in the minds of children. A word that calls to mind tyrannical kings and genocidal maniacs for adults. A concept in which there is no light, a descriptor for actions and thoughts considered inhuman. Evil can take on many forms, but is undeniably present in the world we live in. Man has always sought to escape, or to eliminate evil, in hopes that without darkness, we can live in a better world, one where goodness and purity reign supreme. But what if we need evil? What if evil is a *necessary* part of life? What if evil is essential to allowing us to see the goodness in the world? Without evil, there would be no struggle, no challenge placed on humanity. And like a steel, man must sometimes face terrible fires in order to harden, and become more than what we were before. Evil provides the flames to help us grow. Evil is a sourceless and irrational force of the world with no inherent purpose, but the interactions we have with evil breed struggle and challenge, it ultimately helps us grow, making evil an essential part of our maturing.

Evil has no natural purpose, and is an irrational yet inherent part of the world that humanity interacts with. Examples of evil seem to have a repulsion to any type of logic or reasoning that attempts to explain it. In his essay "Evil", Lance Morrow calls to mind the tale of Padrica Caine Hill, a mother who smoked crack cocaine and promptly strangled two of her children. "Who or what is responsible?" (Morrow 49) Lance asks. He offers a variety of possible victims, from the mother herself to the poor farmers growing the coca that became the drug (Morrow 50). With each example, it becomes clear that blame for the children's death cannot be reasonably assigned to any one source. Crack usage does not often result in the deaths of one's children, how could the mother have expected this? Can the farmers really be told that by watering those plants, they sealed the fate of two children on a different continent? The fact of the matter is, the evil that killed those children was not intended, and had no purpose. It was unexplainable, and yet a part of the world. Even when evil can be traced back to a single source, logical explanations are still nowhere to be found. The character of Iago in Shakespeare's *Othello* is undeniably evil, and yet a clear, present reason for this is never present. The character himself touches on the lack of logic in his hatred for the title character. He outright states that his motivation for all his crimes against Othello is simple: he hates him. "I hate the Moor, and it is thought abroad that 'twixt my sheets he's done my office. I know not if 't be true, but I, for mere suspicion in that kind, will do as if for surety" (Shakespeare 1.3.429-433). His point is clear enough, but the irrationality of his evil is further enhanced by the flimsy justification he scrambles for. Iago's need to alight on a reason for his hatred highlights how illogical his dark intentions really are. He needs at least a tiny sliver of an argument, because he cannot face the truth: His evil is entirely unjustified. There was no point to his misdeeds, beyond an unfathomable hatred. Should there be any doubt left to the utter pointlessness of evil, one only needs to turn to the very real example of the unpredictable, meaningless nature of illness. I was plagued by an unknown illness for months, which wreaked havoc on my life, and left me with lasting symptoms. The illness was interesting, in the sense that it is impossible to justify it in any way. With things like the common cold, or a bacterial infection, a particularly zealous argument could be made that this is just the result of organisms beyond our normal vision simply trying to survive. Nothing of the sort can be said regarding the illness I faced. It was simply a chaotic condition, where my body viciously fought against any food for months, with the resulting effects ravaging my stomach, health, and mind.. What is the purpose of such a disorder? Why would this happen? It can only be explained away as an evil: a purposeless and inane phenomenon, yet one that was tied to a few long months of my life. Evil like this is, at its core, an incomprehensible, random part of our world, one that exists without motive, but exists nonetheless.

Interacting with evil always brings about some kind of pain or struggle, and because of the nonsensical nature of evil, these challenges result in losses that can seem cruel and unnecessary, making the only apparent outcome of evil extended suffering. One of the most famous examples of this are the punishments given to Adam and Eve after they were persuaded to sin by Satan. Directly after, Adam's grief is severe, with him asking, "Why comes not Death," / Said he, "with one thrice acceptable stroke To end me?" (Milton 10.854-856). He continues to monolog, and his

agony is incredibly visible. Already, Adam is suffering from his experience with evil, and his calling for death is a clear indicator of his condition. His loss is so great that the oblivion of death, something his character barely even understands, is preferable to his aftermath. If there was any doubt that his evil actions had a negative impact, it would be dispelled by the punishment meted out to him and Eve: banishment from paradise, their home. Eve's response is understandable. "O unexpected stroke, worse than of death!" (Milton 11.268). The effects of the evil misdeeds on Eve are just as apparent on her as they are on Adam. Just like with him, Eve instantly believes that her current fate is worse than death, and continues to speak about her extensive loss, describing the future absence of the "happy walks and shades...water from th' ambrosial fount" and asks how she would "breathe in other air less pure" (Milton 11.269-285). As a result of evil, Eve now must lose the world she treasured, and implies that the Earth she is now doomed to walk will always be less than what she had. The effects of evil in the world of *Paradise Lost* are utterly negative, undeniably cruel. The aftermath of *Oedipus* is no different. When Oedipus is faced with the evil inherent in his life, his incest and patricide, his suffering is immense. After gouging his own eyes out, he succinctly describes his current state, "I am misery!" (*Oedipus The King* 243). Even the chorus ranks his woes as beyond that of any, saying "is there a man more agonized? / More wed to pain and frenzy? Not a man on earth" (*Oedipus The King* 234). It cannot be disputed that Oedipus is faced with a terrible outcome. His mental state is broken, and none have experienced pain as he has. And when the chorus states, "count no man happy till he dies, free of pain at last" (*Oedipus The King* 251), there is an implication that Oedipus's suffering will carry with him forever. This cruel, doomed existence is his fate, after his interaction with evil. Similar conditions are faced in the real world, and can easily be demonstrated by the pains of illness. When I was sick, it felt like there was no end to what I was experiencing. Every day felt like a step deeper and deeper into a personal hell. The beginnings of stomach pains and vomiting were terrible, but even worse things followed. My mind clouded as a result of the taxing disease and the medication, and my psyche began to alter. I was irritable, and pushed away friends and family. Finally, at the peak, I was faced with the ultimate evil of my life: post operative cognitive decline. After shutting out the people I cared about, I began to forget them, and felt alone, quietly suffering as I battled the evil wracking my body. The fight against the darkness in the world is always taxing. Even in "The Book of Job", while Job never succumbs to Satan's plan of making him curse God, his struggle is incredibly apparent, with him crying out curses of the day he was born, wishing he died in the process, wishing he had died anytime before the present (*The Scofield Study Bible* Job 3.3-13). Even a paragon of willpower like Job suffers at the hands of evil. No matter what the interaction, or how great the evil, something is always lost, suffering always occurs. One's fate is ruled by it. While evil has an irreversible effect on one's life, the seemingly permanent losses and damages are actually opportunities for growth, tools to help one ascend beyond their former state, making evil an important part of advancement. Adam and Eve's grim punishment seemingly destroys their world, and yet after, Michael enlightens Adam with visions of the future, man's redemption, and Satan's downfall. This revelation is so powerful that Adam wonders, "Whether I should repent me now of sin / By me done and occasioned, or rejoice / Much more, that much more good thereof shall spring" (Milton 12.474-476). Where Adam previously believed he only had pain, and suffering, he now sees that he has more than he ever had before. His interaction with evil, his unholy sin, while causing temporary, seemingly endless torture, has actually taken him to new heights of understanding. As a result, he and Eve (who received a similar vision) accept their punishment willingly, now enlightened with new knowledge (Milton 12.638-649). The evil of Satan and their sin did irreparably damage them, and they suffered as a result. But now, they can grow beyond their former states, and ascend to their new role as the progenitors of mankind, thrust forward by evil. This theme of new insight is similarly represented by "The Book of Job". In addition to fairly straightforward material gains, such as a wealth of livestock, a large family, and fair daughters, but he is philosophically changed, demonstrated by his final statement, "Wherefore I abhor *myself*, and repent in dust and ashes." (*The Scofield Study Bible* Job 42.6). Job, as a result of his struggles against Satan's wicked design, did undergo incredible loss, and felt extreme loss, but left with a deeper and more profound understanding of God (and no small material recompense). Oedipus, who since the beginning of the play has promised. "I'll do anything (for Thebes)" (*Oedipus The King* 161), was able to make good on his promise to the people. Creon's news from Apollo is clear, "Drive the corruption from the land" (*Oedipus The King* 164). Oedipus spent much of the play blind to the truth, but by facing the evil present in his treasured life, he was able to ascertain the truth behind the corruption: himself. His interaction with his dark, unknown secret allowed him to cleanse himself personally of his sinful marriage, and fulfill an ultimate duty as king and leave his people to save them. This positive aftermath. was a direct consequence of the interchange between Oedipus and his evil. He suffered, but was eventually able to introduce more good into the world as a result. In a similar vein to Oedipus's protection of Thebes, "Evil" addresses how even the most extreme examples of vile wickedness can spark progress. Morrow conjectures that "a powerful (yet grotesque) case can be made that Adolf Hitler was the founding father of the state of Israel. Without Hitler, no Holocaust, no Holocaust, no Israel" (Morrow 53). In the ashes of the terror spread by one of the cruelest men in history, a hopeful new nation was able to rise, bought from the intense suffering of the Jewish people, and forged in

evil. At the darkest depths of my sickness, I felt completely terrible. My health was vanishing, and my mind was lost. I had forgotten the very things I loved and cared about. And yet when I recovered, and the people I had shunted away returned to me, the loss I experienced has allowed me to view them in a new light. Where before I took friendships for granted, I can now deeply appreciate the care and affection these people feel for me, and I am thankful of my new understanding of what they mean to me. After becoming a shadow of my former physical self, the incredible freedom of good health was illuminated to me, and my health has become one of my most important values. I cannot imagine going through my experience again, but all of that pain and loss has ultimately transformed me for the better. Without the irrational, chaotic evil of that sickness, I would be less than I am now, and the suffering is now a shade in my mind. Evil does leave a mark, and the torment and agony it can bring cannot be denied, but the massive potential for growth as a result is equally undeniable. Sometimes, the damages of evil can be a catalyst to something greater, and can allow one to become something bigger.

While evil is an indescribable force of our world, immune to all logic and reason, and contact with it results in suffering and pain, it is an important part of allowing us to grow, and gain new understanding of the world around us. Evil is, by nature, not something that we can explain away. It is a fact of life, something that is perfectly capable of affecting us all. There is no reason for why it is here, it is purposeless and inane. Coupled with this, all those that are touched by evil can become damaged. Evil is a rampaging force, one that can take everything away from someone, introduce terrible things into their lives, and change them. But, the fires and heat of darkness can act as a forge, and those who are forced to endure it can attempt to build something brighter and stronger, out of something dreadful. We cannot deny the power of evil in our lives. We cannot control it, cannot eliminate it, and will never understand it. It will take our livelihoods from us indiscriminately, punish us unfairly, and attack randomly. In a world with such a frightening force, it can be easy for one to curl up and hide, and imagine that everything is ok, and everything will be alright. But by doing so, one bars themselves from the opportunity to become something more. Facing evil can provide the unique chance to move beyond that curled up position, allowing one to stand. Without evil, we would never be able to appreciate all of the amazing things we have. Without hardship, we would never expose ourselves to trials that transform us for the better. Evil is a force beyond our control, but that doesn't mean we can't decide what we do when faced with it.

SRIHARI, OVIYA**Oviya Srihari**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

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Educator: Jennifer Hartigan

Category: Poetry

LAY YOUR KINGS DOWN

how / do i explain to you that you / have done / something /
/ un- / forgivable / how
do i forgive you anyway / there are days i wish i could leave
/ the body / behind / lie back in the sea and let the saltwater /
wash / it clean / pure / holy again / there are days i wish i could /
stop seeing the heart / and the hands / as two separate
objects / there are
second chances / for this kind of thing / right /
right / teach me
to stop the forgiving / teach me to become / my
anger / warn me this ends /
badly for us / all but
i know / i know / i / know i know / and i will
still say / the hands did
wrong / not the heart / teach me to mix saltwater
with blood / teach me
not everything precious can / be sweet—

SRIHARI, OVIYA**Oviya Srihari**

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Category: Critical Essay

From Grip Strength and Masculinity to Chihuahuas and Pink: a Universal Formula for Heroism Across Time and Culture*“You got into Harvard Law School?”**“What, like it’s hard?”*

This simple exchange between Elle Woods and Warner Huntington III of 2001 American cinematic masterpiece *Legally Blonde* (“*Legally Blonde* (2001)”) would redefine not only the chick-flick genre or 21st-century feminist rhetoric, but the concept of heroism itself. In any other era, Elle Woods would have starred as anyone *but* the leading protagonist: her “ditzzy” nature would likely reduce her to comic relief, and her determination to pursue higher education and empower others around her would have been demonized. Today, however, *ammonium thioglycolate* and Bruiser the Chihuahua are beloved among a generation of viewers that holds Elle dear. *Legally Blonde* is one example of many that demonstrates two key traits of the hero: first, heroism is not a static concept: as societies evolve and cultural norms change over time, our heroes do, too. Second, heroes use what makes them “weird”—quirks, talents, perspectives, superpowers or identities—to make positive change. Thus, a hero can be defined as an individual whose character reflects a society’s most current values and beliefs, and whose quirks, background, identity, or talents are used to create positive change.

A variety of examples spanning time periods and diverse cultures show that heroes both reflect societal beliefs and create change using unique talents. Starting in the earliest eras of storytelling, Germanic and Greek mythological heroes were changemakers that reflected traits beloved at the time: masculinity, physical strength, high status, connection to the gods, and perpetual confidence that acted as a force of unconditional good against well-defined evil. In the Germanic epic *Beowulf*, titular protagonist Beowulf steps up and creates positive change in his own community—killing the demon Grendel, then Grendel’s mother—but what makes him a hero is that he does so as someone who would be idolized by Anglo-Saxons of the time: Beowulf is described as “[a mighty] man-at-arms on this earth standing here: unless I am mistaken, he is truly noble. This is no mere hanger-on in a hero’s armour” (Heaney 19). The epic’s specific emphasis on Beowulf’s high status, physical strength, godlike ability (be it grip strength or super-swimming), boastfulness, and adherence to codes of honor were all traits particularly valued in Anglo-Saxon society. Anglo-Saxon culture was known to be blunt and violent, deeply valuing gendered power structures and traditional notions of masculinity. Thus, a physically strong, upper-class, confident Beowulf, who ascribes to traditional codes of chivalry, is a changemaker admired by Anglo-Saxon society, making him a hero of the culture.

This formula also exists in early Greek mythology, where a comparison between figures Cassandra and Achilles serves demonstrates how one can make change in their community, but is not a hero unless they reflect societal ideals and are looked up to. In this case, Greek society valued polytheistic religion, masculine power, and military-focused honor. Cassandra is an oracle who foresees true events, but cursed to never be believed. Despite her potentially tragedy-averting premonitions, Cassandra—a female hero cursed for her refusal to accept the god Apollo’s advances—was demonized and her story turned into a tragedy because she flouted gender norms and did not idolize the gods (“Cassandra | Myth, Significance, & Trojan War”). Meanwhile, Achilles, a strong, conventionally-attractive demigod and military leader, *was* remembered as a hero for his great feats because of his adherence to such traits valued in Greek society at the time (Cottrell). While both did good deeds, nobody wanted to be a Cassandra, but anyone would have (a)killed(ees) to be Achilles, thus making him a hero of his time.

Moving out of the mythological era and into the Renaissance period, individualism, freedom, love, self-exploration, and drama were idolized (Beadle et al), but still throughout, heroes remained committed to using a specific talent or identity to create change. Shakespeare’s play *Julius Caesar* and Spanish novel *Lazarillo de Tormes* demonstrate these two components. In *Julius Caesar*, Brutus, a complex yet ultimately well-intentioned protagonist attempting to act in Rome’s best interests (“Julius Caesar”), reflects Renaissance-era society. There is a

waning focus on physical strength and masculine stoicism seen in early mythological heroes, and instead, Brutus embodies “Renaissance values” with his intense soliloquies of self-reflection, embrace of complex emotion, and a strict adherence to codes of honor and ethics (“Julius Caesar”). Brutus uses his own traits—a willingness to go against the grain, unyielding loyalty, and clear-headed dedication—to (attempt) creating a just and secure Rome for his people. This use of Brutus’s personal background for change—along with his reflection of values that readers of the time would identify with, look up to, and hope to embody—make Brutus a hero.

Even across cultures in the same era—and among wildly different protagonists—the fundamental components of heroism hold true. Titular main character Lázaro of *Lazarillo de Tormes* is seemingly the polar opposite of older, noble statesman Brutus, but still received as a hero for his embodiment of values celebrated during the Renaissance, and his exposure of injustice perpetuated by the Spanish aristocracy and reigning religious institutions (Manu). Lázaro, a “castaway” of society who grows up in conditions of extreme poverty and social ostracization, is a young boy who writes his own path, learns and explores constantly protect himself, adheres to a moral code (albeit a different one than Brutus’s), and remains dedicated to survival in the face of tragedy (Manu, “El Lazarillo de Tormes”). These values look different than those of Brutus, but still reflect the Renaissance’s spirit of intellectual curiosity, stubborn individualism, honor, and tragedy-centered conflict. While this makes Lázaro well-received and looked up to by readers, what truly makes him a hero is his use of clever tricks and constant outfoxing to not just overcome personal conflicts, but in doing so, creating positive change by laying bare the foundations of social hypocrisy and class-system conflict to readers.

Finally, as contemporary media emerged and continues to evolve today, the hero’s character has similarly evolved to reflect current ideals that value diversity, representation, overcoming great odds, and the notion that everyday individuals—and everyday struggles—are heroic. Even as the idea of heroism and conflict emphasizes the “mundane and everyday,” heroes of all genres and backgrounds still possess a specific identity or quirk that enables them to make positive change. Take Lorraine Hansberry’s 1959 play *A Raisin in the Sun*—while many protagonists exist in the play (centered on a family navigating class, race, and gender barriers in the context of pride and family struggles), Beneatha Younger is the prime definition of a modern-day hero. A Black woman insistent upon exploring the roots of her identity, speaking up for what she believes in, defying preconceived notions of beauty and romantic stereotypes, and pursuing higher education—particularly the primarily White, male-dominated field of medicine—was virtually unheard of at the time (Hansberry). Her actions and character sum up modern values of defiance, beating the odds, progress, and representation. Not only does Beneatha reflect the spirit and identity of current, global (and particularly American) culture, but she uses unique talent—Beneatha’s intellect sets her apart from the rest of the family—to help overcome the economic and social conflicts the Younger family faces (Hansberry).

