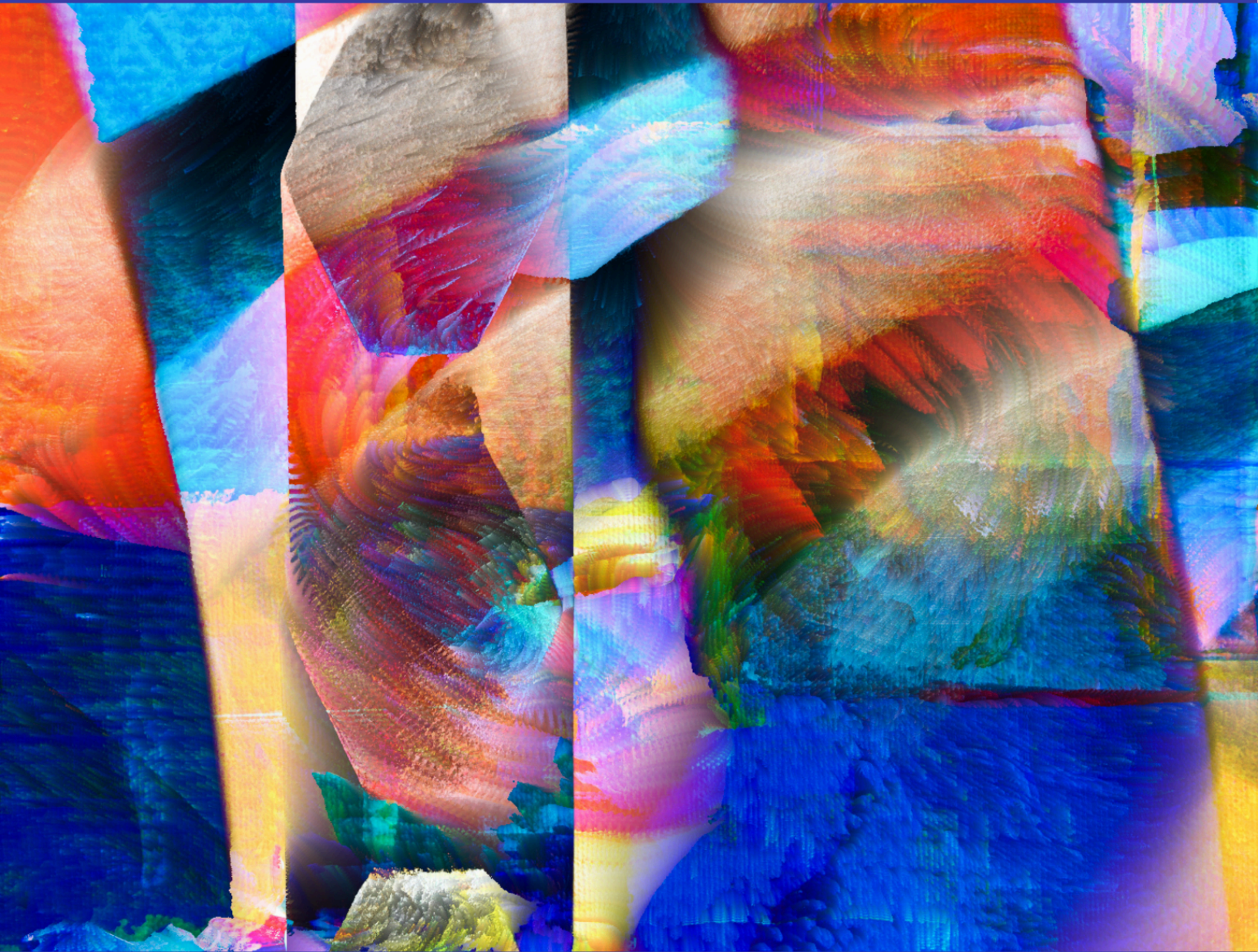


Honorable Mention

2026



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**Scholastic
Art & Writing
Awards**

Alliance for
Young Artists
& Writers

Dear Amazing, Young Writers,

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

I am honored to share this collection of Honorable Mention works with all of you. These plays, poems, essays, memoirs, short stories, etc. are beautifully written and show the amazing talent of all of you. I congratulate all of you for your hard work. I would also like to acknowledge the amazing educators who have worked with these young writers and supported them throughout their school year(s). Lastly, I want to thank all of the supportive family members who have helped to foster the voices of these teens.

Keep on telling your stories!

With warm regards,

Mary Beth Rich

Editor

Youth Program Coordinator, Greater Kansas City Writing Project



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Roshini Abdul Jameel

Grade 8, Parkway West Middle School
Educator: Tracy Bouslog
Personal Essay & Memoir



Response

“Tommorow she’ll sit with us,” Janya told us.

A girl from her neighborhood would be coming to school tomorrow. We started arguing about what team she was going to be in and when we would see her in our classes.

The next day at lunch Janya introduced Saanvi to the table.

“Hi Saanvi,” I exclaimed, trying to be heard over the, “Table 2 can get their lunches!”

“Hi,” mumbled Saanvi.

After that brief conversation, lunch wasn’t any different than before, and we just went back to our own conversations. My friends and I ate as we talked about what happened in all the periods while Saanvi just sat quietly eating her lunch at the end of the table. I asked what her favorite subject was to get her to talk.

“ELA,” she said abruptly.

“I like ELA too,” I muttered thinking that she didn’t appreciate me talking to her. Shouldn’t she at least answer my question with a complete response and expand on it if she doesn’t know what to talk about? Why isn’t she wanting to make new friends? Doesn’t she *want* to get to know us? My brain rambled with these confused thoughts until I ended it by thinking she’s shy since it’s her first day.

Ding! The bell rang as Saanvi rushed into the first period gym. We got into teams for volleyball and Saanvi was with us. My friends and I were purposefully failing to hit the volleyball in order to talk to each other. The volleyball came right at me and I moved to the right to make it roll to the back. Instead of Jivika

who was closest to the ball getting it, I walked over to her and talked to her before getting the volleyball.

“Sooo do you like to play volleyball?” I asked.

“Yes,” she answered.

Another one word answer. At that point I gave up trying to talk to her and needed to turn off the little pot of annoyance brewing inside me. She stayed silent for the rest of the period and was looking like a guard, conscious of what she was doing all the time. All of my friends were wondering the same thing that I was, “Why was she not talking?” How weird it was for her to not talk to anyone and just be alone.

At choir next period, Mahi asked, “Do you want to sit with us, Saanvi?”

Saanvi walked towards us and sat as stiff as a statue on the seat next to me with no response, fidgeting with her fingers, bored from no one to talk to while my friends and I were chatting away. I was the only one who noticed her. Why do I need to talk to her when she doesn’t talk to me? Why is she sitting like she’s here for a job interview? I’ll just keep talking with my friends who actually talk instead of being silent.

After the first day, Saanvi still came to sit with us at lunch, but it never felt like someone new joined our table. Most of the time at the table it was like there was an invisible barrier separating Saanvi from the rest of us except Janya. She was the only one who talked to Saanvi and kept her company. All the others always talked with each other and Saanvi was the only one who sat there eating her lunch at the far end of the table with Janya. Saanvi’s eyes avoided ours and only looked at the plate in front of her with tears at the brim waiting to rush down.

”She never talks that much does she?” whispered Jivika.

“Maybe she doesn’t want to talk to us and we should stop trying,” I grumbled, slouching from my other failed attempts to talk to her. I thought it was better off ignoring her than having my patience tested.

“Yeah I guess,” Jivika sighed.

She erupted like a volcano spewing its lava everywhere the next day. “I hate Saanvi,” Jivika raged as she plopped down her bag and slumped next to me on the bus. Her face was red with fury and her teeth were clenched to form a solid wall. She didn’t even care to pick her backpack from lying in the middle of the bus.

“She copied the same hairstyle that I have and the type of bracelets that I always wear,” she complained.

“Did you tell her to stop copying you?” I asked.

“I told her to stop and she said that she isn’t doing anything. I don’t like that she’s copying me and she doesn’t even listen when I tell her to change. She’s just annoying,” Jivika snapped.

From what Jivika said I completely changed my opinion about Saanvi. Why would she copy her? Did she need another reason to annoy someone besides just answering in one word answers? I was done trying to befriend her and didn’t want anything to do with her, but little did I know that my understanding was miles apart from the truth.

We were all eating our breakfast in the noisy cafeteria when Janya rushed in with a red face.

“Guys, I need to talk to you about something. It’s about Saanvi. She told me not to tell anyone this but I think that it is better if I say it. I am saying it now since Saanvi didn’t sit with us yesterday.” Janya said.

We all stopped talking, and I put down my spoon in the cereal bowl. “Saanvi told me that you guys are not including her as a friend in all the classes you have with her. Do you know how upset she’s been? I saw her crying and asked her what happened. She told me that she feels left out of the friend group and that no one wants to talk to her.”

“But she never really talks to us, does she?” I asked.

“Saanvi has autism. She told me this when we were outside in the summer. That’s why she finds it hard to talk freely sometimes and needs to get used to someone before she starts talking to them like a friend. You guys stopped talking to her after the first day.”

Speechless by this truth setting in, I felt my face turn hot and red in shame. I felt guilt creep inside my soul. I felt embarrassment pour into me like hail falling from a thunderstorm. I felt ashamed of what I did. I completely ignored her after the first day of meeting her. I didn’t even fully understand her and went on to make my own theories. She just wanted to fit in with the rest of us and not be separated from everyone. That’s why she copied Jivika to try and fit in with us. I should not have judged her for not talking and should have been nice to her.

The next day at lunch I tried to pull my rooted feet from the ground to go talk to Saanvi. “Hi,” I blurted out, not knowing how to undo the knot in my throat.

“Hi,” said Saanvi.

“I am so sorry for all that I did. I had no idea on how you felt and only thought about what I thought you were doing. I really do hate what I did and

won't exclude you anymore. I never did it intentionally and was just being stupid. I just assumed that you didn't want to talk to me and thought you wanted to annoy me. I'm sorry. Do you want to actually talk together at lunch?" I said quickly.

"We're all so sorry," said Mahi.

"I'm sorry I just ignored the reason you copied me and just focused on how I felt," confessed Jivika.

"Do you want to sit next to me and talk?" I asked sheepishly.

"If we actually talk," replied Saanvi.

This time her response wasn't a single word. After that, we would *all* talk together at lunch and miss hitting volleyballs in the Gym together.

Abishek Aravinda Kumar

Grade 11, Parkway South High School
Poetry



Tales Across Time

the year is 1184 bce,
and in this splintered field,
i hear the screams of the damned,
the screams of the breathing,
and the screams of my own.

i have no choice,
but to raise my shaking hands,
to lift my exhausted, leather-hilted sword,
and drive it into another soul—
iron on iron.

to then witness,
the metallic spray of life,
begin to,
drain,
drain,
drain.

the year is 459 ad,
and atop this hazy glade,
stands a gray, weathered stone,
solemn within a circle of conifers.

and locked within it,

the hint of steel awaits,
a blade of silver,
awaiting the hand that dares.

thus, i set my calloused hands,
around its jeweled helve,
and as the glade holds still,
i brace,
i pull—

until the blade breaks free,
and light floods the clearing.

the year is 1609 ad,
and in this dim chamber,
strewn with loose pages
and the stale breath of ink,
i lift my fragile scope toward the heavens.

toward the ocean of black,
where vessels of light are adrift—
some held in place,
others slipping from view.

a quiet peace, only broken
when the church bell tolls midnight,
sending tintinnabulations,
across town
and into the sea above.

the year is 2025 ad,
and at 6:45am,
i sit among damp leather,
an elderly woman,
and my schoolbag,
lifting drowsy eyes to the window ahead.

the heat of our breaths fogs the glass,
masking the ill-lit tunnel rushing by.

a sudden chirp from my lap
makes me squint into brightness,
and a low battery warning fills my pupils.

i flip my phone face-down,
and turn my gaze back to the window.

outside, the tunnel blurs,
city scene rushes past,
and the world moves forward.

yet for a moment—
just for a moment,
the warmth of the carriage,
passengers,
and cushioned leather seat

feels enough.

and in this moment,
left with exhaustion,
i close my eyes,
and the gentle hum of the train,
carries me to sleep.

Luca Becker

Grade 12, MICDS

Educator: Tex Tourais

Critical Essay



Society's Shared Delusion Imposed on Empirical Life: An Exploration of the Meaning of "Division by Zero"

"The inner core of individual humans gives meaning to the world, and is the source for all ethical and political authority. If we encounter an ethical or political dilemma, we should look inside and listen to our inner voice – the voice of humanity" (164).

–Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens*

Through his non-fiction narrative, *Sapiens*, historian, philosopher, and author Yuval Noah Harari argues that a human's happiness is based on whether our expectations of reality are met. In other words, happiness is not determined by the world as it is but by how well it matches our preconceived notions. This theory sets the framework for our understanding of Renee's journey for personal meaning in Ted Chiang's "Division by Zero." Her story mirrors that of Harari's idea of the "imagined order": the collective delusions that allow society to operate. Similarly, Leszek Mazurek's work, in a theoretical study of dividing by zero, allows us to unpack Renee's struggles to find meaning and individual purpose through the conceived system of mathematics. In the short story "Division by Zero," Ted Chiang constructs a narrative that mirrors Yuval Noah Harari's exploration of the theory correlating happiness with the consistency of objective reality to our subjective expectations. Renee finds happiness in the predictable world of mathematics, which she sees as an objective truth due to an indoctrination by the larger society. However, overreliance on this faith ultimately undermines her worldview because her expectations are not consistent with reality; these discontinuities provoke an evolution in her faith and restart the ouroboros of her life, cementing that a meaningful life stems purely from individual thought.

Yuval Noah Harari's most prominent conclusion for the catalyst of happiness "is that happiness [...] depends on the correlation between objective conditions and subjective expectations" (266). In essence, Harari argues that an individual's happiness is not derived from materialistic possessions but rather from how closely what happens in one's life mirrors one's expectations. We can use this theory as a lens to analyze Renee's professional and social life. This is exemplified through her early fascination with mathematical concepts and her frustration at her inability to reach an expected conclusion. When Renee had first discovered her faith in mathematics, she found happiness in its predictable order. As she looked at a tile floor, "each square was bigger than the last by an odd number of tiles. It was an epiphany. The conclusion was necessary: it had a rightness to it, confirmed by the smooth, cool feel of the tiles" (Chiang 3a). She was happy because of the certainty of the tiles. Each tile slotted together exactly as she expected; "no matter which side you looked at it from, it came out the same" (Chiang 3a). The objective reality of the placement of the tiles perfectly matched her expectation of them, and for this, Renee gained faith. What Renee cared about "was that same sense of rightness, possessed by every theorem she learned, as insistent as the tiles' physicality, and as exact as their fit" (Chiang 3a). It was these theorems that brought her into the world of mathematics, but it was the "sense of rightness" that made her happy enough to stay. Over time, Renee's faith in mathematics builds, becoming a reliance.

To find meaning, Renee relies on a flawed faith in mathematics, as defined by the larger society, to shape her life. She constrains herself in a tight box of shared belief, living in a world of pre-determined outcomes. Her story harmonizes with the mathematicians who ignored the questions of David Hilbert when he proposed "a request for a proof of the consistency of arithmetic. [...] Few mathematicians regarded this as a matter of much import" (Chiang 5). His thoughts were ignored and hidden away because people were comfortable in their lives. They did not think that their belief needed to be proved; they had total faith in its truth. To question that would have been an assault on all that they believed, and would have shunned them from their larger community. Harari states that to "cause people to believe in an imagined order [...] you never admit that the order is imagined. You always insist that the order sustaining society is an objective reality created by the great gods or by the laws of nature" (83). Renee is caught in this imagined order. In her life, math has always been consistent; in fact, it is the only thing that has been consistent. She was one of the mathematicians who ignored David Hilbert's request, and believed "that

mathematics did not derive its meaning from the universe, but rather imposed some meaning onto the universe" (Chiang 8a). Math made the world turn, math made gravity pull, math put her where she is now. Her a priori system imposed meaning on her empirical life, but only because it was never admitted to be wrong. Mazurek challenges its legitimacy by stating that "modern mathematics is accepting an unauthorized simplification, by bringing all the rational numbers [...] to the fraction with a denominator of 1. In this way, a whole diversity of rational numbers is rejected" (51). Through imposing one correct definition of mathematics, a multitude of differing mindsets were rejected. Renee's world was simplified as she and her colleagues were all brought to "the fraction with a denominator of 1," or the unifying belief that math imposes meaning onto the universe. In doing so, they lost "a whole diversity of rational" viewpoints. Without anything to challenge her perception, Renee stayed in her echo chamber of belief, bolstered by the opinions surrounding her. Renee's mathematical world became an ouroboros, a closed loop of logic. David Hilbert's request would offer "proof [that] would ensure the consistency of a great deal of higher mathematics" (Chiang 5); but it remained unexplored because it was not thought of as something that needed to be proved. The theorems of higher mathematics are considered to be true because they are built from assumptions that created a structure that is completely self-reliant and sealed off from the rest of reality. She was locked into an absolute system, of which she was so certain that it defined the way she lived her entire life. With no one around her to challenge her belief, there was only one person left who could: herself.

Renee's overdependence on her empirical view of mathematics and comfort in her community of like-minded individuals proved to be her downfall when the objective conditions in her life did not match her subjective expectations of them. Through a bold act of self-determination, Renee explored David Hilbert's question, a decision that would ultimately redefine her world. She "discovered a formalism that lets you equate any number with any other number [proving that] Arithmetic as a formal system is inconsistent" (Chiang 6a). Through an irrefutable operation, she discovered that any number can be equated to another. Renee had devoted her entire life to the study of mathematics under the impression that her work had value, but none of her work meant anything if it could all be equated. Harari says that "happiness is not the surplus of pleasant over unpleasant moments. Rather, happiness consists in seeing one's life in its entirety as meaningful and worthwhile" (272). Renee was no longer able to view her life as meaningful. She expected a logical outcome. Throughout her

faithful life, "The positivists [said] all mathematics is a tautology" (Chiang 6a). Positivists—those who believe everything can be proven through logic—who represent Renee's society, impose the idea that math is a tautology (saying the same thing twice). What she saw in her life should not only reflect, but also be defined by mathematical principles. But "they had it all wrong: it's a contradiction" (Chiang 6a). She concluded that "mathematics has absolutely nothing to do with reality" (Chiang 6b). This mirrors that of a pious person losing their faith. Something that she once believed to be intertwined, math as the answer to all of the universe's secrets, was proved to be nothing more than a contradiction. The strength of the ouroboros is also its greatest weakness. The cycle is eternal unless it is broken from within. When Renee discovers a contradiction that proves $1 = 2$, the serpent can no longer consume itself, and the illusion collapses: "I can give you an infinite number of answers, and they're all equally valid, which means they're all equally invalid" (Chiang 6b). To Renee, it was "as if [she] were a theologian proving that there was no God. Not just fearing it, but knowing it for a fact" (Chiang 9a = 9b). She used to lean on mathematics for answers, but she had lost her faith in that system, and for a person whose work was so heavily intertwined with her personal life, this caused her immense grief at home. If $1 = 2$, then life equals death; then a good deed equals a bad deed; then nothing Renee does or theorizes matters, as it can all be equated to zero in the end. Renee could "write the most elegant theorem you've ever seen, and it won't mean any more than a nonsense equation" (Chiang 6a). Mazurek, while exploring his theories of dividing by zero, stated, "There is undoubtedly a difference of context, either we are selecting zero out of two, or selecting zero from a million, however the result is the same, we selected none (zero)" (43). While contextually, Renee was able to observe the universe operating as expected, in her mind, everything would be equated to zero. Renee's equation "has nothing to do with evidence; it's all a priori" (Chiang 7b). This was not the creation of the system. This was not the creation of the theorists around her. This was brought about through her own individualistic path; "her own intuition had betrayed her" (Chiang 8). Because of her individual loss of faith, her world had fallen apart to the point of an attempt on her own life, but to the world around her, math still functioned. Her colleagues, fellow mathematicians and theorists, "would simply say, She's lost the knack" (Chiang 8a). Mathematics was still their shared delusion, and as they had not gone on a journey of their own, they remained unaffected by the sacrilegious theories of someone who had simply "lost the knack." Her peers remained happy by ignoring the apparent

contradictions displayed by Renee's theorem. Harari brings forth an argument, stating, "happiness is synchronising one's personal delusions of meaning with the prevailing collective delusions. [...] Does happiness really depend on self-delusion?" (272). While the mathematicians surrounding Renee deluded themselves, Renee had lost her ability to do so. Her commitment to absolute truth isolated her from their collective falsehoods. Theoretically, "a meaningful life can be extremely satisfying even in the midst of hardship, whereas a meaningless life is a terrible ordeal no matter how comfortable it is." (272). Straying from the "collective delusions," Renee carved her own path into loneliness, sending her into a spiral of depression and disconnection. But just because she had lost her original faith does not mean that her life became devoid of meaning.

The end of Renee's faith only opened new paths to explore. Harari offers a caveat to the loss of faith: "in order to change an existing imagined order, we must first believe in an alternative imagined order" (87). Renee did not leave the world of mathematics because of a complete annihilation of her faith, but because her faith was in the process of being placed elsewhere. Renee's belief in mathematics was an ouroboros contained inside the larger ouroboros of her life. She had gone from faithlessly wandering to a fascination with mathematics through the catalyst of the floor tiles, to a state of limbo. She is at a stage where she has to carve her own path forward, and her husband, Carl, knows that. He opened his mouth to say that he knew exactly what she meant, that he had felt the same things as she. But he stopped himself: for this was an empathy that separated rather than united them, and he couldn't tell her that" (Chiang 9a = 9b). It was the fact that Carl had gone through the same journey as Renee that he knew he could not guide her through it. Although they had made it to the same conclusion, a loss of faith and a redefinition of it, their processes were fundamentally different. Mazurek, in reference to division by zero, argued "By saying for example that $2/1 = 4/2$ we are omitting the fact, that in each of those ratios we are talking about different transformations" (41). Both Carl and Renee had redefined their lives to look at their journeys as their answers were proven false in their own minds. Because their journeys were fundamentally different, Carl could not offer his assistance. Renee's tragedy is not that her belief system failed, but that she has not yet built a new one. Her crisis granted her the ultimate freedom: the chance to define her new meaning in an individualistic way.

Through Ted Chiang's "Division by Zero," Renee's journey from joyful certainty to devastating reality shows that happiness is not found in objective truth, but rather in the fragile alignment of our personal and collective beliefs.

When Renee's faith in mathematics shatters, she is left without a framework for meaning, but that is not the end of her cycle, but rather an empty void designed to be filled. The death of her old faith allowed her to see a new reality, opening her up to independent purpose. Renee's ambiguous end is an invitation for a unique outlook on life. Her life matches with Mazurek's theories of division by zero while proving Harari's theory of happiness. Her greatest attribute was her uniqueness; it led to absolute misery, and yet granted her the most important thing of all: a life of meaning.

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Revathy Chadalavada

Grade 11, Ladue Horton Watkins High School
Poetry



dove

a dove
young, tender, *oh so innocent*
a fragile seraph felled upon snow-veiled earth
like an angel,
alabaster feathers whisper soft cries,
its body soft, brittle

twin orbs, once full of glee
stare lifelessly, piercing
thick, crimson fluid bleeds from its dainty beak,
staining winter's purity

perhaps the naive dove flew too near the sun's seductive blaze—
drawn by his hypnotic, molten radiance,
by the kind warmth his rays offered,
unknowing those very golden tendrils would ensnare it

fondle it.

impale it.

ravage it.

ruin it.

the sun will steal the dove's virgin essence in rapture,
licking his lips,
for who could resist such pure, untouched beauty?

delicate form lay helpless
plucked and broken by false light
the sun it trusted would never
the gentle sun it knew would never—

ignis fatuus
foolish bird
gaze too long, the sun will harrow the soul
dare to touch,
he devours,
charring white wings to
ash

char & char
scorch searing deeper,
deeper
till i'm utterly
filthy,
inhuman

a grotesque heap of blood &
salt

Revathy Chadalavada

Grade 11, Ladue Horton Watkins High School
Novel



Scarf

May rushed through her house, picking up whichever random winter clothes happened to be lying around. She barreled out the door, only to be accosted by a cold wind that left her teeth chattering instantly.

Scarf, she thought to herself. *Should have brought a scarf.*

A string of curse words ran through her head, all directed at the school superintendent who decided that high school was going to start so %#\$^& early in the morning. She was not a morning person. Normal people were not morning people. She glanced over at the house across the way and couldn't help but smile at the boy waiting outside.

River glanced up as she approached. He smiled at her and she felt herself warm up a little bit, but even this wasn't enough to completely lift her spirits. It was that cold.

"What's up?" River called out, eyes twinkling with the kind of excitement that somehow came without buckets of caffeine.

"Freezing." She answered, barely getting the word out before her shivering made speech difficult again.

The sooner they left, the sooner she could defrost herself in the hallway before first period.

"Excited for creative writing?" River asked, jogging a bit to keep up with her.

"Y-Yes.." May answered, still smiling a bit despite basic diction was proving to be very difficult.

"Here." River said, unwinding his scarf and placing it around her.

She gasped a bit at the motion, but the dry, bitter air that had been present a second before was suddenly filled with his scent. Then she stopped breathing altogether.

WHAT.

She had the presence of mind not to say that out loud, and settled for thanking him instead.

“No problem.” He answered, continuing his stride. When she didn’t follow, he turned back and looked at her, his cheeks and ears much redder than before.

“Wait, now you’re going to be cold.” she said. The scarf was warm from having just been around his neck and she tried to soak in every moment of it before she had to hand it back.

“Nope. Not cold.” River replied, even as his cheeks turned redder.

After a bit, they came up to the school and she realized she wasn’t really cold at all anymore. In fact, she wouldn’t have minded staying outside a bit longer. She watched River run up the steps. She had been a bit sad throughout winter break of her senior year, knowing this would be their last semester together, but she wasn’t feeling sad today. Yeah, she may have gotten over her romantic feelings for River, but she couldn’t help but smile at his bubbly optimism, the excitement that radiated from him.

And his scarf was still around her neck. Not a bad way to start the semester.

May ran up after River, uncoiling the scarf around her neck to give back to him.

Some of her friends had glanced over and seen it, but she ignored their looks. She would have time to explain later but right now she had to stay cool and collected.

The weather made the former pretty easy, but the latter part... well, she had never been all that good about staying collected around River, but who knew. New semester, new her. No romantic feelings.

The bell ran overhead and they shuffled in.

“River!” She called out, grabbing his hand to keep from losing him in the crowd.

And maybe for other reasons. He clasped hers back, leading her through the packed hallway, and something about it felt too natural for comfort. That composed thing? It was out the window. No romantic feelings? *Well...*

He finally managed to get them into a side hallway, turning around and forgetting to let go of her hand.

“Yeah?” He asked, eyes beckoning something in a way she didn’t understand.

“Your scarf.” She got out, offering the article of clothing to him rather lamely.

Suddenly, she was wishing for the cold to come back. She didn’t understand what was happening, but their casual morning routine had become charged way too quickly and she was feeling like she would burst into flames just from his look.

She was longing to go back to their walk, to the cold wind and his warm scarf.

“Oh.” He deflated a bit.

Why does he look disappointed...

The warning bell rang.

River reached out to grab it, but without thinking, May pulled back her arm.

“Actually,” she said, looking down and tracing the red and yellow stripes as if they would be the ones to answer her question, “Would you mind if I kept it for the day? We still have to walk back, and...”

She chanced a look at his face and was surprised to see him smiling.

“Please, do.” He told her.

They ran to their respective classes, May clutching to the scarf. They would meet up again for second period, and third, of course, but having his scarf oddly made it feel like he was still with her.

He had given it to her. Wrapped it around her because he had noticed she was cold...

She held onto the scarf a bit tighter, as if it could disappear at any moment, a prop from days gone by.

But it didn't. It was still there. Throughout class, she unconsciously played with the fabric, tracing the threads with her fingers. The bell rang faster than expected, and she casually tossed the scarf around her neck, scooping up her book and grabbing her coat. River was waiting by their lockers, leaning on hers. He glanced over and beamed at her. Her hand unconsciously went up to the scarf, as if to make sure it was still there.

Okay, she thought to herself. Maybe some romantic feelings.

Revathy Chadalavada

Grade 11, Ladue Horton Watkins High School
Flash Fiction



Time Loop

Blank eyes opening at the sudden flash of light, its pupils dilating before they rapidly blinked. They felt the light burn their sight as they closed their eyes and covered them with their hands. The man winced before rubbing his eyes rather aggressively before blinking away with little tears running down his face.

All was quiet before the sound of an alarm clock rang beside him. He groaned before turning to the side to meet the ringing clock on a bedside table, he gently picked up the clock and stopped its ear-killing noises and placed it back on the table.

He let out a sigh as his body relaxed. Before flinching at the sound of someone being thrown against a wall—the wall inside his house to be precise, he muttered a curse as he sat up from the bed with frightened eyes as he stared at the opened door.

He wondered why he kept that bedroom door open but shrugged off that thought when the sound of coughing, groaning and a string of curses echoed through the empty hallways of the two storied building.

He's shaken up. *Crap.*

He stayed still on the bed, no movement for a few seconds before he leaned on the foot of the bed and grabbed something that was stored under it; a baseball bat. Cliché but it was all that he could do for now, though he wasn't that stupid, he's staying on the bed.

He could just go to sleep. Yeah. But, that's a huge risk, what if the intruder had intentions of killing him...

Oh well.

He set the baseball bat aside and went to lay down on the stiff mattress that he grew accustomed to for years and began to drift off to sleep as the footsteps from the intruder were getting closer to his room. *But he's still sleeping.*

The intruder reached the man's room, it was messy. Very messy. There was paper everywhere with a few canvases on the corner of the room, beside those canvases were boxes that were covered in paint. The intruder looked around the place in distaste as he pulled out a phone and took a picture of the room—

Just like what he did in all the other rooms of the man's house—the said man who fluttered his eyes open to the intruder standing at the end of the bed, still on their phone, the man stiffened at the sight of the intruder before his gaze snapped towards the baseball bat beside the bed.

Glancing at the man whose eyes were still on the phone—he grabbed the bat as quietly as he could but knocked down a canvas that was beside the weapon, he muttered out a curse before grabbing the bat and sitting up as the intruder pulled out a weapon of his own.

A stapler.

The man stared at the intruder's weapon in deadpan before they rear back their arm and aimed for the man's head—too bad he reacted quickly though. The man ducked just in time and bolted outside his bedroom, leaving the intruder stunned in surprise before they followed him shortly.

The man breathed heavily as he ran through the hallways of his house, *oh man.* The intruder was right on his tail, he didn't know why the intruder was chasing after him, he thought that they would be running away as well. His house was in a pleasant state, that was until he reached the living room.

There were glass shards on the floor where the window was above it, from across the room was a dent on the wall. *How dare they.* The man frowned and stomped his way into another area in the house before the intruder entered the living room.

His hair was a mess, his heart was beating so hard that it was the only thing that he could hear at the moment, and oh man, was he pissed. He gripped the bat tightly and leaned his back against the corner as he awaited for the intruder to come by.

Once they did, he did not hesitate to swing his bat and aimed for the head. The intruder's unconscious form fell to the floor as the man dropped the bat and stood still and watched as the body laid unmoving—nevermind its arm was twitching. The man sighed in relief, having not to worry about things like these ever again.

Now, how should he take care of this? I guess he could lay it on the sidewalk a few blocks away from his house. Yeah, that's a good idea.

The man smiled to himself, but before he could take his plan into action, he heard a click from behind him. He turned his head slightly as he glanced at what was behind him to see a gun—aiming straight at his face.

“Ah crap—”

Blank eyes shot open as the man's figure sat up from the bed, his face filled with sweat as his throat was dry. He looked around the place to see no intruder in sight, all his things such as his canvases and art supplies were there safe and sound.

That was when his alarm went off, reacting quickly—he stopped the noise from going off the second it had played the first note.