This phenomenon is seen in even more recent pop culture. While still maintaining the concept of using quirks to make change, a range of titles and characters emphasize everyday struggle, the idea of the “underdog protagonist,” and focus heavily on representing a spectrum of identities. The problems heroes of today face—even superheroes such as Black Panther, who *does* still fight supervillains (Lawson)—are no longer just demons or military generals, but instead far more common: loss of a loved one and balancing cultural identities, seen with Indian-American teenager Devi Vishwakumar from TV show *Never Have I Ever*; or friendship-related conflicts and navigating microaggressions seen with Tessa Johnson of the novel *Happily Ever Afters* (Lawson). Rather than idolizing those “above” us as heroes, globalized society sees its own struggles as deserving of recognition, valuing its own tenacity and push for change rather than a specific set of masculine norms or honor codes. What makes these main characters heroes—not simply characters we look up to that are grappling with “relatable” challenges—is the fact that Devi and Tessa use what makes them different (in Devi’s case, her candor and impulsive nature, and in Tessa’s, her talent for writing) to solve conflicts.

And of course, beloved, (legally) blonde Elle Woods, who is not quite so different from strong, kingly Beowulf after all. Just like Beowulf grips his way to victory and portrays societal values that make him a figure-looked-up-to by Anglo-Saxon listeners, Woods’ use of her own quirks and niche knowledge—from hair salon tips to gossip-influenced inferences—end up freeing a wrongly accused defendant and proving stereotypes wrong. Beyond this, she embodies modern values of determination, “underdog spirit,” and a willingness to turn tropes on their head and create strength from biases and judgement—which makes her a generational icon whose confidence many wish to emulate. Stories told in old English or Spanish, onscreen or on paper, from centuries ago or just last year, the definition of a hero fundamentally boils down to the same, two-ingredient formula: someone who uses a unique aspect of their personality to create change and is looked up to by their community due to an embrace of societal values and norms.

SRIHARI, OVIYA**Oviya Srihari**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

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

Educator: Jennifer Hartigan

Category: Journalism

Fitting the Standard: Students speak on identity & standards of appearance*Maybe I should cut this down.**I shouldn't eat that next week.**This should be fixed.*

A year ago, these were the daily thoughts junior Sasha Atterberry would record as she fought through an eating disorder. For as long as she can remember, beauty and body image has affected every aspect of her life, from academics and athletics, to safety and self-worth.

“In our society, if you don't live up to these beauty standards, well, you don't have a position of power, [which results in] lack of control,” Jillian Shah, researcher at Washington University in St. Louis, said. “Put together with the right environment and the right biological predisposition, what do you have? An eating disorder.”

Shah, who works at a lab specializing in eating disorders and psychiatry, explains that environmental pressures (like chronic stress and trauma), paired with genetic and biological predispositions, can trigger an eating disorder. This was likely the case for Atterberry.

“My family was into modeling, so these standards of beauty have always been, *'you're supposed to be a double zero and you're not,'*” Atterberry said. “I know it's bad, but those societal standards have really affected me as a person. You're trained to try not to think about it, but it's really hard to not be affected by things that people say when you're already attacking yourself daily. You're trying to fight against yourself and then you have to fight against other people as well.”

Environmental pressures exist for most people, but not the biological component that catalyzes an eating disorder, resulting in sky-high rates of restrictive eating, distorted self-perception and other unhealthy tendencies that don't necessarily morph into a medical diagnosis. What fewer people know, however, is that misogyny, racism and homophobia are traumatic environmental stressors. For those not represented by the Western ideal of beauty who live in a predominantly-white space, body-image and positive self-perception levels are typically lower.

“[Our lab] found that Black females at predominantly-white institutions are more likely to have restrictive eating habits,” Shah said. “At predominantly black institutions — HBCUs — they are less likely to have those restrictive tendencies. We think that's because of the sociocultural model, where they're not as exposed to these Western ideals.”

For junior Nyeal Biedenstein, an LGBTQ+ man of color, self-perception is also complicated by identity. As an Asian-American, Westernized appearance ideals and a lack of representation felt exclusionary, as did the hypermasculinity expected of him to fully fit the standard set for males.

“When I was in the closet, there was definitely the pressure to look straight and act straight. [And] then, if I were ever to identify myself as purely Asian, I would never be Asian enough,” Biedenstein said. “The amount of times I've been crying over something I could never change? That's with me for life.”

However, if individuals manage to “fit the standard,” the expectation shifts, ultimately ending up with dissatisfaction. The beauty industry perpetuates a vicious cycle: spend money on appointments, treatments and diets to the point of physical danger, only to feel unhappy—then spend more.

“Last year I was a double zero for a little bit,” Atterberry said. “I had severe anorexia, and I still hated myself. I was still being told that I wasn't beautiful enough, and that there was still something wrong with me. I would go to the store and I would buy triple XL, thinking that's my actual size. I genuinely thought that was it. People thought I was just going for a Billie Eilish look or something, like it was trendy, but I was really just mentally ill.”

According to scientific literature, people see beauty standards and their harmful consequences as a one-dimensional issue that affects only affluent, Caucasian women. However, they are synonymous with issues that affect all people: lack of representation, biological racism, misogyny, heteronormativity and an industry eager to profit off of media trends that foster insecurity.

“We're saying we're becoming a more progressive society in terms of mental health and beauty,” Shah said, “so what are we going to tell all of the [people] that are dying?”

SUFFIAN, ELIZABETH**Elizabeth Suffian**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

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

Educator: Tex Tourais

Category: Short Story

Cutting Split Ends

Amy's pale hands, usually smooth from the lotion her mother gifted her, were now stained. Purple filled the smooth surface of the bathtub, dripping like melted crayon onto the crystal knobs. It seeped into the cracks of her palms with each layer of dye she applied. She made her way to the sink, staring at herself in the mirror. Her usual brown hair was now a faded purple, at least on the ends. A ruckus of pots and pans came from downstairs as her mom prepared breakfast. Amy's eyebrow furrowed; she never got used to her mother taking over every meal. Her father was always the one to cook, but now he couldn't, not after the car accident that killed him. Amy looked again to the mirror, her cursed brown eyes were dry, they were always dry. It was a condition she self-diagnosed: tearphobia. Even when she was born, she didn't cry. Not because was sick but because "she was a Peters" as her mother put it. This story was her mother, Shannon's, pride and joy. Every distasteful dinner party, every gauche gala, every chance she got she would boast about it. Of course, to her mother these events were different. Every gala glamorous, and every dinner divine for the exceptional Peters family. Her father used to always sneak Amy onto the patio during those events. He would light up a cigarette and take a breath of relief every time the smoke traveled through his lungs. Amy unconsciously mimicked his mannerisms: flicking the lighter, rising and releasing her shoulders with each puff, then she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror. A wave of sorrow engulfed her, weighing her body down. She looked to the mirror, hoping for her eyes to at least be glassy, but they were still dry. She straightened her now bent knees and made her way back to her marble bathtub. She let the ends of her hair soak in the warm water. It felt nice, even with the toxic aroma of hair dye diffusing through her bathroom. The ring of her intercom interrupted the white noise of the gushing water.

"Amy, come eat your breakfast," her mother beckoned.

"I'm not hungry."

"Amy, please come eat your breakfast."

"Coming."

After turning the water off and running a towel through her hair, she stood in the doorway. Her mother would notice the change, she had to. She tracked every sneeze, step, snuffle, and breath Amy took. She picked up a photograph of her boyfriend Tom sitting on her dresser. Tom, a guy who was often perceived as peculiar and poverty-stricken, asked her out 6 months ago. She thought back to the day this photo was taken. Tom performed magic in the school talent show, and out of the entire crowd, Amy was the only one laughing hysterically. He performed a basic act: sawing a woman in half. Amy eagerly raised her hand to volunteer, while others ridiculed and repulsed. The two grinned the entire act, even when Amy's head appeared separated from her body. After the show, Amy kissed him on the cheek. Tom's face burned red, informing the crowd that they were a couple. She made her way to her bed, her clothes sitting on top of her white hotel-style comforter. She put on leggings and a light blue top to pair with her white tennis shoes. Once dressed, she walked down the carpeted path until she reached the kitchen.

Her mother, martini in one hand, newspaper in the other, wore a black, knee-length dress paired with her signature burgundy-stained lips. She sat at the kitchen table, table clothed and crowded with a meal that could feed 6 families. Amy sat down as her mother's eyes fixed on the obituary section.

"This is ridiculous! I paid for your father to be featured on this page 3 months ago, and still, these incompetent journalists cannot follow one task," she complained rolling her eyes. Amy looked around the room. The walls were plain, a smooth opaque white. The only decoration consisting of artwork her parents bought on one of their auction endeavors. "I should call the times and report this; your father deserves to be honored," she exclaimed.

"It's been 3 months?" Amy's eyes widened.

"Doesn't feel like it?" She stirred the olive of her martini.

"Isn't it a little early to start drinking?" Amy cleared her throat and looked at the island this time, at the expensive knickknacks meticulously placed.

“Why are you attacking me this early in the morning? I made a great breakfast, and in return, I am treated with disrespect.” Shannon sighed.

“You wouldn’t have to be making this breakfast if you had stayed at the party. Not driving home on the 4th of July, when you knew there would be drunk drivers on the road.”

Shannon set her newspaper down. She sat up, her spine becoming straight, and took a deep breath. “You can’t possibly still blame me for this. The car hit us; it was out of our control. I’m sorry you’re unhappy that I survived and not your father, but you need to end this resentment.”

Amy took a bite of toast, the crunching breaking the silence after her comment. She ran her fingers through her hair while looking down at her shoes.

“I dyed my hair.”

“I’ve noticed, it’s so bright that a deer would be blinded by it.”

“I knew you would like it,” her tone now sarcastic, “Well, I should get to school.”

“Don’t leave, we need to finish this conversation.”

Amy stood up, grabbed the keys and backpack that were laid out for her on the island, and left the house.

Parking in spot 4a, Amy turned off her car. The cool October breeze slammed her door shut and caused her shoulders to jump. As she walked to the door, the crunch of red, yellow, and orange leaves faded as she replayed the speech she prepared for Tom. She didn’t know why she was giving this speech. She really liked him – maybe even loved him – but this speech was necessary, and it was structured. She would first tell him that it had been six months, and he had never gotten her a gift. Not for her birthday, not for their anniversary, she never even got a card from him. She would then add that he doesn’t get along with her friends and would never win the approval of her mom. It was the perfect defense; he couldn’t argue with it. But still, Amy’s stomach turned as she practiced the speech one final time to her reflection in the passenger’s side window. Maybe she was searching for a reason to end the relationship, but it didn’t feel like it. She had thought this over very carefully, yet the nagging ache in her stomach was a result of her lies. Tom was the only boyfriend who had ever gotten along with her father. He provided security when he passed; a shoulder to cry on. But her father was gone, so Tom must be gone.

Before she could walk into school, Tom’s Jeep parked next to her. The screeching of tires did not startle her already anxious body. She turned in the other direction, inhaling and exhaling a few times. When she returned to her original position, there stood Tom. His shaggy brown hair that was in dire need of a haircut complemented his baggy t-shirt and jeans. The few times he met her mother, she called him frumpy. Shannon didn’t like anything about him. His nonchalant attitude, his magic tricks, and don’t get her started on his family’s economic status. He wasn’t poor, just wasn’t rich; he wasn’t dignified. While her mother despised these things, Amy adored them. His relaxed attitude comforted her, his tricks and jokes made her laugh, and money wasn’t a factor of her affection. Her father loved him, always laughing at his jokes at the dinner table. The only reason she was allowed to date him was because of her father’s approval. People told Amy they resembled each other, but she didn’t see it. Her speech still replayed in her mind, taunting her as she looked at him. The thoughts made her so uneasy that her stomach churned when he walked up to her. “Hey,” his smile reached his ears.

“Hi,” Amy whispered.

His smile faded as his head tilted. He looked her up and down, a blank expression on his face. “You haven’t been responding to my texts, is something wrong?” he asked.

“I think we need to talk.”

He didn’t speak, only stared at her.

“I just feel like things aren’t working out. I mean I’m just so busy right now with stuff for my dad and school. And you have your career. Maybe it’s time that we just cut it off?” The speech that she profusely practiced was completely forgotten as soon as she saw him. She looked at the white lines of the parking spot next to him. She exhaled. Fidgeted with her nails, her shirt. Anything to pass the silence.

“I’m sorry I’m really confused right now. I thought things were going well with us and now you want to end them? Aren’t you happy?” He questioned as his eyebrows furrowed.

“Of course, I’m happy with you, but I just have so much going on. I don’t have extra time to hang out with you. I mean I have the funeral coming up.”

“The funeral that I wasn’t told about or invited to.” His eyes started to gloss, his words becoming slower. His eyelids squeezed, trying to stop the watering.

“I know, I’m sorry. Can we talk more later? I need to get to class.” Amy’s eyes looked at her shoes. She couldn’t tell him the real reason she ended things, she wouldn’t. Tom would never understand that in order to let go of her dad, she needed to let go of him.

He walked away, leisurely, as if Amy was going to stop him and change her mind. But she didn’t, instead, she started walking to English. She hastily wiped her eyes, checking for tears. Still, they were dry. Shoving the bathroom

door open, she looked at herself in the mirror. An explosive *bang* echoed followed by a stinging in her palm from the area she hit it with. Her speech, she didn't follow her script. Poor, now blinded-sided Tom didn't get to hear the speech, and he deserved to hear it. Her body slung whilst her knees gave out as she rubbed her forehead. She just wanted to hide; the bright light of the bathroom shining on her like a spotlight. The bell rang, stopping Amy from sitting in solemn for the rest of the day.

The murky clouds blocking the sky morphed together as she sat in the passenger seat. Her mother stared attentively at the road, careful not to acknowledge Amy's presence. The event coming up, her father's funeral to be exact, was tomorrow. She got her phone out of her pocket and scrolled through her notifications to pass the time. The car turned left into the parking lot of a Party City. Her mother cleared her throat. "Let's get this over with," she said. She walked out of the car and the humid air hit her skin. Amy involuntarily shuddered at the uncomfortable amount of moisture in the air. Inside, the building was the perfect temperature – not too hot, not too cold – matching Amy's exact body temperature. Natural light filled the store, and the air smelled of plastic packaging. Her mother dragged her to the area sectioned "black fabric." Shannon walked through the aisle, her fingertips grazing each cloth. She stopped at the lace and placed her hand over her mouth. She sniffled, her brown eyes contracted, filling with tears. "He loved Party City," she stuttered, words slurring together. Amy hovered over the scene for a few seconds, unsure of how to react. This was the first time she had ever seen her mother cry. When her father first died, Amy assumed her mother didn't care. It was awful, she was always detached, never showing any sorrow, but this sight was worse. She walked over to her, placing her hand gently on her back.

"This lace will make a beautiful veil," Amy said, hoping to distract her.

"Yes, it will." She looked at Amy with a sad smile. Shannon placed her cold hand on top of Amy's, keeping it there for a few seconds. She then cleared her throat and removed it. Her chest rose and fell as she took one last deep breath and stood up straight, composing herself.

"Let's go, no one should see us in this state." Shannon cleared her throat and faked a smile as another customer walked by.

Amy's stood still for a few seconds, staring at her mother who wouldn't return her gaze. She grabbed the lace and walked to the register.

Guests filled the cemetery, each sharing their condolences and offering casseroles. The sky's gloominess carried over from the day before, not a singular inch of blue sky. Shannon in her long black dress paired with a lace veil and gloves thanked everyone for coming. She carried a singular clean white tissue in her right hand. In the other hand, hidden under her glove, was another tissue: crumpled and mascara stained. Every now and then when no one was looking, she would remove the tissue from her glove, place it under her veil, and wipe her tears away. Amy, on the other hand, wore a knee-length dress curated for the occasion by her mother, her eyes were their usual dry. The priest spoke, signaling everyone to make their way over to the tent covering the Peters section of the cemetery. Everyone in the bloodline must be buried here, surrounded by family. Amy looked over to the wood polished casket, it was open. Her father was in a dashing navy suit, his favorite one. The one he wore the most to galas when they would sneak onto the patio together. On each side of the casket laid an assortment of white candles and roses. Then Amy's body became paralyzed. She heard the familiar sound of Tom's voice saying he was sorry. She turned around to see her mother thanking him, her hand patting his shoulder. Her heartbeat accelerated as her mouth fell agape. A soft melody played informing guests it was time to start the service, but Amy's heartbeat overpowered the music. She looked away towards the exit of the tent. Taking careful steps, she started walking towards it, not wanting to alarm anyone. Lost in the crowd of people heading inwards, she disguised herself. As soon as she reached the opening, she sprinted. It was only a mile run, so she knew she could make it to her house in 8 minutes. The adrenaline rush that tingled every part of her body cut this time down to 6 minutes. She arrived at her front door, her shaking hands struggled to place the key in its lock. Once the door opened, she sprinted up the spiral staircase of the foyer, two stairs at a time, to her room. Stopping for a minute to catch her breath, she grabbed the scissors on her desk. Her lungs stung; heavy wheezing replaced breathing. Amy entered her bathroom, a flash of lightning out her window catching her attention. She stood in front of the mirror and grabbed a fistful of her hair. *Snip*. A mix of purple and brown hair fell into the sink like snow. It was like an addiction, she couldn't stop. The more she cut, the freer she felt. It covered the sink, the floor, her hands. A single tear rolled down her cheek. She felt the teardrop with her fingertip as more started to fall. Soon, her eyes became misty, glossy, her vision became foggy. She blinked rapidly, the culmination of tears cascading down her face. They matched the rain that started to pour outside. She looked up at herself, her hair mostly gone. Some patches remained, but they consisted of uneven layers. Amy heard footsteps behind her, and Shannon's reflection appeared in the mirror.

“Why did you invite him?” Amy asked

“I thought you would want me to.”

“We broke up.”

“Oh, I didn’t know that. I feel like you never talk to me.” Shannon walked over to Amy and took the scissors out of her hand. She started picking up pieces of hair off the ground, transferring them to the trash can. “Your father would have enjoyed how you left his funeral. He was always sneaking you out of events, it was only right for you to sneak out of his.”