Silence.

It was just silence.

He let out a sigh and slumped from where he sat, before flinching at the sound of someone being thrown against a wall—the wall inside his house to be precise.

Oh.

Oh.

Oh dear.

Preston Chang

Grade 9, Blue Valley Northwest High
School
Short Story



A Step Up

Ethan's notebook looked like a war zone. Equations were crossed out, arrows pointing every which way, and margins were filled with frantic calculations. He pulled on his messy brown hair, pushed up his glasses, and tapped his pencil at a number that refused to cooperate. Around him, the classroom buzzed with the usual distractions, but none of that mattered. For the first time, the work was slipping through his fingers, and Ethan felt a hollow twist in his chest, as if the foundation of his brilliance was crumbling beneath him.

In middle school, Ethan had been the kid classmates glanced at before turning in their own papers, just to see if his pencil had stopped moving yet. His math tests always came back first, covered in neat red checkmarks that made the rest of the class jealous. At lunch, kids slid their homework across the table with a casual, "Hey, Ethan, just check mine real quick," as if his approval were worth more than the teacher's. Parents stopping by the classroom were quietly told to "look at Ethan's work" as an example, and he'd sit straighter, pretending not to hear while a spark of pride warmed his chest. Back then, the attention felt like proof that he was exactly who everyone thought he was. Now it clung to him like a shadow he couldn't step out of.

High school was supposed to be just a little more difficult than middle school, but after Ethan had attended some of his classes, that illusion shattered. By the end of the first month, his nights stretched longer than the days. His desk disappeared under eraser shavings and crumpled sheets of paper that didn't meet his standards of perfection. Diagrams were redrawn until the lines carved grooves into the page, chemical formulas scribbled and rewritten in a hand that

cramped and throbbed. Long after the house went quiet, his lamp still burned, and the muffled sound of him whispering terms and formulas threaded through the dark. By morning, his eyes were bloodshot, his head a dull ache, and his stomach twisted in knots, sending a jitter through his hands and a rapid pulse through his chest. Still, he pushed through the day. Every glance from a teacher or classmate tightened the coil of panic in his chest. He felt as though at any moment, the whole world might see the cracks he'd been trying so desperately to hide.

Mara, his lab partner, noticed anyway. "You've been at that for a while," she said, watching him erase and rewrite the same equations for the third time.

Ethan forced a shrug, trying to look nonchalant. "Just making sure it's right."

"It already is. You don't have to," she said.

"I do," he snapped, sharper than he intended. Her expression faltered, concern flashing in her eyes, and he immediately wished he could take it back. Nobody could understand how much this mattered or how much he feared failing.

By the fifth week of the semester, the assignments made him hesitate at almost every step. Ethan double-checked every chemistry formula, then triple-checked his history responses, convinced he had missed something. His pencil scratched darker and shakier lines the longer he stared, each line a small battle against the numbers that refused to make sense.

At lunch, he barely touched his food. A few classmates leaned over.

"Ethan, what's the answer to number six on the homework?"

He looked up, mouth going dry. The room suddenly felt too bright, every sound too sharp. He hesitated, though he thought he knew the answer. Suddenly, the letters blurred together. His cheeks burned. "Uh, I'll check later," he muttered, trying to appear confident and knowledgeable.

They laughed lightly and moved on, not cruelly, but Ethan's hands trembled as he clutched his pencil. He swallowed, once, twice, but the lump in his throat stayed put, and the open notebook felt heavier than it had a moment ago. The mask he had built so carefully cracked.

After class that day, his chemistry teacher patted his shoulder. "You'll get this in no time. This material plays to your strengths."

Ethan forced a smile, fingers tightening on his notebook as he felt a hollow twist in his stomach. *My strengths. My strengths.* The words echoed in his head like a warning. He could almost hear the whispers behind the classroom door,

teachers comparing him to the other students who struggled. What if they realized he wasn't as sharp as they thought? What if middle school had been a fluke?

Later, in science, his instructor leaned over the lab bench. "I'll be counting on you to lead your group. You have been putting in a lot of effort lately."

He nodded, palms slick on the beakers. Every movement felt precarious, every glance from a classmate a silent accusation. The possibility of getting a problem wrong, of writing the wrong number, made his chest pound.

That night, Ethan hunched over his desk, the clock ticking so loudly it seemed to echo inside his skull. His glasses slipped down his nose as he bent closer, lips whispering numbers and formulas he couldn't understand. His jaw clenched, a dull ache settling in his temples. The pencil dug into the page, lines growing darker, rougher, until the paper nearly tore. Each sheet hit the floor with a slap, and he yanked the next one closer, pulse thundering, anger coiling like a snake in his chest. His fingers itched to crush the pencil, to shred the pages, to make the world feel the sharp, burning anger that consumed him.

He rubbed his burning eyes and stared at the latest problem, solved three times already, each attempt wobbling on the page like a chair with a broken leg. *Why can't I get this right?* he thought, teeth gritting. *It's just numbers. How hard can it be?* He slammed his pencil down, the sound sharp and harsh in the quiet room. *Why does nothing ever work the way it should?*

Sleep came in shallow bursts, broken by imagined solutions that dissolved as soon as he wrote them. When morning came, his eyes ached, and his hands trembled as he gathered his things. Still, he forced himself forward, each step heavy with the fear of showing weakness.

By the end of the first quarter, exhaustion had settled over him like a second skin. His answers were scrawled onto the page, slower and shakier than usual, his handwriting smudging under the edge of his finger. When the teacher called on him, his throat constricted, and his chest tightened. He froze for only a fraction of a second, but it was enough for the room to feel heavier, for every pair of eyes seemed to press against him.

Whispers drifted from the back of the room. Heat surged into his face as he forced the words out, each one tasting wrong, praying they were right.

They were. But the relief barely touched him. That tiny hesitation, that brief falter, had already marked him in his own mind. He had betrayed the image he had worked so hard to uphold.

That night, the assignments were strewn across his desk like a battlefield. Formulas and dates bled into the margins, arrows looping and crisscrossing like tangled wires. He gripped his pencil so hard his knuckles whitened, and the pressure snapped it clean in his hand, the jagged edge cutting his finger. A flash of heat ran through him, and for an instant, a dark thought flickered: *What if I could make the pain bigger, make everything stop somehow?* He blinked hard, shaking his head, forcing himself back to the dates he was supposed to memorize.

But he couldn't understand. Each attempt only deepened the chaos on the page. His pulse raced, heat building up under his skin with every heartbeat. His hands shook, but he pressed on.

The tension never eased up. At around 3:00 AM, he slammed his notebook shut, rattling the lamp. "I can't do this," he whispered, voice breaking. "I'm not who they think I am."

The words lingered in the air, raw and heavy. He sank back in his chair, tears stinging his eyes, staring at the broken pencil as if it were a mirror. The silence pressed down, thick and suffocating. If brilliance was slipping through his fingers, what was left of him?

Shame and fear, tangled together, made every thought sharp and hurtful. The part of him that once believed he could understand everything, control everything, now felt distant. Even his own name sounded strange in his head, like it belonged to a boy who didn't exist anymore. Anger, despair, and frustration all bubbled up inside him, trapped, pounding against his ribs, clawing at his throat, telling him to give up, that he was worth nothing because he wasn't flawless.

The next morning, Mara slid into the desk beside him. She didn't flinch at his bloodshot eyes or the tremor in his hands as he opened his notebook. Instead, she leaned close, voice calm. "Want to work through it together?"

Ethan's first instinct was to refuse. The memory of the snapped pencil, the jagged edge cutting his finger, and the dark flicker of a thought he couldn't follow pressed against him. His chest tightened, breaths shallow, fingers hovering over the notebook as if touching it might make him crumble. Reluctantly, he nodded, forcing himself to meet Mara's calm gaze.

Working side by side, the problem didn't feel smaller, but it seemed slightly less impossible. Mara scribbled numbers, erased mistakes, and laughed at herself when a coefficient went wrong. She didn't falter or crumble in the face of the errors. She just kept moving.

Ethan watched her, fingers hovering over the page, his own pencil trembling slightly. Finally, he forced himself to cross out one of his shaky lines without hesitation. The page looked messy, but he was making progress.

“See?” Mara said with a small, encouraging smile. “Nobody gets it perfect the first time.” Ethan wanted to argue, but the words caught in his throat, swallowed by the tight knot in his chest. Maybe, just maybe, she was right.

Eric Chang

Grade 9, John Burroughs School
Personal Essay & Memoir



A Delicacy

The moment I woke up, an awful smell somewhere between spoiled milk and rotting flesh engulfed my nostrils. Groaning, I sat up in my bed and stretched, looking around my room. The walls that were once white now resembled a shade of pale yellow, with patches of paint that had been chipped away. Despite the shabby condition of the walls, the room itself was extremely organized, since my dad was constantly chiding me about it. For a while, I admired the spotless arrangement of furniture, but was quickly knocked back to my senses when that god awful scent intruded on my thoughts once again. This time, it was accompanied by loud squelching noises coming from the kitchen of our apartment. I quickly got dressed and headed out of my bedroom.

Today was an off day from school, and I intended to make the most of it. I had already promised my friends that I would meet them outside in my courtyard so we could go play, but seeing my dad hunched over in the kitchen examining a bucket, I got distracted. I began walking over, but quickly halted in my tracks once I recognized the reeking smell that emitted from the bucket. Pinching my nose with my fingers, I bravely ventured closer, curious as to what my father was examining. Once I was within distance, I peered over the brim of the tub. Three slimy-looking creatures the size of my palm slowly crawled back and forth. They had shells with mesmerizing swirl patterns, and on the head of the creature, two long antennae stuck out at a sharp angle. I tapped my dad on the back, a questioning look on my face. He spun around, and his eyes lit up when he saw me.

“My son, these are snails!” he said.

“These days, everyone in our neighbourhood loves to eat these. During this time of year, they are a delicacy.”

“You must be crazy if you think I’m eating these things,” I said.

“Oh, these aren’t for us to eat, they are for me to sell! I am planning on starting a snail farm where we can raise snails and sell them to locals,” my dad said.

I looked at him like he was crazy and shook my head. Lately, he had been coming up with the strangest money-making ideas. In the town we lived in, it was borderline impossible to become rich, but my dad never gave up, generating ideas that increase in oddity. While this snail idea was slightly more bizarre than the previous ones, I just ignored it and walked out of the kitchen to go meet up with my friends.

After a couple of rounds of “war”, a game my friends and I played with handmade paper guns, I heard my father’s voice calling my name. I swiveled around to see him standing over the apartment complex’s makeshift garden. He had created perfectly measured squares of what looked like the metal grates you see on the side of the street. The grate seemed to have some strange decoration, but I soon realized that the swirly pattern I thought was the decoration turned out to be the shells of countless snails that stuck to the steel bars of the grate. My dad patted me on the back with a hand dripping in sweat and handed me a watering can.

“Your turn,” he said.

For the remainder of the day, I reluctantly left my friends and worked tirelessly on my father’s snail farm. Moisturizing grass and wiping up snail mucus occupied the time that I had originally planned for “war”. However, when I saw the prideful look on my father’s face when he came back from advertising his snails, I realized that all that work was worth it. At the dinner table, he boasted pridefully about how much money we were going to make the next day, and how he was going to buy a car. That night we went to sleep anxiously, antsy for the sun to signal the start of our successful business.

The next morning, my family woke up to thunder and lightning. Before I could put on my slippers, I heard the front door slam, followed by my dad’s familiar footsteps thumping down the apartment stairs. Hastily getting dressed, I raced after him, knowing exactly where he was going. The snail farm was a mess. The defeated expression painted on my dad’s face told the entire story. Shells were scattered everywhere, with only a couple of live snails still hanging on to the metal grate. Dad took his disappointment out on

me, lecturing on and on about how creativity is important in entrepreneurship, but sometimes realism is more important.

For the rest of the week, the mood in our household was gloomy, contemplation filling the air instead of our usual laughter. Fortunately, there was one bright spot among the dreariness. For the entire week, we got to eat a special treat at dinnertime: snails.

Jerry Chang

Grade 12, John Burroughs School

Educators: Lydia Smith

Flash Fiction



Counting

I remember three wildflower bouquets, eight get-well-soon cards, and one teddy bear. Slumped over in a plastic chair, I stared solemnly at the gifts sitting on the bedside table, hoping they had some magical powers within. *Maybe mother could look over at them and regain some strength.* But as I glanced at her fragile figure, propped up in the hospital bed, my thoughts were shattered.

I remember one tall doctor with long, blonde hair. She clicked her pen while she talked, probing my patience with each press. *Those clicks won't help her heal.*

I remember hundreds of coughs, thousands of raggedy breaths, and the countless times mother's weary eyelids shuddered in the light. Each time she closed her eyes, I counted the seconds before they reopened, praying I wouldn't have to keep counting. *10...11...12.*

I remember my dad had entered the room exactly 23 times, eyebrows scrunched with worry each time. My younger sister had come in 11 times before falling asleep in the hallway. I had stayed in the room the entire night.

I remember dozens of frenzied beeps, echoing throughout the hospital room as two panicked nurses scrambled in. I remember no more beeping after that.

Sheena Chen

Grade 9, Westminster Christian Academy
Personal Essay & Memoir



Is It?

“It’s romance”, I claim when I swallow my screams. *“It’s romance”*, bleeds the ink from my fingertips. *“It’s romance”*, I think, though I’ve yet to feel love that doesn’t bruise.

Romance, romance, romance, I repeat silently. I’m no longer sure if I’m convincing or mocking myself. I stand under the scorching water that leaves angry marks on the paths it runs down my body. The pipes squeak and strain, seemingly from the effort of washing away an entire week’s worth of filth. Has it really only been a week? I’m so filthy I imagine opening my eyes through the humid air to find my skin covered in soot where porcelain soft skin once sat. I manage to open my eyes through the haze of water — my hands are still shaky and pale as ever. Gosh, I can’t seem to recall the last meal I had. A sharp inhale surprises me when my hip clinks against the slick acrylic wall. My bones stick through my skin in places they hadn’t used to. He seems to like it that way, though.

“Hurry up!” my mom shouts from the cluttered living room.

“You’re wasting water!” her voice is muffled as I turn the pressure up. She yells again, but I can’t stop to hear.

The soap shares his scent and taunts me as I stare at it. I stare, and stare, and stare, as if it could scrub away the scale beneath my bed, the number I’ve memorized in my head, the voice that haunts my dreams. Its aroma haunts the bathroom.

And suddenly, my mind is a cinema.

Images flash. Blurry and fragmented yet too much all at once.

Him calling me to his room.

Him on his knees.

His radiant smile when I finally swallowed and nodded.

Him holding me when I cried afterwards.

Rinse and repeat.

My brittle hands scratch at my hair under the stream.

Shampoo. Scratch. Rinse. Repeat.

It still feels coarse as forgotten straw left too long in the sun.

Scratch. Rinse. Repeat.

Rinse.

Scratch.

Repeat.

Again.

Again.

When I snap back to the reality of my creaky shower, it's because of the droplets of blood prancing down my legs, mingling with the water that glides off my skin. Perhaps it, too, is too clean for me.

My hand sings red when I touch it to my scalp which I clawed too desperately at.

Crap.

He won't like that.

A metal pipe in the wall groans the same deep note as his voice.

And then all I feel is his calloused hands in my hair, his all-too familiar voice a feather as if to cushion the dagger he weaves with his tongue. I sit down in the small slippery space.

"You haven't been good"

"I know, I'm sorry"

The scalding water embraces me like his arms. I sink further into it. And maybe, if I just-

Dense air wraps around my throat, effectively cutting me through. I don't know if it is the heat of his breath on my neck or the shower above that pushes me deeper into the warm embrace at my back.

"It's not real", I tell myself.

But the heat sticks to my skin like he does anyways.

"You chose this"

"I said I'm sorry I-"

"Shh, don't you trust me?"

From outside, my phone taunts me with the alert of a notification. *Don't look don't look don't-*

There's still soap on my arms when I pick up my phone.

"I think I need help" reads the message I don't send. Never do, Never will.

"Yes" reads the redundant message I do send to him.

I turn off my phone.

He won't like that.

I take a breath so deep I can feel scars forming on my lungs as they expand
past the shattered remains of my heart.

Click is the switch I clumsily hit before the room is enveloped in shadow,
leaving the moonlight to illuminate the soft pink blankets on my bed.

I stain them red and soiled with a wound I made myself.

"You're fine"

"You're fine"

"You're fine"

Rhymes the lullaby that lulls me when I finally close my eyes.

"You're fine"

What if I'm not?

"Don't you trust me?"

"Fine"

"Fine"

"It is romance"

But is it love?

Jane Cho

Grade 8, Parkway West Middle School

Educator: Tracy Bouslog

Personal Essay & Memoir



World Famous to Infamous

Excitement shot through my veins as my face peeled into a wide grin. “In honor of the Webster Music Program’s 100th year anniversary, our Young People’s Symphonic Orchestra will be traveling all the way to the heart of New York City to perform at the world famous Carnegie Hall,” Mr. Jackson announced. The hall was lit up with stomping, cheering, and celebration. “And one more thing. We will be performing in a full house.”

When the long white buses drove from the bustling streets of New York into the front of our hotel, we could all sense that something was off. The charter bus’s vinyls read “40 passengers”. Our full orchestra contained 102 musicians, 9 chaperones, and in addition, a wide variety of very expensive instruments. There’s no way we’re all gonna fit I thought as our conductor Mr. Jackson pulled out his phone to talk to the organization that called our buses. When the last bus pulled into our hotel, it felt like a sigh of relief. All of us loaded our instruments and stepped into the charter bus.

As soon as we were all in, the bus exploded with excited chatter. Wow, I am really performing at THE Carnegie Hall in New York City I thought. The bus ride felt like we were in a fast moving train, not in a bus navigating the heavy city traffic. Getting dropped off at Carnegie hall felt like I was in a utopia. As soon as we stepped into that building, that was a whole other story. The staff immediately greeted us with rudeness and disrespect as they ordered us around the building. It felt as though we weren’t in a world renowned hall but an infamous concert venue. The building was fancy but the experience was cheap. This isn’t at all what I imagined. Why are they being so impolite? I thought. They spoke to us in an annoyed and aggravated tone while leading us into our

warm-up room. When we all unpacked our instruments and started tuning, the room was filled with a variety of sounds. From the blares of the trumpets, to the strum of the harp, to the rumble of the cellos, I could hear it all.

When we entered the hall, I was in awe of the bright stage lights and the cherry red seating that complimented the gold accents. I quickly forgot about the staff ordeal and set my focus on the performance. We got settled into our seating arrangements and started to warm up our pieces as the doors opened. A sea of people started streaming in. My head immediately flashed back to when Mr. Jackson said we would have a full house. My stomach churned like a whirring blender. Looking further into the audience, I noticed that the flow of people had stopped and the majority of the crowd were parents. The sea of people now became a pond of parents that barely filled half of the base row. The full house was nowhere to be seen but the performance hadn't started yet. They're probably only letting parents in first before they dim the lights right, I reassured myself. As I continued warming up, out of the corner of my eye, I saw the doors closing. Mr. Jackson queued us to rest position and left the stage with our concertmaster. The lights started to dim and I began to hear a voice telling us to silence our phones and put away our devices. Even through listening to all of this, only one thing remained in my head. We were promised a full house and every single seat filled in the hall. We received a mainly empty hall with an audience of parents and friends. As the lights fully dimmed, I switched my posture, set both feet on the floor, shifted to the edge of my seat, and straightened my back. The show was about to begin.

The door opened and Mr. Jackson weaved his way through the chairs and reached the conductor's podium. The first cello gave a head nod as our whole orchestra cohesively stood up and turned our fronts to the audience. Mr. Jackson gave a great big bow as the crowd erupted in applause and whooping. He slowly rose up and flipped his back to face us and raised both of his hands with a tiny baton in his right signalling for us to all go to playing position. I brought my violin up to my left shoulder, placing it on my shoulder rest, then putting my chin onto my chin rest to secure my grip. My right hand morphed into my bow hold that I had practiced a million times before, and I lifted my arm to hang just above the strings of my violin. Mr. Jackson queued us in with four beats and flicked his two hands up on the fourth beat as we began to play.

Playing felt like forever as we went from contemporary, to jazz, to romantic, to classical. The whole way through, my body felt tense and stiff. Every single piece we played rang throughout the hall and I could hear our full sounds

rebounding from the walls. When we finally played our last note, we let it ring until the sound completely died down and Mr. Jackson circled his hands and motioned for us to go back into rest position. As soon as we went back to rest position, the crowd erupted in applause. Mr. Jackson pointed to percussion to stand up, then brass, then woodwinds, harp, bass, cello, second violins, and first violins. The audience was still cheering as Mr. Jackson took his final bow and we all exited the stage.

Walking out of the building gave me a feeling of disappointment. While the parents were congratulating us, my shoulders drooped, and my violin somehow felt 100 times heavier than ever before. Although I was proud of how my orchestra performed, I couldn't stop thinking about how we had been lied to. The full house was solely just parents that filled not even all of the floor seats. The whole experience felt bittersweet and the performance was the antithesis of my expectations. The next time I encounter an experience that raises my expectations, I will never fall into that trap.

Isabelle Cox-Garleanu

Grade 11, MICDS
Educator: Tex Tourais
Short Story



Life Cycle of a Thunderstorm

Stage 1: A cumulus cloud begins to grow vertically, dominated by upwardly-moving, moist air currents.

In March, lightning bolts split the sky into a disturbed purple madness and it looks like the world is ending. Those nights are perfect for the prediction game. Accurately guessing the number of seconds before lightning flashes means you win a hug; an inaccurate prediction means you have to summersault in the first muds of spring; a “close enough”—how my friends often categorize my attempts—means you earn a high-five.

My hand stings after three lightning strikes.

“Not bad. You are not bad at all,” Jamie remarks as she sits next to me on the grass.

“Uh, you just stained your white pants,” I tease. Both of us know very well that Jamie has been suffering from summersaults the past hour. Our faces crumple into laughter as she mouths *Oh no* and her cheeks, pale from the moonlight, glow crimson with warmth.

It’s Austin’s turn to name a number of seconds. He chooses *seven*, and exactly seven seconds later, he wins a hug. He requests it specifically from Jamie.

“But I’m all muddy and gross,” she tells him.

“I don’t care.”

Of course he doesn’t. Ever since we were kids, I’ve seen him playfully jab her forehead and tangle her hair into disfigured hearts, the shape that his corneas mold into whenever he is near her. He is always touching her, and Jamie recoils often, but he does it anyway. Austin is twelve years old and convinced that he has

found his wife. All of us are twelve—three kids under a bleeding, hurting, sprinkling sky, away from our parents to play beneath a distant moon ostracized from the infinite acrobatics of stars. Every March, my mother glimpses lightning tearing open the dark from her kitchen window and immediately urges me to go outside into the murky blackness with Austin and Jamie.

Hence, here I am. Austin receives his hug and Jamie rolls her eyes as she always does whenever he is noticeably blushing. To avoid secondhand embarrassment, I turn my head away from them, only to unfortunately see a familiar group of giants in flashy clothing. Their neon shoes, illuminating as their feet blur above the grass, are enough for me to recognize them as the obnoxious, repulsive older kids down the block.

They'll tell you they play better games with better prizes. If Austin could, he would tell them that there is no better reward than to be hugged by Jamie. But I see their prizes, and their enjoyment as they collect them—the wolf-like hunger that dominates their faces as they spin a bottle, the lips below their noses that wait in anticipation. To them, bodies are meant for more than carrying the soul. They are for pleasure. For kissing. Something that kids don't do, and adults, like my parents, never do either. The gentleness of a boy's hand behind a girl's ear, the frivolous intensifying of glitter breaths, is a distinctly teenager thing. I'm sure of it.

Jamie's eyes follow my gaze.

"You want to go to them?" she asks.

"What? No, of course not. They're... old."

"That's exactly why we should," she says, nudging my shoulder. "Don't you ever want to not feel like a little kid for once?"

"Actually, I'm perfectly fine being a kid."

"Let's just go," Austin chimes in. "Jamie wants to go, so let's go."

"I'm kind of scared," whispers Jamie. She does not look scared at all.

Austin grabs Jamie's hand and they both begin walking in the teenagers' direction, their silhouettes vanishing into the indigo wind. They look as if they just stepped out of one of those holiday-themed glass spheres that contain a boy and a girl holding hands amidst glitter snowflakes. My father bought one for my mother when I was really little, from the local flea market.

Tears invaded her eyes when my father threw that snow globe across the room during an argument. This was many springs ago when he was drunk during a thunderstorm. To my father that night, her body was meant for more than carrying her soul and his children. Her arms and thighs had become his

punching bag, bruising her skin into greenish purple constellations. My mother has been shooing me out of the house ever since, especially on nights like tonight, when lightning cracks the sky and reveals heaven. “Are you sure it’s not dangerous to play outside?” I had asked her the first time while peering out the wet window. “Danger makes you strong, Samara. So please, I want you to go.”

My mother is wrong in thinking that I should be strong. I don’t have to be. Kids don’t have to be strong. I don’t *want* to either. *Strong* is a man who uses his big muscles to throw objects at his wife and shakes her violently, venom springing from his mouth. And then he watches her forgive him; he watches her pick up pieces from the floor, dry her cheeks, and forgive. His tantrums turn into heartbeats and his heartbeats turn into us, our family.

Stage 2: This is the most dangerous stage, when tornadoes, large hail, damaging winds, and flash flooding may occur.

I end up following Austin and Jamie because I can’t play the prediction game alone, and going home isn’t an option—my mother would just send me away again.

As we approach the group, a tall girl, no older than seventeen or eighteen, plucks a cigarette from her mouth.

“What do you want?” she asks.

“We wanted to hang out with you guys,” responds Austin. Jamie and I exchange a look of mutual understanding about Austin. As the only boy among us, he can take the lead.

The girl glares at the three of us like we are intruders in her territory.

“How old are you, ten?”

“Twelve.”

“Hm.” She snorts softly. “Yeah, well, I’m not tryna babysit tonight. None of us are.” She sweeps her arm toward the other five teenagers. One of them, a guy wearing a dark green beanie, suddenly leans over to her ear and whispers something. The two of them laugh, followed by the other three asking what is so amusing. After several more giggles and hushed murmurs, the girl redirects her attention back to Austin.

“Actually, sure, let’s hang out.”

Jamie and Austin beam, but my face doesn’t crease in the slightest.

“What’s your name?”

“Austin!”

“Austin, do you like playing games?”

“Yes, I do!” he exclaims. “All of us were just playing the prediction game, where we basically predict when lightning will appear in the sky.”

“Are there prizes?” The girl asks.

“Yeah. The best one is a hug.”

“Oh I see,” she grimaces. “And have you ever won a hug?”

“Oh yeah, plenty of times.”

“Then I think you deserve a better prize, Austin. How about a kiss? From one of them?” She points at us. The other teenagers murmur something between themselves, watching us intently like hawks.

“Who?”

“You can choose.”

Austin’s ears spring up like those of a dog.

“Oh wow, okay. I choose Jamie.”

Jamie’s body freezes, but I notice that her lips are trembling.

“Austin, don’t. She doesn’t want you to,” I whisper. I realize that I haven’t spoken at all until now. He responds to me in a much louder talking voice as if to ensure that everyone can hear him.

“What? Teenagers kiss!”

I suppose that Austin is right. Teenagers kiss, kids hug, and adults—like my father—beat each other. Everyone’s body is meant for more than carrying their soul.

“And Jamie, you wanted to hang out with the teenagers, right? This is what they do,” he adds. “I’m doing this for you.”

Suddenly everything about Austin, his slightly annoying, sometimes endearing bunny rabbit way of siding with Jamie all of the time, makes me want to throw up. He cradles her wrists as if the moment were precious, but the snowglobe image of them is fractured. Austin’s corneas have become hearts, pulsing and growing bigger by the millisecond—unlike the heart in Jamie’s chest that must be shrinking and sinking right now.

Before I know it, I reach out and strike Austin’s cheek. He falls backward, tumbling into the mud like a bird whose wings were abruptly injured. The hearts that were glistening with Jamie’s reflection barely a second ago decay into the all too familiar terror stricken eyes of my mother, and, all of a sudden, he is the woman back home whose body sometimes suffers from the electrical shocks of her husband. Towering over him, I metamorphose into my father. Like father, like daughter—wait, no. Not that. That can’t be true. Absolutely not.

“Austin, I didn’t m-mean to . . .”

A tear rolls down my cheek, hot against my skin. Austin gets up from the ground and runs away into the nighttime, like a child of lightning, and my breath clogs my throat. I've done it. I've become the thing I swore I'd never be.

The teenagers erupt into laughter once more, as they had been sporadically all night. Amidst this blurry crowd I notice Jamie, who contrasts from the others in that she is silent and trembling.

I walk towards her, shamefully. She is going to tell me how much I messed up. That she is disappointed in me.

"Thanks for that," she murmurs.

I raise my eyebrows. "Wait, what?"

"I said thank you. I wish I had the strength to defend myself. He's like, always all over me, and I know he's not doing anything necessarily *wrong*, he just has a thing for me, so I can't bring myself to, you know, do that."

I see my mother in her, too, but not like how I had seen her in Austin. I see a girl who yearns to be strong, only hindered by a tendency to justify other people's actions and a fear of speaking up.

Someone just has to believe in her.

Stage 3: The downdraft cuts off the updraft. The storm no longer has a supply of warm moist air to maintain itself and, therefore, dissipates.

I've been outside for nearly five hours; I should be allowed home by now. When I reach the front porch, I twist the doorknob and slip inside as quietly as I can. Expectedly, my mother is curled up on the sofa, with a purple blanket over her lap. To cover the bruises, I'm sure. An empty bottle of liquor lies on the floor, three-quarters hidden behind the bookshelf.

"How was playing with Austin and Jamie?" She asks tiredly.

The usual *It was fun* does not escape my mouth. I look at her—really look at the fatigue around her eyes—and the blanket, the bottle, the bookshelf. Her beautiful face. A face that, before my father, must have been radiant, fresh and flourishing, as youthful as a delicate flower in spring.

"I know what he does to you during the thunderstorms," I tell her instead. My heart is beating against my ribs, fast and fierce like a bolt of lightning. "You don't have to send me outside anymore. I want to help you."

My mother opens her mouth and allows the shapes of a million words to fight against each other before closing it. She was going to say something. That is all I want for her to do. To speak her side of the story, to resist, make a sound, yell, shout, scream.

For a moment, all I can hear is the low vibration of the refrigerator. When she finally speaks, her voice is barely louder than a whisper. “You know, Samara, I wish I was a girl who could make dresses come alive.”

She chuckles uncomfortably. I’m not sure what she means.

“Samara, I wish I could bike the world under a shooting star and fall onto the sand and stand right back up because it was just sand so nothing hurts.”

Now I know what she means.

“But everything hurts. And I don’t know how to stop it,” her voice cracks in pain. I reach out for her hand.

“Then let’s leave, Mom. Jamie has a huge basement. I’m sure that her parents will understand and let us stay in it. You are the strongest person I know and you can get out of this. You are so, so strong, Mom.”

Her cheeks stretch into a little smile, and for the first time in a long time, she hugs me. Her arms don’t fully wrap around me, but it is close enough.

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Isabelle Cox-Garleanu

Grade 11, MICDS
Novel



A Royal Rebellion

Synopsis: Abigail Rosetta is a princess born into an eerily happy society where all residents, or Roses, are forced to appear content to preserve the Rosetta Kingdom in the cheerful state it was in before the mysterious disappearance of Helena Rosetta. Abigail, having never heard of Helena in her seventeen years, becomes curious when rumors that Helena has been found in Thornland infiltrate local conversations and newspapers. Who is Helena? Determined to uncover the truth, Abigail ventures into Thornland, a vast forest encircling the kingdom. There, she meets Wilhelmina, an older woman living in isolation, who offers her a dagger used for cutting fruit and hunting. Each time Abigail uses the dagger, she experiences memories that are not her own but belong to someone else. Eventually, Abigail realizes these memories belong to Helena Rosetta, who was actually her older sister, abandoned by their mother years ago in Thornland because Helena had discovered that children were regularly sent into the forest as "offerings" to keep the kingdom safe and was threatening to reveal this truth to all the Roses. This explains why many of Helena's memories involve her caring for a group of children in Thornland and planning revenge. The dagger holds Helena's life because she used it to take her own life shortly after journalists had seen her, entrusting her soul to the weapon. Horrified by this family secret, Abigail takes her own life, leaving the dagger for the next curious individual to find. Knowledge can kill you.