Amy let out a laugh, a genuine one. She joined her mother on the floor and started picking up pieces of hair. “I really miss him.”

“Me too.”

“I don’t blame you for what happened. I was being bitter; you didn’t deserve that,” Amy started cleaning up the sink.

“It’s okay, I have to admit that I wasn’t there for you after it all.” Amy looked at her mother, pieces of purple and brown scattered all over her black dress. She went back to helping, turning on the faucet in hopes that it would drain some hair. Shannon looked at Amy as she looked away, the two just missing each other’s gaze. She looked at Amy’s head full of odd patches, smiled, then returned to cleaning. The remainder of the bathroom was cleaned in silence, a comfortable silence.

SUN, CASSIE**Cassie Sun**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Marquette High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Judith Miller

Category: Short Story

Master

Henry Gordon Files, Head of the Division of Neuroscience at Stanford University, had a hypothesis. Now, this in itself was not new or surprising: Dr. Files had yet to achieve a Victor Frankenstein level of insanity, but between the clutter of suspicious-looking fluids he collected and his tendency to mutter incoherent phrases like “I swear to God if I could just crack open his scalp to take a look,” he was well on his way. His colleagues often wondered if Files himself ought to stick his brain under the collection of brain scanners he kept hidden in his lab.

Alas, in spite of his (slightly concerning) behaviors, Henry was not an evil man at heart; he was simply a man drunk on knowledge and the belief that his self-worth should be based on how much he could accomplish, a feature he’d inherited from his mom.

Other than that, Henry really was nothing out of the ordinary. It was a truth that, for a majority of his life, he had been content with. Only occasionally, on the lonely nights when the moon was dim and there was an uneasiness in the air did he let himself feel the full force of being simply mediocre. The thought tickled the back of his brain and settled there, a sort of background anxiety that he couldn’t seem to shake. It was one of these nights that left Henry lying in bed, eyes wide open thinking about all the things he *could* do to become *extraordinary*.

By the time morning came, Henry had been awake for six hours, and the whites of his eyes were tinted red from staring at the computer for so long. He’d composed a five-thousand-word research proposal on something far surpassing the threshold of *extraordinary*: a mind controller.

Well, partially. It was more an Electroencephalogram with built-in transcranial membrane stimulators that could dominate then influence emotion, but Henry preferred calling it The Files Mind Control Model Zero. He worked furiously, often going weeks without any social interaction until he finally figured out the math. The science was perfect; Files knew the quality of his work. The issue, then, was acquiring the funds to actually carry out the model.

Specifically, twenty-point-three-million dollars. He was finishing his pitch now in front of the Grant Committee, wringing his hands nervously as he waited for a response.

“Dr. Files,” a stout man cleared his throat. “You’ve contributed a significant amount of work to Stanford, and we are beyond grateful.”

Henry nodded, feeling himself relax, his mind drifting to state-of-the-art fMRIs and the new rTMS machine he’d been eyeing for the past few weeks.

“Unfortunately,” this time, a tall brunette spoke. She couldn’t have been over thirty, and it was with a conflicted look that she uttered the damning words. “This simply is too impractical for us to grant such a large sum of money.”

His mind emptied. *What?* For a second, all he could think to do was dropkick the EEG monitor beside him to ease the blinding rage and grief and realization that he was witnessing the end of his 37-year-career and there was not a thing he could do about it.

As the panel members filed out of the room, each taking special care to bestow him a pitying glance as if they themselves weren’t the ones who had spewed the poison that led to his demise, the young woman, the one they had entrusted to impart the dreadful news, walked to where he still sat, stunned.

“You know, there are other options.”

He looked up to see her staring at him, a nonchalant yet deliberate gleam in her eye.

“What?”

“I’m just saying, University funding isn’t the only way. I’m sorry we couldn’t give you the money today, but your research...it’s fascinating. I think it’s worth a shot.”

“Of course it’s worth something,” Henry snapped. He wasn’t normally this surly, but this woman was hardly in a position to decide the value of *his* work, especially after what she’d just put him through.

She shrugged. “I voted for you. Not that it means anything now, but, consider private funding. My brother, Timothee Lobbs, he’s got money pouring out of his ass and none of it’s going where it should.” She jotted down a string of numbers on a scratch piece of paper.

“Call him. If what you’re trying to do works, we’ll all benefit.” And with that she walked out the door, leaving a morose Henry staring at the numbers and muttering to himself once again.

Private funding? What a ludicrous thought.

Henry regarded private funding with a particular lot of disdain. It wasn’t that he had ever *been* privately funded or had a particularly unfavorable experience with it; rather, it was the thought of him, of his research being *indebted* to someone that was so distasteful. He shivered thinking of having to perpetually thank a haughty millionaire at every conference he attended.

“Private funding,” he breathed, and with a dignified *humph*, he tossed the paper into the garbage, muttering something about how it wasn’t even good enough to be recycled.

An hour later Henry Gordon Files had fished out the phone number (ignoring the strong scent of rot and the intense regret of *not* recycling earlier) and set up an appointment with billionaire Timothee Lobbs, who had just purchased his third island after selling his fourth artificial intelligence algorithm to Régini’s Center for the Brain.

Tim was a man of few words, and, to Henry’s astonishment, the embodiment of the phrase “money can’t buy happiness.” For Tim was gravely unhappy, this Henry could see from the moment Tim stepped in, clothed in disheartening shades of grey from head to toe.

Henry figured he would try to appear sane, at least for as long as he could, and stuck out a hand with a few mumbled pleasantries. Tim ignored him. Ignored his outstretched hand, and instead plopped himself in the creaky chair in the center, glancing around the lab and uttering his first words to Henry:

“Make me feel again.”

Yes, Henry could see it now. Indeed, Timothee Lobbs was a textbook case of depression. He reeked of it—of despondency and desolation and all the other words D-words that could describe the lack of emotion he felt.

It wasn’t simply the absence of joy, Henry understood. It was far deeper than that; it was *nothingness*, and Tim was not so much a whole, living person as he was a hollow shell, carelessly trifling with the world in a desperate attempt to *be* again.

Perhaps it was because Henry intimately understood the feeling that he nodded quickly gathering his notes to begin the revolutionary work of cultivating emotions in Tim.

He launched into action, throwing together an examination couch for Tim to lie on as he connected a dizzying number of cords and wires, whispering strings of incomprehensible formulas that, to a psychiatrist, might have been enough to send him to the nearest mental facility for observation. To Tim’s credit, he didn’t flinch and instead calmly stared up at the bright fluorescent lights adorning the ceiling. He didn’t speak to Henry, nor respond to Henry’s questions

the first time they were asked. And when he did respond, it was with an apathy that Henry found remarkably charming, leaving him to wonder whether like truly did call to like.

The machine sent out short bursts of electrical currents, Henry explained. Each current's frequency could be altered to stimulate a certain emotion by attaching to the appropriate neuron until Tim's brain could regulate emotions independently, a process that could take up to ten weeks.

At this, Tim blinked an eye open.

"Ten weeks?" he asked slowly.

Henry hastened to stick the electrodes on Tim, worried Tim would withdraw.

"Well, yes, I can only run one session a week one you with my other obligations, not to mention I only have one reenergizer for the model and they are quite pricy—"

"My court date is in four weeks," Tim closed his eyes once again.

"Court?" Henry suddenly felt nauseous. He nearly dropped the machine as he backed away slowly, eyeing the distance between him and the door. If it came to it, he decided, he would only grab the Model he cradled to his chest and his battered notebook on the countertop. He was still carefully evaluating whether his favorite electron microscope would be too heavy to sprint with when he remembered to ask what Tim was on trial for.

Tim frowned, slightly, and Henry readied himself to run. Murder, arson, kidnapping—whatever it was, Henry was far too morally resolute to help a criminal, even if his research depended on it.

"Divorce court."

Henry exhaled. Truthfully, he would've driven the getaway car in the crime of Tim's choice for the amount of funding he was receiving, but the words were reassuring nonetheless.

"If I don't win, I'll lose it all. I'll lose *her*."

"Who?"

"My daughter. They said...they said I had to prove I could be emotionally available for her."

Tim was deep in thought now, in a way that Henry had yet to see him in. His brows were furrowed, but his eyes clear, and this, Henry realized, this must have been Before Tim, and Henry could not repress the deep sorrow he felt for what depression had done to the boy.

It was what spurred him, what sent him deep into thought, rapidly scribbling out calculations to expedite their sessions. Henry could see in Tim's eyes that he loved his daughter very much, and he'd be damned if Tim didn't win the trial.

"Four weeks," Henry slammed down his pen, victorious. It would be grueling, and Henry would have to put a hiatus on the machine-learning algorithm he was building, but...this was *life*. And this excitement coursing through him, this sense of purpose; he could almost believe that this was what extraordinary felt like.

The moment the machine began running, Henry felt a chill run down his spine. Tim whipped his eyes open, and there were waves of fear and shock and awe, all ebbing and flowing to the quiet hum of the monitor.

Henry typed in a series of numbers in rapid succession and watched a thin blue line rise on the screen. *Joy; code 831*, read the key.

"Thank you," Tim whispered, and Henry felt something wet on his cheek, matching the cascade of tears streaming down Tim's face.

They sat in silence like this for an hour, then two. And Tim came back the day after, and the next week, and each time Tim walked out the door, promising to return, Henry thought he saw Tim's lips curve slightly, like the crescent of a moon, and dreamed of the day his smile glowed brighter than the stars.

There was only a week left before the trial when Henry felt a shift in Tom. It was abrupt, and though Henry had expected Tim to regain the confidence, the poise that he had lost, Tim had careened towards assuredness...perhaps too far. It was like Tim had become Jekyll and Hyde, and each session, Henry found himself wishing for Dr. Jekyll and getting Mr. Hyde.

There was a restlessness in the air that day that left Henry nervous, jittery. Tim was taking deep breaths before wearing the machinery, as he always did when he suddenly stopped.

"Could this machine...change my mind?"

Henry stopped idly staring at the computer.

"Hmm?"

"Could it control someone's mind?"

Henry chuckled, then realized Tim wasn't joking at all.

Oh. "Perhaps," he frowned, "but you would have to clip a Stimulator on the back of their head as well." He pulled out a thin black tube with microscopic grooves carved around its circumference, handing it to Tim.

"Why do you ask?"

Tim studied the device, biting his lip. "It's just...fascinating."

An uneasiness plagued Henry, but he ignored it, thinking that it was good that Tim had developed the capacity to find *anything* interesting again. They had been making steady progress, and the date of the court case was quickly approaching; Tim had grown increasingly intrigued by the Stimulator, frequently beseeching Henry to lecture on every little thing he knew of mind-control.

Tim had even begged Henry to try it on him, going as far as activating the Stimulator by attaching it to the back of his own head. This was lunacy, Henry thought. The Stimulator was only a fledging model he had been experimenting with before Tim came along; it had yet to be properly reviewed and he refused to risk his efforts with Tim with only two days left from the trial.

The morning of the trial marked forty-eight hours since Henry had last seen Tim, a bit of record in the weeks they'd been working together. Frowning, Henry adjusted his tie as he stepped into the Marshall County Court, searching for Tim.

There were whispers, he noticed as he stepped into the somber room. Whispers from at least four dozen people that echoed off the high ceilings. A little girl sat in the front row, carrying two broken crayons and a simple coloring sheet.

He took a seat on one of the endless tan benches, finally spotting Tim nervously jittering his leg beside a wealthy-looking group of men.

"We are here today," the judge began, "to issue judgment on custody of Miss Penelope Lobbs, daughter of Ms. Marianne Lobbs and Mr. Timothee Lobbs.

Henry watched the court unfold, a modicum of pride in his smile as Tim gave his testimony. He spoke of love, and heartbreak, and what it was to be a good father. He spoke about Penelope with pure adoration, and Henry was convinced that there was not a single person in the room who could not see that Tim would protect his daughter with everything that he had, and whatever he lacked, he would scour the ends of the Earth to obtain.

The Judge called for silence.

“I call this court to a conclusion with the decision to grant full custody of Miss Penelope Lobbs to Ms. Marianne Lobbs under the conviction that Mr. Timothee Lobbs has yet to complete full certification that he is mentally apt of caring for Miss Penelope Lobbs.”

Henry stilled. *What?*

It happened too fast. Henry looked over, and a stunned Tim was sitting in shock in one moment, then launching himself out of his seat in the next, swiping something small, something ebony from his pocket. He shoved the gentleman beside him off, barreling towards the Judge and slamming his hand against the back of the Judge’s scalp.

The Judge deflected, but Tim was too quick, his movements planned and precise. Another second passed and the Judge’s eyes had glossed over, his hands falling weakly to his sides. Henry rose, horror rising like bile in his throat as he realized what Tim was doing. *The Stimulator.*

He tore through the crowd of people staring intently at the scene, watching helplessly as Tim grabbed the Judge’s face in both hands, his gaze wholly focused on the Judge’s.

“I grant...custody...to Mr. Timothee Lobbs,” the Judge gasped out. A flurry of outcries exploded in the courtroom.

“No!” Henry shouted, “Timothee stop!”

His voice was drowned out by the chaos of the courtroom.

“Timothee, look at me,” he breathed, tugging Tim’s face towards his. “Don’t do this. Please, Tim. It’ll hurt you. It’ll hurt him.”

Tim’s eyes were ablaze with anger, and Henry fought his instinct to run.

“Okay,” Tim conceded. “I’ll stop this. I won’t hurt him.”

Henry nodded slowly, relief clear in his eyes as he pulled Tim into a tight embrace. Tim softened in his arms, letting himself wrap around Henry.

Henry closed his eyes, and that’s when he felt it. A stinging burn on his neck, bursting through his skin in an explosive shock down his spine.

“I’m sorry,” Tim whispered. “I’m so sorry, but I have to have her.”

Henry opened his eyes.

“Yes,” he said, thickly. “Yes, master.”

TIGGARD, SKYLAR**Skylar Tiggard**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Jason Lovera

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Unbury Your Gays

When I was younger, I didn't know what I wanted to be, but I knew I wanted to change the world. All I had to do was open a book to fall into the world of Tanya who could see evil fairies or Luke defeating the population police. These kids were only a few years older than I was, and if they could shape the world, then so would I.

But as I grew older, books changed. Heroes weren't just battling evil demons or sneaking through haunted mansions; they were falling in love with boys as I was beginning to realize I had no interest in them. While Triss was kissing Four over a post-apocalyptic Chicago, I was hiding in the basement of a New Year's party having my first kiss with a girl. As I grew into my sexuality, it became harder to see myself in the heroes I read about.

I scoured Goodreads for books about lesbians only to find myself with a limited list of books, many of which about young women being shamed and even assaulted for falling in love. I soon became very familiar with the trope "Bury your Gays" in which all LGBT characters are killed off by the end of the story. By nature of these books being the primary representation of lesbians available, I was reminded that my existence to the world is defined by otherness—that straight characters are allowed to fight evil armies, travel between worlds, and save lives while all a lesbian can be is a victim.

Frustrated, I began talking with my school's librarians about my inability to find adventure books with lesbian protagonists. I showed them my list only to find that my school library, much like my local library, didn't have any of them. That was when she recommended *Labyrinth Lost*. The summary of the book advertised witches travelling to the world of the dead. It said nothing about the main character being bisexual or the eventual relationship she ends up in with a girl. This book, with all its magic and supernatural adventure, was sitting on its shelf this entire time and I had no idea. Then, one of the librarians suggested starting an LGBT section in the library. Every book with an LGBT protagonist was marked with a rainbow sticker and put on a shelf marked with an LGBT sign. They took my Goodreads list and began buying more books to add to the section. It now spans two rows and it's still growing.

While the new section of our school's library benefited readers, I realized that whether it's books, television, or radio, censorship of gay people seems universal. That's when I realized that at the root of all of my feelings surrounding representation was a sense of loneliness. Being unlike my family, teachers, and friends combined with not seeing characters, celebrities, or musicians that reflected my experience felt isolating. Even if I was able to regain my escape through books, I wasn't helping myself or anyone else who wanted real people to talk to. What was really needed was a place where we could feel normal. I began working with my counselor and my English teacher to start a GSA at my school. I'm excited to start something that not only benefits me, but can make others like me feel as though they have a place to belong.

I've learned that the real world is a lot bigger than 350 pages and that any individual's actions are smaller among a world of more than 7 billion people than they are in a curated cast of 20 characters. As a child, I wanted to grow up to have an impact on the world, and while adding books to a library and starting a school club may not change the world, they impact my world, the world of my peers, and of future students. I am satisfied to know that I took concrete action just like the heroes of my stories, and I look forward to the challenges that come.

TURNER, REMINGTIN**Remingtin Turner**

Age: 13, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Erin Tegtmeier

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Going Under**Going Under**

My alarm goes off at 5:30 in the morning. Every. Single. Morning. I roll around, asking myself *Will today be easier?* But the part that doesn't get easier to grasp is the fact that nobody knows the pain. Nobody knows that it gets easier every day to fake the smile I continue to put on, to make other people happy. Do I hide it well? I couldn't tell you right now, but what I can tell you is that it seems to be working.

Society expects us to speak up when we are struggling, and that we are never alone. But is it really that easy to show how "weak" I feel like I truly am? Don't get me wrong, I have amazing friends and a family I am very thankful for, but sometimes I feel more alone than ever. And honestly, it's tearing me apart. In sixth grade, I got voted "Most Likely to be a Stand Up Comedian", but is the laugh ALWAYS real? I love a good laugh, but it can't cover up the fight that I've fought. But no one would ever know. Why does it have to be this way? Well, society also tries to cover up the fact that people with straight A's, a close family, and a stable life can still be living a nightmare...one that I can't wake up from.

In my life, I never really struggled with my mental health. I never fought a battle that I knew I had absolutely no chance of winning. But at times, life can be so draining. Balancing school, sports, relationships, and a social life can take everything you have out of you so quickly. Do I enjoy the rush? Yes, I do. But what I don't enjoy is late at night realizing I have to do it all over again. Once again, nobody knows. Nobody knows that I feel this way. I don't want to open up about it because to me, it isn't a big deal. But if anyone else was going through it, I would drop everything to help them. Putting others first is something that I take seriously, but eventually, it comes to a point that it overflows.