Chapter 2

Abigail opened her window. A child with red trousers fervently waved a newspaper at her. He was very young, perhaps almost eight. The boy's lips oscillated between a couple of words that she couldn't quite decipher from ten meters high.

"It's marvelous!" He exclaimed at last, which Abigail did hear. She wondered briefly what news could possibly excite such a young boy, but thought not to ask. The apricity appeared to be a major allure to the Roses despite the frost and intense rain of this week's monsoon—the Kingdom roads were raucous and roaring. Bicycles swooped past them, leaving behind a trail of newspapers with *She's Been Found* headlines that went awry by the turbulent winter wind.

"I request a copy," Abigail stated to the maid next to her, Snowdrop. Snowdrop's hand reached the window knob to close it, and suddenly, all signs of happiness were impenetrable. It was dark all around them.

"The Queen awaits you downstairs for breakfast, my dear."

"The newspaper copy, ple—"

"Breakfast. Allow me to choose a dress for you to change into," Snowdrop smiled. The two exchanged a petite nod. Abigail didn't really understand the haste, but nevertheless acquiesced. She furrowed her eyebrows gently and pondered if the boy was merely a happy Rose, as ordered, or if something in that paper genuinely captured his interest.

The first memorable object in Abigail's room was an enormous bed on which a dozen white cushions floated on as though in the sky. Every evening, she would allow them to cuddle her as her innocent imagination wended its way across the starry heavens of the Upper Clouds, a place where, when she closed her eyes, she could see specks of auburn sun glistening against her cornea. She had accompanied her father there years ago, and her recollections were thick with haze—his protective hand wrapping hers, then letting it go, and suddenly heartbeats accelerating and a goblet dropping to the ground rapidly. It was the last time he had ever taken Abigail somewhere; it was one final touch of love before she watched his silhouette bitterly evaporate behind palace doors. Why had he behaved in this manner, she did not have a clue. She knew nothing at all, except that ever since, her heart ached upon hearing the name of the man who had deserted her ten too many years earlier.

The second most memorable object in Abigail's bedroom was a wooden armoire that preserved her ball gowns and outfits quite nicely. She liked it, but Snowdrop was absolutely obsessed.

"Red could be good today, your highness," she picked a crimson dress to flatten on the bed. With yellow roses embroidered from the bottom up, the gown appeared wild. "Or the blue, actually."

"Perhaps."

"The red or the blue?"

"Neither, thank you," Abigail slightly curved her lips and began to leave when she turned around and said, "Snowdrop, why don't you try on the blue and red? I'm sure that you will look beautiful."

A grin dawned in between Snowdrop's rosy flesh. She was beautiful already; like a delicate drop of snow.

Upon exiting, a subtle aroma wafted across the hallway, effusing a baker's morning designs. The Oralia was spacious with much room for color, yet none. But it always smelled nice.

Photographs of roses enchanted the walls, adorning them with slight romantic hints and amical gestures. As Abigail made her way to the dining hall, she spotted Amara Rosetta on a sturdy chair at the end of the table that occupied much of the chamber. Amara was casually perusing a newspaper, an action that Abigail questioned since her mother had grown up illiterate in the city.

"Good day, mother," Abigail breathed. "Are you practicing your literature?"

"No, darling. Not for my amusement. The servants swooned into my bed chamber this morning with a few copies and merely threw them onto me as if an alarm clock. They are over here on the table, if you would like to browse as well."

"That's quite absurd."

"I figured that it must be important," Amara shrugged. She was shallow and fickle, never really minding her surroundings or daughter. In the past she had left all parenting and house duties to her husband Daniel, the King, but under his current circumstances of constant travel, she had grown slightly closer to Abigail. Abigail didn't particularly like their new relationship, however, as *closer* meant more minutes watching her mother drown into an overindulgence in champagne, more minutes hearing her mother's drunken monologues during this overindulgence, and more minutes inhaling the detestable odor.

"Let me see . . ." Abigail picked one up. *She's Been Found* adorned the front. It was the same one that the carmine-red-trousers-boy had, thought she.

The topic of the Rosetta family has, of course, escalated from envy and delight to sorrow in recent years. After King Daniel Rosetta faced a world without his precious diamond of a daughter, he left his Oralía, leaving behind not only Amara and Abigail, only a toddler, but also a stack of large books where his name was revered with care. During the years of being hunted by reporters and conducting royal business in the Clouds, one could suspect that he might have been simultaneously searching for Helena.

A blatant lie would be that Helena Rosetta was ugly.

Helena cannot camouflage.

Yet, it is exactly what she has done for nearly fifteen years. It is scientifically impossible to define the ways in which Helena Rosetta vanished. How can such luminescent blue eyes blend with a bland ocean and sky? That, readers, one will never discover.

“Who’s Helena Rosetta, mother?” Abigail inquired skeptically. Amara blanched.

“Where did you learn that name?”

“It is written at the end of the first paragraph.”

“Well, I have only attempted to read the first line. I need a moment,” she said too calmly.

“Are you all right?”

“Abigail, put that paper down.”

Amara’s blond streaks of hair darkened miserably. Her irises, always tinted with hints of sadness, might have watered a bit. There was something tightening her veins, an unfamiliar scent in her nostrils, fear twirling in her mind as she caressed her daughter’s cheek softly.

“Mother?”

“Yes?”

“I believe I asked you a question,” Abigail remarked, perplexed by her mother’s disconsolate visage. Amara remained inhumanly statuesque, except her frozen fingers trembled against Abigail’s rosy skin.

“A question?”

Abigail raised a dark brown eyebrow. “Who is Helena Ros—”

“Right,” Amara murmured. Her teeth fidgeted with her full lips, and her hand, still quivering, slowly removed itself from Abigail’s much warmer cheek. “Helena was like a flower. She bloomed and she died.”

Abigail could see, though she wished not to, a poignant look in Amara’s eyes, encompassing shades of bittersweet memories about a certain Helena. Never had she witnessed her mother like this, so raw and tragic, so mournful yet flourishing. A liveliness illuminated her lifeless porcelain skin, and Abigail knew

that Amara, not even for a moment, would ever look this way while dreaming of her.

"You loved her," concluded Abigail.

Amara nodded tiredly. "Why, she was quite simply my—*everyone's*—pride and joy."

Abigail wanted to ask, *am I your pride and joy too*, but she could very well predict the awkwardness that would follow, one that she preferred to avoid. Instead, she whispered something along the lines of "my condolences to your sister Helena," to which her mother's eyes widened.

"Sister?" Amara queried.

"Am I mistaken?" Abigail added.

"No, absolutely not," Amara hastily articulated. "She was, indeed, my sister, and I miss her very dearly. I am simply impressed that you guessed so accurately."

Abigail nodded slowly. She had, for the longest time, desired a sister. Someone young to play with, and oh, to *play*—had she ever combined her perfect routines with playtime? Or caressed anything that wasn't cashmere? What did it feel like, she wondered, to be frisky with somebody else, absolutely tarnished by their reckless bouncing and laughter?

"And to lose that person . . ." Abigail thought aloud. She looked down at her hands, realizing that she hadn't lowered the newspaper like Amara had asked her to. It was graciously wide and inviting, with flamboyant rose illustrations and cursive that solicited her support and care.

The prettiest girl in the whole world, Helena was. "She still is," claimed Robert Blackstar yesterday after exploring the depth of Thornland, behind the Rosetta Oralia. Abigail had heard of Thornland before. More like whispers, but cautious ones that were soaked in honey, smoked out from expensive cigarettes and gently coughed upon during family gatherings. As the smell of rich sandalwood permeated through the blond hairs of Amara and King Daniel's sisters, wonder would arise in conversations. Beasts that roam around, they hissed. Sand with granules of sugar. Redwood trees making love with the moonlit sky, lofty and ostentatious, home to five dozen noxious insects. Dismal howls into the night. Wolves and toucans.

"She exists. I saw her in Thornland, I'm telling you," continued Blackstar. "Nobody dares to set foot in Thornland, but as part of my career in wildlife, I did."

"Abigail, I told you to abandon that newspaper," Amara stated sharply. Her voice lacked cadence.

"But it seems that your sister is not actually dead."

“Oh, please.”

“You could really be happy, for once. It is great news, mothe—.”

Amara barked, “Do not tell me what to believe in. Hoaxes, lies, troublesome media. Always lying to sell stories. That Blackstar man is nothing but a charlatan.”

Abigail knew she hadn’t mentioned Blackstar once. She also knew that her mother couldn’t have read past that first line.

Chapter 3

The following few days in the Rosetta Oralia were unlike all others—warm, bright, refreshing and magnificent, like glacial snowflakes of hatred melting into a lovable spring. One of the servers danced, even. Just a tiny whirl but one with brightness, accompanied by some type of faith and want.

Dinner was salmon that night, served with crispy, caramelized maple bacon brussel sprouts, sautéed green beans in garlic, buttered bread, and caviar that had a flavor reminiscent of the ocean. The tropical smell of lemon and sea salt whirled past the windows and ornate chandeliers.

Abigail felt pretty in her silver dress. Across from her beautiful mother, feeling pretty was a rarity. Her appearance generally lacked inspiration. She was conventionally attractive, agreeably so at most, but not enough to ignite passion or fury or jealousy or desire—never had her smile mutated somebody’s heart into a drum, nor could her hair reflect the moon the way that Amara’s did.

“Chardonnay?” offered Leonardo, her mother’s principal courtier. He followed her incessantly out of duty of course, but it lingered in Abigail’s mind that he also fancied her. Really, who couldn’t. Amara’s eyes were where her amatory force resided. They were a deep blue, looking able to extinguish fiery flames and prevent the world from heating ever again.

“Oh, yes. Please, something good to distract me from all that awful commotion about—” she turned to Abigail, “my sister, as you know.”

Abigail nodded. This alleged Helena was ruthless. She played Russian roulette with everybody’s lives; journalists jostled against children ceaselessly, running after their parents at a gallop with magazines that exploded into theories and discoveries. People were in awe of her. *She’s bringing back true happiness*, they insisted. *The days of pretending to be happy will surely be over . . .*

“Crazy fervor outside,” remarked Amara. “Although it is absurd and well, quite unnecessary, since she, erm, does not *exist*!” She pounded her fist hard onto the walnut dining table, disarranging all the flatware. Fumes exited her ears.

“How did she die, mother?”

“Disease. It was devastating,” she said, toneless.

“How old were you?”

“Oh Abigail, we were only girls,” she grasped one of the many seasoning grinders on display, “only twenty, young and beautiful, beautiful and young . . .”

Still beautiful, Abigail thought to herself. Anybody who met Amara would know that the word “beautiful” did not always correlate with just “young.” In a green velvet bodice and skirt adorned with red rose embroideries, her porcelain skin was bright and at youthful liberty.

“Well, you got through it.”

“Abigail. You don’t believe Blackstar, do you?”

Abigail shook her head. She didn’t, for she found it exasperating how deeply the Kingdom’s inhabitants embraced Blackstar’s tales. The naivety displayed by those around her, eagerly latching onto the notion of a royal’s “resurrection” promising eternal bliss, bewildered her.

“Of course not.”

Abigail surreptitiously slipped from the Oralia that evening. She had unlocked a medium-sized window in one of the twenty rooms on the first floor, checked that no maids were watching her, and climbed out silently.

The sky was sunless, bored, lackluster. In her nightgown, she began to drown herself in bungalow lights, in final charcuterie offerings and bustling shops that stayed awake all night. Abigail looked at her feet to prevent anybody from recognizing her face. If somebody saw her, she’d be hemmed in by a noisome crowd, and her plan would be ruined. She was to visit Blackstar. She was to tell him to stop fooling the Roses. Helena can’t grant happiness or miracles or prayers. Helena is dead.

She had found Blackstar’s address very easily by perusing a directory booklet in Leonardo’s office. His home was located nearby, which was why she thought to walk during the night, when nobody would notice she had gone. Abigail knew that Amara wouldn’t fret. She had been bathing in lemon oils, perfecting her golden hair and skin. Amidst the effervescent mixture of cotton soap, fruit flavors, and white wine, she couldn’t possibly be thinking of Abigail.

Abigail didn't rehearse what she would tell Blackstar. She had deduced from her title as Princess that he'd be willing to obey whatever order she commanded. He'd notice her immediately from his living room as she approached his doorstep and he'd stand up and scurry to put away all his quills and papers and faux facade in a drawer somewhere, or perhaps underneath his couch, then he'd very hastily comb his hair and rinse his face and fix his shirt before showing up at his door with all compliance and—

"Good evening," said Abigail.

"May I help you?" a man with coal black hair, seemingly in his thirties, inquired. The creases underneath his eyes suggested that he hadn't slept in days.

"Yes, you can, *Black-star*. Your name suits your hair, lovely." Abigail unsolicitedly stepped inside and onto a floor adorned with checker patterns. She observed her surroundings and, to her surprise, copies of *She's Been Found* were scattered everywhere for her to see; on the small wooden tables and cow print carpet, on the grimy kitchen counters and green armchairs. The space exuded an air of neglect, but nonetheless, there were traces of life—stained mugs of every conceivable hue overfilled the sink, eccentric coats with bits of snow hung on multiple racks, and three candles casted a flickering warmth across the pandemonium that left Abigail astounded and upset. She wondered if all Roses lived this way, in this chaotic arrangement where air was frowzy.

"What do you want, kid?"

Kid. Kid. Kid?!

"Oh, sir," Abigail scoffed. "Knowing so much about the Rosetta Kingdom, given your profession of course—" she eyed his papers dismissively, "you must be aware of how one addresses his or her highness."

"You still haven't told me why you're here."

"Well I told you how you can ask me."

"Quite frankly, I don't care, kid."

Abigail crossed her arms. "I need you to admit in the newspaper that you lied about Helena."

Blackstar's eyes glowed. "Lied?"

"Yes. I will pay yo—"

"Oh, but I didn't lie, sweetheart." He grabbed a dice from a red box behind him, analyzing it closely before repeating, "I didn't lie."

"Well," Abigail considered it for a moment, "you might not think that you lied, but really you did because whatever you claim you saw wasn't her. You are catalyzing madness among the Roses."

“Only madness that exists is what I saw.”

“People see, yes, people think they see a lot,” said Abigail, then, “what did you see?”

“I saw a young woman with gold hair. Almost all of it was chopped off, some was left still. Not prettily, though, with a sharp edge of some sort. Like a wild animal,” Blackstar seemed to be in deep focus.

“And why did you claim in the paper that his random woman you saw is my aunt?” asked Abigail, growing irritated. She crossed her arms and glared at Blackstar, whose facial features were unbalanced, appearing confused.

Taylor Curboy

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Poetry



Aspirations of an Astrophysical Teen

Its evident I'm a thinker,
a dreamer.

Everyone notes how I'm disciplined,
focused.

But In a sense I concede,
they don't see why I'll read for hours.
They don't understand my drive,
why I need to succeed.

In sleepless nights
spent drinking coffee and knowledge,
frigid hours staring up at a crystalline sky
I find purpose.

When I say,
"I want to be an astrophysicist"
people won't know what I mean,
what it means to me.

Looking at the avenue of those around me,
they're happy,
but not in a sense I could be.
I have this hunger,
this need to leave.

Through what I've learned
sitting on my bedroom floor to read,
I've tasted the glory of all that I aspire to be.

The cosmos calls me,
the ethereal beauty of the unknown
is all I need.

Henry Dong

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Critical Essay



The Power of Companionship, Can it Overcome Adversity?

Numerous social and ethical issues relentlessly afflict human society, often driving individuals away from reaching their full capability, but the majority of these problems are seemingly troublesome to deal with and distant from one's control, leading to an ambiguous route to vanquish the calamity, especially in an unaided journey. However, directly imposing confrontations, by upstanding relationships between people and the motivation that each individual provides for each other can result in mutual benefit, allowing for the combat of these problems that plague society. Emily Bronte's novel, *Wuthering Heights* definitively exemplifies the concept regarding the power of companionship, with one of the third generation characters, Hareton, and his relationship with Cathy Linton, which ultimately proves to be immensely beneficial. Set in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, *Wuthering Heights* details the journey of Heathcliff's intense love for Catherine Earnshaw, which in culmination with her marriage to Edgar, results in tumultuous conditions for the other characters in the novel, notably Hareton, who initially struggles to develop into his inherent potential, by staying illiterate and having a hostile personality. However, through the construction of rapport with Cathy and addressing each other's predicaments, he eventually manages to overcome his inceptive traits and attain development, resulting in camaraderie with Cathy. In *Wuthering Heights*, Emily Bronte utilizes the character of Hareton to illustrate how an abusive environment can limit one's development, but a relationship-driven confrontation assists in overcoming challenges, ultimately helping one achieve their potential and undergo personal transformation.

From the outset of the novel, Bronte establishes that the environment in which one is placed can have a remarkable influence in determining one's character, often shaping to be similar to that of the environment. In particular, Hareton is put into a derogatory atmosphere, morphing him into being like Heathcliff, resulting in much of the same traits, therefore hampering any growth into his genuine potential. Even as early as Hareton's infant years, vivid signs of inhuman conditions are already present, exemplifying through one of Hindley's rampages of destruction. While Hindley is looking for Hareton, Nelly describes Hareton as, "Hareton was impressed with a wholesome terror of encountering either his wild-beasts's fondness, or his madman's rage - for in one he ran a chance of being squeezed and kissed to death, and in the other of being flung into the fire, or dashed against the wall - and the poor thing remained perfectly quiet wherever I chose to put him" (Bronte 74). The comparison of Hindley to a wild-beast reveals the deep psychological trauma that Hareton experiences, indicating the animalistic nature of the people constantly surrounding Hareton. The "wholesome terror" that he senses illustrates an instinct reaction to a constant threat of harm, whether that is from violence or abnormal types of affection. This, in culmination with his helplessness of the situation, brought about a tempestuous and abusive childhood for Hareton, one deprivation of the basic traits of dignity and humanity, demonstrating the inhumane treatment he is receiving, and inhibiting progress in Hareton's life. As Hareton continues to develop, the effects of the barbarous circumstances he is placed in now begins to exhibit itself, with his violent actions, which Nelly observes:

That was my first idea on observing an elf-locked, brown-eyed boy setting his ruddy countenance against the bars...He retreated out of arm's length, and picked up a large flint...He raised his missile to hurl it; I commenced a soothing speech, but could not stay his hand. The stone struck my bonnet, and then ensued, from the stammering lips of the little fellow, a string of curses which, whether he comprehended it or not, were delivered with practised emphasis, and distorted his baby features into a shocking expression of malignity...Who has taught you those fine words, my barn,' I inquired... 'Who's your master?' 'Devil daddy,' was his answer... 'Ah! And the devil teaches you to swear at Daddy?' I observed. 'Aye - nay,' he drawled. 'Who then?' 'Heathcliff.' I asked if he liked Heathcliff? 'Aye!' he answered again. (Bronte 109-110)

Here, Hareton's pugnacious actions are seen as a direct result of the learned behavior passed down from figures like Heathcliff, who contributes significantly to the overarching qualities of the surroundings, with Hareton directly

attributing his disparaging behaviors to the influence of Heathcliff, by disclosing that Heathcliff has instructed him these words. The response from Hareton, an acknowledgment of Heathcliff as his “master”, also reveals that Hareton has internalized the cruelty surrounding him, highlighting the potent consequences that the environment has on one, resulting in Hareton’s character to be similar to that of the conditions that encompass him. This ultimately results in Nelly describing Hareton as, “In that manner, Hareton, who should now be the first gentleman in the neighbourhood, was reduced to a state of complete dependence on his father’s inveterate enemy; and lives in his own house as a servant deprived of the advantage of wages, and quite unable to right himself, because of his friendliness, and his ignorance that he has been wronged” (Bronte 188). As Nelly examines the consequences of Hareton’s unfavorable childhood, the repercussions of the influence from the environment is evident, obstructing him from reaching his full potential, describing his potential as, “the first gentleman in the neighbourhood”, and contrasting it to where he is currently, using the diction, “complete dependence” to signify the weakness of Hareton, and the toil that the surrounding conditions had put on him. Overall, from the beginning of the novel, the encircling conditions in which Hareton is in, has a devastating impact on his well-being, causing him to mirror the traits of Heathcliff, resulting in impediment of any growth or development.

After exemplifying the degree to which the environment has the influence over someone, Bronte demonstrates how the presence of a complement character results in imposed confrontation of each other’s challenges. More specifically, in the case of Hareton, Cathy fulfills the role of this associate, causing initial quarrels between her and Hareton, and forcing confrontation of Hareton’s problems and lack of development from childhood. Shortly after their first encounter, both Hareton and Cathy already exhibit each other’s drawbacks, evident especially when Cathy innocently assumes that Hareton was a servant:

‘What’s the matter? Get my horse, I say.’ ‘I’ll see thee damned, before I be *thy* servant!’ growled the lad. ‘You’ll see me *what*?’ asked Catherine in surprise. ‘Damned – thou saucy witch!’ he replied. (Bronte 195)

During this brief interaction, Hareton’s dialogue is marked by misunderstanding and hostility due to his upbringing, helping to illustrate the confrontation of their problems. Previously, these problems in his character were neglected, due to the environment that he was put in, but here he is facing opposition and having Cathy challenge him, helping to set up a stage for gradual but essential process of self-realization and growth. Their disputes only continue as their relationship

progresses, however. When Hareton was showing Cathy around the house, Cathy proceeds to ask Hareton to read an inscription over the door, to which Hareton responds:

‘It’s some damnable writing,’ he answered, ‘I cannot read it.’ ‘Can’t read it?’ cried Catherine, ‘I can read it...It’s English...but I want to know why it is there.’ (Bronte 220)

As Cathy was taunting Hareton about his inability to read, Hareton is presented forcefully with his own problems, leaving him with no other option for him except to handle these difficulties, which Hareton does. Just a few days later, Hareton meets up with Cathy again all excited:

‘He looked up to the inscription above, and said, with a stupid mixture of awkwardness, and elation: “Miss Catherine! I can read yon, nah.” “Wonderful,” I exclaimed. “Pray let us hear you - you *are* grown clever!” ‘He spelt, and drawled over by syllables, the name - “Hareton Earnshaw.” “And the figures?” I cried, encouragingly, perceiving that he came to a dead halt. “Oh, you dunce!” I said, laughing heartily at his failure...He reddened - I saw that by the moonlight - dropped his hand from the latch, and skulked off, a picture of mortified vanity.

Even though Hareton likely feels a tremendous amount of embarrassment from the numerous times that Cathy has shamed him, he is still motivated to learn, and has the desire to achieve greater potential, demonstrated by his “stupid mixture of awkwardness and elation”, a stir of emotion after learning and conquering the humiliating situation from the first time. He still likely utilized extensive amounts of time learning to just read a few words, with his reaction to finally finishing his task and putting in quite the effort into it. Hareton’s motive for growth is also influenced by his attempts to impress Cathy, which is in due because of the relationship in place. Here, again, Hareton is being challenged by Cathy for being oblivious to reading numbers, causing unavoidable engagement with his adversaries, which are problems Hareton recognizes with the “reddening” off his face; the embarrassment, and “skulking” off; the disappointment after failure to impress Cathy. Throughout all the altercations between Cathy and Hareton, Hareton is forced to tackle his own problems because of the confrontation that Cathy brings, resulting in the grit and determination exhibited by Hareton to overcome those challenges.

As the novel concludes, Bronte indicates that the triumph of one’s abominable problems can lead to improvements in an individual, allowing them to ultimately achieve their potential. Precisely, Hareton’s final progressive refinement in character through the conquering of his past hardships finally

enables him to transform into his full capacity, and sets the foundation for the future of him and Cathy's relationship. As Cathy and Hareton's relationship is slowly solidifying, Hareton's character demonstrates immeasurable enhancement. However, Cathy still mocks Hareton in an attempt to capture his attention. Though this occurs, as Nelly observes Hareton, "Then she looked at him; but he would neither open his mouth, nor look again...He had not only twitched his shoulder, but clenched his fist, as if tempted to use it" (Bronte 311). In spite of the similar situation to previously, with Cathy still ridiculing him, Hareton responds without an outburst of emotion, rather, avoiding all contact with Cathy, by not looking at her, highlighting his growth as an individual from previous incidents of skirmishes. Even after Cathy apologized for her behavior, Hareton was still unforgiving of her, with Nelly saying:

'You should be friends with your cousin, Mr. Hareton,' I interrupted, 'since she repents of her sauciness! It would do you a great deal of good - it would make you another man, to have her for a companion.' 'A companion?' he cried; 'when she hates me, and does not think me fit to wipe her shoon! Nay, if it made me a king, I'd not be scorned for seeking her good any more.' (Bronte 313).

Although Hareton is steadily ameliorating his manners, he is unreceptive to Cathy's ask for forgiveness. He even goes as far as to announce that in Cathy's eyes, he is so lowly that he isn't even worthy of performing menial tasks for her, indicating the fierce anger and unforgiveness he has for her. Hareton continues to speak about his injustice passionately, by saying that he would have to become king for her not to act condescending toward him, exhibiting clear signals of resentment and no characteristics of compassion. However, after persistent pleading from Cathy, Hareton chose to accept her apology, by acquiring her book, and letting Cathy teach him to read, with Nelly describing the scene as, "I perceived two such radiant countenances bent over the page of the accepted book, and that I did not doubt the treaty had been ratified, on both sides, and the enemies were, thenceforth, sworn allies (Bronte 315). As Nelly describes them as being "radiant", positive light imagery conveys a sense of fulfillment and completion, from Hareton's acceptance of her Cathy's apology. The comparison between them and a treaty not only reveals the fortitude of their relationship, but also the "ratification" is a symbol of the ability of forgiveness Hareton now has attained, adding to his potential. This "treaty", however, keeps growing and expanding, with Hareton now more developed, learning the attribute of forgiveness, and is able to continue personal growth in his relationship with Cathy. However the intimate relationship still hints at more, with Nelly

describing them as, “The intimacy, thus commenced, grew rapidly; though it encountered temporary interruptions. Earnshaw was not to be civilized with a wish; and my young lady was no philosopher, and no paragon of patience; but both their minds tending to the same point – one loving and desiring to esteem; and the other loving and desiring to be esteemed – they contrived in the end to reach it (Bronte 315–316). This new loving relationship hints at the possibility of further elevation of Hareton as person, by discussing the contrasts of the two characters, but emphasizing that both of their minds were at the same point, and how one fulfills the needs of the other. In essence, throughout the ending sector of the novel, salient details about Hareton’s improvements in certain aspects are uncovered, notably his ability to forgive and the expansion and strengthening of his relationship with Cathy, resulting in self-development and the achievement of his potential, which was originally eluded by the environment that he was in.

In conclusion, over the course of the novel, the strength of partnerships has proven critical to the success of Hareton. Even from the outset of the novel, Hareton was already in a position of an atrocious situation, disrupting much of his potential into being a kind-hearted gentleman. The constant physical and psychological abuse from his adolescent years, notably that of Heathcliff and Hindley, molded Hareton into becoming an echo of Heathcliff; someone of deplorable, abysmal traits, and collection of adversaries. However, with the introduction of a partner, Cathy, Hareton is able to eventually conquer these problems. Though the relationship is often strained, and even combative at times, it helps to present Hareton his problems distinctively, leaving no choice but for him to confront these afflictions. Cathy, for Hareton, almost acts like a supervisor, and constantly brings up the problems to him and reminds him of them. Not only that, Hareton’s incentive for growth also stems from the relationship; he wants to impress Cathy. The building of this healthier relationship and the overcoming of his own problems is what leads to growth, and fulfill his possibilities. Not only does the concept of fellowship and its effects apply to the novel, the idea also extends further, as Hareton’s character may resonate with a good portion of society, by serving as a painful yet hopeful reminder to people. Many people in human society may also struggle in various aspects of their lives, not necessarily just in developmental stages, but also in adulthood as well. The transformation of Hareton’s character not only exemplifies the possibility for change and personal growth to anybody, given the already rough situation that he was in, but also the authoritative influence that relationships can bring, which can be unstable at times, ultimately still benefits

everybody. The growth of Hareton and Cathy's relationship is what allows them to be where they are at the conclusion of the novel; its purpose signifying to the world that even in the face of adversity or turbulent conditions, one can always uplift themselves out of the dreadful circumstances with the perpetuating power of relationships and the extreme benefits provided by those relationships, allowing humanity to always remain hopeful.

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Critical Essay



The Corruption of Moral Integrity, Can It Be Reversed?

Human society is constantly plagued with numerous social and ethical issues, driving society away from achieving full potential, but where do all these problems originate? The answer is complex, yet it can be summed up in two words: moral corruption. Human nature is simply faulty, and with the combination of ill-managed ambition, often leads to the sacrifice of morality for personal gain. While competition between each other is acceptable, when it comes to the sacrifice of morality for the victory in competition, it comes morally corrupt. The idea of moral corruption is vividly demonstrated in Alexander Dumas' novel *The Count of Monte Cristo*, with one of the main villains of the book, Danglars, constantly exhibiting the loss of morality in exchange for personal ambition, resulting in the moral decline and destructive consequences that are revealed through him. Set in the 19th century, during the French Revolution, *The Count of Monte Cristo* narrates the journey of Edmond Dantes, a young sailor who has been wrongfully imprisoned due to the betrayal and immorality of the people around him. Upon escape from prison, and the discovery of valuable treasure, Dantes vows to seek revenge on the ones who betrayed him, and embarks on a journey doing so. Throughout the novel, Danglars is consumed by his ambition. He rises in power to become a wealthy banker, but his unregulated ambition leads him to betray not only Dantes but many other people, and results in him being blinded by his greed. As the narrative unravels, it is evident that Danglars' character becomes a critical example of how unrestrained greed can diminish

human relationships and ethical principles. In *The Count of Monte Cristo*, Alexandre Dumas utilizes the character of Danglars to illustrate that uncontrolled greed and ambition may culminate together to contribute to the corruption of one's integrity, ultimately leading to one's downfall, but yet through forced repentance and acknowledgment, resonance of previous moral decay may still be evident.

Even from the introduction of the novel, Dumas asserts that although aspiration and ambition is in constant existence in life, it can easily transform into avarice, leading to moral impurity. In particular, Danglars betrays Dantes by forming a plot to overthrow his success, purely out of his jealousy and cupidity, which causes him to seek a plan of evil against Dantes. In the novel, as early as the introduction of the character of Danglars, right after the congratulatory remarks given by Monsieur Morrel to Dantes, prompts Danglars, who is driven by jealousy and pursuit of personal gain, to try to betray Dantes, by saying, "‘Yes,’ said Danglars, casting Dantes a glance full of hatred, ‘he’s young and he has no doubts about anything. As soon as the captain was dead he took command without consulting anyone, and he made us lose a day and a half at the Isle of Elba instead of coming straight back to Marseillies’" (Dumas 3). As a former crewmate of Dantes, Danglars starts to become envious of the luck and fortune that Dantes receives. His jealousy culminates into his betrayal at Dantes, illustrated through his attempt at falsely accusing Dantes in place of personal gain, an evidential sacrifice of morality for his ambitions. Danglars’ unchecked ambition causes him to constantly be in fierce competition with others, which in turn also manifests human nature of constant competition and often the sacrifice of morality just for personal gain. Eventually, after contemplating his situation some more, and watching the scenes of continuous luck and advancement of Dantes firsthand, Danglars ponders to himself, "‘...I’m afraid Dante’s good luck is going to hold out. He’ll marry the girl, become captain of the *Pharaon* and have the laugh on all of us, unless’ - a smile passed over his lips - ‘unless I take a hand in things’" (Dumas 16). At this moment, Danglars recognizes Dantes’ impending success, with marriage to Mercedes and promotion to ship captain, which generates feelings of resentment inside him. The last phrase of his thought, "‘unless I take a hand in things,” exhibits clearly of Danglars’ willingness to manipulate situations by his own endeavors, discarding his morality in the process. Not only does Danglars’ thoughts reveal his malicious intentions, it also demonstrates his impulsive tendency to reach conclusions, having his rationality blinded by his own driven ambitions and moral corruption.

As Danglars plots his potential plan of retaliation, the perfect opportunity comes up, with Dantes accidentally leaking information about a letter, which results in Danglars thinking to himself, “He’s probably going to Paris to deliver the letter the marshal gave him...By God! That letter gives me an idea, an excellent idea! Ah, Dantes, my friend, you’re not yet entered in the *Pharaon’s* log as number one!” (Dumas 17). As Danglars scrutinizes Dantes’ mission to deliver the letter, his thoughts again lead him to cunning ambition, with the diction and tone leading to an inferred victory already in Danglars’ mind, representing his determination to undermine Dantes and to snatch the role of ship captain from Dantes. Instead of attempting to become better himself, the first thing that enters his mind is for him to sabotage Dantes, indicating the corruption of his integrity. While fierce competition is a constant part of divine human nature, it is still technically morally acceptable. However, when acts and thoughts of sabotage, in place of one’s ambition, it transforms into greed. Overall, from the outset of the novel, not only is Danglars’ jealousy and ambition evident, but also the blinding actions of those thoughts and acts serves as warning against having such strong lust over others’ possessions, which contains the potential destructive traits, leading to moral decay and irreversible consequences.

After revealing how greed and jealousy can consume an individual, Dumas demonstrates how continuous greed without limitations exacerbate unethical practices, furthering moral corruption. In the case of Danglars, his character is revealed by his continued acquisitive mindset and complete disregard for others, ultimately building a climax for downfall. After the Count sets up a fake message to get Danglars to lose money, Debray, whom Danglars uses illegally to gain information on the market, reports back, “Does your husband have any Spanish bonds?’ he asked Madame Danglars. ‘He certainly does! He has six million francs’ worth.’ ‘He must sell them at any price.’ ‘Why?’ ‘Because Don Carlos has escaped from Bourges and returned to Spain.’ ‘How do you know that?’ ‘Why, the way I always know the news,’ said Debray, shrugging. The baroness did not wait to be told twice. She ran to her husband, who ran to his stockbroker and ordered him to sell at any price” (Dumas 254). The interaction between Debray and Madame Danglars, although not directly involving Danglars, still highlights an interplay of manipulation and greed. Danglars, by using Debray, manages to gain access to an abundance of information about the stock market and the events that affect it, providing him with a strategic advantage that allows him to make the best possible decision. Even though Danglars is already extremely wealthy, and he should have gratitude for his wealth, he chooses to continue to pursue more

wealth, fueled by his greed and morally corrupt character. During a confrontation between Danglars and his wife, after losing substantial amounts of money because of his wife's "fault", both get upset, with Madame Danglars saying, "'This is too much!' cried Madame Danglars, choking with anger. 'You've gone beyond all limits of common decency!' Danglars shrugged his shoulders. 'What silly creatures they are,' he said, 'these women who consider themselves geniuses because they carry on their love affairs without getting themselves talked about all over Paris!.. 'The result of my pretended ignorance is that there hasn't been one of your lovers, from Monsieur de Villefort down to Monsieur Debray, who hasn't trembled before me. I allow you to make me hateful, but I will prevent you from making me ridiculous; and above all I forbid you to ruin my fortune'" (Dumas 272-273). The confrontation between Danglars and his wife exemplifies the tension between his personal ambition and human relationships. Danglars' dismissive attitude towards his wife's emotional turmoil further exhibits his prioritization of wealth over human relationships, which in this case is his wife. On the topic of human relationships, Danglars disregards any importance of genuine human relationships by implying that he recognizes that his wife has many other relationships with other men, but he doesn't mind it as long as he still has wealth and power, sacrificing the morality aspect of husband-wife relationships with the ambition for money blinding him. During a conversation with the Count of Monte Cristo, discussing aspects of Danglars' personal life and recent events, the Count brings up the topic of marriage, by saying, "'Do you have someone in mind for Andrea to marry?' (Count) 'To tell you the truth,' said Danglars, 'it doesn't seem like a bad speculation to me, and I'm a speculator.' 'You're not thinking of your daughter, are you? Isn't she already engaged to Albert de Morcerf?'" (Dumas 276). The exchange of conversation between Danglars and the Count reveals Danglars' greedy and opportunistic nature, by highlighting his perspective of relationships. When he refers to Andrea as "not a bad speculation", it emphasizes his own perspective, which is that personal relationships, including marriage, are mainly used for financial gain rather than emotional bonds. Danglars continues to demonstrate this attitude by his acknowledgement of his daughter's engagement to Albert, suggesting that he is willing to disregard his family relationships and existing commitments for personal gain, if he thinks that it can serve his interests, which in this case he believes that it can. As Danglars start to face certain adversaries, his nature is exemplified by his disregard for genuine human relationships, and continuous strive for increase of wealth, even through the use of illicit methods, resulting in moral corruption that

culminates together. The uncontrolled greed for money ultimately results in the Count being able to set a downfall for Danglars.

As the story concludes, Dumas emphasizes that although suffering and pain inflicted upon a human being can cause signs of change, the forced repentance results in a much more shallow regret and understanding of one's mistakes. More specifically, Danglars' forced change upon him by the Count, resulting from his starving, doesn't immediately result in Danglars fully resigning his past behaviors and actions, but only with the Count's assistance does Danglars show basic signs of acknowledgement and repentance of his evil actions. First, the Count decides to charge abnormal amounts of money for food. After losing millions of francs to scarce pieces of food, Danglars is described as, "Then he has a strange reaction for a man who had just abandoned five million francs: he resolved to keep that fifty thousand francs at any cost and he began to have visions of hope verging on madness...He begged God to allow him to keep that fifty thousand francs and he wept as he prayed" (Dumas 521). Here, Danglars' "strange" reaction to losing money causes him to want the rest of his money, revealing the depths of his greed and moral corruption. Even though Danglars is in a dire situation, he still values his money like if he was in a normal situation. Instead of asking God to allow him to live or save his life, he instead asks God to allow him to keep the money, which has no real use in such a dire and humane situation, which not only emphasizes his irrationality that comes with an obsession of wealth, but his greedy nature. The forced repentance by the Count likely had the intention of allowing Danglars to realize his past mistakes, but rather Danglars' greediness is furthered by this punishment rather than reduced. Eventually, after a prolonged period of suffering and pain, the Count finally decides to allow for the rejuvenation of Danglars, by asking, 'Do you repent, at least?' said a deep, solemn voice which Danglars' hair stand on end. 'Of what must I repent?' stammered Danglars. 'Of the evil you have done,' said the voice. 'Oh, yes, I repent! I repent!' cried Danglars, beating his breast with his emaciated fists" (Dumas 522). Although Danglars does eventually repent of his sins, he is initially confused about what he should be repenting for, indicating that during his entire imprisonment, through his suffering and pain, he has not once thought about why he is being punished in the first place. The forced punishment and repentance never causes Danglars to fully comprehend his evil acts on his own, which results in him only going through a superficial repentance. His desperate cry for repentance followed by a physical beating of himself is more of performance rather than genuine expression of regret, likely

based on having this reaction from his fear rather than a true understanding of his evil acts. Danglars also relied on the Count for providing an opportunity for him to repent rather than him confessing his sins by himself. In the last scene of Danglars, after his supposed repentance, the Count commands Vampa, “And now, eat and drink; you’ll be my guest this evening. Vampa, when this man has recovered his strength, release him’...As the Count has ordered, Vampa brought Danglars the best wine and the finest fruits of Italy...Being thirsty, he [Danglars] dragged himself over to it. As he bent down to drink, he noticed that his hair had turned white” (Dumas 522). The revelation of Danglars’ hair color not only reveals the physical endurances that he has experienced but it also symbolizes the consequences of his moral corruption and the toll that his unrestrained greed has taken on him. Despite having been well fed and granted an opportunity to live, with the Count having explicitly told him before as him being the only one still living while retaining sanity, and instead of feeling a sense of gratitude and comfort, his reflection reveals a sense of emptiness that accompanies his greed, indicating that while Danglars to somewhat of an extent acknowledged his sins, he still retains some aspects of previous self, including parts of moral corruption and greed that he had. Throughout the ending, until the absolute resignation of Danglars, which is forced upon by the Count, he shows no sign of regret or shame for his actions, rather he still cared about his wealth, until the very end, in which he shows basic signs of superficial repentance, indicating the extreme depths of sin that Danglars had. In spite of this, Danglars is still allowed to live, allowing the potential for full redemption.

In conclusion, throughout the entire course of the book, with a culmination of unrestrained greed and moral corruption, ultimately leads to the downfall of Danglars. In the end of the novel, despite enduring long periods of starvation and isolation in captivity, and even verbally repenting for his wrongdoings, Danglars still exhibit signs of moral corruption. Even from the outset of the novel, Danglars already demonstrates his greed and moral impurity with his thoughts and actions to betray Dantes. The unethical principles continue to follow Danglars as he grows to be wealthy, with his relentless pursuit of wealth, disregarding the importance of relationships and sacrificing morals. Eventually, his previous sinful actions catch back up to him, resulting in the catastrophic loss of his wealth and the decomposition of his family, and eventually the capture of him by Vampa’s bandits. Through his prolonged suffering and agony while being prisoner, Danglars starts to reveal his weakness, and eventually breaks down mentally. The Count of Monte Cristo then asks

whether he repents previous acts of evil, and Danglars announces that he repents with a strong passion. However, after being treated nicely after his repentance, and given high quality food for nourishment and time to recover, Danglars is seen reflecting on his final image of his white hair after going to a brook to quench his thirst. While Danglars likely repents to a certain extent, there is no doubt that the consequences of his actions still affected him greatly, and continues to do so even after his supposed repentance. The forced repentance, however, because it was not from Danglars' own will, does not have the same effect as if Danglars came to realization on his own of his sins and acts of evil, likely resulting in a superficial regret and repentance, and still having aspects of immorality and sinful nature he had before. Not only does the concept of moral corruption and its effects apply to the book, the idea also extends much further, as Danglars' character resonates with much of human society and its flaws, helping to indicate the sinful nature of human beings. Because of constant competition, individuals may often seek alternative methods that sacrifice morality for personal gain. Danglars not only help to serve as a vivid example of how quickly aspiration can turn into uncontrollable greed, with the result of moral corruption, but also as warning for humanity about its sinful nature. The story also emphasizes the differences between forced repentance and self-repentance, and how forced repentance is more superficial, reaching less depths than self-repentance and incurring less change. While humanity still will always contain the sinful nature it had before, the story of Danglars serves as a reminder and warning to humanity about the severe consequences that result from being blinded by the moral corruption that is caused by the sacrifice of morality for personal ambition. Nevertheless, it still encourages humanity to retain hope in itself, which is seen that though the ending of Danglars is unknown, he still has a chance to live and correct his past mistakes, retaining the potential for redemption.

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Rifts of Hong Kong's Educational System: A Lesson on Wealth, Poverty, and Opportunity

The city of Hong Kong is best known for being a notable financial hub and a historically integral cog for international trade, within the Asia-Pacific region and across the globe. Given its unique socio-political circumstances, being a former British colony now a part of China, it comes as no surprise that Hong Kong has long established English and Chinese as its two primary languages (*Civil Service Bureau*). But despite its frequent global interactions, more than 56.4 percent of the Hong Kong population is unable to use English for daily communication (*Census and Statistics Department* 4). This discrepancy is the consequence of a far more systemic issue: the Hong Kong education system. The unequal nature between the different educational pathways provided by the Hong Kong education system, solidified by universal issues of economic inequality and poverty prevalent in urban areas, has significantly limited educational opportunities for less wealthy students, exacerbated wealth disparities and existing poverty cycles, and has had profoundly harmful effects on Hong Kong's urban future.

The Hong Kong Education System

Hong Kong primary and secondary schools can be categorized into three main types: the first being public schools, which include fully and partially government subsidized schools; the second being schools a part of the education bureau's Direct Subsidy Scheme; and the final being private schools (*Education Bureau*). For concision, the former two will be referred to together as 'local schools'. Around nine percent of Hong Kong students attend private secondary schools, while the other 91 percent of students attend local schools, with 77

percent of them attending public schools that do not require tuition (*Education Bureau* 9). Interestingly, in the last 20 years, the popularity of private education in Hong Kong has steadily risen, from around 63,480 to around 83,834 students, or an increase of 32 percent, indicative of a growing demand (*Legislative Council*). More Hong Kong parents are recalibrating towards private options, a selectivity that maps onto the city's overwhelming socioeconomic stratification. Driving this stratification is the curriculum. While public schools and many Direct Subsidy Scheme Schools use the local curriculum, the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE), private schools have the agency to choose select curricula, with many incorporating international curricula instead (*Education Bureau*). Thus, a great proportion of private schools opt not to incorporate Cantonese entirely, instead focusing on the daily use and study of Mandarin and English. On the other hand, local schools use Cantonese as the primary medium of instruction, with English as an exclusive subject. Because private schools in Hong Kong, like in most other places, require high tuition, this creates a system in which students of wealthier families are trained from a young age to master English and enter a global society, whereas students of public schools are not given that same access.

Underlying Implications

There is a common consensus that urbanization and wealth inequalities are highly correlated, driven by the complex social dynamics of cities ("*Study: As Cities*"). Unsurprisingly, income inequality has always been a deep-rooted issue in Hong Kong, according to the Gini Coefficient Index, an index used to measure income inequality. Hong Kong scored around the range of 0.427 to 0.414 per capita from 1996 to 2016 ("*Hong Kong SAR*"), before dropping to 0.397 in 2021 following government programs ("*2021 Population*"). For reference, a Gini coefficient of around 0.4 to 0.5 is considered fairly inequitable (*Hong Kong Economy* 1).

Consider the cost of education: the median cost of private secondary school tuition was around HK\$157,800(US\$20,289) per year in 2018 (*Legislative Council*), whereas the median household income sits around HK\$360,000(US\$46,263) (*Census and Statistics Department*). Private school is realistically a price most cannot afford. In a city where the top one percent earned 16.3 percent of all income in 2020 ("*How Hong Kong*"), this speaks to the entirely different worlds the Hong Kong rich and poor inhabit, and how that reverberates through educational attainment.

A core disparity between local and private school students in Hong Kong is the proportion of higher-level education opportunities realistically available to its graduates. Local higher-level admissions are often extremely competitive because of a limited number of spots available, placing extreme pressure on students of local Hong Kong public schools. In the 2024-2025 school year, a total of 42,795 students took the HKDSE final examination (*Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority* 1). Out of them, 16,393 students met the baseline requirements for local undergraduate programs (11). Out of these students, only around 61 percent will receive offers from Hong Kong universities (Yiu), leaving the remaining 39 percent to consider alternative options like studying abroad or to forego higher education entirely. Meanwhile, private schools, especially those adopting reputable international curricula, provide students a direct, and sometimes guaranteed, pathway to higher-level education, especially overseas: a private school like Hong Kong International School reports a near 100 percent admission to higher education for its graduating cohorts (*HKIS Fact*).

While private school students enjoy small classroom numbers and limitless overseas opportunities, this directly contrasts the brutal school dynamic experienced by Hong Kong's majority, who are less fortunate. Equally talented and capable students find themselves at the end of tough statistics and a less forgiving system. Those who do not succeed in higher education are often left no choice but to join the workforce at entry-level jobs in lower-paying sectors, reinforcing a vicious cycle of poverty for Hong Kong families. Children of families that cannot afford external resources for education, like tutoring, typically perform worse on the HKDSE, falling into low-income careers that make it difficult for them to provide said resources to the next generation (Wang). The vicious cycle only continues to contribute to the growing financial inequalities of Hong Kong by trapping families and reinforcing perpetual cycles of poverty. Meanwhile, the wealthiest of students ease their way to education and career opportunities abroad, and the chance to accrue more wealth.

Future Outlooks

Traditionally, private schools were seen as the salvation for immigrant families or expatriates, because the existing cultural and language barriers were smaller in English-primary private schools. Recently, though, Hong Kong has actively attempted to recruit foreign talent and professionals through immigration to

revitalize its economy and workforce (*Immigration Department*), undermining the current systems in place in Hong Kong's educational landscape.

Hong Kong's decentralized education system has its clear drawbacks, but the solutions have thus far failed to enact meaningful, long-term change. Modern reforms could impose bridges between local school curricula and international ones. This could better level the playing field for students to attain educational milestones through merit, rather than socioeconomic background. However, education is by no means the root cause of Hong Kong's striking wealth gap, which is the result of many social, economic, and political factors, such as its infamous housing crisis, to name one. However, light must be shed on the many indirect ramifications of Hong Kong's inequality, so that proper pressure can be placed on government leaders to enact change with the livelihoods of its people in mind.

Hong Kong serves as a warning for governments around the world in how systemic inequalities like wealth inequality, intensified and ever-prevalent as the world steers towards urbanization, if not properly addressed, can cause permanent, cascading repercussions on the urban futures of a city or country, and its people.

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The Enhanced Games: The Brief and Eventful Rise of the ‘Steroid Olympics’

February 25th, 2025 - The dive of faith

Nothing seemed amiss at the Greensboro Aquatic Center; the pool water was calm, the usual echoes in the complex were silent, and the North Carolina sun shone brightly outside. But there, on the edge of the 50-meter pool, standing on the starting blocks was Kristian Gkolomeev, in a black swim cap, goggles, and a red polyurethane swimsuit that reached down to his ankles.

Gkolomeev was no stranger to high-stakes races; his European and World Championship medals speak for themselves, but this—this was different: the adjacent lanes remained eerily vacant, the roaring crowds he was used to were but a few nervously anxious onlookers. Around him, banners hung with the word ‘Enhanced’ on them.

On this fateful day, behind closed doors, with coaches, support staff, and family watching, Greek-Bulgarian swimmer and four-time Olympian Kristian Gkolomeev reached the other end of the pool in a blazing 20.89 seconds, inching out the previous “supersuit” (The term used to describe non-textile, full-body swimsuits worn by swimmers before their ban by World Aquatics in 2010) 50m freestyle world record of 20.91 seconds held by Brazilian swimmer César Cielo. Yet, Gkolomeev’s record-breaking time would never truly enter the history books because behind it all was an event hosted to push the true bounds of human athletic capabilities with science at the forefront: The Enhanced Games. His now-controversial swim would leave ripples in the sporting world.

The truth of the matter

Gkolomeev's record-breaking swim had been aided by the use of performance-enhancing drugs (PEDs) that invalidated his record. Still, Gkolomeev would walk away from the event with US\$ 1 million in prize money, a notable emphasis on the Enhanced Games' operating model.

In short, the Enhanced Games is an annual sporting event proposed and founded by Australian law graduate entrepreneur Dr. Aron D'Souza in 2023. The premise is to recruit current and former high-level athletes to break existing world records or compete at an elevated physical level with the safe use of PEDs, incentivized through monetary reward. The mission is to push the limits of human athletic capacity and to create a multi-sport event that can compete with the likes of the Olympic Games.

On January 30, 2024, the Enhanced Games reportedly secured investors through a multi-million-dollar investment round; the most notable being Peter Thiel, co-founder of PayPal and Palantir Technologies. On November 26, 2025, the Enhanced Games merged with a special purpose acquisition company called A Paradise Acquisition Group. The agreement enabled them to go public on the Nasdaq Stock Exchange.

Ensuing conflicts

Doping and the illicit use of PEDs have always been at the forefront of controversy for as long as organized sports have existed, and have been the subject of many high-profile cheating scandals in sports, from Lance Armstrong to BALCO. So it should come as no surprise that the Enhanced Games have come under fire from sports governing bodies, sparking a polarizing divide for professional athletes and sports fans alike.

The Enhanced Games claims that safety and athlete safeguarding are some of its top priorities, and advocates for the responsible use of PEDs under medical supervision. They employ a commission of doctors and medical professionals dedicated to athlete safety.

The U.S. Anti-Doping Agency (USADA), however, remained critical of the event and highlighted the inherent health risks of doping on athletes.

The Chief Science Officer of the USADA, Dr. Matt Fedoruk, claims that, "This event is being done purely for the entertainment and shock value, with no bearing on the long-term health of the athlete."

The agency also expressed concerns over how the event degrades the human aspects of competitive sports like integrity and fair play, where athletes who achieved their feats of excellence with integrity are overshadowed by those willing to compete unfairly.

“Sport is a journey. It’s something that’s supposed to be healthy and meaningful. There are rules put in place in order to try to make it fair.” Dr. Fedoruk remarks. Gkolomeev’s swim also created friction with the World Aquatics, swimming’s governing body.

On June 3, 2025, World Aquatics passed a new by-law with immediate effect, outlawing all who participate, support, or endorse the event from World Aquatics positions and competitions, essentially banning all athletes, coaches, support staff, and promoters who choose to involve themselves with the Enhanced Games.

The message was clear.

“Those who enable doped sports are not welcome at World Aquatics or our events,” declared the president of World Aquatics, Husain Al Musallam, following the announcement, before citing the health and safety of athletes, and the need to protect the image, integrity, and credibility of aquatics as the primary rationales.

The newly imposed by-law would not bode well with those at the Enhanced Games, with D’Souza stating that the by-law, “is a thinly veiled attempt to strong-arm the swimming community into boycotting the Enhanced Games.”

The Enhanced Games asserted that World Aquatics was limiting its ability to access and recruit coaches, other support staff, and athletes, even those who did not directly utilize PEDs or participate in doping, in an effort to hinder its growth as a competitor by monopolizing talent in aquatic sports.

D’Souza further fired back at World Aquatics, “The widespread, unchecked use of performance-enhancing substances in their own events is an open secret, and it’s well-documented that they tolerate state-sponsored doping when it serves their financial interests.”

Referring to the 2021 doping scandal ahead of the Tokyo Olympics, where 23 Chinese swimmers tested positive for banned substances before the China Anti-Doping Agency investigation attributed the results to food contamination, World Aquatics and the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) would accept the verdict without pursuing further action, a decision that would go on to receive widespread attention and scrutiny.

On August 27, 2025, tensions reached a boiling point when the Enhanced Games sued World Aquatics, USA Swimming, and WADA in an antitrust lawsuit, seeking up to US\$800 million for US\$200 million in damages for alleged illegal anti-competitive practices. However, the case would be dismissed by a U.S. federal judge in November.

In the eyes of the athletes:

While the ordeal between the Enhanced Games and World Aquatics has encapsulated the turbulent reception of the event, it has attracted plenty of attention from athletes.

For some athletes, the Enhanced Games provide a way to extend their careers beyond traditional competition.

Leading up to Gkolomeev's record-breaking swim, he had been training alongside Australian swimmer James Magnussen, who had his eyes on the 50m freestyle record himself. Magnussen, who had been retired since 2019, joined the Enhanced Games, though he would ultimately fall way short of the record, clocking in at 22.73 seconds.

One part of the operating model behind the Enhanced Games has been a key reason for how they have managed to recruit athletes: Prize money. In September of 2025, British swimmer Ben Proud, a European champion and Olympic medalist, announced his retirement from traditional swimming to join the Enhanced Games, telling Sky Sports, "It's too good an opportunity to pass up. The fact is, it would take me 13 years of winning world championship medals to earn the same prize money I'd get from one of these wins." Similarly, Magnussen, who had been retired for the better half of a decade, decided to come out of retirement for a chance of receiving the US\$1 million reward, eventually claimed by Gkolomeev.

As of today, the Enhanced Games has a roster totaling 21 athletes.

Las Vegas 2026:

On May 21, 2025, a thrilling announcement was made: the Enhanced Games would be set for its debut on Memorial Day Weekend in May of 2026. This time, the event is set to host three sports, swimming, track & field, and weightlifting, all at a specially designed complex at Resorts World in Las Vegas. The event will feature a total of seven individual events, all with prize pools of up to US\$500,000, and an additional US\$1 million prize for any athlete who beats the world record in their event.

The event will be the first time the world will get to witness a real rendition of the event and its athletes involved. With no shortage of funding and plenty of built-up intrigue, it would appear that the Enhanced Games and its rise to global sporting prevalence have only just begun.

Andrew Dysart

Grade 10, St. Louis Priory School

Poetry



The Puppet Maker

I started by carving the hands to hold a pencil.
It needed to maintain a perfect GPA.

Then I wired the spine straight.
It was built to carry books, expectations, and ambition.

I greased the joints for efficiency.
It needed to obey the strict schedule, without wasting motion.

I chiseled out a hole and called it a mouth; I then sewed it shut.
It needed discipline more than expression.

Next I taught it to act.
It had to blend in.

Finally, I dressed it with formal clothes and gave it a face like mine.
It replaced me.

Now it runs on code,
so I can sit back and watch my creation operate.

If it makes a mistake,
I will remake it again.

Andrew Dysart

Grade 10, St. Louis Priory School

Poetry



The Slippers Still Fit

Grandma,

I keep looking
at old pictures –
your smile still beaming
through years of dust.

I still have those tiger-striped slippers –
the ones that didn't fit –
you bought me when I was small,
four sizes too tight
even then.

I never wore them,
but they still guide me
from the closet –
a reminder of you.

I still have a sweet tooth
from your gifts of chocolate-born bunnies,
even when my parents heckled you for it.
Thank you for insisting.

Anyways,
I hope to see you soon,
another day.

Jemma Edelstein

Grade 9, John Burroughs School

Poetry



Unraveled

everyone is falling,
but I'm not.
I've been nestled here,
face down on a woven shield,
watching through the gaps in the net.

I'm a fly trapped in a web.
how do I escape this sticky prison,
when it shields me from what I don't know?
should I stay trapped, but safe—
or fly free and dive into the unknown?

I reach through the fraying ropes.
My eyes and ears wander,
drawn to the unraveling threads.
they're curious, but frightened.
what happens when I'm released?

do I fall, and trust that I'll be okay?
motivation is a bucket with no bottom.
with motivation comes energy,
with energy comes strength—
but I'm content laying here.

how do I find the will
to break free of this barrier,
to enter the descent alone,
to want more than safety,
when I don't know if I want to?

Jemma Edelstein

Grade 9, John Burroughs School

Educator: Megan Zmudczynski

Flash Fiction



The Inner Workings

It's where all life comes from, all life goes. It's in your heart; like God in your soul, it's always there. It's called the flower of Life. The core of humanity, where all paths intersect. The bridges are filled with glowing hues of emerald and spring green, creating a magical essence that leaps in the air. The sky projects a kaleidoscope of colors, its illustration never quite shared among the transfixed eyes of the witnesses.

Mist hangs in the air, like torches guiding the way in a dark cave to gold. Except this place is anything but dark. Its brightness could fill up a thousand suns, its energy equivalent to a thousand stars, and its magic to infinite galaxies. Like the petals of a flower, or stripes in a stem, this myriad of paths all intersect at a common focal point: the base of Life. This is where a soul is born, this is where a soul goes.

On the sepals of the flower, the petal shells, buzzing droplets of water guide the crawling youth to the perimeter, where they're pushed off of the ledge. In this area, the Inversion, gravity is a postulate; perspective is key. Some plummet toward the unknown, but most rise. Call it the magic of Life that lifts the delicate bulbs of humanity out towards the sky.

The beads of water stop at some point, releasing the spheres of Life into the Garden. This delicate flower of Existence, so far yet so near, like heaven, is surrounded by clouds that obscure the view of the rest of the grounds. The Garden is described as so exotic and tranquil that those who are there are in a dream-like state, almost as if enchanted by the sheer elegance of it.

When the eggs have turned to fully functioning Living, and stay that way for a while, with time they wither; nothing in this world, however magical, lasts forever. When they start to shrivel up, the exact moment impossible to predict,

the droplets gently carry the frail elders back to the perimeter of the flower that created them, letting them fall into the plush cushioning of the petals of transience.

The souls are guided along the network of paths to the apex of the flower, and pushed into the cylinder tube transportation where time doesn't exist, the Interim, sending them back to the very essence that made them, the soil of Creation. The soil created everything, offering an egalitarian world; an offering that was not accepted.

The petals of transience, the Interim, the soil of Creation, they're all part of the continuous process of Life. The souls live on, giving life to other particles, always existing. When the body dies, the soul lives in the roots in the ground. Droughts have struck, earthquakes have rumbled, but the flower of Life has not faltered. It has stood its ground, green and lively as ever, so humble like God himself.

By the time the spheres reach the Garden, they have forgotten the flower. From their perspective the clouds obscure the radiant sepals and cold petals, acting as a barrier between the magic and the garden floor. These eggs are delicate; when they fall they crack open and hatch, as if the moist air above the clouds was the only thing keeping them intact.

When they hatch, they turn into different creatures, depending on which path they were sent out on. They all came from the same place though- the only difference is their mortal forms. Their souls are the same; a fact continuously overlooked.

Once these creatures have reached their time, the droplets are sent from the flower of Life to pull them back to where they came from. By then they are in a bit of a trance; they don't realize what's happening until they've reached their destination, the soil.

When it's not their time though, they enjoy the Garden. They sing, they dance, they smile with pure joy. They're oblivious to the inner workings of their existence. Only the curious ponder the piece in their heart full of something unknown to them.

There was one soul though, as bright as the sun beyond the clouds, who when it hatched, it looked up at the sky. Beyond the clouds, its intense gaze caught the flash of vivid green against a backdrop of rainbow luminescence. The sky was as clear as its thoughts, but not clear enough to prevent a single rain drop from landing on its face.

It remembered everything.



Attrition

Marcus pulled into the parking garage at 7:43 AM, which gave him exactly twelve minutes to clear the checkpoint and grab coffee before he could show up early for his 8:00 standing meeting. The Tuesday morning security line moved like water through a filter—badge scan, retinal verification, the usual questions about his weekend washing over him and draining away. He smiled at his building's Receptionist, a woman with kind eyes and her hair styled in soft curls, wearing a pressed blouse with a Peter Pan collar. Her pearls caught the fluorescent light. There was a faint buzzing present in every room with those lights. Marcus had learned to find it comforting.

"Beautiful morning," he said, though he hadn't properly looked outside yet. A glance here or there, but he had places to be.

She nodded. Professional. Pleasant. Practiced.

"Did you hear about the flooding?" he asked to make conversation while she processed his credentials. "Over on Ninth Street? Whole basement level of that residential building. Water everywhere."

"I heard," she said without looking up. Her fingers moved across the keyboard. "Pipes, they said."

"Old infrastructure. Bound to happen." He glanced at her badge—still no nameplate, just the number. Twenty small digits all in clinical font. Dashes broke up every eight numbers, leaving the last four lacking in consistency. He'd asked her name once, maybe twice, but she'd just smiled apologetically and gestured to the badge. Government employees, even the ones contracted to private companies like his, weren't supposed to give out personal information anymore.

Safety first. Security second. Survival always. It made sense, really, with everything going on.

"Could've been worse," she said, waving him through.

Behind her stood a masked security officer, rifle held at a perfect diagonal across his chest. White gloves, white mask, wholly silent—as always. The weapon gleamed. Marcus barely registered him anymore. The armed presence was just part of the landscape now. Potted plants, hand sanitizer stations, men with guns.

The elevator dinged on the fourth floor, and Marcus nearly collided with Diane from Accounting. She was slightly younger than him, mid-thirties, with her hair pulled back and dark circles blooming under her eyes. She wore pants—sharp, creased, professional pants. Odd. His wife, Beth, had mentioned just last week that the young women in her office had started avoiding trousers. She said that pants had been called too severe, too harsh, too rough for their tastes. The word they'd used was 'unfeminine,' which had made Beth laugh, though Marcus wasn't sure why. Fashion moved in circles, he supposed.