When I can't put my feelings into words, the only visual I have to explain it is gasping for air, praying for a break. It will get better, I know it will, and that's why I'm here to make it clear that you NEVER know what someone is dealing with. What someone who you walk next to in the hallway every day with, cracking jokes, is actually going through behind the scenes. No matter how close you may be with them, everyone is fighting his or her own battle. Silent or heard, it is there, living with them.

The stigma will be broken. The silenced ones will be heard. And it starts with me, someone no one would expect to talk about it. I am not perfect, but I was put here for a reason. And so was every single person on this planet, but what I do know is no one was put on this Earth to be silent about the overwhelming world we live in. Although I have a feeling that I'm going under, all I know is that I'll make it out alive.

TUTEUR, JACOB**Jacob Tuteur**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Shannon Koropchak

Category: Short Story

The Unfamiliar Doorknob

It was a frigid, yet eerily sunny, winter afternoon. With my gaze directed toward the floor, I entered the bare house and proceeded directly to my room as usual. I removed a hand from the pocket of my ripped, oversized hoodie. While opening the door, I froze like a statue under the doorframe. The doorknob felt different. I could tell immediately. I looked down at it as if it miraculously had pulsed. I tried withdrawing my hand and grabbing it again and again, but it still felt different. Its dull edges fit my hand awkwardly. Each time the cold, metal knob met my palm, it sent a slight chill through my fingers. Everything seemed to revolve around this doorknob. The space felt so still around me. The sensation was odd.

I couldn't make out what exactly had caused it, however. Was it the size? Had it been this large before? Was it something about the texture? I couldn't decide whether it previously had been smoother or rougher. Or had it actually been smaller before? I eventually returned my hand to the pocket of my ripped, oversized hoodie and inspected it more closely. Was it this shade of silver before? Was it previously even silver? I swore that it was gold. Or maybe it was black? Had it even changed at all? Had I imagined it all? My mind felt like a busy intersection at which cars were zipping past each other at 60 miles per hour.

Deep in thought, I continued my after-school routine. I walked across the nearly pitch-black room, tossed my backpack down in the usual dusty corner, and turned on the desk lamp. Its paint was beginning to wear away. Although a single window lay just above the desk, little light was able to infiltrate it, leaving the lamp and the old ceiling fixture, resembling the solar system, as the only sources of light. I much preferred the gentle, dim light of the lamp to the piercing light of the solar system fixture. However, I wished that I did not need the light to be able to see my work. I wished that I could paint in the natural, dark coziness of the room.

I grabbed my brush and stirred it around in the cloudy cup of water that already lay beside my desk. I let out a relaxed exhale. The desk itself was a bit rickety, but I loved it nonetheless. My knees pressed against its bottom. My father built it for me as a Christmas gift just before his passing. I had asked for one for several years, so that I no longer had to paint on the floor.

I love painting. There are no boundaries in which you must stay, no rules that must be followed, no standards that must be met. You don't have to overthink anything or interact with anyone or make sure you don't flub your words. You can just let your imagination run wild. You can be at peace. You have total control. Everything goes exactly as you wish.

But even as I stroked the paper with the brush that day, even with the music flowing from my headphones, I couldn't help but feel the presence of the doorknob behind me. From time to time, I even would look back at it as if I was trying to catch it moving or somehow changing. I never was successful. The doorknob was too elusive. After hours of painting and glancing over my shoulder, I hoped that sleep would remedy my vigilance. But even as I lay in bed, with my legs sticking out from the other side, I would find myself opening my eyes and peering through the darkness in the direction of the door.

I don't recall falling asleep, but I must have at some point, as I woke up the next morning with a peculiar tingling sensation on my face. As I sat up in my bed, a hazy stream of light washed over my eyes. It nearly knocked me down onto my back. I blocked it with one hand and rubbed my eyes with the other. Once my surroundings became clear, I traced the light back to its source: the window just above my desk. I furrowed my brow in confusion. Never

had this much light passed through it before. I drew closer to inspect. As I neared, the stillness intensified. Surely, the window must have grown larger. Or maybe the window had shifted along the wall? But the direction toward which it shifted was unclear. It seemed possible that it could have moved in any direction. I remembered the window as just a regular, rectangular window, but maybe it hadn't been. What shape would it have been before, then? A triangle? A circle? Do non-rectangular windows even exist?

From then on, the entire room felt different. The light polluted the cozy darkness that I enjoyed so much. The desk lamp's dimness stood no chance against the intense window-light. The air now was stagnant, dry, and lifeless. It gave the entire room a tenseness that it previously did not have. I felt as if someone, anyone, could come up to the window and peer through it to spy on me and my canvas. With every stroke of the paintbrush, I was reminded of the window's mysterious presence. I anticipated a pair of glaring eyes to appear and look down on me, although I knew that they would never come.

The sense of stillness recurred over the following days. One night before bed, I ambled down the hallway to the bathroom. As soon as my foot touched the cracked bathroom tiles, I felt a tenseness rush up my legs. I looked down for a moment. The familiar thoughts of uncertainty infested my head. The cracks seemed both numerous and scarce. The tiles appeared both too large and too small. I rushed back to my room without showering for the night. Similarly, one afternoon, having returned home from a draining day of school, I trudged through the creaky front door in need of a lengthy painting session. I barely could take two steps into the house before an infectious wave of still air washed over me. The striped carpet beneath me, which long had spanned the floor of the foyer, now seemed foreign. Trekking across it felt sickeningly awkward. Thereafter, I always entered the house through the backdoor.

I began to confine myself to my desk when not at school. It never made me feel disoriented. It never made me feel heavy in my chest. It never made me feel like I had lost a battle. It was the only part of the house that I could trust. In fact, it was the only part of *my life* that I could trust.

This turmoil did not discourage me from painting. In fact, I painted much more during this period than ever before. Passion exuded from each brushstroke. The music from my headphones blared. My canvas was one of the few things that had remained constant in such an inconstant time.

One day, I swiftly returned to my room with a fresh cup of water to wash off my brush. It had been weeks since I had last refilled it. My eyes flitted across the room as I stiffly shuffled over to my work. I sat down in the creaky chair. I reached for my brush, but snatched back my hand midway. It hit me. Even with the recent slew of changes, it still caught me off-guard: the desk had changed. I dropped my brush. Like all of the other changes, I could not identify the exact differences. But this change hit me in a different manner than all the others. In addition to the usual stillness that accompanied such a change, I felt my heart tighten. Suddenly, I looked around to see that nothing appeared remotely familiar. The coarse, wooden floorboards at my feet made the hair on my shins and forearms rise. The solar system light made my breaths increasingly shallow and quick. The jet black paint on the walls caused my palms to become clammy. At last, my attention returned to the canvas. I could not look at it without a stream of discomfort coursing through my veins.

I jumped to my feet and scrambled to gather my brush, palette, and water cup. I nearly knocked over the desk in the process. With my hands full, I hobbled across the room straight to the closet-door. Drops of paint and water splashed in my trail. With my free fingers, I struggled to turn the knob. The sweat on my fingertips prevented me from getting a good grip. As time passed, my heart became increasingly dense. I felt as though I was being chased by a monster in a horror movie, and the closet door was the only thing to protect me from its wrath. Finally, I managed to crack open the door, slamming it shut behind me with my remaining strength. Once inside, I forcefully clutched my supplies as I slumped along the back wall of the cramped space. I tried swirling around the brush in the water cup, yet my body's convulsions persisted at the thought of what awaited me beyond the closet door. I then blindly dipped the brush into the paint remaining on the palette and hastily stroked myself with it amidst the darkness. The cold layer of paint felt like a suit of armor. I uttered a shaky sigh. I felt protected by my solitude. I could not discern whether my tears were those of relief or fear.

So, I sit here shrouded in darkness, watery-eyed, brushing my entire body. I must make sure that no parts go uncovered.

WALDRON, FINNIAN**Finnian Waldron**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Barstow School, Kansas City, MO

Educator: Marina Ganter

Category: Poetry

Gift**Gift**

Of long-expected sunsets and mornings come too soon,
Of woodsmoke afternoons beneath autumn's golden sky,
Of oft-remembered places old enough to be renewed,
Of the doves' nest above the door.

Of ne'er abetting sunlight seething scorn upon the yard,
Of thorny creek-side childhoods written in calloused fingers,
Of manufactured history, and the pride to keep us humble,
Of music in the hills of an old midwestern farm, lit at dusk with fireflies.
Of little bits of coal.

If understory trees can grow beneath the shade,
If the bones of ancient bison can feed the red-tailed hawk,
If every bit of genius can be happy in oblivion.

If I could balance all I am with everything I'm not,
If I could make amends
Of what was and what might be, then I can give back
 all you've given me.

WEITZ, ETHAN**Ethan Weitz**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

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

Educator: Marilyn Yung

Category: Poetry

In A Galaxy Far, Far Away, There Is A Boy**In a Galaxy Far, Far, Away, There is a Boy**

In a galaxy far, far away
With the trees that fall with no one to hear them
There is a boy
He who has found an empty corner behind a pinball machine
Trapped between a heart and a hard place
In a galaxy far, far away
Magic dances with the child
In the mind that stamps a river with a face and a name
There is a boy
He holds The Everything in his tired expanse
Excited to treat his friend Death to lunch
In a galaxy far, far away
He runs along the mossy stones which are, in secret, in love with him
In love with a knight and a magician, with a god and a fish
There is a boy
He hides behind Death like she's camouflage
He's lost a game of chess to the cards in his pocket
And in a way, it did him a favor.
In a galaxy far, far away
There was a boy

**Something You Should Know
(Inspired by Clint Smith)**

Something you should know
is that as a kid, I spent my time in the water.

I swam the lengths of the rivers, oceans, and lakes I could dip my toes in.
Once, I observed a lonely mollusk in the sand, still,
As to be unseen from the world around him.
When my fingers brushed his shell from above, he did not flee.
He introduced his tongue to my touch, as if to seek my identity.
This left me in awe of his willingness to explore, at the chance of his own demise.
Perhaps that is when I turned my gaze to my own ocean.
Perhaps that is why, even now, I have never minded to seek familiarity in the unknown.
In this world, I do not flinch for a hand that tries to grace my shell, for I am just
A clam in an infinite ocean, a universe of blue, and I
Shall never run from the bigger fish, for it may just be a child eager to discover,
Just as I was.

**My Father is a Broken Drum
(Inspired by Metaphor Dice)**

My father is a broken drum
Whose heart beat one too many times
And his promised rhythm has run dry
His springs have sprung
His sticks have cracked
And he sits in the corner, collecting dust
My father is a broken drum
I see worn photos where his ring was not yet echoed
Where his snare was not yet snarl
Where his bass was not yet busted
And I used to hold him in my tiny hands
When his beat was still for them to play
My father is a broken drum
Desperately played by the hands that aren't so tiny anymore
Desperately rung into the bonfire I made by myself
Desperately thrown into the air
As if somehow the wind will fix it
And it strikes to my step once more
My father is a broken drum
And I am a roll of tape
And I am a tube of glue
And I am a set of brand new springs
And I am the hands that throw it all together
And you can only imagine the disappointment after it still lies splintered
My father is a broken drum
That I wish was fixed

And the only thing I wish to hear from it
 And the only thing I wish to hear from him
 Are four simple beats
 "I'm proud of you".

Apology To The Moon

We used to talk every night
 When the streetlights would buzz in discord
 And the seasons would change outside that awful, awful place
 You used to hold me in the light you reflect
 Unlike those around me
 It felt good to be seen, looking into your eyes
 It felt good to expel the pain from my lips
 You were a jar in the sky
 Filled to the brim with the pieces of my broken heart
 And sealed with a lid so tight no one could open it
 As I got older, we stopped having those long conversations
 Those silent pleasantries in your pale grin empty in my ears
 You almost had a voice as you whispered "*ok, yes, alright*"
 And I almost had a voice as I thought "*thank you, Moon*"
 Every day we talked a little less
 Like an old friend you see sometimes on Facebook
 And every once in a while I pop up in your inbox
 Saying
 "*I'm sorry I left*"
 And you respond with
 "*That's ok. How have you been?*"

The Child Which Has Been Foretold

Dance, child
 For the stream has missed you
 Sing, child
 For the gods have kissed you
 Dance barefoot in the mud
 Until the bullfrogs dismiss you
 Sing gaily to the clouds
 Until your sister joins you
 Wave your sticks and flash a smile
 Show your war-torn face
 Hug the blades that tried to stab you
 And put them in their place
 And when you're lost
 And all alone
 Just climb those trees

And follow those bees
As they will always guide you
Home.

WHITEFORD, PATRICK**Patrick Whiteford**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: James Lewis

Category: Flash Fiction

WILDFLOWER LN

WILDFLOWER LN

It took every ounce of effort to start the car. My vision quickly fixed on the rearview mirror and the empty garage it reflected, an unnecessary exercise as I returned to peering through the dark and empty street. My eyelids fluttered closed as I ran my thumb on the rim of the imitation leather covering the steering wheel, noticing for the first time a small crack placed on the very top. The trickling of light returned to my perception, introducing again this uninviting road, and I felt my finger stall, my restless leg suddenly stop in its tracks, my every action slow to a dreadful crawl as this singular, stupid, goddamn street consumed my mind.

My eyes drifted slowly until I reached the lone visible streetlight, dimly illuminating a rusty, pale green rectangular street sign containing the bold white letters *WILDFLOWER LN*. I let out a forceful exhale, briefly sparking a realization that I'd been holding my breath before I returned my focus to the whimsical name. A weak smile formed on my lips as my back relaxed and I absorbed the absurdity of being so terrified of something called *Wildflower Lane*.

I closed my eyes again, returning to the first time I read that name. It was back in mid July, two years back, and you would definitely know it from the striking heat. I was so excited for some reason. There was not a single weed, much less a wildflower, on any of the perfectly maintained lawns surrounding the sign, but to me, the place might as well have been coated in the most beautiful variety of flowers imaginable. Why was I so excited? I remember humming the entire car ride over, leaning my head on his shoulder as I talked non stop about how excited I was to finally see his place.

A jolt ran through my spine as he permeated my memories when suddenly I heard him slam from the front door. He looked almost unrecognizable from that car ride. His face, that face I had spent countless painful nights studying with what little light was at my disposal, was scrunched up to a scowl that I was all too familiar with, and I knew what was coming.

He began to shout, but I couldn't devote anything to comprehending him. My fingers dashed to lock the car as every bit of tension overtook my body. I saw the spittle flying from his mouth, the violent gestures pointing in every direction, but his words were indistinguishable; the only thing I could recognize was the unadulterated fury consuming his every impulse. I felt my breath pick up as I was overwhelmed not by a shock of this moment, but a shock of the numbness that I feel looking at this picture. I checked my rearview mirror again, finding no change, but searching desperately for something, anything that could divide my attention. I couldn't hear that voice without summoning his snide, restrained comments leading up to this, his pitiful, begging apologies that would follow it, his sweet nothings that seem so utterly divorced from the reality I was losing the will to look away from.

My eyes flicked from the mirror as I made direct eye contact with him. An empty glass bottle slipped from his hands, bouncing harmlessly on the grass below. His brows slightly softened. I saw his eyes well up, further dampening his already drool covered face. Although he looked more distorted than before it was suddenly incredibly difficult to not really see him. To see the man who never seemed to forget a thing I told him, the man whose music taste I basically adopted. Every smile, every laugh, every night I spent sleeping happily beside him, danced in my mind, taunting me for what else stuck in my mind: the fear, the conflict, the pacing relentlessly around the house clutching my phone but unable to dial a single digit of anyone I knew.

I remembered wishing so hard that he would be something else. That I could wake up one day and I would realize he was secretly a vengeful robot sent from some alien species to destroy me, and I could hop in this car and drive as fast as I could down Wildflower Lane and never come back. But that never happened. And then I would look into his eyes and I would see it. Love. Demented, distorted, terrifying love. It shouldn't change anything. This *thing* I continued to make unbreaking eye contact with is inside of that same person who charmed my parents, who talked at length with all my friends, whose house I wake up in every day. It's more than inside of him, it is him.

My hand latched on the gear stick, squeezing as hard as I possibly could for dear life. But it didn't move an inch. He looked down at the ground, picking up the bottle he dropped and putting it to his lips, trying his best to extract any liquid that might be left to no avail.

My hand collapsed. I closed my eyes and screamed, as loudly and piercingly as I possibly could, suddenly shocked by the first noise to come from within this car. My head laid back on the remarkably uncomfortable headrest and I sighed, imperceptible to my ears after the previous sound. I continued to look perfectly straight as my hand drifted towards the unlocking mechanism. I placed my finger on the button. It felt perfectly smooth and surprisingly cold.

My finger remained unmoving for minutes. Eventually I removed my hand to run my fingers through my hair, and the weariness from a late night set in. My eyes closed. I continued to hear his voice, making demands, accusations, or pleas, but my eyes stayed steadfastly closed. The door remained locked the rest of the night, which I spent in this car.

Eventually, I fall asleep, and start dreaming of a meadow completely covered in wildflowers. Real ones.

WILLIAMS, CHAUNTELL**Chauntell Williams**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

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

Educator: Ben Bullington

Category: Short Story

Writer

Name: Chauntell Williams TITLE: OBSIDIAN: Era of DEMOROC-PART 1 Date: Dec 12, 2021

HOUR: 2nd

Teacher: Mr. Bullington

Chapter 1: VEMORICA

As I'm peacefully sleeping, I can feel something lick my face. When I open my eyes, I see my dog Pibb smiling and panting, followed by happy barking. I sigh and smile as I manage to lift myself out of bed. I turn behind me and grab my phone off my pillow. When I turn back around, Pibb already has my clothes all laid out for me. "Good job, Pibb!" I say in a sweet tone as I ruffled his fur. He then scurries out of my room. I then get dressed for school. As I finish getting dressed, I look over myself in the mirror. 'Black jeans, black shoes, black hoodie. Simple and lowkey. No one will notice me. Perfect.' I thought to myself. Picking up my backpack, I look over at Mr. Ping's picture sitting pearchly on my desk. I laugh to myself as I can imagine what he would say. 'C'mon, bumbles, wear some color!'. I can feel that old fart's ghost hovering over me as we speak.

I miss him.

I then get ready to leave, but before I could head out the door, Pibb stops me at the doorway.

"What? What's wrong?" I ask. Pibb then heads to the table in the living room. I follow him, knowing now what he was trying to tell me....

I stare at the metal collar. Its red light staring right back at me. Taunting me. Pibb then jumps onto the table and nudges it towards me. "No, Pibb! I am NOT some kind of monster! I can control my element on my own! I don't care if people are afraid of me! I'm not wearing that thing!", I huff angrily as I cross my arms. Pibb tilts his head and scoots the collar further towards me. I really didn't want to put it on. Not because it weakens my powers. But for one day, I just wanted to be normal. To not have that thing around my neck. But of course, I cave in and put it on because if I don't, I could get arrested. Or worse.

The cold metal wraps around my neck as I can feel the locks tightening. "There. Happy?" I say to Pibb as he smirks a bit and tilts his head towards the door. I then head out to my bus who pulled up just in time. Looking back at Pibb, I wave to him and in response, he barks and wags his tail.

As I step onto the bus and sit in a seat, I can see the nature clan kids clutching their roots, the soul clan kids stared at me with looks of pure hatred, and the diamond clan can't even see me so I'm not too worried about them. Well except for one little girl. I think her name is TinTin. I know that she is blind but she always looks directly at me and smiles. As if she senses my presence or something. All I know is that we have something in common. We both have to wear these stupid collars. There only for those who "can't control their elements". In other words, it's for those who are considered a threat. I can't even begin to imagine what kind of damage TinTin could bring besides being the smartest person at our school. She is so small and frail, I don't see how she's a threat to anyone. But I can't help but feel....connected to her...

Maybe it's because we're the only ones who have to wear these. Or the fact that were outcasted by everyone and everything. Even though I've never said a single word to her in my life, I feel like we know each other all too well. I look over in her direction. She then looks at me and smiles again but her smile quickly fades as she looks out of my window. As the bus abruptly stops, I quickly turn around.

There are monsters everywhere....

Chapter 2: TinTin

Tick. Tick. Tick. DING!

'Time to get up. Today will be an eventful day.'

Seeing that I'm already dressed for today I head downstairs. Mother and Father are meditating as usual. I see my collar waiting for me on the kitchen table. I'm quite tempted not to wear that wretched thing but if I don't, Vemorica will not see it and our connection will not grow. And I won't be able to do what I need to do. And I've seen every

i cant help but stare at her and her bright red hair. Her eyes a light golden brown. ‘She intrigues me more than she should. So mysterious yet i’m hesitant to talk to her. Since shes literally an outcast, it may bring my popularity down, therefore losing my chance for winning that moddling spot for DEMTECH. As much as i want to talk to her, i simply cant. But man oh man, i am tempted every single day’. Putting away that thought, i take my earbuds and phone out of my pocket and began to play some music.

A few moments later, the bus stops abruptly and i can see everyone standing and everyone looking out of the windows. ‘What the hell IS THAT?!’ i shout as i see monsters runnings around outside and rampaging the city. I knew i shouldve walked to school instead.

Chapter 4: SEV AND BONG

SEVS POV:

Yes! After endless weeks of pleading, Bong finally agreed to ride the bus with me! Trust me, i know she probably said yes so i could stop asking her but i’m happy anyways!

Plus, i worry for her walking alone. I know she hates it when i worry, but i cant help it. I care for her alot.

As were standing on the bus stop, i can tell something is different about her today. “Hey, Bong you ok? Your not talking as much.” I ask. She then turns to me. “I’m fine Sev. Stop worrying.” She says very bluntly. I just smile at her sweetly to assure her. She then slightly smirks but when she sees that i notice it, she quickly turns away and looks down at the ground. Her poker face is back again. Even in this moment, waiting on the bus. I cant help but stare at her. Shes just so beautiful!

BONG’S POV:

Finally! Now he can shut up already! Hes a persistent bastard, ill give you that.

Well i do get it somehow. He worries about me alot. Honestly, i don’t really mind hime worrying about me, but trust me, i will never let him know that. After a while, i can feel that hes staring at me again. What a drag. I pick up heard and look forward. “Sev, weve talked about this. Quit staring at me.” He then chuckles nervously and scratching his kneck. “Ahhh sorry about that Bong.” As he says this, the bus pull up and we get on it. As we head to our seats in the middle, i really want to restrain fron thanking him so he wont get any ideas but something is compelling me too. I then look at Sev. he notices me looking at him and turns completely around from the window. “Hey whats up? He asks me. “Thanks.” i say , trying to sound as monotone as possible.

He looks even happier and hugs me tightly. I actual enjoy if for 4 seconds and then i push him away. “Ok oknow get off of me.” He scoots away quickly but i can imagine that hes cheesing from ear to ear. As the bus is moving along i can see that girl Bong sitting a few seats in front of me. She has to wear that collar. Luckily, no one even knows that i am also apart of the fire clan. Ive mastered my powers enough to cloak it and fool people thinking i’m apart of the nature clan. Which is why Sev, my only friend, is the only one who know about my true clan.

NARRATOR’S POV:

As the bus comes to an abrupt stop, Sevs looks out the widow and not soon after, immediately taps Bong on the shoulder. “OMG! Bong! Look outside! Theres these things everywhere! And there messing up the city!” As soon as he says this, Bong immediately looks out the window as they both watch a building being destroyed.

BOTH POV:

‘Holy shit.’

YANAGIMOTO, LILLIAN**Lillian Yanagimoto**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Annelyse Gelman

Category: Poetry

Leda and the Swan

I have no fear of birds, only men
who act like them. Once father came
home late with his face cut
old and blue by the front door's
slanted shadow, mother
didn't want his bright eyes anymore,
his twitchy walk, his love
for fish. March, when he tried to fly
and failed, we moved
away; I learned the difference
between *inevitable* and *sad*,
which goes on farther
than you'd think. I learned
that when a swan tumbles
towards your lap, you test
the heartbeat under his puffed chest,
you find the vein
of light screwed through his eye,
make sure he's not moving
like a man, but when it happened
it was morning
in a new town, he was soft,
his twitching body limp,
so I didn't think to look—instead
I slept, and woke
to find his swan-skin peeled,
white feathers sloughed
across the couch. Between my hips:

the warned-of ache, throbbing

like a star. Late that night,
he passed by, beaming.

YANAGIMOTO, LILLIAN**Lillian Yanagimoto**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Steven Espada Dawson

Category: Poetry

The Conversion of Augustine

Outside, the pool clots. Beneath
my window: persimmon's
cobble arm, weak

with bruised fruit. Curling
on that black limb: my second
linen shift, still

gripped with salt
from last week's bath—
the week when I was ill

and did not want to see
myself. Days passed
without prayer or easy sleep;

I was a relic under bed-sheets,
white homunculus, sunken
like a river-bed. Sometimes

my hands were blue.
Sometimes I rested at a slant
to keep the food back.

When birds crossed
my window, darts across
the tight cold frame—

I wanted to throw myself
towards them. Weight,
the only difference

between my body
and that sky.
And suddenly an opening.

YANAGIMOTO, LILLIAN**Lillian Yanagimoto**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Shannon Koropchak

Category: Short Story

On Display

8/13/2019

1:16 p.m.

[0:01] . . . *Yeah, it's recording now, we can start. So, first of all, thank you for agreeing to an interview.*

[0:06] *Of course.*

[0:07] *This is, as you know, for an article about the Bernhill exhibit. I want to ask you some questions about Bernhill, and get your thoughts on a couple of his pieces, things like that—it shouldn't take too long.*

[0:18] *Of course, yeah. Happy to talk with you.*

[0:21] *I was also hoping . . . I heard that you—the St. Louis Art Museum, rather—acquired Bernhill's Red Portrait recently.*

[0:28] *Yes, that's right.*

[0:30] *Is that going to be on display?*

[0:32] *I . . . we're not sure. I don't think so. There's been some debate about it.*

*

We're sitting on the floor of your dorm room, drawing. Or I'm trying to draw and you're trying to watch: my sketchbook is balanced in my lap and I've bowed my head to block your view.

Last week, we had a four-hour class with a live model. You slouched on a stool in front of me, head swiveling between the model and your sketch, thin hands oily with charcoal. When you paused to push your curls out of the way, you left a dark smear across your forehead. I could see the shadows of your tendons, the thin greenish vein skirting your wrist-bone. I'd been wiping my own indelicate hands off every fifteen minutes, but my palms were still clammy with sweat.

We compared our drawings afterwards. You rendered the model beautifully: the shadow of her hip-bone, the light catching underneath her jaw—depth and proportion, all of it. Deliberate, nuanced. It was much better than mine. But you said mine was nice. You said you liked the way I'd done the face—her expression, questioning, expectant. We tried to ignore the rest of my drawing: blocky and narrow, an awkward pale figure half-smudged in charcoal. My approximation of a woman, my best guess. It was embarrassing.

“What are you drawing?” you say.

Now that you've asked, I have to show you. I lean back, give the sketchbook a little push. It tumbles off my lap and onto the carpet; you pull it towards yourself and squint at the page, eyebrows lifting.

It's full of women. Most of them are posed awkwardly, hands at their collarbones or on their hips. They're faceless, and not wearing much. In my defense, I'm trying to figure out how their bodies work. How do you draw them and make them look real?

Your eyes drift over the page; they snag on a woman half-draped in cloth, her arms in the air, and your forehead creases. It's not good, is it? You don't like them. They're stiff, strange—torsos too small, necks too long. I wait for a moment while you pick them apart.

"So?" I ask. "What do you think? I'm not working from reference right now, so they're all—they might be bad." Might be: that's me, being kind to myself. And working without reference isn't much of an excuse—last week's class is proof of that.

You start to frown, and draw your bottom lip between your teeth, briefly. Yesterday you complained about an ulcer budding there. "I think they look nice," you say.

You're never honest with me. You try to say something polite every time.

*

[0:37] *Oh. Well, I guess . . . I'll get back to that in a moment. How about you start off by telling me a little bit about Bernhill? His style, body of work, things like that?*

[0:48] *Sure. Glenn Bernhill was born in St. Louis in 1973, and, as you know, passed away in 2015. He's not, for his generation of artists, incredibly prominent, but his work has been well-received by critics. He enjoyed—how can I say—he enjoyed creating shape and then interrupting it, if that makes sense?*

[1:10] *Mm.*

[1:11] *For example—in earlier work, you see that he fastens fishing nets, plastic, rope, or even barbed-wire fencing to his canvasses, over these beautiful arrangements of shape. In later work, that interruption—the interruption of shape with industrial elements—becomes more subtle.*

[1:22] *Sure.*

[1:23] *So I have—pulled up here, some images? If you want to take a look at this one, it's titled Collage 12: Patina—*

[1:30] *From . . . can you clarify the date?*

[1:33] *2010. And I'll email these to you as well.*

[1:37] *Thanks.*

[1:38] *Of course. Notice that the paint's been scraped off with something. There are traces of rust on this canvas, though the average viewer is not going to notice that . . . you don't need to lean in, you really can't see it on the screen.*

[2:00] *Oh. Haha.*

[2:03] *So basically what we have, here, is evidence that some old metal thing has been used to remove paint, but we don't see the thing itself. Which is classic Bernhill—simple, but very deliberate.*

[2:15] *Got it. And this is in the museum's collection, correct?*

[2:19] *Yes. We purchased it at auction for \$6.2 million in 2018.*

*

You were the one with the vision and the talent. It stings, sometimes, but I've tried to be happy for you. The only thing I turned out better at is faces, portraits. I never told you, back then, how I felt about yours. Maybe I should have warned you—don't pursue it! Stick with what you're good at, which is everything else! I flew down to St. Louis see an exhibit of yours in 2006, a series of portraits, after I read about it online.

It was what I had expected. Your portraits were flat. Whatever lives behind a person's eyes was, behind theirs, half-asleep or dead. This is what I wrote in my critique of your exhibit. Unresponsive, I said. Like always, Bernhill

ably demonstrates his technical ability; unlike his abstract art, however, these portraits fail to conjure emotion in the viewer. I wonder if you ever read that. Did you recognize my name at the bottom of the article and think, Oh, so that's what happened to him? For a while that thought filled me with guilt, but by then there were so many people writing about you, and my article was another blip in the noise. Besides, I was just being honest. You were talented enough to take it.

Still, I'm only reminding myself about the article because it doesn't matter anymore.

*

[2:24] *Wow. That's quite a sum.*

[2:26] *Yeah. Bernhill's work has seen a dramatic increase in price after his death—plus, his studio was destroyed in a fire a few years ago, almost immediately after he died.*

[2:32] *I heard about that.*

[2:34] *It was a real shame, honestly. A shock. So we lost some unsold work from that. And a lot is tied up with private collectors . . . auction prices have been high.*

[2:45] *Mm. So—can I ask—are you being loaned work for this exhibit? I heard you'll have two-thirds of his Collage series in, which is exciting, but I didn't think the museum had purchased many of those paintings?*

[2:56] *No, you're right. We've just finished securing loans from two or three private collectors—I'm very excited, personally, as his Collage series has always been my favorite. Actually, if you look . . .*

[3:07] *Ah. Computer background. Very nice.*

[3:10] *You like it? It's Collage Six: Ribbon. Sold for \$863,000 back in 2011.*

[3:16] *Wow.*

[3:18] *Yeah. I wish we'd bought it. Anyway, we'll have Collage Two, Five, Eight, Nine, and Fourteen for sure. We were trying for One and Six, but it didn't work out.*

*

When we were sitting together on the floor of your dorm for the very last time, and you looked over my sketchbook drawing, you said, "Yeah, they're pretty nice." I thanked you. You blinked at me again, paused, and prodded the ulcer in your mouth with your tongue. I could see your jaw working, gently, as you sucked in your cheek.

"Have you thought about adding faces to them?"

I looked down at my spread of clumsy, faceless women. Adding faces to them would make them real. Then they'd be embarrassed of their bodies, themselves.

"Do you think I need to?" I said.

"I don't think you need to," you told me. "It's just that I think they'd look good with faces. You were always so good at drawing faces. You should use that, do it whenever you can." You took a breath. "Your faces are so much better than mine. You capture things that I can't."

It was the first and last time you'd tell me that. For a moment, I felt the buzz of pride sweep through me, warmth flaring in my stomach. Then it rose, thickening in my throat, and I tasted acid. Saying these things—these small, false compliments meant to soothe my embarrassment—cost you so little. We both knew I had never been better than you at anything. But I glanced up at your face, carefully, wanting to see honesty and afraid to startle it away—and for a moment, it was there. An openness, the eyebrows raised, the thin mouth half-smiling, as if to say, It's true, and I'm bitter about it. Then you yawned, cupping your face in your hands, and it was gone.

We'd talked, already, about how I was changing my major. How I'd be transferring to a different college. What I'd do when I got there I didn't know. Journalism, maybe. Political science. I needed a break from art—that's what I told you, anyway. I wonder if you ever regretted being that gifted. If, while you worked, you felt it settle like a weight around you, around everybody else in the room. Coiling, forceful. Something the rest of us couldn't call upon.

I sat and added faces to the women. And they looked—better? Lively, interesting, more human? I couldn't get over their various disproportions, their awkward stances. But you looked at the page when I was done and nodded quietly in approval.

*

[3:27] *I mean, it sounds like you've got a good lineup. So, in general, can you talk to me about why the museum decided to have this exhibit? Why Bernhill, why now, etcetera?*

[3:35] *Well, he's a local artist, first of all, and one who died with twenty-five, thirty years left of work in him. It was such a tragedy, to lose his potential and talent. I think his work deserves whatever audience we can give it, especially because he didn't have as much of a reputation in popular culture. Since we'd recently acquired a few of his works—*

[3:56] *Yeah.*

[3:57] *I thought, why not? Let's see if we can make it happen. And the museum was behind it.*

*

After that, I left your dorm and didn't see you for two days. I was going home for winter break, and I needed to pack. I hadn't found a time to explain that I wasn't coming back, that I'd start second semester at a different college. On my last day, I walked down to the studio where we'd done the live-model drawings; it was left unlocked for students who wanted to work on weekends.

The studio was dim and empty. Weak winter light slid through the windows and sank onto the linoleum tile. The rusted metal easels were still propped up, clustered around the white box where the models posed. I picked my way through them, heading towards the cubbies at the back of the room. I just needed to get my class portfolio. It was the only work I planned to save.

I crouched there, rifling through the stacks of paper on the bottom shelf until I found the crumpled sheaf of newsprint with my name on it. I'd folded it over the stack of my drawings to keep them safe. I peeked at the edges of the stiff paper inside; some were bent, but not badly.

Abruptly, the lights flickered on—I flinched, pressed my portfolio against my chest. You were standing in the doorway on the opposite side of the room, one finger poised above the light switch, a blank canvas tucked under your other arm. Of course. You came here to paint when you weren't busy. I hadn't been thinking.

You blinked. "Why are you taking your portfolio? Were you going to work on something right before break?"

"Hi," I said. We stared at each other. "No. It's because, actually—this is my last day." In the empty room, my voice sounded hoarse, hollow.

Your eyebrows twitched, drew together slightly, and then flattened into an uncertain line. You ran a hand through your hair, rubbed your face. My eyes stung. Was it really that hard to believe, to process? Hadn't you watched me grit my teeth over my art, grip my charcoal until my knuckles whitened? Hadn't you seen me cut pages out of my sketchbook, fold them, drop them in the recycling? Wasn't it clear that I wanted to be done? I could feel my face burning, and I shifted my portfolio up until it reached the tip of my nose.

You nodded, slowly. Still staring at me, you threaded your way through the flock of easels. Your face was thoughtful, settled. At the time, I'd taken it for acceptance. Maybe it was regret. I couldn't tell.