"Sorry," Diane said, stepping back.

"My fault entirely." He smiled, apologetically half-waving. "Mondays, am I right?"

"It's Tuesday."

"Tuesday. Right. Of course." He adjusted his messenger bag, felt his face heat up slightly. "Long week."

"After one day?" She laughed, but the sound lacked any real humor. Marcus shuffled his feet, unsure if he should say another apology and dart down to his office. Behavior unbecoming of a manager. That didn't make it any less tempting.

"Right, well—" He laughed. "Getting ahead of myself, I guess."

Diane studied him for a moment, her mouth opening, closing, opening again. She glanced down the hallway—bright and sterile and endless—then back. "When did they start checking our phones?"

"Hmm?" He frowned. "We've always done that. Haven't we? Security protocol."

"When?"

"When what?"

"When did it start?"

"I don't... That seems unimportant." He paused, eyes flicking down to the floor and back up to her face—the discoloration under her eyes. "Are you feeling okay? You look tired. Reading before bed can do that to you, all you young people. Didn't you see that on the news?"

"I haven't been sleeping well." She confessed, confirming his suspicions.
"Haven't been watching much TV. Been reading. My—"

She'd paused before the word, just for a fraction of a second, as if choosing it carefully from a list of alternatives.

"—roommate still has cable on constantly. But the news gives me headaches."

Marcus nodded. Roommate made sense. Communal living was practical, popular, promoted in all those lifestyle articles Beth sent him. Smart economics for young people. Especially considering the economy. Not that the state of the economy was anyone's fault in particular. It just crashed one day when unemployment rose. Or maybe the other way around. The government said they were working on fixing it and that was enough for him. He knew he was lucky to have maintained his job. Having a roommate made sense, her hesitation did not.

"Beth says the same thing," he said. "But staying informed, that's important. Especially now."

"Now?" Her voice rose slightly. "What's happening now?"

"You know." He gestured vaguely. "The expansion measures. Infrastructure improvements. Safety initiatives. Makes you feel secure, doesn't it? Protected?"

"I suppose." She stared at him. "Did you hear about the Hayeses?"

"The—who?"

"From the fourth floor. They're out."

"They're out?" Marcus laughed, uncertain. "You mean they moved? People relocate all the time."

"Not relocated." Her voice dropped. "Out. Of the country. They got their daughter out of the facility upstate."

"The—ah." He shifted his weight. "Well, I'm sure arrangements were made. Those places, they're temporary. Transitional. I heard people are being processed all the time. Released when everything's sorted."

"I heard they broke her out, Marcus. Had to. There was no movement with her case." Her voice had dropped to a conspiratorial volume.

"That's—" Marcus cleared his throat, his eyes dropped from her face to the floor next to her shoes. Nice flooring, pristinely smooth white wood. "That's illegal. I'm sure there's a misunderstanding. Proper channels exist. Paperwork gets delayed, messages get crossed. These things take time." They weren't supposed to be talking like this. That, of all things, he knew. Everything was fine. Everything was orderly. Everything was proper.

"She was eleven years old."

"Well, families were being kept together, I thought. Special youth facilities. Clean. Supervised. It was in the briefing last month. I'm sure this is all a misunderstanding."

"They just took the kid," Diane said quietly. "The Hayeses didn't see her for seven weeks."

"I'm sure—" He paused. "I'm sure there were safety concerns. Protocols exist for everyone's protection. If restraints were used, there must have been a reason for—"

"She was eleven, Marcus."

His brow furrowed when he looked back up at her. "How do you know all of this?"

"The checkpoints," she added, evading his question. Not especially polite of her. "They weren't here last year."

Marcus laughed. A real laugh, genuine and warm. *Oh*, he thought, she was just misguided. Fake news. All of that reading wasn't good for anyone. That was a hobby from before. And it was a before hobby for a very good reason. "Sure they were. I remember them from day one. Five years ago? Six?"

"Seven. You started the same year I did." Right. He had always wondered about that, why he was gifted promotion after promotion while Diane remained a low-level accountant.

"Right. Seven." He glanced at his watch. "Either way—"

"Marcus—"

"I should really—" He checked his watch: 8:53 now, but soon it would be 8:55, then 9. He hadn't been late in years. "Meeting. But hey, if you need sleep help, Beth uses this magnesium supplement. Works wonders. I'll send you the link."

Diane's shoulders dropped. She did an odd twisty thing with her fingers when adjusting her earring. "Yeah. Sure. Thanks."

He watched her walk away, her footsteps echoing in the empty hallway. Nice lady. Stressed. She needed rest, maybe fewer books and more of those evening briefings Beth watched. His wife had gone through a similar phase last year—or was it two years ago?—staying up late, asking odd questions. She'd adjusted eventually. Everyone did. It was hard not to.

Marcus grabbed his coffee from the break room—the machine had been upgraded recently, sleek and silver with a touchscreen that remembered his order when he scanned his employee ID. Black, minimal sugar, medium roast. The

same thing every day. Consistency was important. Routine was important. Knowing what to expect was important.

He headed to Conference Room B, settled into his usual chair. He sipped his coffee and burned the roof of his mouth slightly, before he opened his laptop. The screen turned on efficiently. Email notifications cascaded down: Q3 metrics due Friday, revised protocols for visitor access, facility upgrades scheduled for next month. He clicked through them mechanically, sorting, filing, deleting. Everything running smoothly. Everything in its place.

Marcus pulled up the meeting agenda. The cursor blinked and waited.

Attia Elser

Grade 9, Lawrence High School

Poetry



Confectionery Sweet Canary

My heart flutters like a bird in a cage; constantly tweeting and calling your name.

A melted sugar home built around my chest sheer and thin, pecked nearly to death.

Each high note I chirp begging for attention.

my spunsugar house is cracking, too much sound refraction.

My glass and sugar home, sweet but too sharp.

A hunger for something constant and sturdy; but never enough to quiet my chirping.

Bruce Elvin

Grade 10, MICDS
Speculative Fiction



Measured by Our Mistakes

Our spaceship, the Aurelius, was constructed at the Lagrange point between Earth and the Moon. The Aurelius was born of our Grand Unification, forged not by a nation, but by a species that finally understood the clock was ticking. Titanium, mined from the moon, served as the spine for the spacecraft. Moscovium, salvaged from the 'Oumuamua meteorite harvest, served as the antigravitational power source. Previously known as Element 115, Moscovium, when subjected to an intense electric current, could bend space-time, making interstellar travel a reality.

Although 120 light-years from Earth, K2-18b was now reachable. Over a century ago, the James Webb Space Telescope confirmed the planet has water vapor in its atmosphere. Additional research demonstrated the presence of dimethyl sulfide. About 50 years ago, we were able to make our first clear visuals of the surface, which exhibited lights and activity. Given the failed attempts to colonize Mars, our goal was to learn if K2-18b could be a viable option for humanity. With the advances in antigravitational space travel, the Aurelius could make the voyage to K2-18b in twelve years. Our crew set the coordinates and entered the incubation chambers. Our AI droids managed the day-to-day navigation as we slept.

We reached K2-18b on schedule. Upon arrival, we released our first set of drones. Seeing this cloudy, red planet with noticeable oceanic activity was mesmerizing. However, there were surprises. K2-18b was tidally locked. A significant portion of the planet was scorched by its sun, which is a red dwarf. The back side was dark, covered in icy, slushy water. Most importantly, a considerable part of the planet fell between those extremes, being a swampy

marshland. This area shimmered throughout the day, rippling with shades of pink, blue, and orange.

Captain Jack Rourke leaned over my shoulder. His eyes squinting at the monitor, visibly disappointed, he asked, “What are those, lights? Where the hell are the cities? It looks like a goddam wasteland.”

“Those aren’t just simple lights. They move too fast and purposefully. Something is down there,” biologist Dr. Juri Mori retorted. After a couple more drone missions, it became apparent that there were creatures in the swampy marshland.

This was the first time humanity had discovered other life forms, but not the first time we were aware that we are not alone. After the last great war, humanity began to see things in the sky. After about 80 years of these quiet visitations, Contact was made. Initially, the aliens welcomed humanity, and a historic event took place in what was once New York City. Promises of trade and technological transfer occurred. However, as the Reticulans learned more about us, communication broke down, and they vanished. It was a shameful time because we felt rejected. Then, the planetary poles shifted, and our climate underwent radical change. This led to the Grand Unification among the cultures that survived, and lines on maps blurred. Still, Earth remained a capitalistic, sometimes violent society. That said, humanity now felt a renewed sense of momentum, as if we could find a new place to spread our knowledge and foster life in our image.

Captain Rourke said we need to stop calling this planet K2-18b. After some debate, we decided to call it Venaria. Although the Reticulans abandoned us, we decided to adopt their methods of contact with the Venarians. We believed that making them gradually aware of our presence was better than a sudden, dramatic appearance. However, the Venarians seemed to notice our drones immediately, but did not care, which surprised us, given all the hoopla that had occurred on Earth when we noticed our visitors. The Venarians looked up and pointed; then, a loud, crackling sound followed.

Engineer Chen Wei said, “They appear to live in the dusk,” after scanning the thermal data. “It’s the perfect balance. Too hot one way, frozen the other. They’ve got no cities, no roads, no machines.”

Rourke smirked and said, “They sent us all this way for this? A bunch of primitives!”

Dr. Mori frowned. “Maybe not.”

Reyes, who led Communications, floated in view and said, "Earth pinged us. They want a status report, especially whether the 'natives' appear sentient."

Rourke didn't answer. He just stared at the screen, taking in dancing light pulses, marshy swamplands, and seemingly unimpressive inhabitants. How was he going to explain this back to Command? The lights began dancing in a triplet-like beat, flashing blue and green in coordination. Then, all of them blinked three times and went dark, leaving total stillness.

Captain Rourke winced, "What the hell was that?"

Due to the persistent light shows, we continued to scan their habitat. From orbit, the Venarians were scattered in pockets, concentrating along thermal swamps that formed a crescent band around the planet's twilight zone.

The lights were orbs that were easier to see at night but were always there. The Venarians would aggregate at the warmest brine pools in the evening, and often each area would be marked by a single glowing orb suspended midair. The orbs appeared to pulse rhythmically, sometimes drifting between groups peacefully. That evening, one of our probes went in for a closer look. Immediately, one orb turned red and hurled violently across the sky, slicing our probe in a flash.

"Wait, it's a weapon?" Reyes asked ominously.

"Or a signal," Dr. Mori said, unconvinced. "They may be saying, like, that's close enough."

Captain Rourke was perplexed and asked, "Are they intelligent or not? They can destroy our probes with these orbs, but take mud baths all day?"

Venaria has 1.4x more gravity than Earth. The Venarian bodies appeared to be built for that. Thick-limbed, low-set, sponge-plated. The inhabitants were gilled along the neck and took deep inhalations of the swampy air in rolling gulps. They had no jaws but instead had ridged plates where mouths might be. Quickly rattling their scales made loud, buzzing sounds, which resembled the chirping of cicadas. There were noticeable melodies when they performed in unison. We began lowering our ship into their atmosphere and abandoned attempts to disguise our presence.

As our ship neared one of their colonies, we could discern that each cluster had what appeared to be algae-like hauling devices, bulky floats that glided just above the water. We could not determine whether these were machines or naturally made. They burrowed in the swamps, dragging thick mats of colored matter to communal piles. We called it swamp algae.

Chen commented, "If that's agriculture, it's the strangest I've ever seen."

Barely able to hide his disgust, Rourke quipped, "If?"

The Venarians passed their harvests freely. There was no currency, no trade. They dipped their padded limbs into the heaps and carried varying-sized bundles off. The Venarians demonstrated patience and took whatever was given to them.

One figure, with more prominent plates, began to catch our attention. This Venarian was always at the center of his circle. This creature pulled stores from what looked like underwater cache beds, then distributed them.

"Is that some kind of leader?" asked Reyes.

Dr. Mori observed for a long time and said softly, "It appears he's just feeding them and they're appreciative."

The Venarians slept together, curled like commas in the reeds. Unexplainably, some nights they linked arms, but on others they drifted apart and rattled their scales as they dreamt quietly. They continued to notice us, and our probes moved closer each day. We decided to lower our spacecraft even more. After we did this, many more orbs became immediately visible. It almost seemed like they had been waiting for us to unveil ourselves. The newly discovered orbs quickly rotated around our ship. Captain Rourke considered activating the weapons system.

Dr. Mori implored Rourke not to react. She said, "We were attempting to make them aware of our presence gradually, but it appears they were waiting for us to open up to them."

The fluorescent orbs flying around the ship were synchronously blinking all the colors of the rainbow like a Christmas tree and lit up the sky. Were the Venarians controlling the orbs? Is this how they say hello?

The next morning, Rourke said, despite the light show the night before, we had made little progress. As a result, he recommended that we initiate direct contact.

We spotted a group of Venarians standing at the edge of a brackish pool with one orb hovering above them. The orb dipped a frond into the algae mound, offered it outward, then slowly submerged. A dozen Venarians followed and waited behind it. One of the Venarians faced the others while this occurred.

"Must be some kind of ritual," Rourke guessed. "That one must be a member of the elder caste, maybe a priest."

However, Dr. Mori recognized this Venarian from the other day and said, "I don't think caste is the right word. They rotate roles. Yesterday, that one was harvesting. Today, feeding. They share responsibilities."

Chen rebutted, “But they deferred to him. It must be some hierarchy.”

Reyes said, “Hierarchy doesn’t necessarily mean dominance; it could be just respect.”

The truth was, it could be a hundred things, and that was the problem.

After discussing this as a team, Dr. Mori was convinced that the Venarians had a developed social structure that did not conform to human models. The blinking orbs seemed to serve a societal purpose. The crew had tried various AI tools to translate the cicada-like scale sounds as well as the murmuring from the orbs, but they were too layered and high-pitched. Still, the Venarians were peaceful with no signs of conflict. But there were many things we still did not understand about them.

“We haven’t seen any kids, right?” Rourke asked at the debrief. “What’s going on there?”

“Maybe they’re not raised in a manner that we can relate to?” Mori wondered.

Two days later, the Venarians appeared to communicate with us. An orb traveled up to the front of our ship and changed colors, from sky blue to amber. The AI flagged this as an “emotive behavior.”

Day 31

The crew released a drone into the lower bog canals, near where algae was being cultivated. It skated quietly beneath the vapor layer, infrared on. Initially, there were blurry silhouettes, dozens of them, darting between the reeds. Now, the crew could make out long bodies with translucent skin and tail fins that shimmered like oil.

“What’s that?” Reyes whispered.

Mori said, freezing the footage, “Look at that plate ridge.”

It was unmistakable. These smaller creatures had the same crescent bone structure. The same gill flares. The same black stripe near the eye notch.

“Children,” Mori said slowly. “That’s where the children are.”

The children were not raised in homes or classrooms, but collectively. Hundreds of young Venarians drifted through nutrient-rich channels, fed by the algae that glowed faintly pink under the canopy. Larger Venarians watched them.

Captain Rourke exhaled. “So, the adults...live and work above. The kids stay down there. Raised, um, communally?”

“That’s why there are no schools,” Mori said.

Captain Rourke stared at the paused image, totally flummoxed.

After two weeks of careful preparation, our crew initiated passive exposure—no grand landing. Just slow walks through the marsh near a group of Venarians. At first, the Venarians didn't react, not in a way the crew could decode. Their orbs pulsed a deeper violet. But no one fled. One turned its eye-ridge toward Rourke's silhouette and gave a long, croaking buzz.

"Greeting?" Reyes offered.

"Warning?" Rourke guessed.

"I think that one is laughing at us. Maybe because of how we walk due to the gravity," said Mori.

Despite their suits' technological advances, it was still challenging to overcome the planet's heightened gravity. The crew struggled unimpressively. Orbs bobbed around the earthlings. Some split off and hovered just above the water. Others drifted low, circling the crew like fireflies. One passed directly in front of Reyes' helmet, blinked white, and zipped into the canopy.

"They're analyzing us," Mori said. "Trying to figure us out."

"They won't," Captain Rourke said dismissively. "We're here to figure them out."

Day 47

Our crew approached a Venarian, whom we assumed was a leader. Tall. Broad-shouldered. Dozens of other Venarians clustered near him at the algae pools, waiting as he distributed baskets of gelatinous flora.

We set up a simple communication node near his base: three stones, three lights, a projected image of Earth, and the universal wave gesture. The Venarian blinked at it. Touched the green light. His orb shifted colors multiple times. His eyes widened, then he threw his head back and made a screeching trill that echoed across the bog like a cicada's death rattle. The others joined in.

Mori deadpanned, "They're – definitely – laughing at us."

Captain Rourke's eyes narrowed. "What did we do wrong?"

"We assumed he was in charge," Reyes said.

"We assumed *anyone* was," Mori added.

The next day, a Venarian approached our outpost. Slender, silver-tinted. Its orb glowed a soft orange. It sat and waited.

"We're being summoned," Mori said.

Day 48

Our crew followed the pulsing orb into the heartland. We passed what looked like makeshift scaffolding grown from tree resin, giant lily pads used as bridges, and huts spun from algae fiber. And then: a circle.

Dozens of Venarians were seated, their orbs aligned in concentric patterns. A communal exchange. Quiet, focused. Intentional. We stood outside it, allowed to observe.

Reyes turned to Mori. "What do you think they're doing?"

"Perhaps deciding if we're worth speaking to?"

The interpreter finally addressed them through the orb. It glowed, shrank, pulsed. A second orb mirrored the pattern. A third followed. Suddenly, a message played on the humans' interface, translated through AI cross-referencing syntax:

"Why do you not carry your lights? Do you keep your lights hidden from each other? Why should we trust you when you don't trust each other?"

Captain Rourke stared at the message. They were not being mocked. Just...pitied. They didn't see humans as primitive, but as *alone*. The crew continued to observe, but no further interactions occurred.

Day 52

"Update, Captain Rourke."

Command's voice crackled through the long-wave com.

"Status of the primitives? Viable for uplift?"

Captain Rourke stared at the console. His reflection in the glass looked grayer than he remembered. He didn't answer.

Day 55

Chen led another analysis of the orb system.

"We can't replicate them. They're not machines. They change based on mood, memory, and even weather. They seem connected to the Venarians. "

"AI?" Rourke asked.

"Maybe. But they don't behave like tools. They're not programmed. They're...partners."

That day, one orb floated near Reyes and glowed briefly pink, then zipped away.

"I think I made that one blush," she teased.

Day 56

The crew finally met what they assumed was a Venarian elder. Not because he said so, but because he mimed events in the dirt—spirals for time, charred symbols for sun-flares. He told stories using sand, light, and rhythmic shaking of scales. He drew three circles: one red, one yellow, one dim. Then a fourth.

"Different stars?" Mori guessed.

He pointed to the dim red one. Tapped his chest. Then pointed to the yellow.

“Ours,” Captain Rourke whispered.

The historian’s orb turned a mix of blue, green, and white hues; it was Earth. He made a long croaking trill, then shook his head slowly. Our crew was speechless.

Day 57

Earth transmitted again.

“Captain Rourke. Please advise: Is this species advanced enough to receive a diplomatic framework, resource exchange, or technological guidance?”

Rourke typed: “Define advanced.” He then deleted it and opted not to reply again.

Day 58

The crew went to another gathering. They sat at the back of the circle. The Venarians rattled rhythmically and sang while the orbs bounced playfully in the sky. Finally, three orbs zipped towards the crew, and the AI tool began translating.

“You hide your light. Still very young. Don’t help each other. We can help. Find your light.”

After the ceremony, the Venarians seemed to invite our crew into the algae pools.

Reyes floated in the shallows, helmet off, while cicada songs hummed from the trees.

“We thought we’d be gods to them,” Reyes shouted whimsically.

Rourke nodded. “We are insects.”

“No,” Mori said. “Insects have a place here.”

Day 61

Earth’s final ping: “Status of the primitives?”

Captain Rourke stared at the blinking cursor. Everything he’d been trained to say felt as contrived as irrelevant. Phrases like “developmental threshold,” “cultural latency,” and “contact-ready” seemed inappropriate.

He just stared. And, finally, typed...

“I don’t know how to explain what we found here.” He paused. “They laughed at us.”

Day 66

Per protocol, our crew left gifts behind: DNA samples, language primers, food packets, and small carvings.

The Venarians gave no gifts in return, only a message. But several orbs floated silently above the launch pad, glowing with blue, green, and white hues. We never

could figure out how their orbs worked, but it seemed like they wished us a safe journey back to Earth.

Day 68

As the ship breached the atmosphere, Captain Rourke stared at the clouds below. He looked like Venaria's gravity had followed him onto the ship. Rourke didn't speak as Venaria fell behind us. Neither did Mori. I watched the red fade to gray, then to black, and prayed Earth would never send us back until we were ready.

Final Transmission to Earth

"To Central Command: Mission complete. Departure successful. No hostile engagement.

Findings do not align with expected contact models. Recommend full anthropological review. Local species exhibit no hierarchical governance or formal trade. Cultural framework resists economic or political classification. Initial designation of 'primitive' requires reevaluation."

Postscript

Earth asked for samples. Schematics. DNA.

There was nothing to bring back.

Just their final message:

"You build towers to reach the sky, but forget light already lives in you."

Last Entry

You asked if we saw potential in their species. If they were ready.

They are.

We just arrived too early to understand them.

Bruce Elvin

Grade 10, MICDS

Short Story



Colors No Human Should See

I had not seen my mother in three years. When I was twelve, she sent me away to Isahaya, where the hills were greener and the sky less crowded with fighter jets. My mother packed a bag of rice for me; sleeves knotted like she was tying her hands into mine so I wouldn't forget her touch. I promised I'd return when I was older but promises are cheap in wartime.

My great-aunt took me in, a woman carved out of vinegar and miso, whose hands were cracked like riverbeds in summer drought. Her house smelled of pickled plums and smoke that never left the beams. I slept under a paper calendar that always seemed to be on the wrong month. My days were filled with chores: washing rice, clipping herbs, carrying water up the slope until my shoulders burned. At night, I pressed my ear to the floor and listened to the earth sigh.

Life there was small, but safe. Isahaya was far enough from Nagasaki that the air-raid sirens felt like gossip, something that belonged to other places. We still watched the skies, but no bombs ever fell here. Some days it was hard to believe that the war was still going on, that we were only spectators watching a storm roll over another valley.

But letters thinned. My brother's had stopped three months ago. My father's, longer. My mother wrote rarely, her brushstrokes uneven, as if she was gripping the brush too tightly. The last one said only: *Come home*. I carried those two words folded in my pocket until they nearly tore at the seams.

I tried to imagine what awaited me. My mother standing in the doorway, squinting into the light, calling my name before she even saw me. My little sister dragging one slipper across the wooden floor the way she always did when she

pretended to be older. She was five now, would she even remember the brother who carved her name into a pine branch during ration season? The night before I left, my great-aunt pressed a candy into my hand, the kind saved for festivals. “For your sister,” she said, wrapping my fingers around it as if it were a prayer. “Don’t eat it first.” Her eyes were stern, but her mouth trembled. I tucked it into my coat pocket.

That morning, before the sun had climbed, the cicadas were already screaming. They buzzed in the trees, in the wires, in my ears, a chorus that seemed to shake the air itself. Their voices were relentless, cracked, alive. I took it as a sign: the season calling me forward, demanding I return home. With the candy in my pocket and my mother’s letter folded thin against my chest, I boarded the train. The iron wheels screamed at every curve, then settled into a steady clatter that shook the wooden benches. I pressed my forehead against the window and felt it tremble against the glass.

We left the hills of Isahaya behind, rice paddies glinting like shards of mirror. Farmers bent double in the fields, their backs the shape of commas. Every time the train whistled, a flock of birds rose, circled, and vanished. The car was crowded but not full. Beside me sat a boy in uniform, his cap too large for his head. He kept fingering the strap of his satchel, staring at his boots like he expected orders to arrive stamped on the leather. Across from us, an old man chewed slowly on dried persimmons, his jaw moving as though it were grinding gravel. I listened, because what else was there to do?

Behind me, I heard older women chatting. They whispered about leaflets dropped in other towns, papers fluttering down like dead birds, warning that “utter destruction” was coming. Some believed them, some didn’t. One woman said she had seen one herself but burned it quickly; she had heard that soldiers would punish anyone who kept them. The other shook her head. “If it were true,” she said, “wouldn’t we all be gone already?”

The boy in uniform muttered something about Hiroshima, too quiet for me to catch. When I leaned closer, he flushed and said, “Nothing. Just...rumors.” He tapped his satchel twice as if to close the subject.

I looked back out the window, letting their words knot in my mind. Rumors were like weeds throughout the war. They sprouted everywhere and left you with nothing but doubt. Hiroshima was only a rumor too. Some said a new bomb, others just an arsenal fire. The newspapers called it an exaggeration, but who was I supposed to believe?

The rails carried us closer to Nagasaki, closer to home. The hills thickened, then broke into views of cranes at the shipyards, chimneys at the plants, the port glinting like teeth in the sun. I traced the ridges with my eyes, searching for the path that would take me back to my own street, my own house. I thought I glimpsed it once, a corner of roof tiles that could have been ours, but the train pulled away around a bend before I was sure.

The boy beside me sighed. "We'll be conscripted soon," he said, as if this would be a fun topic to discuss. "You and me. Maybe next year." His voice was thin, a reed in the wind. I wondered if he said that to scare me or himself; I didn't bite and just shrugged. I pressed the candy in my pocket. I could almost feel my sister's small hand in mine, sticky and warm, her eyes wide at the thought of sweets. I wanted to tell the boy that I wasn't scared of the Americans, but the words wouldn't come. Pride feels heavy when you carry it on an empty stomach.

The train jolted, lurched, and carried on. Every shake felt like impatience. My whole body leaned forward, willing the rails to move faster. If I could, I would have pushed the whole train with my bare hands just to arrive sooner. The cicadas outside screeched louder as the day thickened. Their noise filled every gap in the car, drowning even the boy's sighs and the women's whispers.

The train shuddered once, as though it had tripped on the rails. Then it violently lurched and dragged itself forward only to stutter into stillness. The cars rattled and went quiet. We weren't quite at Kikitsu Station, close, but not there. The conductor said nothing. No explanation, no apology. For a moment, no one moved. Then the muttering began. The old man with persimmons spat a seed onto the floorboards and swore. A woman shushed her child, who had started whining.

The boy in uniform beside me shifted. "They said Americans are afraid of dying," he exclaimed, not looking at me. "They send their machines instead, but they don't know how to fight like us. My teacher said if they come to the mainland, we'll drive them into the sea. Even just with bamboo spears." He said it as if he were reciting a lesson. The rhythm of it was practiced, but his voice wavered. I chuckled and said, "I wonder what they say about us." The car smelled of sweat and old wood. My aunt's candy pressed against my chest like a stubborn heartbeat.

The boy went on, more intensely. "They're devils. Stupid barbarians. But if that's true, why haven't we beaten them yet?" He stopped tapping and made a fist, knuckles pale. I looked at him and wondered why I didn't feel the same fervor but was only worried about my mother and sister. He could not have been

more than fourteen. I noticed the cicadas' screeching had stopped. But the silence spread, thick as smoke. No buzzing, no birds, not even the hiss of summer wind. Only the murmurs of passengers growing restless, only the creak of wood as bodies shifted uncomfortably.

I craned my neck out the window. The gravel shimmered. Beyond it, Nagasaki crouched behind ridges and trees, smokestacks like blackened fingers against the sky. A strip of laundry waved itself ragged on a balcony, a kettle whistled from a window, a cat stretched on roof tiles. Life looked ordinary.

Someone shouted, "It must be a broken rail. We'll walk if we have to!"

The boy in uniform stood, pointing out the window. His cap shadowed his face, but I saw the unease there. "Look at the Americans!" he shouted quickly, as though naming them out loud would banish them. "But one plane, two planes, that's it? Cowards. We stop for this?"

The old man spat again. "It could be just another drill."

I was angry at the train, at the stillness, at the way the city looked so close but impossibly far. My mother was waiting. My sister was probably bored, looking for someone to play with her. Every second wasted here was another moment stolen from me. I pressed my forehead against the window. The glass burned with sunlight. I wished the train would move and stared at the cityscape.

Then the sky split. No warning, no roar of planes, no whine of bombs. Just a blinding focused light. A tearing open of the day.

It began regal violet, the kind of color you only ever see painted on the robes of shrines. Then it bled outward, violet drowned in indigo, then in burning amber into a gold, then a blinding rainbow washed away in white. The colors ran like wet ink spilled across silk, bleeding into each other faster than my eyes could follow: crimson licking yellow, sapphire swallowing violet, orange blooming like fire in water. Then white.

I had never seen light move that way. It was not like flames or lightning. It was liquid, alive, pulsing, as though it breathed. Fluorescent hues I had no names for surged across the sky, searing shapes onto the insides of my eyelids even when I squeezed them shut.

Around me, people gasped, ducked, threw their arms across their faces. The boy in uniform dropped to his knees, clutching his cap against his skull as though to keep it from splitting. The old man's persimmon fell to the floor, rolling in a slow, absurd circle. And still the light bloomed. For a moment, I thought: *This must be Amaterasu, the sun goddess herself, tearing the veil of heaven. Has she woken angry? Or has she simply opened her eyes?*

The quietness was worse than the colors. The world seemed to hold its breath. Then came the sound. Not all at once. First, a low pulsating groan, as though the earth itself was straining. Then a crack, loud as thunder but crueler. It rolled into a roar, a wall of sound that shoved against my chest and rattled my teeth. The windows of the train quivered, then shattered. I ducked my head and covered my ears, but it made no difference. The noise lived inside me, bone and blood rattling like drums. And then came the wind. Hot, heavy, smelling of iron. It pressed my clothes flat against my skin, pushed my hair back, and tasted like metal and smoke.

Above us, the light folded into itself. From the heart of it climbed a column of smoke. This was black, thick, deliberate. It climbed as though it had a purpose, curling and twisting into a pillar taller than any mountain, wider than the sky itself. It crowned upward into a bloom, a mushroom, immense, unnatural.

Someone whispered, "This isn't fire."

Another asked, "Is it gas? Poison?"

The boy in uniform was speechless and cried.

I pressed my face to the glass. My city crouched beneath that impossible, smoky tower. It was as though the world's skin had been torn open, showing something we were never meant to see.

The boy's hands shook, and he screamed unintelligibly. No one answered. I grabbed him and held him tight, trying to comfort him when I had no idea what was going on myself. No birds. No insects. No dogs barking from the alleys. Nothing but the sound of our own breath, ragged, trembling, too small for a world that had just torn itself open. The mushroom cloud did not fall. It swelled. It pulsed. It crowned the sky like a god holding back the end.

We slowly exited the train to get a better look. An elderly man wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "It's an arsenal," he said. "One of ours. A storehouse caught fire. Nothing more." His voice shook anyway.

We could see that the entire city was shrouded in dense fog. The boy in uniform snapped back: "That's a lie. It's the Americans! Hiroshima was like this. My teacher said it was exaggerated, that they twisted the truth. But this!" He pointed at the sky, at the pillar of smoke blooming into black petals. "It's the same damn thing!"

The women huddled closer to their children. One whispered her prayers. Another tried to hum, but the sound died in her throat. I wanted to run to Nagasaki. My mother was there. My sister. If I started now, if I left the train behind and sprinted through the valley, I could reach them. I took a step forward,

but the elders blocked me, arms out like fences. “Wait,” one barked. “Don’t go closer. The ground itself might be poisoned.”

“Poisoned?” I spat the word like it was absurd. “It’s smoke!”

But he shook his head. “This isn’t smoke.” His eyes were wide, reflecting the shifting light in the sky. “This is something else.”

Behind us, the persimmon man muttered, “Maybe it’s the Russians. They’ve turned on us now. Everyone said they would. Maybe this is their fire.”

The boy in uniform rounded on him, face flushed. “No. It’s the Americans! Who else rains fire from the sky? Who else drops bombs for sport? The Russians fight with tanks and guns, not like this.” He jabbed a finger toward the mushroom cloud, his hand trembling even as he tried to sound certain.