*

[4:02] *Let's talk about Red Portrait for a second. You mentioned some of the attention it's gotten—and you say it's not going in Bernhill's exhibit? Can you elaborate on that?*

[4:11] *Yeah, sure. I mean, first of all, it's a portrait.*

[4:14] *Which Bernhill didn't do.*

[4:16] *I think he did one series of portraits—2006, 2007? I'd just started working here and I went down to see it with some colleagues. It wasn't very good, as I recall.*

[4:24] *No, it wasn't.*

[4:25] *Did you see it?*

[4:26] *Back when I'd been writing for the arts section—I did an article on it. It was the only article I ever wrote about him, besides, you know, this one.*

[4:34] *I didn't know you'd written about Bernhill before—I hope I haven't been boring you, telling you all these things you knew already?*

[4:39] *Oh, no, no, it's fine. I haven't been following—I hadn't been following his career until, you know, 2015. After the fact.*

[4:46] *Sure. I understand.*

[4:48] *Yeah. So he wasn't a portrait artist.*

[4:51] *Exactly. And Red Portrait is—you've seen it, yes?—a really successful painting. The subject, this young man, framed against an expanse of crimson, turning towards the viewer with this sad, complex expression It's far more intimate and evocative than any of his other portraits. Stylistically different, too. Undermining its credibility further is the fact that it's not signed or dated. We think it's early work; I'd place it from 1995-2000.*

[5:17] *He never signed it?*

[5:18] *No.*

[5:20] *I didn't know that. Why wouldn't he sign something like that?*

[5:25] *We don't know. We didn't even know the portrait existed until the museum found it in storage, packaged with a bunch of his other stuff.*

[5:36] *So they don't even know if it's his?*

[5:39] *They thought it was, at one point, if you remember the headlines—"Significant Early Work by Bernhill Discovered in Museum Archives," things like that. And then there was a whole slew of critics and experts who examined it and couldn't decide whether to authenticate it or not.*

[5:54] *So it's—*

[5:55] *Yeah. We're not going to put in the exhibit. It'll go up in the museum, eventually, but nobody can agree if it's a Bernhill or not.*

[6:02] *What do you think?*

[6:04] *I don't actually know. It's so different than any portrait Bernhill painted, and if it really does precede his other portraits—what happened in the middle, right?*

[6:14] *Yeah . . .*

[6:16] *I can see that you're a little disappointed.*

[6:19] *Oh. Haha. No, it's just—I was hoping it would be in the exhibit. I wanted to see it again. I was kind of hoping you'd decide to give him credit for it.*

[6:30] *Maybe one day.*

[6:32] *Sure, sure. Look, I'm going to go get some water, if that's okay, and then we can keep talking.*

[6:37] *Go ahead.*

*

"Would it be okay if I make you something before you leave?"

I nod. It's not what I'd expected you to say.

"Can you come over here, really quick?"

I follow you to the white box in the middle of the room. We stand there for a moment.

"I want you to sit here," you say. "Just for a bit. I'll be able to do the rest without you—I just need to get a sketch of your face." You place the canvas on the easel, adjust the height.

"I feel like I could get your face," you're telling me. The easel between us flattens your voice. "Faces are hard. I've never tried to get yours, but I think I can. If you give me your address, I can mail it to you when you're done. Pick a color."

"Red," I say. The first one that comes to mind.

YANAGIMOTO, LILLIAN**Lillian Yanagimoto**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Michael Dee

Category: Poetry

Re-Caulk Bathtub (Cannot Fix the Faucet)

The faucet breaks again, beads
 gray water into tub-belly
 like a runny nose, I wish
 my skin could be plastered
 white to keep the sound
 from seeping in, but

nobody gets the luxury of
 letting words roll
 off and dry harmless. Even if
 you coat yourself in porcelain,
 your next
 movement will send cracks
 down the folds of
 your arm. Line-breaks, fault-lines,
 fault finding, the Richter
 Scale cannot apply
 to the minuscule divisions
 of everyday splitting.

(Make me vitrified: I
 will let my skin harden until
 my cuticles become
 half-moons of china plates.)

The sound waxes and then wanes,
 back again, scythe-edge
 crescent swells to gibbous,
 rounds itself out, becomes
 a perfect pearl of sound, but

nobody gets the luxury
 of empty tone, broken ears,
 a second change, spare
 change, another chance. The
 faucet drips, clear-pearl
 tears like glass, wet around the
 rim like a mouth
 after spitting. It's not
 a pretty set of metal
 parted lips, it only speaks
 in hollow constant tones—

A song of flat ringing that beats
against
 the back of my eyes
like dead silver, the dull
 edge-swell of flat nickel.
It's the jab of mercury, with
 the temperament to match:
it drips and drips again, changing sound,
 changing softness, while I
sit in the empty tub, knees-to-chest,
 pale and blue but not
yet with white ceramic hardness.
 How long until I
crystallize? How long
 until I calcify, become
a white line in another vein?
 If I closed the drain and
waited, how long
 until the tub would fill?
Tell me.

How long until
 I grow large enough
to fill the hallway
 with my tears?

YANAGIMOTO, LILLIAN**Lillian Yanagimoto**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Shannon Koropchak

Category: Poetry

Plant Pathology

Everything fractals, diminishes into itself.
Bent over the bed of soil, your broad back.

And the pale hair crossing your neck, fine,
unkempt kind of tessellating.

Wet nurse, I fed your feeling. We are told:
This soy develops cysts. This grain is lost

to white-pearl, egg-cuticle. Lost unless
we're gentle with the roots. These stems

weep, lesion. Fruit safe but soft, puckered,
too ugly to sell. Groves burned for that.

To save young leaves from sickled worms
that enter through their wounds.

Save culms from stiffness, neck-nodes.
And isn't a chemical method just as dangerous?

Here chestnut splinters, girdled with disuse,
riddled-ring; tomato's velvet prickled stalk

turns ashy, flakes away. We're reminded
how small clear things can cluster, writhe.

How they clot the tapered root.
And there isn't any way to know for sure?

Well, say the vine dies. You know by then:
it's been too late for a long time.

YANAGIMOTO, LILLIAN**Lillian Yanagimoto**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Shannon Koropchak

Category: Poetry

Flaming June

To speak, or swallow
something down. Yesterday,
when you unbent yourself

from above the marble
sink & could not breathe, I
could only watch your ribs

as they moved against
your skin. Raw-throated,
trailing off—this ribcage,

desperate bell, unopening—
these tendons striking lines
against your hands. I tried

to keep you framed
like this, against
the hot and clustered

world, to pin down all
the edges against
tapering. When you pressed

your hand against
your mouth and told
me to go home,

I left. In clouded
bathroom glass you were
a white shape, a shadow

with a spine. Cruel summer—
this split sun, pale
& burning on the water,

thins out. I watched
you deepen into yourself,
& thought that I

could be an anchor.
I had this image of you, sleeping

in the light—

YANAGIMOTO, LILLIAN**Lillian Yanagimoto**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Shannon Koropchak

Category: Short Story

My Son Paul

My son Paul is twelve. What you have to understand about Paul is that he is unlike every other child his age—I mean, of course every child is special in their own way, but Paul is a prodigy, a child prodigy. He plays piano. He's done a ton of concerts, he's been on NPR; we were just—well, the trouble started after his concert at Carnegie Hall a day ago. You can find videos, if you look for him online. Or I can send you some links. I would be happy to do that—more than happy to do that, really. Anyway, my Paul—look at the doctor, Paul—has been having a little issue. I'm sure it's nothing serious, but we'd like to get this resolved, wouldn't we . . . ?

He's not speaking much right now; I think he's nervous. Look at the doctor, Paul. No? Well, I'll tell you what happened, if Paul refuses to use his manners. I'm sure he's just tired. That's usually what it comes down to.

So, Paul and I were in New York City—the drive's two hours—and an hour or so before his big concert, when Paul was getting settled backstage, he told me he wasn't feeling good. Sick to your stomach, right, sweetie? Yes? Anyway, I thought it was nerves.

Paul has always been a sensitive child. I didn't give him medicine; I didn't think he needed it. I just had him drink some water and then he performed and did quite well—though there were some small, small mistakes. He was a little lethargic, a little clumsy. Nothing that your average listener would notice. Again, I thought it was nerves.

But then when I found him backstage he was awfully pale and rather short of breath. He wanted to go straight home, but there were a lot of people who wanted to meet Paul—important people—that I thought he should see before we left. He calmed down after ten or twenty minutes—I didn't want him embarrassing himself in front of anybody—and then we went out into the reception hall. After that I thought he was fine. Just post-show adrenaline, is what it was. I want to stress that Paul has, yes, always been a little sensitive, but he's never had a problem. I thought he was fine.

We drove home and Paul got a little sick in the car—nothing too bad, just a little queasy again. I understood, you know? He was tired, it had been a big day. But then that evening when we were in the driveway and I was getting everything out of the trunk, he—well, he hadn't unbuckled himself and gotten out like I'd told him to, and he threw up inside the car. Sometimes Paul has a habit of not listening to me all the time, right, Paul? Yes?

Anyway, I cleaned it up and sent him to bed. I felt his head and back; he didn't have a fever, so I didn't give him anything. He did ask for some Tylenol—he said his head hurt—but I thought it would be best not to disturb his stomach, so I got him a cold cloth instead. After he fell asleep, I was updating my photo album—I have this big collection of photos from Paul's performances, almost every photo I have of him is from one of his performances—with a spread for Carnegie Hall. I had a two-page spread in mind. Don't roll your eyes, Paul. He knows that I like to open my album when I get upset with him, to remind myself how much of a special child he is. I really am blessed to have you, aren't I, Paul? . . . Giving us the silent treatment today, huh. My apologies. I don't know why he's being so rude.

Where was I . . . ? Oh, yes. I'd started cutting out the photos when Paul came back down. He'd been asleep but had woken up again; his eyes were red. I remember being startled by how pale he was, coming in from the dark hallway. It was funny; he was like a little ghost out there, shuffling into the kitchen like that. He had his baby blanket and everything. Don't give me that side-eye, Paul. Anyway, he came in and said he felt—tingly? I think that's what he said. He felt cold and tingly; his joints ached. I felt his forehead again and he didn't have a fever; he said he wasn't queasy. Yes, *you* said that, Paul. I didn't know what to give him—I thought it would be best if he slept it off.

So I sent him back to bed and kept working. The two page spread was going to fit at least seven photos, and I needed one or two extra, but the printer was almost out of ink, so I went to Walgreens . . . Yes, I did, but I locked the door and everything. He was already asleep; he didn't know that I'd left, and I was barely gone at all. We have alarms, we have a German Shepard, everything like that. He was safe. You have to understand, Paul's never had a problem.

When I woke up the next morning I heard Paul practicing his scales like usual. Yes, he always practices two hours in the morning and two hours in the afternoon . . . he's homeschooled, I do it for the flexibility. Well, you should understand that I'm not working him that hard—some of these kids, they practice seven, eight hours a day, and they go crazy by the time they're fifteen or sixteen. But Paul's not a quitter, are you, Paul? No, he's not. Paul and I, we don't believe in quitting.

Anyway, Paul was doing his scales. That made me happy—sometimes he gets crabby and won't start until ten or eleven. I went downstairs to sit and watch him practice, like always, until I saw that his form was horrible. No offense to you, Paul—but his wrists were limping up and down the keys, drooped over the piano, and he wasn't applying enough pressure. I mean, Paul is very talented. He doesn't make mistakes when he plays scales—he's perfect at his scales. So it was alarming to me, when I saw him playing badly, and I thought something might actually be wrong. Maybe he had the flu or something. But he didn't have a fever that morning, and he didn't have chills or aches. He was completely fine when I checked him this morning, after everything. He wasn't sick.

So you can understand—well, I asked him why he was making those mistakes, and he said his hands were numb. That he felt fine otherwise but couldn't feel them. He said it so quietly, without looking at me, that I thought he might be lying. I grabbed them and squeezed the fingers a little bit, and he started to cry and gasp for breath, so I thought, you know, that he might be lying to me. I thought he might be lying to me because he'd been playing badly—and because, when I applied just a little pressure to his hands, he reacted as if he'd felt something. Don't hunch away like that, Paul, you'll fall out of your chair. But he said he needed to go to the doctor. *Insisted* on it. He said his hands felt like they were someone else's; that was clearly a lie. Said he'd made a little cut in his hand—see it? That tiny red nick on his left palm? Lift your hand, Paul. He said he'd made it with a kitchen knife, to see if he could feel anything. Obviously he was just trying to get out of practice. He's done it before, making little cuts like that. But he said he wanted to go to a doctor, so I took him. We're here to figure this out, aren't we, Paul? We're here to get things sorted? Go on. Show the doctor, Paul. Show this nice doctor your hands.

Here—I'm sorry—he's not . . . let me show you. They look fine, don't they? Fine? No loss of circulation or anything? They're not cold, they're not swollen, they're absolutely normal. I understand that Paul was feeling a little sick yesterday—I understand that. But he got hysterical with me today—don't you give me that look, Paul, that's *exactly* what happened—because of his hands. So I took him here, and we're going to get this all figured out. Stop twitching, Paul.

He does this sometimes, he—Paul, what are you doing? Take your hands out of your mouth, Paul! Stop biting!

YANAGIMOTO, LILLIAN**Lillian Yanagimoto**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Shannon Koropchak

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Setting Aside the Personal Cudgel

I didn't get in trouble very much when I was younger. I was quiet and well-behaved and derived a feeling of comfort from following rules; I usually felt horrible when I felt I had broken one, guiltier than I think I should have been. Naturally, during the infrequent but inevitable moments when my parents would become frustrated with me, I felt awful. My response each time was the same: while being lectured, I would fight tears, and then I would go upstairs and shut myself in the bathroom. There, I'd spend a minute or two watching myself cry. After these minutes were up, it was time to stop crying and occupy myself with something else.

The whole experience was vaguely unpleasant; standing in front of the small, hinged mirror, I'd watch my puffy face with a mixture of self-pity and disgust. Even as I cried, another part of me was tired of the part that was crying: I could only stand to watch myself for so long before moving on. To this day, I don't understand why this was how I chose, as an eight- and nine-year-old, to process my emotions. Was that meant to be soothing? Cathartic? Upsetting my parents often felt catastrophic—afterwards, did I feel that I deserved punishment? But what part of crying by myself in front of a mirror was punishment? I grew out of this pattern a long time ago and hadn't given it any more thought until I read *The Scarlet Letter*.

In *The Scarlet Letter*, Dimmesdale, agonized by guilt, develops a pattern of self-punishment as a way of paying penance for his sin. He fasts and goes sleepless, but also “[views] his one face in the looking glass, by the most powerful light which he could throw upon it ... [T]hus typify[ing] the constant introspection wherewith he tortured, but could not purify, himself” (96). Of course there is a significant difference between the guilt I experienced as a nine-year-old and Dimmesdale's all-consuming and ultimately fatal struggle with it. Still, reading this passage, I understood—at least in part—how he felt: like everybody else, I am familiar with guilt, self-frustration, and my own ways of managing them. But Dimmesdale's reason for scrutinizing his reflection in the midst of his turmoil seems different from mine. For him, viewing his reflection is a repeated action, part of his daily penance. Dimmesdale will not let himself forgive and forget; by looking at himself in the mirror, he seems to re-confront himself and his sin. When he looks at himself in the mirror, he is filled with “unspeakable misery”; he is so inflamed by guilt that he hallucinates haunting visions appearing in the mirror. Hawthorne likens the process to “torture” (96). But is this agony what I experienced?

Like Dimmesdale, I felt guilty about, and frustrated with, my own behavior. When I made it to the bathroom and saw my reflection—the red, squinted eyes, the trembling chin—my emotions flared. There was no way to tamp down my guilt and frustration; for a minute or two I had to stand there, gripping the edges of the sink and trying to slow my breath. When I regained some control over my physical response, I'd look back up at my reflection and begin berating myself for what I'd done or failed to do.

Was this the punitive aspect of my behavior? Like Dimmesdale, I was reiterating my failure to myself and suffering whatever unpleasant emotions arose as a result. Unlike Dimmesdale, however, who day after day continued to be consumed by his emotions, I found that the intensity of mine faded. As I watched myself cry, self-pity and frustration cooled into impatience—even disgust—which, in turn, faded into acceptance. “Stop crying,” I would think to myself. “You've cried enough.” Of course I was still frustrated with what I had done; I still felt guilty. But where Dimmesdale could not help but wallow, I could step away. After my mirror ordeal, I was calmer and less overwhelmed.

So was this punishment or catharsis? And why did I pursue either one—or both—via my mirror episodes? Returning to Dimmesdale's experience may answer my questions. Dimmesdale, “loath[ing] his miserable self . . . above all else,” (96) believes that he deserves punishment; so did I. Neither Dimmesdale nor I faced external punishment—Dimmesdale from the public, and I from my parents—that corresponded with the intensity of our guilt. Perhaps, like him, I was attempting to create “appropriate” consequences for my behavior by berating my reflection.

This explains why I scolded myself alone in the bathroom: self-criticism is often a sensitive and private matter. The resolve I experienced at the end may have been because I felt, finally, that the necessary consequences had been achieved. (Dimmesdale, on the other hand, cannot move on until the public is aware of his sin; this is why he punishes himself continuously without experiencing acceptance.) This seems like a good explanation: I felt I deserved more punishment than I received, so I criticized myself in private until my feelings were resolved. *Private punishment and private catharsis*. In the past, I would have accepted this as the entire answer. However, after considering Dimmesdale's experience, I believe there is an additional layer of understanding I can explore.

When Dimmesdale "smit[es] himself," he "laugh[s] bitterly at himself the while, and smit[es] so much the more pitilessly, because of that bitter laugh" (96). Dimmesdale's ability to laugh at himself suggests that he, at some points, becomes removed enough from the intensity of his guilt and shame to pass judgement on his state of being. He is not finding humor in his situation—the laugh seems rueful, unhappy, self-pitying—but a part of him, separated enough from his overwhelming emotions, is able to react to them. When this occurs, Dimmesdale punishes himself even more extensively in an attempt to reassert control over his emotional response. Perhaps he doesn't seem to believe that any part of him should be allowed to step back and feel pity. This makes sense to me: by this point, Dimmesdale hates himself, and believes he should; self-pity makes it hard to foster hatred. By eliminating—or at least trying to eliminate—his feelings of self-pity, Dimmesdale's punishment becomes more complete.

Though I cannot completely explain Dimmesdale's emotions in this passage, it illuminates another facet of my experience. I believe there was an element of emotional regulation present, aided or accelerated by the presence of the mirror. Like Dimmesdale, I don't think I wanted to entertain any self-pity. I would tell myself to stop crying—tears being the telltale sign that I was feeling sorry for myself—instead of letting things taper off naturally. Looking at my disheveled, puffy reflection was a confrontation of what, at the time, seemed like an over-dramatic response. It was ridiculous to cry and feel sorry for myself when the mistake had already been made. Thus, by looking in the mirror, I could see the "part" of myself that was feeling self-pity and lecture it away. This explains why my feelings of self-frustration endured longer than my tears. Just like Dimmesdale, I felt that frustration regarding my actions was appropriate, while self-pity was not.