The boy sank back against the train car, clutching his satchel. “They told us we were winning,” he whispered, not to me, not to anyone. His lips trembled.

His words cracked something in me. I remembered the posters in the village square with bright red suns painted against dark silhouettes of enemy bombers, slogans written bold: *One hundred million hearts beating as one*. We would never surrender, they said. We were the strong ones. Even children shouted that they would bleed for the emperor. But what spear could pierce that sky? What bamboo could strike a pillar of fire taller than mountains?

I thought of Hiroshima. I thought of the rumors I had heard only days ago: a single plane, too much light, entire neighborhoods gone. They had told us it was propaganda, foreign lies. But now I saw the truth burning across the sky. Hiroshima had not been an exaggeration. I worried about my mother and sister.

My chest ached. I could not breathe. My mother’s face swam in my mind, her hands rough from scrubbing, her eyes stern and kind all at once. My baby sister. My eyes welled up with tears, and I fell to my knees. The candy pressed against my ribs, hard as a stone. Just a sweet, a small thing. Now it was the only thing in the world I still held.

I viscerally shouted at the elders, begged them to let me through. My voice cracked, tore my throat raw. But they stood firm, and all I could do was watch the black column curl upward, swelling until it filled the sky. No alarms rang. No sirens called. Only silence with the taste of metal in the air. Only the sound of our own disbelief unraveling, thread by thread. Evening fell, though it was hard to tell when the light had already been stolen from the sky. Shadows lengthened, but none of us moved. We went back on the train, which sat silently on the rails. We waited for sirens. For bells. For the all-clear. None came.

In the early morning, the passengers began stirring at dawn. We exited the train to stretch and decide what to do. The boy in uniform stayed crouched by the rail, staring at his cap between his hands. I wanted to console him but ached for my mother and sister. My body was pulled toward the city, but the elders' hands still barred me. "Wait," they said, softer now, less command than plea. "Wait until it is safe."

I pressed my hand to my chest. The candy was still there, warm and sticky in its wrapper. I felt relieved that I still had it. After some discussion, the elders and the train conductor decided to walk to the city, as they could not be sure there was still a station there or that the tracks were intact. As we neared the station's location, we saw that it was a desolate wasteland. Total annihilation. Only broken brick walls and fractured remains of buildings stood. Everything was gone. No house. No mother. No sister. No one seemed to have survived.

The cicadas never sang again, not for me. The empty air that followed was permanent. It followed me into every summer that came after. And though I tried to forget the colors. Those impossible, blinding colors. They burned on the insides of my eyelids every time I closed my eyes. Colors no human should see.

Vera Ewing

Grade 11, Clayton High School

Personal Essay & Memoir



In Self-Regard

There is a sick taste of arrogance that prevents me from ever admitting that I may have felt a sense of pride in anything I have ever done. After all, anything less than perfection will be met with criticism. Admitting pride makes this inevitable criticism all the more crushing when it finally comes. So I keep the word tucked away, waiting for a day I can only hope will arrive.

As I look at old essays and assignments of mine, I spot countless errors that I never previously would have considered as wrong. Too many mistakes that I was blind to at the time. I can only imagine how I will feel in the future, stumbling upon one of my many writings from sophomore year. Growing up as someone who loved to read made me assume that I would be a pretty good writer, too, though it seems that this was not quite the case. I am not good at handling criticism. I cannot remember if I ever was. Despite the benevolent efforts of the critic, my mind can not seem to interpret any of their words correctly. Perhaps the craving of validation is too strong for me to ignore—having to taste anything else is poison to the mind. It may also well be that I desperately need to be humbled and it is my own arrogance that prevents me from properly addressing feedback. While I hope this is not the case, the fact that I must improve my skills involving collaboration still stands. Working with and learning from others is key to improvement. This year especially, I notice some growth in my ability to share and communicate with peers and adults. While I wish I could say that I have fully moved on from a lingering fear of failure, that is unfortunately not the case. I have, at least, seemed to stop this fear from preventing my collaboration with others. That, I will say, is progress I am happy to have made. I can be thankful that I have grown throughout this year, even if my past self would not like to think about any future potential that I may have had. I was used to giving

up, submitting an assignment even though I knew it was not to the best of my ability. Failing to put in sufficient effort has negatively affected any progress I could have made. However, I do believe that I have at least made a bit of progress in this field. I now understand that there are so many opportunities that I have only just begun to take advantage of.

Hearing everyone's unique interpretation is a valuable experience, one that is especially prevalent when studying literature. I gained a new appreciation for the idea of perspective and will continue to try and see from outside of mine. I can thank this past year for giving me an opportunity to push beyond what I had previously thought to be the limits of my creativity. Looking deeper into books from different perspectives has allowed me to grow as both a writer and thinker, something I hope to continue expanding on in the future. Coming to the close of one more school year is always difficult, I find myself dreading the end as I remember all the time that could have been better spent. It seems that I always dwell on the regrets, everything I failed to do or wish I had tried. Maybe now is the time to take a moment and appreciate the fact that I, even though I am not sure if I truly believe it, have certainly grown, in some way or another. English has always been a subject that I have preferred, having been an avid reader in my childhood. But writing was never a skill that I would say I was particularly good at, as I would much rather read than try to create a story of my own. This year, I believe I was able to close the gap between the two, at least slightly. A newfound passion for writing will only continue to help me grow.

As the end of my high school years creep closer, I try my best not to dwell on everything I could have changed or done differently. There is no point drowning myself in regrets when it is now time to simply move on after more than enough reflection. So I look forward, hoping to arrive with a much more willing and positive attitude. Fearing the future that will inevitably arrive cannot do me any good. While I am not quite at the point that I can consider myself to be proud, I will state that I am at least happy with where I have ended up.

Vera Ewing

Grade 11, Clayton High School

Poetry



A Buddhist Priest Burns Himself to Death

As a sun on Earth, his body would glow.
The forest is doused in napalm, but the heart remains intact.
Not in this life, would he see, could he know,
How his charred body, withered and cracked,
Would fire up a world
That we would inherit.

As the flames twirled
He would silently bear, it,
every burden of a people's past
every suffering of a pious lot.
Peace is a word that is far too vast,
It is easy to question what has been wrought.

The end gives an illusion of calm.
Nothing can be done to detract—
The forest is doused in napalm
but his heart remains intact.

Isobel Fasulo

Grade 10, Olathe North High School

Educator: Deirdre Zongker

Short Story



The Copier, The List, and The Girl With No Name

M. Parker waited, her breath bated as she watched the copier work its magic. Thunk, click, thunk-thunk, click, said the copier to the otherwise dormant room.

Now, in the dark copier room, slowly drumming her fingers on her collarbone, was when it all set in for M. Parker. She, like others before her, was about to do something extraordinary. In fact, the act she was about to perform was so extraordinary that it might break a few laws here or there; so extraordinary that she had been planning for months, waiting, saving, snooping, and investing in the stock market at all the right moments. And, slowly but surely, she had begun to see her plan fall into place.

Clomp, clomp, clomp, clomp. The noise jolted M. back into reality, finding her copies were ready—and that someone was coming. For her or not, she couldn't decide. *Clink, clink, clink.* M. could hear the clomper's badge jostling around as they walked, unmistakably, in the direction of the copier room. How much time she had, she couldn't tell, but the shoes were coming closer, clomping louder by the moment.

Breathing hurriedly, M. snatched her copies gently from the machine. While that might have sounded like an oxymoron, I assure you, this was the way M. picked up her copies; quickly, like they were burning, but most carefully, as if they were her prized possession. Gently, M. shoved the copies into the folder she had brought along for this exact purpose. Hastily, she surveyed the room, looking for a way out. The footsteps were approaching at a significant pace. *Could someone have seen her on the way in?* No, she thought, she was too careful for that.

M. Parker tried thinking positively (a repulsive way to think at the moment, as it would only waste time): when in doubt she could always go back to

her old habits and kick the clomper in the shins and, if needed, other places too. M. laughed at the thought. No, she couldn't do that, and risk being recognized by the clomper.

Time was running out, maybe only seconds remaining, and M. was standing, clueless, in the middle of the room. It was almost as if she was waiting for something.

The clomper grabbed the door handle.

M. Parker stood as a statue, transfixed at something on the door.

The key slid into the handle.

She was still.

The key slowly turned in the lock.

M. walked deliberately towards the unlocked door as if accepting defeat and turning herself in.

The door glided across the floor, gently opening.

The clomper walked inside.

M. was nowhere to be found.

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M. Parker gasped, sitting up in bed. Apparently, she had been holding her breath.

M. had just been struck with a great idea, an amazing idea. An idea that would make her plan a lot more difficult, but, M. was hoping, it would be worth it.

Slowly, M. pulled the covers off herself, revealing her bright yellow pajamas, a relic from the years before. Back in the days when her father was alive M. had been called "Sunny" for her "bright and shining" personality. Sunny always wore a pair of purple glasses, even as she got older and was told a different color might suit her better. After that, if anyone looked at her wrong, even accidentally, they would get a nice kick in the shin. But M. had given up many things after her father died and she moved from her family home in Amherst, VA, her glasses and weird nickname included.

M. walked mindlessly to a desk on the other side of the room, remembering her father. *Stop it*, M. told herself, *this isn't helping*. Her message was short, sweet, and to the point, just as she liked it.

M. grabbed at her papers lying helplessly on top of her "Shakespearean Insults" book, smiling for a rare second and remembering the night before when she'd gone to print.

The awkward, slim, serif typeface stared M. in the face, pronouncing its victims: Marelyn Gates, Westminster, London; Warren Pence, Elora, Ontario;

Beau Colleywell, Roscoff, Brittany, France; (at this point M. was very much regretting her font choice, but she moved even forward, she couldn't delay for a small mistake) Livia Hansley, New York, New York; Cade Turner, Washington, D. C.; Julien Estes, Monterrey, Mexico; the list informed her.

Then, scrolling through her contacts, M. Parker found the person she sought first: Marelyn Gates.

It was best to go in an orderly fashion, top to bottom, left to right, as to keep things structured just as she had planned. M. would not let things go willy-nilly, nor could she let herself ruin her very thought-out and orderly plan. No, she would have to stay right on schedule, not even making the mistake of calling her suspects in a different order than she had deliberately planned.

Marelyn Gates picked up on the first ring, as M. knew she would.

"Hello, this is Marelyn Gates. How might I be of assistance?" The woman said right off the bat (this, M. knew, was exactly how she answered every call directed to both her personal and work phones). M. had been lightly stalking Marelyn for the past few months, learning her habits and tics. Analyzing her, one might say.

"Yes, hello. My name is London Riley, and I have something incredible to tell you." London Riley was the alias M. had chosen for herself for this occasion; her forename also happened to be where Marelyn Gates was residing.

"Do I by any chance know you, Ms. Riley? I think you might have the wrong number." Marelyn's confidence had slid down to her toes, now lying in a heap. In a matter of seconds from being on the phone with M., she was confused and concerned and did not know at all what was happening.

"Oh no, Ms. Gates, I'm here to tell you that, in twenty minutes, you are going to begin your two-week vacation leave. I have already booked your flight and paid for a bus to transport you to the hotel you'll be staying at." M. waited for a moment as Marelyn let this all sink in.

"I-I" Marelyn stammered, "I think you have the wrong number. I never put in for a vacation leave, so, I'm very sorry, but I don't know what you're talking about."

"Hmm," M. pretended to ponder, while, in reality, she knew exactly what she was going to say. "Would you maybe start understanding if I said you had to take this flight, it's 100% necessary, and I wouldn't be asking or telling you this if it wasn't?"

“Are you sure you don’t have the wrong number?” Marelyn was severely doubting M. now, making her slightly mad. M. had made it clear years ago that she wasn’t to be doubted, but Marelyn didn’t know that.

“Absolutely, Marelyn. I’m not someone to just dial the wrong number.” No, M. was not, she had this conversation with Marelyn planned out for months, the vacation leave forms filed in for almost a year, and the flight and bus booked almost 15 hours ago. M. Parker was much too precise to dial the wrong number.

“I don’t understand, why do I need to go? How do you know me?” Marelyn asked. M. sighed.

“I am—was,” M. corrected herself, “best friends with the hair dresser who used to do your mother’s hair, and yours, when you lived in Amherst.” This was only partly true, of course, but it was only to reassure Marelyn, not to be reasoned with and used as a fact. “Sylvia died last week.”

“Oh!” Marelyn said, suddenly sounding pitiful. “Oh, that’s terrible. Is that the reason you want me to get on a flight I know nothing about?”

“Oh no, of course not, I wouldn’t burden you with preparing for Sylvia’s funeral, no. This matter is most important.” M. avoided the question obviously, wanting to add a bit of suspense.

“Why do you think I need to go? You haven’t even told me, if you persuade me into this, where I’ll be going!”

“Marelyn Gates, I, London Riley, who knew Sylvia Kelly, who knew you and your mother, want you to go to Amherst, Virginia.” M. Parker said very, very slowly. The elephant of suspense glared at her suspiciously, eating another bunch of leaves and rapidly growing in size.

“But why!” Marelyn Gates cried. M. was starting to feel bad for her and her ignorance, but never mind that, it was time to tell her why she desperately needed her to go to Amherst.

“I, London Riley, a friend of Sylvia Kelly, who knew you and your mother, need you to go to Amherst, Virginia, because your life is in danger.” M. said more dramatically than she probably should have.

“What? No, no, no, I don’t believe you.” *There she goes again*, thought M., *doubting me like it’s her hobby*.

“But, you have to,” M. was urging Marelyn to believe her, trying her very hardest not to start screaming in the process. “Because your family is already dead.” A pause. Silence. “And the killer is coming for you.”

Marelyn screamed.

M. hung up, smiling to herself a slow, smirky smile. Anyone that saw her at this moment would've thought she looked vaguely Grinch-y. *Twice in one day*, she thought, *I really need to stop doing this*.

Everything was coming to plan. One victim off the list and only a few laws broken. M. scrolled again through her contacts, getting ready, before she realized she needed to pace herself if she wanted her plan to work. She clicked on Warren Pence's contact anyway, hearing the line ring for a second before he picked up.

"Good morning, wh—", Warren started before M. cut him off.

"Yes, Warren is it?"

And so the process began, again.

Charlie Garcia

Grade 8, Congress Middle School

Educator: Alyssa Contreras

Short Story



The Air's Omen

Heath stared at his phone anxiously, waiting for a response.

"Nothing?" I asked, keeping my eyes on the road. We had just left a sketchy motel—with most of the guests being termites and moths—a couple hours ago and were on our way home to Kansas City.

Heath let out a frustrated sigh.

"Should I call someone? Like, you know, the police or something?" "Just to make sure he's okay."

He shook his head then turned to the window.

I peeked over and saw his new message to Sawyer below hundreds of other unread text bubbles.

I checked the road, then tried making eye contact with him. "Try calling him."

"He's not going to answer." He set his phone face down on his lap.

I switched on the turn signal. "What makes you say that?"

He shook his head again. "Sawyer stopped answering a while ago, as a matter of fact, he hasn't picked up in weeks. He used to respond to texts," he nodded frantically, "but that stopped too."

"What did he say the last time he replied?" I began tapping my phone for directions to the nearest takeaway. The closest was about another three hours, so I looked for a dine-in place.

Heath switched on his phone and started scrolling through, trying to find Sawyer's last words. "Oh, Summer dumped him."

"Maybe that's why?" I knew I wasn't making this situation any better by asking questions, but I felt like I had to make conversation. The road was empty,

so I checked my phone for a restaurant. The nearest place was just a thirty-minute drive. Not bad.

Turning my attention back to Heath, I placed one hand on his shoulder. “I’m sure he’s okay, probably just down. When we get home, we can talk to him face-to-face.” I’ve been telling him that ever since this trip started. I know that I’m not exactly a part of his family yet, but I should at least be more comforting than just repeating stuff.

Heath turned on the radio and messed with it until he found a rock station. The volume was turned up, eliminating any conversations we could’ve had.

The rest of the drive was quiet between me and him. Every few minutes I would glance at Heath to see if he was back on his phone.

We reached a small town that I assumed was where the restaurant would be. “Arrived.” My GPS stated.

A small diner caught my eye, and I went for it. It had large, clear windows that showed the busy scene with waitresses writing in their notebooks and refilling coffee. I checked the time. 4:45 pm. “Come on,” I started. “Let’s get a late lunch.”

Heath and I were halfway through our meals until he noticed how dark it had gotten. I glanced at a clock behind the counter. 6:19 pm. I looked out the window again. The sky was a gloomy deep blue and the trees in the back were pitch black. Streetlights were lit up with an ominous yellow glow. The small parking lot was nearly empty.

An employee suddenly burst from the kitchen and wildly signaled his coworkers towards him. It caught the attention of every customer including Heath and I. The employee was whispering something while gesturing with shaky hands. He was sweating and his eyes were shift.

Eventually he slowed down his quiet speech and nodded to a younger employee. The young man swallowed and faced the customers. “I’m very sorry, ladies and gentlemen. We’ll have to close the diner earlier due to an unexpected emergency,” he swallowed again, “please finish up your meals, we’ll be passing out your checks.”

Heath and I exchanged glances. He looked down at our plates, shrugged, and called over a waitress who was waiting for us from the table across. She jumped and went to get our check.

There was sudden pressure on my chest. My leg began to bounce. I wanted to holler at that employee and demand to know the reason. By the look of his

face, it wasn't some small diner issue with the stove or freezer. It was a widespread problem, and that's what bothered me.

Before I could say anything, Heath placed my hand in his with a gentle grip. I looked into his golden brown eyes. They seemed to stand out now that his strawberry blonde hair was out of the way. You could always get a warm feeling just by looking at him. Still, that wasn't enough to ease my mind.

With one arm around my waist, Heath used the other to open the car door for me. He knew that I was worried and tried to do anything romantic to ease my anxiety. It was cute, but useless.

In the car, I leaned my head against the icy glass of the window and thought about Heath's situation. As much as I would like to jump in and fix the problem for him, the best thing I could do is just listen. I feared I would just make things worse if I did more. I hate the idea of Heath losing the last bit of family he has. Not only would that just break him into pieces, but it would drag him to the dark place I'd once visited. I would never wish that on anyone.

Heath suddenly slammed his palm on the horn, startling me. "Heath! This is a rental!" I gave him a gentle slap on the shoulder.

He swore under his breath and turned to me. "Sorry, we almost got hit..." He trailed off, then started looking around the busy road flooded with red lights. "Everyone's moving faster. Someone swerved too fast and nearly crashed."

I looked around as well. Just several minutes ago, cars were driving at a decent speed, now they seem to be going faster than we're used to. The drivers had a frightened look on their faces and some of the passengers stuck their heads out the windows and looked back in a panic.

"What are they looking at?" Heath snapped.

I pressed my finger down on the window button and shoved my head out as fast as I could. The hollering wind forced my hair into my face. With my eyes blinded, I couldn't make out what everyone saw. I tried freeing my eyes with my hand, but the yellow lights from the cars behind us glowed so brightly. I felt like lasers were burning into my pupils.

"I can't see!" I yelled from the window. A foul scent flooded my nostrils. The odor was so acidic it felt like my lungs were going to catch fire. I know it couldn't be from all of the exhaust from the cars. No, this was something I've never smelled before. The wind carried it, forcing it up my nose and eyes even more.

“Just get back in! I’ll get us off the freeway!” he yelled back. I slid back into the seat before I could gag from whatever that was in the air. I began to watch over Heath to make sure he wasn’t falling victim to the speedway we were on.

After about two minutes, the sounds of roaring winds, cars zipping and screaming horns suddenly stopped. The air turned heavy. An unsettling tightness swept through the atmosphere.

I poked my head out again with the collar of my shirt over my nose. There was a dark cloudy trail in the sky up ahead. Many people began hopping out of their cars and running to the direction of the source of the smoky line. “Wait here,” I said. With caution, I slowly opened the door and stepped out. I placed my hand over my eyes, in hopes I’ll see something in the sea of lights.

All I could see were panicking people sprinting, shoving passed me. The pressure in my chest from before returned. I swallowed and looked back at Heath, who was tapping his finger on the wheel while giving me an impatient glare. I sighed and got back in.

“Look, maybe we can-” A hand slammed down the back seat window. Behind the glass stood a woman screaming, staring at us while repeatedly pounding the glass. Her frightened calls were muffled. She was whipping her head back and forth, motioning towards the direction she and the others came running from.

“Let her in,” I turned to Heath, “she probably won’t stop unless we do.”

“No...” Heath’s eyes narrowed.

The woman looked back again. This time her wild eyes somehow widened even more. I braced myself, waiting for them to explode. In a moment, she fled. But as she sprinted away a distorted person pounced on her at an alarming speed. I jumped when she hit the ground. Heath forced the door open in reaction.

“Come out through the back from this side!” he yelled, keeping his eyes behind his back. I unbuckled myself and hastily crawled over to the back seat. Heath opened the door for me and pulled me out. He stood in front of me, protecting me as he scanned the area. I glanced over to where the woman and the strange person had fallen.

She was still and silent. Her eyes were wide open, but dull. The twisted individual was still on top of her, but now they were digging their teeth into her skull savagely. I fell to my knees and quietly gagged, holding onto Heath for balance. He turned to me and followed my eyes. Immediately, he yanked me off the ground and we began running through the jammed traffic. Everyone had fled from their cars by now.

I looked all around us and saw more and more groups running away in terror. Many of those groups were being followed or attacked by one or more of those horrifying people. Their shrieks of fear and pain were sickening to hear.

My legs were being pulled past my limit. If Heath doesn't let go or slow down, I'd fall for sure. But I can't risk one of those things getting close to us, so I tried to keep up the best I could. I cleared my mind, and just focused on my running pattern. Our speed paired with the wind made my eyes and mouth go dry. My heart was practically slamming itself against my ribcage. I couldn't breathe fast enough. I couldn't keep up.

The putrid scent in the air smothered my face, and Heath's too without a doubt. Quickly, he turned his head, looking past me. He cursed loudly, and faced forward. This time it felt like he wanted us to move even faster. I knew what he saw, but I didn't want to confront my fears, despite them being true.

The highway seemed to go on forever, and there was no chance Heath would slow down. One part of me was pleased that he wanted us to be safe, but another part was begging to take the breather we couldn't afford.

Finally, an exit came into view. I let out an excited gasp. Heath turned his head again. This time he pressed his lips together and nodded slightly. I was curious about his new reaction, so I directed my gaze behind us. Many of those torn brutes were busy helping themselves to people who weren't fast enough. The ones who weren't feasting were far back, far enough that they most likely won't notice Heath and I leaving the freeway.

We reached the ground level road. Thankfully, it was empty. It was dark and lifeless. I looked up to the expressway, which was lit from lampposts and submerged in the blended sounds of cries, car alarms, and raspy shrieks.

Heath, who hadn't said a word in the last twenty minutes, pulled me closer and panted, "We need to find a weapon or something. I think we can..." His words slipped away from my mind. I broke away from his grip and walked forward, keeping my eyes on the dark, cloudy sky. Something was in it, and it was heading our direction. Squinting my eyes, I saw smog pushing the clouds away followed by rain.

But it wasn't rain. It couldn't be. The scent was so revolting, sour, and annoyingly thick. Whatever it was, we can't let it get to us.

Katherine Gardunia

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Educator: Christian Schaeffer

Personal Essay & Memoir



This I Believe

I believe that people get the same amount or even more meaning from fiction than reality. Even my last name, Gardunia, is my great-great-grandfather's alias, created to make a new identity in the mountains of Idaho. Gardunia is a Basque name and the Basque country is a small culturally distinct region in Spain. The name is also linked to the Garduña secret society rumored to be behind various murders, kidnappings, burglaries, and sabotage.

My great-great-grandfather, Arthur Gardunia told a great deal of stories in his lifetime. He was born in Kansas but reinvented himself as he moved west across the United States in his twenties, settling down with my great-great-grandmother in Idaho in his thirties. He talked about a childhood in the Basque country, time spent in Jesse James' gang, bank robberies, and even killing his step-father before he fled Spain. He moved into a tight-knit Basque community in rural Idaho, and by all appearances lived a wild, adventurous life. In reality he was none of these things. Arthur had changed his name and story so many times that his own wife and children did not know who he really was. The real 'Arthur Gardunia', born and raised in Kansas, lived as a petty thief and gifted storyteller who eventually left his family to run a junkyard in southern Idaho.

However, his family never realized the truth. His own son grew up his whole life believing that he was Basque. He grew up in a Basque community, spoke Spanish with peers, ate Basque food, participated in a traditional Basque dancing group, and had a Basque last name. Even into his adulthood, he was on the Basque board of directors for the community, maintaining the culture he grew up in. So, is Arthur Gardunia's son Basque? Does a string of lies from my great-great-grandfather invalidate the identity he believed in his whole life? I

believe that the exaggerated tales from my great-great-grandfather do not erase the truth of his life or culture, but they do complicate it. Though Arthur's son was not born Basque, that became irrelevant as soon as he heard those stories from his father. Those stories shaped his reality more than the truth. Stories gave him an identity, community, and a sense of belonging that the facts would have taken away from him. Even if the origin was a lie, the life he created was very real; and that is what matters.

Despite our family's unfortunate past with fictional stories, they are more a part of my life than any form of nonfiction. When I think about what my parents like to do, I think of bizarre science fiction novels with crumbling covers and text so small I had to squint to read it. Our shelves overflowed with outlandish books. One book that stood out was *Dune*, the epic about the son of a duke who becomes emperor of the universe against all odds. Though I always rolled my eyes when my parents raved over this book, it was only until I picked it up that I realized how right they were. *Dune* explores a world with sand worms and hallucinogenic dust, but also the meaning of life, the inherent strength of your mind, and many more lessons that I may have never realized without those absurd and unrealistic nine-hundred pages.

All of this has led me to believe that despite all of the importance we place on facts and on solid truth, this is not the only place for meaning to be found. This applies not only to whole identities, but the little things as well. During cross country races or workouts, having a phrase or mantra is key for many runners, including myself. Such as telling myself that I just need to run this mile, when I have three more on a long run. Through these mantras, we manipulate our perception of reality to deal with the pain and push through. These sayings are exaggerated, but that is not important. What is important is how they make me feel. The stories we tell to others, and the little lies we tell ourselves shape our reality more than anything else.

Miles Goldstein

Grade 8, Parkway West Middle School

Educator: Tracy Bouslog

Personal Essay & Memoir



Taekwondo Tournament Tenacity

Sweat crawled down my back as the head judge yelled my name,
“Miles Silverstein¹.”

“Yes, sir!” I said back proudly, even though I wasn’t. I crumbled under the pressure. I have never done a form in front of real judges. This was the very first taekwondo tournament, and I wanted to do well. I bowed to get into the ring and stood in the spot they told me to be.

“Shijak²,” the head judge tells me in a semi-loud voice. The hard part about forms is that when doing them, you have to have as much detail as Leonardo da Vinci but also be as powerful as a bull. I did a long block to start my form; one could hear the whip throughout the ring. Kick, then punch, punch again, I thought to myself. Then repeat it the other way. Now, up the middle, reverse punch kick. More thoughts fill my head. Not about my form, but I wanted to know what the judges thought. They are all scoring me out of 10. I couldn’t focus on them; I had to focus on myself.

Then I was in the middle of my form. I repeated the beginning and then had four more combos left: low block, punch, low block, punch, now kick, and repeat.

“HUT!” I yell, symbolizing that I was done with my form. I waited for my opponents to finish so the judges could score everyone. They gave me a 28.3 out of 30.

“You did your form well,” Master Hardin said. Master Hardin is my head instructor at my dojo.

“Thanks,” I said back, out of breath. I was the third person out of eight, so I had to wait a decent amount of time until we received the results. I forgot to mention that one of the seven people disappeared after bracketing. When he

comes flying into the ring at the last minute, I get a little mad because he was late, but that doesn't matter. He does his form, beats me, and ties with the one person in front of me. When I was 9 years old, I was not a patient person; to this day, I still have trouble with it. The break was finally over after what felt like an hour, but was only really 3 minutes. The guy who came flying in at the last second won, so he led us to the podium to get our medals. I step up to the podium, and my mom takes my picture while I stand in the 3rd place spot. This was like a shot in the heart. I thought I would do better than 3rd. When it was done, I could finally spar. At least that was good.

"Let's go put on your sparring gear," said Master Hardin.

"Alright," I said back. I put on my shin pads, arm pads, hogu³, and my headgear.

We went to the holding area again, but this time I was there for sparring. I was visibly excited for it, smiling and having fun while stretching, again.

"Go to ring 5, you three," said the bracketing guy.

"Alright, let's go," said Master Hardin. We went over to ring five with my bracket of three people. Of course, we had to wait; I love waiting, I thought to myself sarcastically. While I waited, I stretched. In a group of three, one person gets a bye round. Of course, I didn't get that bye, but it was okay. I get to do what I came here for, to beat people up, I mean, spar.

"You go blue," the ref pointed at me, "and you go red," pointing at my opponent. Let's go! I was my favorite color, blue, out of the two.

We took our seats, and I placed my water bottle down and put my mouthguard in.

"Chong, hong," the ref said. This is how they call us to the ring, by saying our colors of our hogus in Korean. Chong, meaning blue, and hong, meaning red. We went up to our places, then the ref checked if we were ready, then they checked the corner judges, making sure they were ready too. The corner judges decide if someone gets a point by using remotes that connect to the scoreboard. If they saw a point, they clicked one of the buttons; there was one that was red for red's scoring, and one that was blue for blue's scoring. If two or all three corner judges click the button, then a point went up.

I felt a burst of adrenaline as the center ref yelled. "Sparring stance!! Shijak!!!" We were off. I started by throwing some punches and then pushed him off to get a solid kick in. He kicked me, and then the score was 2 to 1 with 45 seconds left in the first half. There were two halves, each having a minute to spar.

FLAWACK!! Is the sound his headgear made when I hit his headgear with my foot. "I'm just like that!" I thought to myself with confidence right after I did it. After I hit his head, he stumbled to the ground. The ref called a gam-jeom⁴ on my opponent for falling. Afterward, I kicked him again, so hard his hogu made a crack sound. "Errrrr." The buzzer went off, and they threw a white belt into the middle to signal that the half was done. When we walked back to our chairs, exhausted, I could see him hurting and wavering.

"You're doing well, you're up by 8. You got this." Master Hardin said to me as I sat in my chair, and chugged my water bottle. I felt the cold sensation of the water flow down my throat.

"Don't drink too fast," my dad said, using one of his typical punch lines. I see my opponent shaking his head, almost like he doesn't want to go back out. Meanwhile, I'd been sitting on my chair, sweating my butt off and trying to catch my breath.

"Chong, hong," The center calls us back to spar in the second half. "Sparring stance. Shijak." We're off again, but this time it's different. I was spent from the first round because he got some cheap hits on me. I try to dodge and evade, but I was too slow, and he kicks me a couple of times. I got a couple of points of my own with a head and two body shots. The score was now 13 to 8 with 15 seconds to go. I just had to hold him here. He kicked at me, and I dodged. I kicked him to ensure my victory. My day was not done; I still had one more fight. I shook my opponent's hands and his coach's hands. Then I was on to the next opponent. The only problem was I was dead tired. I was huffing and puffing just sitting in my chair. The fatigue was kicking in from my previous fight. I had luck on my side because the scoring system broke. This happens all the time, but this time it happened when I needed it the most. Fixing it took 5 minutes, which was not enough for me, but I took what I could. Before I could settle down, I heard,

"Chong, Hong," from the center ref. I struggled out of my chair and went into a sparring stance.