At first, I had viewed this experience as both punishment and catharsis. There is undoubtedly an element of self-punishment here, but what about emotional resolution? I believe this experience was cathartic in the sense that I could physically express—and fully experience, if only for a few minutes—the emotions I felt as a result of my mistake. But attempting to abort part of an emotional experience is the opposite of cathartic. Though I often felt calmer as a result, there must have been a cost of returning to that equilibrium, of asserting that control over my feelings. What was it?

I don't know that I have an answer to this question—at least not yet. If, in the present, I am more likely than average to try and regulate my emotional responses to things; if I have maintained a habit of self-criticism—if, as recently as this week, I took great pains to keep from crying in front of my family—I cannot say if those things are *consequences* of my childhood method or if they are simply more proof that I am "wired" in a certain way. Perhaps I am—for whatever reason—predisposed to this type of behavior. Or perhaps, just as Dimmesdale's guilt and self-punitive behavior are encouraged by his religious experience, something in my environment has exacerbated my tendencies. I can only speculate.

Ultimately, the consequences of emotional regulation and self-punishment are significant regardless of their roots. Dimmesdale, convinced he is irredeemable and undeserving of pity, denies himself compassion or respite. Up until his death, he is tortured by his belief that he has failed himself, his community, and God. And when he does not receive, from an external source, the punishment he believes he deserves, he inflicts it upon himself.

This is no way to live. It is impossible to maintain "perfect" behavior, to consistently meet every internal and external standard placed on you. Failure cannot be avoided. To believe that you must suffer for failure; that if you fail you are not deserving of compassion or pity; that you must not feel anything for yourself but guilt or frustration—this is a recipe for a lifetime of misery.

Since finishing *The Scarlet Letter* and writing this paper, I've been trying to give myself more grace. Instead of perseverating on small mistakes, I'm giving myself permission to let them go. Instead of lecturing myself about how to feel, I've taken moments to sit with my emotions and understand where they're coming from. And I've tried to be honest with my parents about how I'm doing. No change has occurred overnight; I have habits that need to be examined closely, uprooted, overturned. I'm not always going to be successful. But, unlike Dimmesdale, I believe that I deserve to try.

All quotations with page numbers sourced from: Hawthorne, Nathaniel. The Scarlet Letter and Other Writings. United States, W. W. Norton and Company, 2005.

YANAGIMOTO, LILLIAN**Lillian Yanagimoto**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Shannon Koropchak

Category: Poetry

Hybrid Learning

In the car I'm thinking all plants are fractals outside the dog
tears through the electric fence skitters down the driveway
the dogwood's small bitter arms are white-tipped too early
same as last year two weeks of warm weather & everything

premature go get the dog she says if you follow everything
to its end it's all the same shapes this blue spruce trailing
off the road at night slick with rain the columns of light
streaking through it forever driving at night is good practice

she says I think the ghosts must drive the reflection-cars
the upside-down ones blurry in the road also we can't
go inside his apartment he is sick he has been sick
for just a little while the dog won't follow me inside

she says if you follow this fern to the very end of it you
will see it unravels itself in miniature one thousand times
my fingers green in the light his poor daughter she says
just think about that keep driving you'll miss the turn

YANG, MAX**Max Yang**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

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

Educator: Julie Blank

Category: Journalism

A Dive into the Career of Our Ocean's Guardian: An Interview with Dr. Sylvia Earle

“What makes your heart beat fast?” That was the question raised by Dr. Sylvia Earle, the former chief scientist of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Time Magazine’s Hero for the Planet, and the founder of Mission Blue, one of the most influential conservation efforts dedicated to protecting the ocean. As the national champions of the Ocean Science Bowl competition, four team members and I were ecstatic to learn our award was an interview with Dr. Earle in a private Zoom call. Dr. Earle had probably spent more of her life underwater, and knew more about our world’s ocean, than any other person on the planet. Over her lifetime, she has educated several generations about the importance of the ocean, and for our one hour together, I was honored to be her student. It was like meeting a legend, and I was utterly starstruck.

With a graceful smile and welcoming tone, Dr. Earle enthusiastically recounted how she fell in love with the ocean. Growing up in Dunedin, Florida, she would often go out onto the local shrimp boats as they came in to dock. As huge nets with a “half of ton of life” were hauled ashore throughout the early morning, Earle would observe all the different bycatch that would also come up. “They picked out the shrimp,” she recalled, “and everything else got dumped over the side. Well, I was interested in everything else. Everything that they thought was trash, I thought of as treasure.” Her curiosity and willingness to go out of her way from an early age would lead her to a lifetime dedicated to science.

In response to why she became committed to ocean conversation, Dr. Earle vividly recalled some key moments in her career. After graduating from Florida State University, she began her work in the field studying algae in the Gulf of Mexico. When she first started, the negative effects that humans had on the ocean were relatively unknown. One of her first scientific expeditions was in 1970, when Dr. Earle led a group of all-female “aquonauts” in the Tektite II mission. The group spent two weeks in an underwater habitat, conducting experiments and gathering samples from the sea floor. Living in such close proximity to the life of the ocean opened her eyes to the adverse effects humans were having on the environment.

As Dr. Earle described the decline of coral reefs, kelp forests, and all types of marine organisms, there was sorrow in her voice. She warned that we could be the last generation to “know what a bluefin tuna tastes like,” and yet, “we’re killing them at a rate that is clearly unsustainable.” She emphasized that humans, as a species, have taken “so much, so fast” that we have reached the point where we now threaten to decimate entire ecosystems. “We did not make the natural world. It took four and a half billion years to get to where we are. It’s taken us about four and a half decades to significantly unravel those critical systems.” In an effort to reverse our destructive impact, Dr. Earle established Mission Blue, an organization dedicated to protecting life in the ocean through Hope Spots. These Hope Spots, “special places that are scientifically identified as critical to the health of the ocean,” are part of her team’s plan to increase protection of the ocean from 6% today to 30% by 2030, a goal she views as crucial to allow life in the ocean to recuperate.

At her presentation to the World Economic Forum in Davos, Dr. Earle illustrated how the world’s economy was inseparably tied with the health of the ocean. The “great financial gurus” and “guys with their coats and ties”—chief executive officers and world leaders—became fascinated by the specifics of nitrates and phosphates in whale excrement, and how it acted as a fertilizer for phytoplankton, which drives the oceanic food web that creates 60% of the Earth’s oxygen. Dr. Earle noted it was exciting and unexpected to hear “economists discussing the carbon cycle” after her speech, which demonstrated that making people acutely aware of the significance of preserving a healthy

ocean is crucial to saving life on our planet. Dr. Earle also highlighted a study done in the Pacific island nation of Palau, where President Tommy Remengesau ordered an assessment of the economic value of the roughly one hundred gray and whitetip reef sharks living in the country's waters. The study found that if these one hundred sharks were killed and sold for their meat and fins, their worth would total a maximum of \$10,800 dollars. However, if left alive, each individual shark could generate nearly two million dollars over its lifetime through tourism revenue.

Throughout our conversation, Dr. Earle emphasized how the ocean was inseparably connected to life on Earth. All living beings—humans, plants, animals, and everything in between—can trace their origins back to a single microscopic bacteria that lived in the ocean 3.7 billion years ago. The ocean has nursed and nurtured life on Earth like a protective mother for eons. Simply put, it makes life on Earth possible. If we as humans can recognize “how dependent every living thing is, including every human being, on the existence of the ocean,” and actively work towards conserving the ocean through our collective ingenuity and determination, we just might be able to save a part of our planet that is so intricately intertwined with all aspects of our lives.

“If you could choose to be a kid anywhere in time, I would choose right now,” said Dr. Earle with a sparkle in her eyes. Our hour was coming to an end. She congratulated us on our championship win. “I started out just like you, as a kid, doing what you're really good at, asking questions.” She reminded us of the qualities of being a good scientist, “observe carefully, report honestly, and get to the bottom of things.” Finally, Dr. Earle implored us to find ways to connect our futures with the ocean. The rapid advancement of technology in the last few decades has facilitated information dissemination and dramatically increased public awareness of the importance of ocean conservation. Passionate individuals, from presidents and billionaires, to students and all other walks of life, now have the opportunity to contribute their share towards a healthy ocean. Dr. Earle's vision and hope inspired us to think about what we all can do to preserve the future of our blue planet. And that call truly makes my heart beat fast.

YANG, MAX**Max Yang**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

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

Educator: Huiling Ding

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

A Panacea and My Journey of Detoxification

I'm not quite sure what I was thinking the day I tried out my first drug.

Of course, I remember what happened on April 28th, 2017. I remember the hush that fell over our school's Science Olympiad team as we learned our rivals were the new state champions. I remember the cheers that erupted from the other teams, who were ecstatic to see our school, an annual powerhouse, fall. I remember the tears we initially held back, but let pour out on the stairs outside the auditorium. I remember the wave of guilt that struck me full force when my coach told me that my event, Roller Coaster, had placed dead last. That day was the most acute sense of failure I had ever felt.

The traumatic events of that afternoon have been etched into my brain. As the youngest member on the team, I had a lot to prove going into the competition. My event involved building a roller coaster that guided a marble to a finish line. For the months leading up to the competition, I spent countless hours at our school's woodshop perfecting my contraption, often until my coach and I were the only ones left in the entire building. After all these efforts, I was confident that the device would perform well. And I remained confident during the actual run, up until the very end. As the marble thundered down the last ramp, it suddenly started veering uncontrollably, colliding harshly against the sides of the track, and losing momentum until it came to a halt just short of the finish line. By a few centimeters, our team failed to make the national competition. And it was all my fault.

As an Asian American, I constantly feel the societal pressure that pushes me to strive to be perfect. My East Asian immigrant parents who came to America for postgraduate education, as well as countless others, have been taught that America is a land of opportunity where success is obtained by hard work and measured by achievements. To stand out in competitions seemed to be the foundation to do well in life. As 7th grade me observed my older teammates, who competed and succeeded in a myriad of activities, I was fascinated and yearned to one day join their ranks. But the pain and devastation etched into their faces at that year's loss showed me that for many of them, success was to always be expected and failure was unbearable. Many of my teammates were in the 9th grade, the last year they could compete in the competition, and my failure took that opportunity of success away from them. That thought traumatized me to never want to fail again.

To be clear (and much to the relief of my parents), there were no actual narcotics involved. But the way my panacea permeated my brain and hijacked my thoughts were eerily similar to the effect of actual drugs. The same day of the Science Olympiad competition, I created my first drug, knocking on wood three times. It was primarily a coping mechanism, a painkiller of sorts to numb myself from my own failure to meet the expectations of those around me. I went to sleep somewhat assured that night, convinced that the cure would turn my luck around and prevent failure of such magnitude from ever befalling me again.

In the weeks following the competition, no student or parent would ever directly blame me for the loss. But the silence was deafening: I knew that I bore the most responsibility. I heard plenty of whispers from other parents—comments along the lines of “my child had worked really hard for his event” but “it was quite a shame the team couldn't make it to nationals.” Their backhanded remarks felt like salt on an open wound, yet, I understood their frustration.

So, for the competition the following year, I worked with the mindset to make sure I would not fail my team again. Plenty of people held me accountable to the goal. My teammates would often come and offer their help. We held a

silent, mutual understanding that each and every one of us had put in a lot of time and effort into the team, so by helping each other out, we could best ensure our team's success. Or at least, we could prevent catastrophic failure. But I also had another frequent visitor, a parent of a teammate, who regularly dropped in to watch me work. While he spent plenty of time observing me, he never offered anything in assistance, and quickly averted his eyes whenever I glanced at him. I knew why he was there, yet I didn't want to believe this harsh, cut-throat reality. But I understood. In this super-competitive environment, could you really trust a scrawny eighth grader to not screw up his child's chance of success in life?

"Bro, you have been knocking on that wooden table for the past 30 minutes," one of my Science Olympiad teammates observed in the middle of the award ceremony that 8th grade year. "What the heck are you doing?"

"Shhh! It's good luck," I whispered back. Sure enough, we won the next event called up. And the event after that. And after that. At that competition, our team won so many events that we set a new school and state record, beating our rivals by a landslide. To succeed where just a year ago I had failed felt intoxicatingly good.

I was hooked.

It was exhilarating to discover a greater power that acted as a safety net and ensured my success. As long as I worked hard towards a goal, my panacea would supply the extra dose of luck to help me succeed. I complacently created new rituals, such as powering off my phone before a competition or submitting assignments at certain times I deemed to be auspicious. I was on a winning streak that eighth grade year, medaling in several events at the Science Olympiad state finals, winning my middle school's most prestigious character award, and gaining acceptance into an honors orchestra. The panacea made me feel invincible.

I developed tolerance rapidly. The panacea and the continual success it brought soon became my status quo. But I too had entered the rat race. So just like an alcoholic turning to stronger drinks, with each accomplishment—a good test grade, a first-place finish in a competition, an artwork being accepted into an exhibit—I prescribed myself more and more rituals. They became more complex, occupying more of my mental real estate. In turn, I attributed more of my success to the panacea that was always at the forefront of my brain. I began disregarding the time and effort I put into my work and most regrettably, the sacrifices of those around me. All the times when I would forgo family dinners to stay in my room and study. Or when I would practice cello for so long that my brother and sister would complain. And outside of a few lines on a Father's Day card, I never thanked my Dad for all the times he was there to pick me up late at night after Science Olympiad practice.

Of course, my drug still couldn't make me perfect. But it was easy—too easy—to use it as a scapegoat for the times I didn't succeed. Instead of holding myself accountable and recognizing where I had room for improvement, I blamed myself for forgetting to use my panacea the right way. And in a twisted sense, that made me more content with myself.

Then came addiction.

"Son, you need to sleep," my mother gently reminded me the eve of the Science Olympiad state competition my 9th grade year. "Your brain must be tired."

I was physically and mentally drained. But shackled by my own fear of failure, I knew I couldn't sleep until I performed my rituals to perfection.

"Sure," I forced out a reply. "I'll be upstairs soon."

I succumbed to my own drug-fueled mind. What should have been climbing two sets of stairs up to my bedroom became as formidable as summiting Mount Everest. *You tapped that one light switch just a bit off. You stepped on the top stair with the wrong foot. You didn't shut the basement door with both hands.*

Could I live with knowing that tomorrow wouldn't be perfect?

Back down to the basement I returned.

Over the past few years, my drug had become more harmful than the disease it was supposed to cure. It had blinded me from opportunities of self-reflection, and moreover, chances to ask myself why I was putting myself under so much stress. Outside of the Asian community, the academic success of Asian kids is taken for granted. It's met with ambivalence, or worse. Yet in this process of standing out, we exert tireless efforts, bear mounting pressures, and sacrifice our mental health just to meet society's expectations of us being the model minority. We fall silent to the ever-increasing hurdles in the college admission rat race, instead opting to raise our own expectations. Even then, I have heard plenty of stories of how Asian-Americans have failed in getting into their dream schools, despite having perfect GPAs, shining records of academic competitions and sports, and impactful community service initiatives.

I falsely believed my drug helped me to cope with external pressures. Instead, it served as a constant reminder that I was boxed in by societal expectations, which left the rat race of achievements as seemingly the only way out. But why should I succumb to these expectations and play into the stereotype so dutifully? Getting accepted into a prestigious school or landing a well-paying job is not the holy grail of existence. Life, after all, is not a linear journey. Feelings of disappointment, anguish, and grief are inevitable parts that we all must face. But by coping with failure using healthy and productive ways, we find the power to learn from our setbacks and grow.

A sea of eyes stared up at me, hanging onto my every word. Starting last year, I chose to lead our school's quiz bowl team out of my passion. As captain, I felt that it was my duty to promote the exchange of knowledge and lead our team to success. However, just as importantly, I tried my best to create a less cut-throat and more collaborative environment. I knew what it was like to be under constant pressure, and I wanted to make sure none of my peers had to be forced into making the same mistake that I did. But even with my good intentions for my teammates, I was still concerned for the performance of our team, leading me to occasionally default back to my drug.

But as our team competed together, I came to understand that our success did not define our mutual respect. No matter win or lose, my teammates and I would always be there for each other. And this camaraderie gradually overtook the unhealthy pressures that fueled my fears. I found myself resorting to my drug less and less, and its ill effects were starting to lose their potency. And through this intentional detoxification, my drug no longer symbolized that I was trapped.

We did not win the state competition. But we still had a team banquet to celebrate how much we had improved as a team. And amid the chatter, one of the young members asked me about my small rituals I did during the competition.

"Oh, you mean when I do this?" I smiled and knocked on the table three times. "It's just a reminder that we can learn through our mistakes."

Outside in the restaurant parking lot, the crisp, night air brushed against my cheek. Between each step on the wet pavement, I realized that graciously accepting defeat felt enormously refreshing. And now, for the first time in four years, I was embracing growth, not just achievements. I breathed in slowly. Everything will be okay.

YUN, YEJUN**Yejun Yun**

Age: 14, Grade: 10

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

Educator: Jeff Morrison

Category: Critical Essay

The Value of Competition

The Value of Competition

I recently volunteered at a local First Lego League (FLL) competition, an event in which teams of middle schoolers work to build a small LEGO robot using a common basic platform. Each robot has to complete a number of preannounced tasks that are all linked to a yearly theme, which in this case was “Cargo Connect,” or efficient and clean transportation. During the course of several months—or weeks, depending on the time they started—individuals would work together to design, build, and test their robots, as well as make a series of three presentations that went over all of their work. Teamwork, camaraderie, and innovation are the main purposes of FLL, although friendly competition also motivates many.

My job consisted of all the standard assignments expected at an event of that size: catering, setting up judging rooms, cleaning up after competitors that had too much for lunch, etc. But the most interesting work I had was helping to judge the teams attending the competition, which was a necessary step in qualifying for the regional tournament. Groups would be separated into enclosed judging rooms where they would showcase their robots and give their presentations. Although it was not the main focus of the event—the area where the robots had to physically complete their tasks was elsewhere—the presentations, and the judges’ reactions to them, gave a closer view into the spirit of the competition than anywhere else.