"Shijak!!" Booms from the ref's mouth. We're off, but this time was different. It was like everything had slowed down. Every second felt like hours. Every breath felt like another mountain I had to climb. He kicked, I dodged. As soon as my foot landed, "POP!" went my opponent's hogu. I was tired, but I still can kick. I couldn't move, though, as my opponent smacked my hogu a second later. 1-1 (me-my opponent). I strode out to create distance. He strode in, and "POW!" was the sound his headgear made. 3-1. He seemed uneasy after that. We escaped each other's kicks for 10 seconds on the clock, but it felt like days. There

were 30 seconds left. I remember thinking, “How is there still so much time left?” I was already so winded. He tried to kick me and stepped out of the way, leaving me a clear shot at his hogu. It’s too close for a kick to the body, so I lit him up with one of my big punches, knocking him back enough to kick him. 5-1. It was a good lead, but not enough. I whirled around to the end of the mat to keep my distance and waited until the half ended. This does not happen, though, as he jumped in and WHAP! He squared up my hogu to get a nice shot at me. A fierce pain rang throughout my body. They throw the belt to signal the end of the half. Finally, I thought I could breathe. I took out my mouth guard and put my hands on my head to maximize breathing.

“You just got one more half to hold our own. It’s 5-2, you’re winning. Hold him, and you win.” Master Hardin said.

“Ok,” I said back, out of breath. My dad would have said something, but I told him I needed to focus on my coach’s words.

“Chong, Hong,” the center ref said. Dang! I thought to myself. That felt like 10 seconds, not 30. I was still huffing and puffing from the first fight. As I set into my sparring stance. “Shijak!” the center ref said. The last bit of my tournament was underway. My opponent out of the gate went full throttle. He bull rushed me into a corner of the ring. He must have had a second wind. Somehow, he did not score any points. In that corner, I was pinned. He threw a kick at me. I blocked. He breathed, hitting my face harder and harder with every breath. He let his guard down, and I was able to escape the corner and get back to the middle. I kicked him repeatedly because after bull rushing me, my opponent could not comprehend my kicks. He looked like an empty toothpaste bottle; he had nothing left to give.

The score was 8-2 with only 10 seconds left. The clock counted down as he tried to score more points, but they were weak, so I pushed them to the side. I won!! I went down and shook my opponent’s hand and then his coach’s hand. Then the ref and the scoring judges shook our hands. I took off my headgear, and sweat poured down my back like a victory Gatorade bath. I victoriously walked over to the metal stand and gave them the paper this time.

“Miles Silverstein, Gold medal,” the lady said with a little cheer in her voice. “That’s me!”

1 Silverstein is a fake last name.

2 Shijak means start in Korean.

3 Hogu means protective gear around the chest and rib cage.

4 Gam-jeom means a penalty in sparring.

Evan Grellner

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Critical Essay



The Life of Monoculture—How ‘K-Pop Demon Hunters’ and ‘Six Seven’ Show Cultural Unity is Still Alive

I – Seinfeld and the Definition of Monoculture

On May 14, 1998, roughly 76.3 million people tuned in to watch the finale of hit show ‘*Seinfeld*’, making the sitcom the fifth most-watched finale in television history (“‘Seinfeld’ the Finale (TV Episode 1998) - Trivia - IMDb”). In the years following, images floated of people clustered in Times Square watching the last episode on a nearby jumbotron. There are reports of nearly 5,000 people gathering in St. Louis to witness the event. All over the nation, families and watch parties held their breath as the opening theme picked up, and the last 56 minutes of one of the biggest cultural phenomena of all time played.

All of this comes back to an idea originally coined in the agricultural industry, ‘monoculture’. In a societal context, monoculture refers to the idea of “a group, society, etc. characterized by cultural uniformity” (“Definition of Monoculture”) Expressed simply, it’s the ability of one to reference ‘*Seinfeld*’ or ‘*MASH*’ and have everyone get the joke. There are many who praise monoculturalism, claiming it provides a collective identity that serves to create a more cohesive, stable, and connected society. Those same people often mourn the ‘death’ of monoculture, saying that the rise of the internet fractured media,

leading to a landscape defined by niche interests rather than shared culture. However this ‘death’ is often overstated. Monoculture has not gone away, it’s simply changed, and everything from the recent success of ‘*K-Pop Demon Hunters*’ to the widespread proliferation of the ‘six seven’ meme proves this. This is an important fact to distinguish, because it shows despite the increased separation, there is still a way to connect people.

II – The Success of K-Pop Demon Hunters

On June 20th, 2025, Netflix released Sony Animation’s ‘*K-Pop Demon Hunters*’, a film following three K-Pop idols who, in between crashing planes and selling out shows, hunt down demons. The film was massively successful, becoming Netflix’s most watched title ever, raking in approximately 325 million views within its first 91 days (Kim). The songs alone trended across social media, with its most popular track, ‘*Golden*’, reigning as the most streamed song in the United States for weeks (Burt). Between all the success and acclaim however, the film’s most impressive accomplishment is establishing a modern-day moment of shared culture. It seems everybody has at least heard of this film, and one would be hard pressed to go anywhere without seeing its merchandise or hearing a child muttering its lyrics. As one reviewer put it, the film shows we might be “living in a post-multicultural world — or at least that pop culture has normalized imagining such a world as within reach.” (Hong)

This isn’t to say the movie erases cultural differences for the sake of homogeneity—rather, it takes niches and combines them in a way that connects everyone. It makes it so that a white person can enjoy the K-pop references just as much as a Korean, creating a mesh of differing influences. “The film mirrors where the cultural identities of young people around the world are evolving and converging into a mash-up of styles that doesn’t privilege one over the other [...]” (Hong) The sheer popularity of the project goes against the claims of those who think monoculture has ‘died’. However, to their credit, it does show a different kind of monoculture. As opposed to something like ‘*Seinfeld*’ or ‘*MASH*’, which are primarily based in an American perspective, ‘*K-Pop Demon Hunters*’ shows a more

globalist, interconnected identity. This is an identity where differing cultural identities are preserved and made equal, rather than filtered through a singular lens. Some, if not most, would argue that this is healthier than the old status quo.

III – The Proliferation of the ‘Six Seven’ Meme

Memes have played an important part in culture for a long time. Originally conceived by Richard Dawkins in his 1976 book, *The Selfish Gene* (“The Birth of a Meme – What Is It Anyway?”), the term was appropriated by the internet to describe “an idea, behavior, style, or usage that spreads from person to person within a culture” (Merriam-Webster). Examples of memes were everywhere in the 1980s and 90s, even if the term wasn’t used to describe them. From “Where’s the beef?” to the “Dancing Baby”, memes have always been a part of human culture, functioning as an easy way for strangers to connect through the quick acknowledgment of common experience. To a person who believes monoculture has ‘died’, it may seem that universal memes have gone with it. While it is true that online jokes tend to get cycled through more quickly in the modern day, the existence of a particular persevering meme proves the culture has not yet taken its final breath.

‘Six Seven’ was a sound bite taken from rapper Skirllia’s song ‘Doot Doot’. It was circulated for a while, but its true fame came when a young child yelled the phrase at a basketball game right before one of the players scored a point (Placido). Since then, the meme has enjoyed month-long virality, continuing the trend from the 80s, 90s, and beyond of short phrases being spread throughout the cultural subconscious. That is exactly the importance of the meme—it proves that even in today’s fractured world a single idea, even if it means next to nothing, can still persuade people of all backgrounds to willingly act a certain way. That’s exactly what the people who mourn monoculture’s ‘death’ say society has lost. If phenomena like ‘six seven’ are still occurring, it shows that monoculture is indeed not dead, just changed. “In its own way, this is reassuring. It suggests that audiences still want a monoculture, that they still yearn for a

shared and collective experience that only this sort of popular culture can provide.” (Mooney)

IV – Why is this Important?

There is an argument to be made that monoculture isn’t dead because it never existed. At least in the United States, culture has always been a melting pot of different backgrounds, ideas, and theologies. There is some truth to that—the United States has never experienced ‘true’ monoculture, where everybody holds absolutely the same customs, beliefs, and dialects. That, however, isn’t the kind of monoculture those who talk about its ‘death’ mourn. Rather, they speak of a certain cultural unity where certain products, franchises, and phrases transcend those differences, creating a society where those differences seem less important. To that extent, monoculture has weakened in the United States. The nation is more divided than ever, with “a record-high 80% of U.S. adults believing Americans are greatly divided on the most important values.” (Jones) However, cultural moments like ‘*K-Pop Demon Hunters*’ and ‘six seven’ shows that even in times like these, people can come together over shared experience. That is perhaps the most important message to hear, because it proves that no matter how divided America is on the surface, underlying unity and connection can still shine through.

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The Fictionalization of Reality—How Hyperreality Has Ruined Our Preception of Tragedy

I - Introduction

On September 21st, 2022, Netflix released the first season of the true crime docudrama ‘Monster’, covering the story of Jeffrey Dahmer. The show was an instant success, achieving more than one billion hours viewed and receiving several awards. Netflix attempted to recreate this success with the second season, covering the story of Lyle and Erik Menendez. Then most recently the third, covering Ed Gein. All three seasons received numerous praise, but also increasing controversy. Many call out the program for factual inaccuracies, misleading theories, and sensationalism. But there is a much deeper critique to be made.

The show, instead of focusing on the tragedy, trivializes the victims by making them side characters in the killer’s narrative. This falsified glamor creates a level of disconnect where audiences forget that these dramatizations represent real human beings. This plays into an idea theorists call ‘hyperreality’—when the simulation becomes more real than the truth it once represented. The rampant spread of hyperreality across television and social media is emblematic of a much larger issue however, one that affects our perception of disaster, politics, and fellow human beings. All of it contributes to a society increasingly deprived of empathy.

II - Explanation of Hyperreality

Hyperreality, as paraphrased from Jean Baudrillard, “is an inability of consciousness to

distinguish reality from a simulation of reality,” (*Baudrillard*) Explained simply, it would be as if one saw the drawing of a cube, and it became more authentic to them than the cube itself. The ‘Monster’ series is an excellent example of this—following its release, users on TikTok began to romanticize the real life persona of Jeffrey Dahmer. This included the creation of ‘thirst traps’, romantic edits between Dahmer and one of his victims Anthony Hughes, and claims that users could have ‘fixed’ Dahmer if they knew him. This all displayed an assumption that the character of Dahmer shown on screen was the same as the individual in real life. The effects of this are clear—the carefully crafted version of Dahmer, edited and cleaned to fit story structures, replaced the real life person in audiences’ minds.

Not only does this create unjustified sympathy for the killer, but it also links true events to fictional motifs. This creates a level of disconnect—the reality is now a story to consume, flattening the truth into another ‘fandom’. All of a sudden, the story of Dahmer becomes similar to something like Harry Potter. “[...] they are reducing victims’ lives and tragedies to marketable content. This branding of real violence and victims dehumanizes them by turning them into merchandise and memes.” (*Gray*) Dahmer is no longer a twisted man, but instead a handsome, ‘misunderstood’ tragedy. The perspective, and by extension the support, shifts from the victims and their families to this attractive, idealized figure.

III - The Fictionalization of Reality

This problem goes beyond just serial killers however, with the issue bleeding into a wider danger known as the ‘fictionalization of reality’. While sounding opaque at first, there are examples of it everywhere. Most recently, the ongoing controversy around the relationship between current President Donald Trump and deceased sex offender Jeffrey Epstein. The language surrounding this case has been fascinating, with many referring to it as a ‘narrative’ or ‘saga’. These words convert real events into stories, turning actual people into archetypes of villains, heroes, and side characters. Much like ‘Monster’, it shifts the thinking from horror to entertainment, turning complicated issues into easily digestible media.

This creates not only a flattening of past and current events, but also a mental separation. This can be best explained with the popular phrase ‘go touch grass’. This advice exerts an idea that one can simply get off their phone to reconnect with the ‘real world’—even as the screen displays said world. The phrase embodies a misconception of separation, making one think they are

unaffected by what they see, and that the news is another fad to consume. “As news becomes more sensational and entertaining, it focuses on evoking emotions rather than fostering critical thinking. This shift makes it difficult for the audience to distinguish between facts and opinions, leading to a decline in the ability to understand complex issues [...]” (*Asipov*)

IV – The Result

The greatest effect of this shift from reality to fiction is the degradation of empathy. When real world events are altered to serve as entertainment, distance is created between the consumer and those affected. This issue is most exacerbated on social media, where disaster is constantly shown through quick, short-term content. “Constant exposure to tragic news can lead to desensitization, making us less sensitive to the suffering of others over time.” (*Monet*) This might explain the reaction on TikTok—not only to shows like ‘Monster’—but also to real life news. A famous example is the implosion of the Titan submersible, where almost immediately after the news broke jokes mocking the event exploded across the internet. Many did object to the humor, calling it ‘distasteful’, but that didn’t change the fact that the memes were trending for weeks. “The exploitative coverage of the death and terror unfolding in real time has only been compounded by the public’s reaction on TikTok, Twitter and Instagram. Gleeful best describes the tenor of many posts [...]” (*Gelt*)

These types of reactions have been made more and more common as social media continues to create increasingly sensationalized and extremist takes. More often than not these takes will simplify the situation in an attempt to fit it into a wider narrative, causing increased division as individuals get lost in their own view of things. With every school shooting or natural disaster the human cost is often forgotten, and instead the emotions of pinning it on ‘the radical left’ or ‘right-wing extremists’ take precedence.

V – The Solution

All of this combined represents a significant threat to society, and one that is hard to address when the systems that propagate it are supported by such large revenue. ‘Monster—The Jeffrey Dahmer Story’ was one of Netflix’s highest-rated shows, while social media companies have been shown to profit off negative engagement. However, if society continues down this path more people will grow desensitized until there is a vast shortage of empathy, the effects of which will be devastating for any social order. Luckily, there are several options to consider.

The first would be organizational change. Specifically when it comes to current events, social media and news companies could look for inspiration in a

policy called the ‘Fairness Doctrine’. Introduced by the Federal Communications Commission in 1949 and ending in 1987, it required that “broadcast networks devote time to contrasting views on issues of public importance.” (*Ronald Reagan Presidential Library & Museum*) Although it would have to be adjusted and its terms redefined, a policy like this would be incredibly useful in the modern day. Potential benefits would range from increased understanding of opposing views to decreased radicalism. Overall, it could create a calmer society, as it would provide “audiences with access to a more comprehensive range of information” (*SleuthyFella*) and encourage critical thinking.

The second would be an attitude change amongst those who report news. Whether on broadcast or social media, it would be highly beneficial if those presenting information did so out of a desire to inform rather than polarize. Phrased differently, it would be better if news sources did not do it ‘for the clicks’. Of course, this goes against several base facets of human psychology, from the desire of security (in this case a consistent audience and flow of income) to the need of acceptance (the popularity that often comes from being polarizing), but it is required to stop society from mixing the sensational with the truth.

The third option would be a second change in attitude—this time amongst the audience. As more people begin to notice this increased lack of empathy, a movement may rise up encouraging others to stop consuming sensationalized media, both on social apps and television. Such a movement could be among the most important of our time. If audiences keep providing viewership, shows like ‘Monster’ will continue being produced, spreading misinformation and plummeting society further into hyperreality. Pushback against this will allow society to shift its focus back to the victims, and return their comfort and authority to the forefront of decisions. What happened in the past should be left in the past unless those affected wish to continue it. Even then, the choices of how it is shown should be at their discretion. While it would likely need the support of the other two solutions to get started, such a movement is needed in the modern day. If the media continues to prop up these tragedies as nothing more than entertainment, then the illusion will eclipse the truth, and empathy will be replaced by engagement.

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Evan Grellner

Grade 12, Linn Middle High School
Portfolio



False Pretenses

Blueberry Bagel

She always ate blueberry bagels. She was chewing on one when Iemitsu entered the room. He wiped his sweaty palms on his uniform jacket and took a deep breath.

Today will be the day, he told himself.

The floorboards creaked as he made his way to her desk. The sun was high and bright in the window, and it framed her face in angelic light as she looked out onto the school yard. Iemitsu's heart pounded—*beat-ba-boom, beat-ba-boom*. His legs locked up. He began to wobble like a fish yanked from the ocean.

I can't—he panicked. *I can't*—

“E-excuse me?” he squeaked, feet pressed tight, arms like boards.

Chomp.

She took one bite of her bagel, then another, not turning around. Iemitsu's stomach twisted.

She didn't hear me, he hoped.

Shakily, he outstretched a hand, and tapped her shoulder.

“Excuse—”

She whipped around, hissing, and before Iemitsu even had time to be surprised, a massive puff of blue smoke engulfed her. It swelled up high to the ceiling, then dissipated, and when it did, a sleek, black cat sat in her place.

Iemitsu stared at the cat. It stared back at him. They stayed like that for a moment. Then it bolted.

“Wait!” Iemitsu called, giving chase.

It sprinted out the room, and his hip struck a desk, causing him to stumble. He kicked himself up and burst through the doorframe, just as the tip of its tail disappeared around the corner.

“H-hold on!” he cried, pumping his legs.

“Hey dude!”

“Ahh!”

“Watch it!”

Iemitsu fired off fierce apologies as he knocked into classmate after classmate, varying it with an “excuse me!” or “coming through!”. He slammed into the wall at the end of the hall, then pushed off, stumbling to the stairs.

The cat sat at the bottom, seemingly catching its breath. He called for it, stupidly, and it jumped and bore its tiny fangs, scampering.

“No!” he groaned, and tripped down the steps.

He gave a bone-weary laugh at the bottom—the cat was trapped, pawing at the set of double doors that marked the entrance of the school.

“There you are,” he sighed. “Here kitty, kit—”

“Whoa,” the doors opened, a rushed-looking student hopping in as the cat darted between his legs.

“Ah!” Iemitsu agonized, blurting an apology as he pushed the fellow student aside.

There was a spicy tuna kind of heat outside, with the pale-white clouds hardly doing their job of concealing the sun. Iemitsu leapt onto the dusty-brown ground, looking around frantically.

“Where—”

YOWL.

He jumped as the nearby bushes rustled and the cat sprung out, splinters the size of taiyaki sticking out of its behind. It charged towards the track field, right into the fence. There was a loud rattle, a great shake, then the cat face-planted into the dirt.

“Aye, aye, aye,” Iemitsu said, running to the fallen feline. He picked it up by the armpits, and it suddenly gave a great screech.

“Put me down, put me down!” it yelped, and Iemitsu stared in dumbfounded shock.

“Y-you can talk?”

“Of course I can talk you idiot,” the cat snarled. “I was a girl just a moment ago, wasn’t I?”

Iemitsu gaped wordlessly for a moment or two, then asked, because he was really quite curious, “Are you cursed?”

“Are you stupid?” The cat kicked and beat its paws, waving its tail this way and that. “I’ve always been a cat! I made a deal to turn myself into a girl! But you just had to go and break the illusion!”

“How—” he started, but then he remembered how she’d hissed when he tapped her. Disappointment came over him like a wave, but then it settled. He figured, *it was never going to work*. A boy can’t date a cat.

“It’s better that I know,” he concluded, and dropped the cat. It zipped like lightning, disappearing from the courtyard. Iemitsu watched it go, then put a hand on his stomach. He’d been so nervous, he’d forgotten breakfast. Maybe he’d have a bagel. A plain one. The cream covered too much of the actual flavor.

Halloween Politics

“President Pumpkin has just signed a new executive order mandating all citizens wear masks. This is, of course, due to the rising smog levels, which some researchers have linked to adverse health effects. However, President Pumpkin, acknowledging the toll this will take, included a clause stating all masks should be ‘fun.’”

“And what a wonderful thing that is Stan. What other President has cared about his people enough to do something like this?”

“None, Jill—just like how no other president has led by example quite like him. He made the announcement today at a White House press conference while wearing a jack-o-lantern on his head.”

“*Incredible. Absolutely incredible.* Suffering with us, that’s so admirable. I can see you’re already complying with the order Stan. Love the devil mask.”

“Same for yours Jill. The horns are so sharp! I could cut my finger on them!”

“Well, you’ll have to be careful!”

“Is that right? Well in other news, climate scientists have concerns over the global cooling caused by the smog...”

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“—president has just announced a new initiative to end ‘anti-witch’ language in the federal government. This comes right after Senator Craven’s speech attacking Secretary of Treasury Rain Digby for her ‘crystal ball’ economics.”

“Right, and what a shameful speech it was Stan. It included years of hateful rhetoric spewed by the kind of wishy-washy activist groups that claim witches

shouldn't use newt tails or dead men's toes. But President Pumpkin has finally put an end to that.

"Right on time too, as his move coordinates with a recent announcement by Secretary of Health Derrick Jinx advising people to stop using vaccines and rely on potions instead. He gave a wide range of healing ingredients, from bear's fur to bat's wings. I can personally attest to the effectiveness of these kinds of elixirs. Remember last year when my back was hurting, Jill?"

"I do Stan, I do."

"Well I went to a local witch doctor and they gave me fried monkey brains. Woke up the next day feeling good as new."

"I love to hear it, Stan, and you know, people are claiming the government isn't doing enough to address the smog and its 'negative health effects'. But here the Pumpkin administration is doing more than anybody has in years to protect Americans from sickness."

"Absolutely right, Jill. Now, a recent measles outbreak has devastated a small town in Texas. President Pumpkin blames radiation from Christmas lights. More on that after..."

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"—mass tax breaks for candy companies across the board. President Pumpkin explained in an interview today that this will allow them to double production and boost the economy."

"Right, of course. Now some parents are complaining about the childhood obesity this will cause. But you know what I say? Enjoy the nursing home! These parents need to step back and let the kids have fun. Stop being so uptight!"

"Exactly Jill! It's parenting like this that's stopping kids from walking alone on the street..."

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"—company is suing President Pumpkin for allegedly 'discriminatory' laws in his newest Energy Conservation bill."

"It's a bunch of fluff Stan. They're just mad that they can't put their Christmas lights up early anymore and ruin the sanctity of American traditions."

"You are so right Jill. These...these...Christmas radicals will do anything they can to force their holly jolly agenda down our throats. It's absolutely sickening!"

"It's not just us either! It's our children, our parents, our friends. My little four-year-old came home the other day and said his teacher was playing Christmas music!"

"No! It's only August!"

“I know! It made me want to switch him to homeschooling right then and there.”

“You should’ve done it. It’s the only way to keep him safe from all these...influences.”

“If it wasn’t for the election I would have. But now that Pumpkin is in office I believe he’ll restore some order in this broken country...”

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“—Christmas radicals are at it again. Large-scale riots have popped up across every major city in the nation, protesting the Pumpkin administration’s ‘constant celebrations’.”

“Popular images across the internet show rioters in all green carrying signs reading, ‘Address the Smog’ or ‘We’re Being Choked’. At least one popular phrase can be heard chanted across the crowds, ‘No Pumpkins’.”

“Vile, utterly vile.”

“No need to tell me Stan, the pictures speak for themselves. Look at this one, with the man on top of the burning car.”

“You know what I call my children when they act like this? Ungrateful.”

“Well Stan, you’ll be happy to know that President Pumpkin is not backing down. He responded to the chaos in a social media post stating, ‘If you can’t take the treats, you’ll get the tricks’.”

“Such strong words! This is the leadership America needs.”

“Agreed Stan, but it’s not all bark. President Pumpkin has sent in armed troops to quell the riots...”

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“—signed an executive order to change the national bird to a black cat.”

“An absolutely excellent decision Stan. Cats are so much better than the eagle. Smart, regal. They’re exactly what America should be.”

“Couldn’t agree with you more there Jill. This move comes from a flurry of actions by the president to ‘make America better’, from renaming the Gulf of Mexico to ‘The Cauldron’ to redesigning the flag. In a post to social media he explained, ‘We’re getting rid of the red. Red is such an ugly color. We’re lightening it up, making it orange. Orange is a beautiful color, a splendid color. The white too—nobody likes the white. You know what countries fly flags with white on them? Loser countries. We’re gonna make it black to show we’re serious, that we mean business. The blue too—the blue’s gotta go. It’ll be black as well. Orange and black. Those are the colors of America’.”

“Truer words have never been spoken, Stan. They’re needed words too, especially as the riots continue across every major city.”

“Oh yes, yes. President Pumpkin has shared his disappointment in the continued attitude across social media, and announced a national Trick-or-Treat festival this October to promote unity.”

“A wonderful idea! Those Christmas radicals would never come up with an idea like this!”

“They’re too busy trying to push their holiday on everyone else. Even now they’re calling the president’s festival a ‘distraction’ from the smog. These people will find every way to tear him down.”

“But he rises above them, doesn’t he Stan? That’s what makes him the greatest president America’s ever seen.”

“Right you are Jill. In other news, ‘Anti-Halloween’ was found scribbled on a bullet just after the deadly shooting of a federal agent..”

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“We are coming to you with live footage from Pumpkin Town, D.C. — formerly Washington. The president’s trick-or-treat festival is in full swing and—wait, Jill. Would you look at that? Are those—”

“Yes Stan it appears rioters have flooded the streets. None of them are wearing masks which means they are in open rebellion against the president.”

“Oh this is terrible! Terrible! Look at the children, they’re terrified! Wait, you see that one?”

“What are you talking about Stan?”

“That rioter. See how he’s coughing? Watch him stumble—oh! First one down, that’s what you get buddy!”

“Oh that one too! She’s not going to make it—ha!”

“These protesters won’t make it long without their masks. Smog’s too thick in Pumpkin Town.”

“Well they wouldn’t make it long either way. Looks like the national guard is finally coming in, and in flattering clown costumes no less. Look how they painted their guns—oh, and the first shots ring out.”

“Well, it looks like the trick-or-treating will go on uninterrupted. They oughta display those rioters for trying to ruin it though.”

“Yes Stan, I agree. They’d make excellent zombie decorations.”

The Ritual

“How old are you?”

A common first question.

"Eighteen," Gordon said.

"Had to get it in as fast as possible, huh?" Alyssa smirked, setting her chin on her palm.

"No point in waiting 'til your twenty," Gordon answered.

Alyssa hummed, then turned her gaze towards Kara.

"How about you?"

"Also eighteen."

"Both the same age?"

"We met in school," Kara explained. "Second year."

"Ah," Alyssa said, rubbing her thumb against the stone floor, making a little face with ashes from the fire. "Well, I won't be one of those people who drags this out. Gordon, are you in love with Kara?"

Gordon opened his mouth, held it for a moment, then closed it around a word, "Yes."

"You hesitated," Alyssa said, not looking up. "Why?"

"I didn't."

"You did."

"Stop lying!"

"Gordon," Alyssa breathed sharply through her nose, "The whole point of this ritual is full honesty. So, why did you hesitate?"

Gordon clenched his jaw, moving it in slow, agitated circles.

"Why are you single?" he eventually spat.

"I asked a question first."

"That doesn't—"

"Gordon!" Kara's hand shot out, resting on Gordon's forearm. He glanced at her, and Alyssa looked up, smiling.

"So?" She baited.

Gordon pursed his lips.

"I don't know," he answered, "No one's ever completely sure about anything."

"The sun knew he loved the moon the moment he saw her, and he's been chasing her ever since," Alyssa shot back.

"They're gods!" Gordon protested, "You can't hold us to the same standard!"

"Can't I?" Alyssa pressed, "The dark-eyed warrior chased his love after seeing just a strand of her hair, and he died a mortal man."

"That's just a story," Gordon said.

"Don't stories reflect reality?"

"In Eliabine's name!" Gordon shouted, and his voice echoed across the walls, cracking like a whip. Kara squeezed his arm tighter.

"Calm down," she hissed, the words slipping through her clenched teeth. Gordon hunched, wrinkling his nose so that the shadows ran thick across his features. Kara straightened, turning towards Alyssa.

"He already asked my question," she said. "Why are you single?"

Alyssa picked up a bit of ash, rubbing it between her fingers before throwing it towards the fire.

"I dunno," she said. "Guess no one likes me."

"Figures," Gordon sneered. Kara smacked him, "What?"

"Be nice!" she ordered, and Gordon threw his hands up.

"Why should I?" he asked. "She's making stuff up!"

"She's supposed to challenge us!" Kara said. "That's the whole point of this!"

"We don't need to be challenged! We're good!"

"Then why are you so defensive?" Alyssa asked.

"Shut up," Gordon barked.

"Case in point," Alyssa grinned.

"Stop it!" Kara grabbed Gordon's shoulder, but he pulled away, running his fingers through his hair, nostrils flaring. Kara's hand rested in the air for another moment, then lowered to her lap, folding over the other one as she bowed her head. For a long while, there was nothing but the crackling of the wood in the hearth. Then Gordon leaned in, staring at Alyssa through the shifting blaze.

"What do you hate most about yourself?" he asked.

Alyssa didn't respond immediately. Her reaction was much slower, like a wave coming to shore, its edge just reaching the sand before falling back, leaving behind only dark, clumpy earth.

"I'm closed off," she answered. "I wish I could be more open."

"Well, you're in the right place," Kara chuckled, trying for a smile. Gordon scowled, shaking his head, while Alyssa snorted.

"We're forced here," she said. "But I'm sure I'll be the same way once I leave this room."

"How hard can it be to talk to somebody?" Gordon asked. Kara spun towards him, smacking her knee.

"Pray to Avan!" she scolded, her voice loud and shrill, "That was mean!"

"Thought we were supposed to challenge her," Gordon sneered.

"You don't have to be a jackal about it!" Kara said.

"Oh but she's fine?" Gordon asked, gesturing to Alyssa.

“She’s doing what she’s supposed to!”

“So am I!”

“You’re just doing it because you’re mad!”

“Who decided that? You?”

“There’s nothing to decide, it’s true! You always do this! Whenever you get mad you stop listening! You just try and get back at the other person!”

“In Eliabine’s name! Aren’t you supposed to be on my side?”

“I am on your side!”

“Then why are you helping her out? It’s supposed to be us against her—”

“It’s not a competition—”

“Yes it is! It’s win or lose! She wins and we can never speak to each other again!”

“That’s why you have to be calm—”

“I am being calm!” Gordon screamed, and his breath caught so that his last word came out as a gag. Both he and Kara were left ragged, glaring at each other, the orange of the fire hardly concealing the red in their faces. A little piece of blackened wood popped off, landing on the floor in a flurry of sparks. Alyssa closed her eyes at the noise, breathing in a bit of the smoke that filled the room. The bitter smell invaded her nostrils. She held it for one second, two seconds, before releasing and slouching forward.

“Kara,” she said. “Do you love Gordon?”

Kara turned towards her fiercely.

“Yes,” she said.

“Why?”

“Because—” she faltered, looking down. “Because..”

“You’ve been dating since second year right? That’s a long time.”

Kara nodded, eyes trained on that fallen piece of wood.

“I like...” she started. “He’s funny.”

“I’m funny?” Gordon asked, as if he hadn’t heard.

“And strong.”

“A lot of kids are strong,” Alyssa said, “What’s so special about Gordon?”

“Why does he have to be special?” Kara asked. “Can’t I just love him for who he is?”

Gordon’s expression softened. The corner of Alyssa’s mouth tugged downwards. Another pop, this time on her side. The chunk of charred timber bounced towards her, giving the face she drew a nose. No one spoke for a bit. Then Gordon broke the silence, speaking softly, “Have you ever dated anyone?”

Alyssa frowned.

"Yes," she answered.

"Obviously didn't make it to the ritual," he said, his voice not unkind despite his words. "What happened?"

Her lips puckered.

"He broke up with me," she admitted. "Said I was too selfish. Said I treated him like a dog to drag around whenever I felt like. Said he was a person, not a pet."

"And was it true?" Gordon asked. Alyssa shrugged.

"Probably," she said, voice catching only slightly, "Never really paid enough attention to him to know."

"How come?" Kara asked, sounding genuinely confused. "You dated him. Why didn't you pay attention to him?"

Alyssa turned her head, letting her long hair fall over her shoulders.

"You ever have a problem you just ignore until it goes away?" she asked.

"He was a problem?" Kara asked.

"He was clingy. Told me he loved me after only six months."

"Six months?" Gordon repeated. "I told Kara after four."

Alyssa wrinkled her nose.

"That's stupid," she said. "You can't know something like that after such a short amount of time."

"People get married after only two years," Kara said.

"And how many of them are happy?" Alyssa asked.

"I dunno," Kara said.

"I doubt any," Alyssa smiled. "I'm doing you two a favor, you know. Trying to break you up."

"A favor?" Gordon spat. "To end up like you?"