The first team I watched was a group of three young Indian students who were ushered in by someone who appeared to be the father of one of them. Together they carried a tall tri-fold poster board, setting it on a table in front of the three judges. I was off to the side timing the presentations to make sure they stayed on schedule—each team had a roughly thirty-minute time block to present. Without any introduction, the team quickly launched into the first pre-scripted presentation which was mainly about the robot, reading off colorful sticky-note flashcards. As always with youth-oriented programs like FLL, mistakes were made, and cues were forgotten. The team mentioned multiple times that they had started late in the season and were ill-prepared. But they gave a thoughtful presentation, and none of the judges minded the minor slips.

Their next presentation was over their “innovation project,” describing how they had applied the engineering design process in their improvement to transportation. This presentation was short and direct, lasting less than three minutes. The next and final presentation over “core values,” however, was not as clear. The team talked mainly about how they scheduled their work, emphasizing the value of teamwork in the process. There was also a tangent about how they had celebrated their successes by playing a game they had invented, a point on which I was confused at the time. All in all, the three presentations were over well ahead of schedule, and the judges allowed the team to go early to have more time to score their rubrics and discuss among themselves.

After a few complimentary remarks about their enthusiasm were made, the judges first focused on scoring the robot and innovation project presentations, giving average marks for each. But discussion quickly moved to the subject of core values and how the team had displayed them. The judges went over items such as “impact” and “inclusion,” and it was then that I realized that the students’ mention of playing games to celebrate their successes corresponded to a specific section of the rubric: the “fun” category. Overall, the team was rated favorably on their core values, having done most of what the judges wanted to see.

The next team that I watched was larger, with six members instead of three. Unlike the previous team, they brought in their robot, something which was not required nor mentioned in the rubric, but helpful in earning points nonetheless. They also hammered in the theme of cooperation—notably, when asked what the team did for fun, one member responded with only the word “teamwork.” But after they finished giving their three presentations, they were still regarded slightly less favorably than the previous team by the judges. The reason was a single member of the team: a tiny, extroverted boy who had answered most of the questions during the Q&A session. The judges

described him as an “alpha male,” and docked points in the categories of “teamwork” and “inclusion” for the entire team because of his behavior. Despite the higher quality of their presentations, a fact which the judges agreed on, they likely scored worse than the previous team because of the transgressions of one member.

The rest of the day went by fairly quickly. Teams shuffled in and out of the room, now guided by volunteers leading them through the building. One of the teams had a member sleeping on the floor during their presentations, an entirely unscripted and spontaneous act. Another had two of its members standing in cardboard robot costumes during their presentations, their actual robot being named “the imposter” for reasons entirely unrelated to transportation. The final team of the day, however, broke the pattern of flashcards and missed cues. With a relatively small group of five, they still managed to give a performance head and shoulders above that of their peers, one which was memorized, clean, and even had a girl throwing on a black-and-white striped “burglar” costume mid-presentation. One of the judges later likened some of the previous presentations to “pulling teeth” compared to the final one.

After watching the work of the students and the judges’ reactions to them, I had a variety of thoughts—mostly positive, but with still a few exceptions. For one, most of the teams were racially homogenous, a testament to the ongoing problem of diversity that STEM programs are trying to solve. But in my opinion, there was also another issue present that organizations sponsoring competitions for younger students often struggle with—that is, the challenge of clear and direct communication to students.

During all of the presentations, there was a sense that competitors had spent a large amount of time interpreting the rubric rather than working on their robots, specifically the section on core values. While promoting things like “teamwork” and “fun” may be laudable in the abstract, in practice, the points often go to teams whose adult mentors teach them the specific phrases that judges look for. Competition becomes a game of turning abstract principles into specific, tailor-made strategies to win competitions that are generally unrelated to the event of the year. While the stakes are low, I believe that this practice teaches the wrong lessons to motivated students: specifically, that navigating something akin to a miniature version of corporate bureaucracy is more worthwhile than excelling at the assigned job.

Here is what would be fair: a straightforward, easily understandable set of problems to face; an expectation of civility and teamwork independent of any extrinsic motivators such as points; and a transparent framework for judging, one which eliminates any concerns that particular teams got ahead not because they worked together more effectively, but because they understood the tricks for scoring points on unclear sections of the rubric. If all similar competitions adopted these credos, then students would grow up learning to prize the values of equity and hard work, instead of learning how to gain unfair advantages by means of connections and interpreting corporate values.

Fun should be the ultimate goal of these competitions, and because of that, they should be arranged according to these ethics. Students should not feel burdened by concerns that they are not displaying their values exuberantly enough whenever they present their work. They should, instead, feel the most relaxed when it becomes time for them to show off what they have done. A presentation of one’s work should be exactly that: an affirmation that you, yourself, have achieved something, and no one can take that away from you. In FLL, students should be expected to do only what they signed up for—building the best robot that they possibly can.

YUN, YEJUN

Yejun Yun

Age: 14, Grade: 10

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

Educator: Jeff Morrison

Category: Critical Essay

Immigrants in America

Immigrants in America: The Descendants of Atlas

America, the richest nation in the history of the world, is loud, brash, and the antithesis of cultural values from all over the world. And it is the one place where everyone wants to go, in both Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* and reality. The main character Gogol Ganguli's life, that of a second-generation immigrant with Indian parents, and his process of becoming American represents the foreigner's struggle between heritage and success. In his social life, he trades one for the other in three different instances: his rejection of his father Ashoke's birthday gift in his teenage years, his dating of Maxine Ratliff as a young adult, and his marrying Moushumi Mazoomdar in the prime of his life.

By rejecting Ashoke's gift, a collection of short stories by his namesake Nikolai Gogol, Gogol is ignoring his heritage for the sake of fitting in with his American culture. There is no question about his preference; he puts it bluntly: "He would have preferred *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* or even another copy of *The Hobbit*" (Lahiri 80). Even before Ashoke knocks on the door, he is listening to an album, *White Album*, given to him during his American birthday party. He also loves the Beatles, being "a passionate devotee of John, Paul, George, and Ringo" (Lahiri 79). All of these icons—the books, albums, and bands—are as distant from his Indian culture as his home of New England is to his parent's home of Calcutta. He is embarrassed and disinterested in his heritage, which he views as the edicts of a strange and foreign culture. This feeling is the natural result of becoming American, where popular culture reigns supreme and must be accepted to gain social recognition, at any cost.

Maxine Ratliff, an exuberant New York socialite, represents the life that Gogol wanted in his childhood, the opposite of what his own out-of-place Indian family offered, and that is why he dates her, once again trading his heritage for success. He is easily lured in by the different, cosmopolitan culture of her household: "Quickly, simultaneously, he falls in love with Maxine, the house, and Gerald and Lydia's manner of living, for to know her and love her is to know and love all of these things" (Lahiri 147). His meals, once consisting of either traditional Indian food or American junk food, are now lively and fresh; with Maxine's family, he eats dishes from cuisines all over the world each evening—polenta, risotto, bouillabaisse, osso bucco, pâtés, and more. When he visits his parents with Maxine, who wants to bring wine for lunch as a gift, he says to her: "It doesn't matter...My parents don't own a corkscrew" (Lahiri 156). What has always been alien to his family is now his everyday life, and he feels free, further away from everything Bengali than ever before. Maxine Ratliff is attractive to him because she represents Gogol's desired end state. He ends up, however, drifting apart from her after his father's death—an example of how it is impossible for him to be in her life and still hold attachments to his family and his father's legacy, how it is impossible for any immigrant to achieve that end state without sacrificing part of their culture.

Reversing the pattern of his life, when Gogol marries Moushumi Mazoomdar, a fellow Indian-American, after breaking up with Maxine, he partially accepts his heritage and what his parents want of him. He meets her around a year after his father's death, going on a date with her to a French restaurant in New York at his mother's request. Afterwards, he asks, half-jokingly cutting to the heart of their relationship, "So, should we make our parents happy and see each other again?" (Lahiri 212). She is to him a strange mixture of family and stranger, someone who he never really knew outside of her role as a Bengali "relative." She is also a newfound blending of Gogol's two cultural worlds, Indian and American, a person who has played "Jingle Bells" at a party in his childhood, but who is also a woman of her own, the same as Maxine Ratliff or any other American who Gogol has dated. By loving and eventually marrying her, he realizes, even if unconsciously, that he cannot become fully American in the sense that he once wanted, returning to accepting the guidance of his surviving parent, as if he were a pendulum swinging between two poles. He regresses into what turns out to be an unsuccessful relationship, with Moushumi later cheating on him with an old boyfriend, once again having traded one for the other, success for heritage.

Gogol never becomes fully American, and at the same time, he is more American than most natives. America is a nation of immigrants who each wants more, but also carries with them a part of another world that they cannot throw away. They, who continue to arrive on her shores, continue to fight between success and heritage, their goal being to succeed in a new country while still carrying the weight of their identity. Like Gogol, who carelessly rejected his family, broke off relationship after relationship, and finally entered a flawed marriage, they trade between the two because they cannot make a definite choice, and they make mistakes in their indecisiveness. The main character of *The Namesake*, with all of his many faults, represents the progeny and the end result of these people, the immigrants, the ones who by definition want more than their peers, the ones who go forward into a new world, and the ones who end up carrying the weight of both on their shoulders.

ZHOU, CELINA**Celina Zhou**

Age: 14, Grade: 8

School Name: Ladue Middle School, Saint Louis, MO

Educators: Judith Miller, Greg Schmitz

Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy

ephemerality

Even the mortal realm must be able to feel the tension that drapes over the sky and seeps into the earth, even if they do not know why.

The heavens themselves hum with prospect, and none feels its weight more than she. She stands before the altar, tracing the marble-carved whorls and grooves as she waits.

The time god is late.

Her hands curl into fists, nails scraping gently against the surface. She has long since become accustomed to his unpunctual tendencies, but she is unable to stifle the flicker of irritation. After all, he is the one who called her here in the first place.

Whisper-soft footfalls sound behind her as though summoned by her thoughts.

She turns.

She blinks. Once, twice.

Her irritation dissipates in a heartbeat.

The god is glowing: eyes alight with a terrible radiance, hair set in an otherworldly halo, veins shining golden like tiny fractures across his skin. There is a light, clawing at the bonds of his human form, threatening to break free and tear him apart at the seams.

Oh, divinity is a fickle, fickle thing.

She steps towards him, choking concern swelling in her throat. He only smiles faintly as he approaches, clasping her outstretched hands and lowering them gently.

“It’s alright,” he says, quiet and faraway. “I’m alright.”

The pain on his face says otherwise, but her protests tangle on her tongue as he meets her gaze. There is no fear in those terrible, ancient eyes. Only a quiet peace.

“Is it...?” she starts, halting words tearing from her throat. “Now?”

He hums, a low, gentle sound that echoes in the air around them. “Yes,” he says, brushing past her towards the altar without another word. She follows on his heels, halting beside him as he sweeps the intricate carvings with his eyes.

“Does it distress you?” he asks finally.

She hesitates for a moment, glancing up at him. “No,” she replies, quiet as falling snow. “I just ...I thought we had more time.”

The harsh lines of his face soften, cast into crystal clarity by the light surrounding his eyes.

"Ah, time, time, such a peculiar thing," he says, "And it has decided that today is mine."

He sets a hand on her head, and she leans into the touch, into the warmth of the aura that settles around him like a physical thing. He gently tilts her chin until she is staring into those unfathomable, unreadable, unaging eyes.

"I have been ready for a very long time, child," he says. "What of you?"

She pauses.

She breathes.

She thinks, remembering a time long ago.

"The gods are not creators. Life, death, war, love – these are all concepts that would have existed without us," he explained.

His form that day was tall and slender, with umber skin and silky hair and gentle eyes like molten gold, sweeping over the horizon to an end only he could see.

"We are only guides, scion mine, who maintain these ancient powers – who make sure they do not spiral out of control and wreak havoc upon the world."

He paused, and the world around them stopped on a half-formed thought. Ethereal birdsong cut off in a discordant echo, and even the wind stilled in its neverending journey.

"How much," he said, softer, "do you know of the Before?"

She blinked, unable to stifle the flash of surprise that jolted through her. "Nothing," she responded. "No one has ever spoken of it to me."

He smiled: faintly, quietly, sadly. "I am not surprised. My heir you may be, but the Before is not something we speak of often," he told her. "No one quite truly remembers, but we do our best to bury those scraps of memory. It was not a happy time."

"Gods," he continued, "are what mortals make us. But before there were mortals – before there were gods, before there was thought and heart and soul – the world's powers ran wild and rampant."

"Godship is something that is necessary – exhausting, agonizing at times, but necessary. So long as the world has life, the world will have us. It must."

The world is waiting.

Are you ready?

She nods.

He smiles.

And he whispers, "Thank you."

She can only shake her head.

He lowers himself onto the altar with a billowing sigh, eyes closing as he settles. He breathes, his unearthly glow flickering with each rise and fall of his chest. Light dances around them in shimmering threads and orbs and sparks like fireflies. Slowly, he draws out that terrible power from within him and nestles it within his hands.

Finally, he opens his eyes.

Aeons. There are aeons in that gaze, in the glittering light of his irises and the neverending black of his pupils which bind her tight and draw her close until all she can see is golden.

His body begins to shimmer, blurring at the edges as though the world is washing him away.

The world within her gaze blurs with him. A single tear drips down her cheek, disappearing within that blinding glow. It is all she will allow herself.

Haltingly, shakily, she reaches forward, and brushes her fingers against the trembling light.

His smile widens, gentle and relieved and open. And with a shivering sigh, he disappears in a shower of gold, like ash on the wind.

As it falls from the tenuous grasp of a dying-god to a new-god, time slips free for just a moment. And within that moment, empires fall and kings take their final rasping breaths, history unravels and is remade. Within that moment, mountains crumble and oceans dry, the core of the world itself stirring in its slumber. Within that moment, the world stills and bursts into motion all at once in a whorl of blurring lines and fraying seams.

Within that moment there is eternity.

She seizes the ends of time's trailing threads and pulls it close, curling it into her chest in a tangle of strings and space and silk.

And *oh*, she can *see* now.

The nebulous veils of the material realm tremble and fall away as effortlessly as gossamer come morning light. The Beyond unfurls into the world of her sight in a kaleidoscope of color, vermilion and cerulean and emerald veined with liquid gold bleeding into bottomless onyx.

She thinks she can understand the look in his eyes now, that glint that always made him seem as though he was searching for something more.

She lets it dance in her fingers for a moment, reveling in the sensation of divinity settling into her bones, in the newfound power that hums down to the tips of her fingers. It is beautiful and terrible and intoxicating and she knows, oh she *knows* that she could keep this feeling forever and she could drown in it.

But the world is waiting as time sits trapped in her grasp, and so she lets it unravel from her hands. It falls neatly into the grooves already worn in the fabric of fate, and she urges it forward. Onward, onward, never falter.

Time settles.

The god smiles.

The world breathes.

ZIPFEL, MAE**Mae Zipfel**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Michael Dee

Category: Critical Essay

What Is Paradise?

Tintern Abbey by William Wordsworth builds on the theme of childhood memory and purity of mind, something that Wordsworth longs for in his adult life. As Wordsworth develops his writing he remembers his past self and the serenity that came with the isolation he desired. He also makes connections and realizations about himself and his true “paradise” that he strived to reach, showcasing an everlasting desire for seclusion and complete isolation, living as one in absolute solitude to concentrate on one’s relationship with nature. Wordsworth views the act of self isolation as the best way to connect with the universe and the best way to reach paradise and divinity.

Isolation holds such an importance to English romantic poets because it limits outside opinions and influence. Essentially, complete isolation is viewed as the primary way poets can ensure that what they are observing and perceiving in nature is truly derived from their own mind. Throughout Tintern Abbey, the poet’s natural longing for the paradise that past isolation in nature brought him is shown. “Paradise,” as Wordsworth describes it, is the calming presence of nature, mountains, and clear streams, and these are only a few of the many examples given. This “paradise” is one he can no longer return to, not because of the physical location the “paradise” exists in, but rather because of a change in mindset within himself as he exits his youthful and naive viewpoint on life.

In the past, nature made up the poet’s entire world and shaped everything from passions to appetite. Despite this past, Wordsworth does not mourn his past self. Although Wordsworth can never resume his past relationship with nature, he can now acquire a new series of more mature gifts to navigate the world, enjoying the beauties of nature in one moment, but able to see the “sad song of humanity” in the next. This sad music connects the world through loss, death, and grief, emotions that humanity has the misfortune of experiencing. Its sense of connection is something that Wordsworth’s younger self would not have been able to understand or experience due to his complete isolation that he embraced so strongly. Wordsworth’s current appreciation for the music and the connection it brings shows personal growth in a sense that he now wants to feel a part of something, specifically humanity, and make personal connections rather than live in complete isolation.

In the second stanza of the poem, as Wordsworth visualizes Tintern Abbey, he begins to mentally transport himself to that place, embarking on a journey of transcendence, existence or experience beyond the normal or physical level. This begins to calm his mind. Although his mind does transport itself, this act of transcendence works wonders on him physically as well. His breathing calms and his heartbeat slows down, implying that this paradise and isolation he had once found in Tintern Abbey truly did have significant effects on the poet’s wellbeing.

Wordsworth describes how the “beauteous forms” have a power to calm him even when he is amongst people in a crowded city. The mere thought of this paradise provided him with “sweet sensations.” This simply shows how even though he is not physically amongst these beautiful sights, the divine nature still has a power to calm him. With such a vivid imagination, he later sees himself as looking into the eyes of his sister, bringing happiness and tranquility. While looking into her eyes, he even begins to see his past self. These examples not only show the power of one’s mind, but also that it is not the specific location that brings peace and serenity, rather a state of mind.

While the nature and the physical location of Tintern Abbey is paradise, the location itself is not what the writer seeks and longs to return to. Instead, he searches for the feelings and emotions that paradise, solitude, and sublime areas brought him. It is not the beautiful views in nature that are divine, it is instead the feeling of peace and the connections with oneself that is truly divine. With the power of transcendence, Wordsworth shows he is able to return to this peaceful state of mind. With mental transportation to this place, it is clear that the isolation, divine nature, and beautiful views were never what he was seeking. Instead, he was searching for a peaceful state of mind and body, which he is now able to achieve through his newly found state of mind.