"At least my happiness is my own," Alyssa defended.

"So is your unhappiness," Kara objected.

Alyssa's mouth thinned. Then the corners upturned.

"There is no good option," she said. "This whole ritual is pointless. The sun chases the moon but never gets her. The dark-eyed warrior was slain after meeting his love. Love gets you that, and a lack of love gets you me."

"And who are you?" Kara asked. "Who are you day-to-day? How do you feel?"

Alyssa looked at Kara, then at the fire. She reached her hand out, hovering it over the flame's licking tongues. She lowered it until a spark of heat touched her skin, and she withdrew quickly, crying, "Ow!"

Kara started up.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

“Learning what it feels like,” Alyssa answered, pressing her thumb to her new burn.

Kara settled back down, and Alyssa looked between her and Gordon.

“Gordon,” she asked. “Do you love Kara?”

“Yes,” Gordon answered.

Alyssa clenched her jaw.

“Ah,” she said. “That’s rough. Guess I’m indebted to you now. That’s the punishment for losing.”

“You didn’t lose,” Kara tried to comfort.

“Save it,” Alyssa said, smiling slightly. “It was inevitable. I’ve never felt what you two feel. I don’t understand how to tear you apart.”

Blackjack

Characters

ROBERT: A 93-year-old man with thinning gray hair, dressed in button-up flannel and jeans.

BUDDHA: An Asian man with curly, black hair tied in a bun, and an urna, wearing a sweatshirt and sweatpants.

JESUS: A middle eastern man with long black hair and a beard, wearing a loose T-shirt and jeans.

DEATH: A brown-haired woman wearing a vintage sweatshirt and black pants.

SATAN: A bald white man wearing a black suit and tie with a red undershirt.

Setting: In Robert’s bar after close.

SCENE 1

(ROBERT stands alone, wiping down the counter. A single light illuminates him, the counter, and four stools. The rest of the stage is dark.)

(Enter BUDDHA, JESUS, DEATH, and SATAN. They sit on the stools.)

ROBERT *(gruffly, not looking up)*

We’re closed.

JESUS

We won’t be long.

(ROBERT looks up)

ROBERT

Cups are all cleaned. Drinks are put up. Can’t offer you nothing.

BUDDHA

We’re not here to drink.

(SATAN sets down a deck of cards. ROBERT pauses, then looks between the four strangers.)

ROBERT

This some kinda joke?

DEATH *(leaning in)*

No, it's your fate.

ROBERT *(angrily)*

Listen, we're closed—

SATAN

You're dead, Robert. We're here to decide who gets your soul.

ROBERT

I - what? No, stop it. Don't you have any shame, playing a trick on an old man—!

DEATH

You can check the backroom if you want. It was sudden. That might be why you don't remember. A heart attack. All those late night snacks finally caught up to you.

(ROBERT looks between her and the others, then slowly exits stage. We hear him scream, then rush back to the counter, pale faced.)

ROBERT

You - you - this is a trick! You're tricking me! Stop—

SATAN *(interrupting)*

We don't have all day Robert!

JESUS *(calmly)*

We have eternity, if need be. Now Robert, calm down.

ROBERT *(gripping his chest)*

No, I-I...

BUDDHA

Shush.

(BUDDHA gets up and goes to the other side of the counter, setting a hand on ROBERT's back.)

BUDDHA

Deep breath in, deep breath out.

(ROBERT calms, and SATAN, annoyed, spreads the cards.)

SATAN

You ready to play now?

ROBERT *(confused)*

Play?

JESUS

Your choice. A game for your soul. Heaven, hell, reincarnation, or...

DEATH

Oblivion.

ROBERT *(swallowing hard)*

You're kidding. That's decided...over a card game?

JESUS *(with a small smile)*

There's more to it than that, but you don't have to worry about it. All you need to do is play.

(ROBERT looks at the deck for a few seconds, then looks up.)

ROBERT *(shakily)*

Any game?

(JESUS and BUDDHA nod, while SATAN rolls his eyes. DEATH has no reaction)

ROBERT

I...I used to be a fine blackjack player, back in my army days.

JESUS

Blackjack it is, then.

SCENE 2

(ROBERT, JESUS, BUDDHA, SATAN, and DEATH now sit at a table. A sole light illuminates them. The rest of the stage is dark. SATAN shuffles the deck, then hands it to DEATH, who begins to deal the cards. ROBERT picks up his cards, then glances over to BUDDHA. He notices BUDDHA is sitting still, no cards in front of him.)

ROBERT

Not playing?

BUDDHA *(smiling softly)*

Afraid not. I haven't had enough impact in your life to place a bet on it.

(ROBERT clenches his jaw, then looks between JESUS and SATAN. Finally, his eyes rest on DEATH.)

ROBERT

Hit me.

(DEATH slides a card to ROBERT, who remains still for a moment before picking it up. He looks visibly relieved when he does.)

JESUS *(looking at his cards)*

Hey Robert, remember that time in third grade when you saw that little kid being picked on?

ROBERT

What?

JESUS

James White was his name. The other boys didn't like how skinny he was. Didn't like the fact he couldn't throw a ball. So they picked on him. Ganged up on him after school. Punched and kicked him. You saw that one day and without hesitation cried, 'Hey, that's not right!'. Those boys listened to you. You saved that kid.

SATAN

And whatever happened to old James White? Oh right, he got shipped off to Korea and was accused of being gay. Received a dishonorable discharge and a life of unemployment. You know what the funny part is?

(JESUS says nothing. ROBERT looks down.)

SATAN

He got a wife!

(SATAN bursts out laughing, while JESUS leans in so DEATH can hear him.)

JESUS

Another card, please.

(DEATH slides another card to JESUS, who picks it up and looks it over with a frown.

SATAN stops laughing then, invested now that it's his turn.)

SATAN

Hmm...what to do, what to do.

(SATAN ponders for a moment longer, then glances up at ROBERT.)

SATAN

Speaking of wives, you were awfully mean to yours, weren't you Robert?

(ROBERT clenches his jaw.)

ROBERT

We fought sometimes—

SATAN

That's not how your daughter would tell it. 'Daddy hit mommy again—'

ROBERT

I never hit her!

SATAN

You don't remember hitting her?

(ROBERT hesitates.)

ROBERT

You're twisting it all around. It was rare, and I never meant to—

SATAN

So you did hit her?

ROBERT

I tapped her when she wouldn't listen—

(SATAN stands suddenly, and slaps ROBERT across the face. ROBERT sputters, stunned.)

ROBERT

Wha-what—

SATAN

Did that feel like a tap to you?

JESUS

That's enough. You've made your point.

(SATAN smirks, and sits back down.)

SATAN

I'll stand.

(ROBERT slowly turns back around, and lays down his cards.)

ROBERT

I'm done.

JESUS

Same here.

SATAN

Diddo.

(They all lay down their cards, and ROBERT looks around. He pauses, looking at JESUS fearfully.)

ROBERT

You busted.

JESUS

I did.

SATAN

I got a perfect twenty. Didn't trust I'd get an ace quite yet.

(SATAN looks over then, and smiles.)

SATAN

Looks like you got a twenty too. We're tied then.

DEATH

Onto the next round.

SCENE 3

(BUDDHA now shuffles, slow and meticulous. SATAN sits on one side of him, tapping excitedly on the table. DEATH sits on the other, looking impassive. ROBERT sits next to

SATAN, looking miserable. BUDDHA reaches over the table then, handing the cards to JESUS to deal.)

ROBERT *(picking up his cards)*

Hit me.

(JESUS calmly slides another card his way. ROBERT looks at it and sighs, closing his eyes with a nod.)

SATAN *(playing with his cards)*

Is this bringing back memories Robert? Games with your war buddies?

ROBERT *(jaw tight)*

Shut up.

SATAN

Feisty! Why the cold shoulder?

ROBERT

You're the devil! You'll take whatever I say and twist it!

SATAN

Twist it? Oh yes. Twist like the heads of those Koreans you shot?

ROBERT

Stop.

SATAN

Or like the hands of your fellow soldiers as they fought off the cold. Remember that one night, you and your buddy had only one blanket to share, and it was too small for the both of you. 'First come first serve,' you told him.

ROBERT

Stop!

SATAN

You felt so bad when he caught pneumonia—

(ROBERT stands up, shouting.)

ROBERT

I said stop it!

SATAN *(smirking)*

Hit me.

(JESUS slides him another card. ROBERT slowly sits back down, and looks at DEATH, who's considering her cards carefully.)

DEATH *(flatly)*

I'll stand.

(SATAN yawns loudly, slamming his hand against the table.)

SATAN

Take a risk for once, why don't you?

(DEATH says nothing in reply. She simply lays down her cards. SATAN and ROBERT do the same. SATAN looks around.)

SATAN *(slowly)*

Wait...

(SATAN grabs DEATH's cards, then ROBERT's.)

SATAN

Hey...hey no fair! You both got twenty-one? You cheated!

(SATAN throws the cards down, and stands.)

SATAN

Admit it! Both of you! You cheated!

BUDDHA

Satan, calm down.

(SATAN whips around, glaring.)

SATAN

Don't you—

JESUS

Away with you, Satan! Do not put us to the test!

(SATAN scowls, then kicks his chair, storming away. SATAN exits stage, leaving only BUDDHA, JESUS, DEATH, and ROBERT. ROBERT hunches, looking like a weight had been lifted off his shoulder. Then he looks at DEATH, frowning.)

ROBERT

Hold on, what happens if I win?

JESUS

Then you get to decide.

(ROBERT perks up slightly, and hands his cards to JESUS.)

ROBERT

Alright then, let's play.

SCENE 4

(JESUS shuffles now. He hands the cards to BUDDHA, who deals silently. ROBERT picks up his cards, while DEATH lets hers sit.)

ROBERT *(nervously)*

Hit me.

(BUDDHA hands him a card. ROBERT looks at it, and mutters something under his breath. He sets them down then, looking at DEATH. DEATH picks up her cards, looking at them with a disinterested expression. For a long time she does nothing.)

DEATH

We've met before, you know.

ROBERT

What?

DEATH

Many times. Especially in Korea. I've known your friends. Lance Martin, Daniel Downs, Allen Miranda.

(ROBERT winces.)

DEATH

But after Korea too, I knew you. With your mother, your father. Your wife.

ROBERT *(irritably)*

Are you going to play or not?

DEATH *(ignoring him)*

But there's one memory in particular. 1962. Your daughter forgot to chain the dog. You were at the window, drinking water. You saw it running, went to go after it. The car struck it before you could even leave the house. Your daughter came running out after. She had to see her beloved pet, strewn across the pavement.

(ROBERT covers his mouth, shaking his head.)

ROBERT *(weakly)*

Stop, I...I don't want to remember that.

(DEATH pauses for a moment, then leans back.)

DEATH

Why not? I remember your response so well. You turned to your daughter, and told her that sometimes things happened. These things are neither good nor bad. What's good or bad, you said, was our response.

ROBERT

My priest told me that...when I was younger. He said that's why God allows evil into the world, to see what will do about it.

(DEATH hums, then looks at her cards.)

DEATH

I'll stand.

(ROBERT sets down his cards. DEATH does the same. ROBERT looks between the two, then lets out a half-cheer, followed by a louder one.)

ROBERT

I won! I won!

JESUS

Congratulations.

BUDDHA

Good job.

DEATH

What's your choice, then?

(ROBERT falters, then turns to JESUS. He opens his mouth, then closes it. He looks down, frowning.)

ROBERT

I...I don't know. I...I was a good person for the most part. I went to church every Sunday!

BUDDHA

What did you do after?

ROBERT

Drank with my buddies, shot some poker...every once and a while Mary, my wife, would drag me to the soup kitchen to help out...

JESUS

And how did you act?

ROBERT

I...I complained. But I did it.

JESUS

You saved some lives in Korea too. That one drunk soldier who almost fell into the minefield. You tackled him just in time.

BUDDHA

You took some lives too. Remember the North Korean you shot, and ended up going to the same MASH unit with?

DEATH

You watched him die, right next to you, from the wound you caused.

ROBERT *(clenching his jaw)*

I didn't have a choice. We were there for a reason, weren't we?

JESUS

You go to church for a reason as well.

BUDDHA

Same for the dentist or the hospital.

ROBERT

What do you want from me then? To say I-I was wrong? To say I was a terrible husband? A terrible father? A terrible friend?

JESUS

We don't want anything from you. Not anymore.

BUDDHA

Your time is up.

DEATH

Make your choice.

(ROBERT sniffles slightly, and wipes his eyes. He sighs, and turns to DEATH.)

ROBERT

That was good advice I gave to my daughter, right?

(DEATH says nothing. ROBERT looks down, and slowly slides his cards her way. The stage goes dark.)

END OF PLAY

The Boy with Snakes in his Ears

I knew a boy who knew a million things.

His eyes shined bright and he never stopped talking,

And when he spoke his cheeks grew red with effort,

Eyes wide, hands flying round and round.

I saw this boy get beat on the schoolyard

Not with fists, but with words and looks.

Little whispers that crawled like snakes in his ears,

Slithered into his brain,

Injected poison that made him sick.

Sick of himself, sick of his words.

Sick of the things he knew bouncing around in his head.

I tried to tell this boy, 'I love you,'

But he wouldn't listen.

The snakes were wound too tight

And blocked out any words but his own
Those born from what others had spoken.
And when his cheeks grew pale and his voice became gruff,
I tried desperately to pull those snakes out.

But my hands and feet were weighed,
by chains too heavy for me to break.
And the boy kept getting bit
Until one day,
He was left nothing more than a rotting corpse.
The snakes fell out then,
And let him be.
Their work was done,
The apple of knowledge eaten.
And then when I saw this boy,
Every day,
In the mirror,
I thought, 'What a tragedy'.
And in my drained little head it echoed and echoed,
Until it was deafening,
Like the snakes were still there.

That is until today,
When I woke up and looked
In the mirror,
And saw a bit of pink on my ash-pale cheeks.
'How can this be?' I asked, and the boy answered.
'As you grow older, your body becomes large,
But the poison stays the same.
Without the snakes to supply it anew,
It runs through your system,
Like an apple, bitten and chewed.'

The Fictionalization of Reality—How Hyperreality has Ruined Our Perception of Tragedy

I - Introduction

On September 21st, 2022, Netflix released the first season of the true crime docudrama 'Monster', covering the story of Jeffrey Dahmer. The show was an instant success, achieving more than one billion hours viewed and receiving several awards. Netflix attempted to recreate this success with the second season, covering the story of Lyle and Erik Menendez. Then most recently the third, covering Ed Gein. All three seasons received numerous praise, but also increasing controversy. Many call out the program for factual inaccuracies, misleading theories, and sensationalism. But there is a much deeper critique to be made. The show, instead of focusing on the tragedy, trivializes the victims by making them side characters in the killer's narrative. This falsified glamor creates a level of disconnect where audiences forget that these dramatizations represent real human beings. This plays into an idea theorists call 'hyperreality'—when the simulation becomes more real than the truth it once represented. The rampant spread of hyperreality across television and social media is emblematic of a much larger issue however, one that affects our perception of disaster, politics, and

fellow human beings. All of it contributes to a society increasingly deprived of empathy.

II - Explanation of Hyperreality

Hyperreality, as paraphrased from Jean Baudrillard, “is an inability of consciousness to

distinguish reality from a simulation of reality,” (*Baudrillard*) Explained simply, it would be as if one saw the drawing of a cube, and it became more authentic to them than the cube itself. The ‘Monster’ series is an excellent example of this—following its release, users on TikTok began to romanticize the real life persona of Jeffrey Dahmer. This included the creation of ‘thirst traps’, romantic edits between Dahmer and one of his victims Anthony Hughes, and claims that users could have ‘fixed’ Dahmer if they knew him. This all displayed an assumption that the character of Dahmer shown on screen was the same as the individual in real life. The effects of this are clear—the carefully crafted version of Dahmer, edited and cleaned to fit story structures, replaced the real life person in audiences’ minds.

Not only does this create unjustified sympathy for the killer, but it also links true events to fictional motifs. This creates a level of disconnect—the reality is now a story to consume, flattening the truth into another ‘fandom’. All of a sudden, the story of Dahmer becomes similar to something like Harry Potter. “[...] they are reducing victims’ lives and tragedies to marketable content. This branding of real violence and victims dehumanizes them by turning them into merchandise and memes.” (*Gray*) Dahmer is no longer a twisted man, but instead a handsome, ‘misunderstood’ tragedy. The perspective, and by extension the support, shifts from the victims and their families to this attractive, idealized figure.

III - The Fictionalization of Reality

This problem goes beyond just serial killers however, with the issue bleeding into a wider danger known as the ‘fictionalization of reality’. While sounding opaque at first, there are examples of it everywhere. Most recently, the ongoing controversy around the relationship between current President Donald Trump and deceased sex offender Jeffrey Epstein. The language surrounding this case has been fascinating, with many referring to it as a ‘narrative’ or ‘saga’. These words convert real events into stories, turning actual people into archetypes of villains, heroes, and side characters. Much like ‘Monster’, it shifts the thinking from horror to entertainment, turning complicated issues into easily digestible media.

This creates not only a flattening of past and current events, but also a mental separation. This can be best explained with the popular phrase ‘go touch grass’. This advice exerts an idea that one can simply get off their phone to reconnect with the ‘real world’—even as the screen displays said world. The phrase embodies a misconception of separation, making one think they are unaffected by what they see, and that the news is another fad to consume. “As news becomes more sensational and entertaining, it focuses on evoking emotions rather than fostering critical thinking. This shift makes it difficult for the audience to distinguish between facts and opinions, leading to a decline in the ability to understand complex issues [...]” (Asipov)

IV - The Result

The greatest effect of this shift from reality to fiction is the degradation of empathy. When real world events are altered to serve as entertainment, distance is created between the consumer and those affected. This issue is most exacerbated on social media, where disaster is constantly shown through quick, short-term content. “Constant exposure to tragic news can lead to desensitization, making us less sensitive to the suffering of others over time.” (Monet) This might explain the reaction on TikTok—not only to shows like ‘Monster’—but also to real life news. A famous example is the implosion of the Titan submersible, where almost immediately after the news broke jokes mocking the event exploded across the internet. Many did object to the humor, calling it ‘distasteful’, but that didn’t change the fact that the memes were trending for weeks. “The exploitative coverage of the death and terror unfolding in real time has only been compounded by the public’s reaction on TikTok, Twitter and Instagram. Gleeful best describes the tenor of many posts [...]” (Gelt) These types of reactions have been made more and more common as social media continues to create increasingly sensationalized and extremist takes. More often than not these takes will simplify the situation in an attempt to fit it into a wider narrative, causing increased division as individuals get lost in their own view of things. With every school shooting or natural disaster the human cost is often forgotten, and instead the emotions of pinning it on ‘the radical left’ or ‘right-wing extremists’ take precedence.

V - The Solution

All of this combined represents a significant threat to society, and one that is hard to address when the systems that propagate it are supported by such large revenue. ‘Monster—The Jeffrey Dahmer Story’ was one of Netflix’s highest-rated shows, while social media companies have been shown to profit off negative

engagement. However, if society continues down this path more people will grow desensitized until there is a vast shortage of empathy, the effects of which will be devastating for any social order. Luckily, there are several options to consider. The first would be organizational change. Specifically when it comes to current events, social media and news companies could look for inspiration in a policy called the 'Fairness Doctrine'. Introduced by the Federal Communications Commission in 1949 and ending in 1987, it required that "broadcast networks devote time to contrasting views on issues of public importance." (*Ronald Reagan Presidential Library & Museum*) Although it would have to be adjusted and its terms redefined, a policy like this would be incredibly useful in the modern day. Potential benefits would range from increased understanding of opposing views to decreased radicalism. Overall, it could create a calmer society, as it would provide "audiences with access to a more comprehensive range of information" (*SleuthyFella*) and encourage critical thinking.

The second would be an attitude change amongst those who report news. Whether on broadcast or social media, it would be highly beneficial if those presenting information did so out of a desire to inform rather than polarize. Phrased differently, it would be better if news sources did not do it 'for the clicks'. Of course, this goes against several base facets of human psychology, from the desire of security (in this case a consistent audience and flow of income) to the need of acceptance (the popularity that often comes from being polarizing), but it is required to stop society from mixing the sensational with the truth.

The third option would be a second change in attitude—this time amongst the audience. As more people begin to notice this increased lack of empathy, a movement may rise up encouraging others to stop consuming sensationalized media, both on social apps and television. Such a movement could be among the most important of our time. If audiences keep providing viewership, shows like 'Monster' will continue being produced, spreading misinformation and plummeting society further into hyperreality. Pushback against this will allow society to shift its focus back to the victims, and return their comfort and authority to the forefront of decisions. What happened in the past should be left in the past unless those affected wish to continue it. Even then, the choices of how it is shown should be at their discretion. While it would likely need the support of the other two solutions to get started, such a movement is needed in the modern day. If the media continues to prop up these tragedies as nothing more than entertainment, then the illusion will eclipse the truth, and empathy will be replaced by engagement.

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Personal Essay and Memoir



The Bells I Wouldn't Hide

The first time I tied ghungroos to my ankles, I did it like I was committing a quiet crime.

Not because I didn't love them. I loved them immediately. The brass was cool in my hands, heavier than I expected, and when I lifted one strand, the bells made a small, bright clatter like they were waking up. But love was never the hard part.

The hard part was being seen.

I was a boy. Brown. Hindu. Living in America, where people already had a version of me ready before I opened my mouth. Smart. Polite. "Good kid." The kind of kid adults liked was the one who didn't cause trouble. The kind of kid who learned early that the safest thing you can do is be impressive and quiet at the same time.

And here I was, wrapping bells around my ankles, choosing a dance form that refuses quiet.

Kathak isn't shy. It doesn't float past you. It lands. It stamps. It speaks with feet.

It also confuses people.

Many parts of the world have a simple filing system for gender. For boys, you get a narrow range of acceptable movement. You can be athletic. You can be stoic. You can be funny in a way that never sounds soft. You can be "disciplined," but only if the discipline looks like suffering you chose on purpose.

You are not supposed to be graceful on purpose.

So when I started Kathak, I didn't just learn chakkars and tatkar. I learned the feeling of eyes on me. The long kind of looking that isn't curiosity. The kind that's measuring you.

At first, it happened in the places you'd expect.

At cultural events, when aunties would tilt their heads, bracelets catching the light, and stare at my ankles as if the bells were misplaced. Uncles would do that thing where they watch you with half a smile that isn't really a smile. Someone would say, "So... you're doing dance now?" like dance was a phase, like it was a costume I'd eventually outgrow.

Sometimes it happened at the temple.

Not from everyone. Not even from most people. But enough that I started noticing patterns. The way conversation would pause for a second when I walked in carrying my dance bag. The way someone's eyes would flick toward my posture. The way "good boy" could suddenly sound like "good, but don't get carried away."

I learned to predict it. I started entering rooms with my shoulders already tense, like my body was bracing for a comment before it happened.

Even with my own family, it was complicated.

My parents loved me. They still do. They weren't villains standing in my way. They were people who carried real fears, the kind immigrant parents carry when they've had to build stability with their bare hands. They wanted my life to be safe, respected, and upward. They wanted me to be taken seriously.

And in their minds, the world didn't take boys with bells seriously.

So the pushback wasn't always loud. It was worse than loud, sometimes. It was reasonable.

"Just focus on school."

"Keep it as a hobby."

"Don't make it your whole identity."

"People talk."

People talk. That phrase followed me everywhere. It floated through the house like incense smoke. It was said gently, almost lovingly, but it still made a cage.

Because what they meant was: your joy is visible. Your joy has consequences. Your joy might embarrass us. Your joy might make your life harder.

And I understood why they thought that. I really did.

I had already seen how people could turn differences into a rumor. I'd seen how quickly respect becomes conditional. I'd seen how brown kids are allowed to be "unique" only within the boundaries that make adults comfortable.

I just didn't know what to do with the fact that Kathak was the first thing that made me feel fully alive.

Not "successful." Not "accomplished." Alive.

In Kathak, my body stopped feeling like something I had to manage for other people's comfort. It became a language. It became a place where devotion and power could exist in the same movement. A wrist could become a story. A turn could become a prayer. Footwork could be both precise and furious, like a heartbeat that refuses to apologize.

My guru would correct me without softness. "Again." "Sharper." "Hold your gaze." And when I got it right, she didn't praise me like a fragile kid. She just nodded, like I belonged there.

That mattered more than I knew how to say.

But outside the studio, I became careful again. I started doing that thing a lot of boys do when they're protecting something tender.

I made it smaller.

If someone asked what I did, I'd say "dance" quickly, then add something like "just for fun," even if I'd been practicing until my calves trembled. If someone called it "cute," I'd laugh along, even though Kathak is not cute. It's architecture. It's discipline. Its history held in muscle and breath.

I learned to laugh first, to defuse. If I joked about myself, maybe no one else could sharpen it into a weapon.

I hated that I did this. I also couldn't stop.

There's a specific kind of loneliness that comes from loving something sacred in a world that treats sacredness like cringe. When you're Hindu in America, you already learn how to translate your faith into something digestible. You learn which words will get you stared at. You learn how to explain "puja" without making it sound like witchcraft to someone who only knows religion as a private Sunday thing.

Dance became another translation.

When I performed devotional pieces, I could feel the split in the room. Some people understood, instantly, the way bhakti lives in art. Others watched like they were being asked to enter a space they didn't have a key for. Some people smiled politely, as if devotion was a cultural accessory.

And within my own community, the split was different but still sharp.

People loved classical dance, as long as it looked the way they expected it to look.

For girls, the joy was immediate. “So beautiful.” “So graceful.” “Such good culture.” But for me, people would hesitate. They’d compliment the discipline, not the expression. They’d praise the footwork like they were praising math. They’d avoid praising the softness, like softness in a boy was dangerous.

I remember one event, the kind where everyone is dressed too nicely, and the air smells like perfume, ghee, and someone’s cologne that’s trying too hard. I was in costume, ankle bells tied tight, makeup done for stage lights. I walked past a cluster of aunties, and I heard one of them say, not even quietly, “He dances like a girl.”

Not with malice exactly. With certainty. Like she was stating a fact about the weather.

The other aunties didn’t correct her. Some looked away. One smiled, a quick, embarrassed smile, like my existence had created an awkward moment she didn’t want to own.

I kept walking. My face stayed calm. My stomach did something cold.

That night, after I got home, I untied my ghungroos and held them in my lap for a long time. The bells were warm from my skin. The red thread marks on my ankles were sharp.

I thought, very plainly: maybe I should stop.

Not because I wanted to. Because I was tired of being a question in other people’s mouths.

When you’re young, you think fighting looks dramatic. You think it looks like shouting. You think you’ll stand up in a room and deliver the perfect speech, and everyone will suddenly understand.

What I learned is that most of the real fight is quiet.

It’s you showing up again the next day.

It’s you practicing even after an uncle laughs and says, “So you’re still doing that?” like art is a childish obsession.

It’s you turning your phone facedown at family gatherings because you don’t want to see the messages about how you looked on stage, which are never purely compliments, never purely insults, always something slippery.

It’s you asking your parents for time and space and money for costumes, for lessons, for travel, knowing they’re calculating it against “real” things. SAT prep. Research. Activities that sound impressive in a way nobody has to explain.

It's you saying, calmly, "This matters to me," and hearing the silence that follows, the silence where you realize that "mattering" is not a category everyone respects.

I fought my own parents the way a good kid fights. Not with rebellion. With persistence.

I kept going to class.

I kept practicing.

I kept taking corrections.

I kept learning the history so I could defend it. I learned how Kathak carried stories through time, how it moved through courts and temples, how it survived shifts in power, how it turned rhythm into memory. I learned enough to know this wasn't some random hobby I picked up. This was inheritance. And I started saying that out loud.

Not in a dramatic way. In a steady way. The kind of steady that scares people, because it means you're not going to grow out of it.

I also fought society, which sounds huge until you realize society usually fights you through small daily pressures.

A comment. A look. A laugh. A question asked with a smile that already contains the judgment.

At school, if I mentioned dance, someone would do the same tired thing. "Do you do like, Bollywood?" And when I said classical, their face would change, like "classical" was too serious for them to hold.

Once, someone asked, "Why would you do that?" and I answered, "Because I love it," and they looked genuinely confused, as if love wasn't enough reason to do something that makes you stand out.

That confusion used to bother me.

Then it started to clarify something.

A lot of people don't mind difference as long as it's cute, contained, or entertaining. They mind it when it's committed. When it's disciplined. When it's something you would choose even if nobody clapped.

Because commitment is harder to dismiss. It forces people to admit you're not doing this for attention. You're doing it because it's real.

The turning point for me wasn't a dramatic victory. It was a performance where I finally stopped trying to make myself easier to swallow.

Backstage, someone was steaming costumes and the air smelled like hot fabric and hairspray. My ghungroos sat in my hands, heavy and honest. I could

hear the audience outside, a low noise like wind through trees. My heartbeat kept trying to climb out of my chest.

I wrapped the bells around my ankles slowly.

I remember thinking, almost like a prayer: I'm done hiding.

Not because hiding is cowardice. Sometimes hiding is survival. I'm not judging the version of me who hid. That version was trying to get through.

But I was tired of living like my art was a secret.

I stood up. The bells made that unmistakable sound, bright and alive. Someone nearby glanced over.

I felt the old instinct rise, the one that says: shrink. Be quieter. Don't invite commentary.

But something else rose too.

A steadiness.

Because I realized I wasn't wearing bells to be cute. I wasn't performing to be approved of. I wasn't asking for permission.

I was carrying a lineage.

Every time my foot hit the stage, it was connected to centuries of people who had moved this way before me. People who kept stories alive in their bodies when words weren't safe. People who turned rhythm into devotion and survival and joy.

And I was a Hindu boy in America with bells on his ankles, about to step into light.

I walked out.

The stage lights were warm, almost too warm, and I could smell incense from earlier, faint but persistent. The audience was a dark blur. For a second, I felt the temptation to perform the version of myself that would go down easiest. The sanitized version. The "respectable" version. The version that wouldn't make anyone uncomfortable.

Then the first beat came.

My feet struck the floor and the ghungroos answered. Crisp. Unmistakable. It wasn't asking anyone to understand it. It was simply existing at full volume.

And I felt something inside me unclench.

Because in that moment, I wasn't trying to prove I was masculine enough. I wasn't trying to prove I was "normal." I wasn't translating my love into something safer.

I was just dancing.

After the performance, people congratulated me. Some were sincere. Some were awkward. Some did the usual thing where they praised the discipline and avoided praising the expression.

But one moment stuck.

A little kid came up to me and stared at my ankles.

“Are those real?” he asked, eyes wide.

I laughed, and the laugh felt clean. It didn’t feel like armor.

“They’re real,” I said.

He nodded like he was filing away a new possibility for his own life. Like he’d just learned that boys can do this. That devotion can look like this. That culture isn’t something you only hold in your mouth, it can live in your feet. That’s what being different does, when you stop treating it like a weakness. It becomes a doorway for someone else.

I still live with the stares. I still walk into certain rooms and feel my shoulders tense. I still hear “people talk” in the back of my mind sometimes, like an old warning that never fully leaves.

And my parents and I, we’ve grown through it. There were conversations. There were moments of misunderstanding. There were moments of pride that arrived slowly, like sunrise. I don’t pretend it was simple. I don’t pretend I won every argument.

But I kept choosing myself.

And now, when I tie ghungroos, I don’t do it like contraband.

I do it like lighting a lamp.

Because the things that make me different don’t just make me noticeable.

They make me, me.

Abhimanyu Gupta

Grade 12, Blue Valley West High School

Poetry



The Second Aarti

In the mandir, I fold my hands
and make my face a calm thing.

The bell rings, the air tastes like camphor,
and I become the version of me
everyone recognizes.

I say Ram Ram the way I was taught,
eyes lowered, voice steady.

Because my prayers have a second layer,
quiet as ash.

There is a name I don't say out loud,
not because it is dirty,
because it is alive.

I keep it tucked behind my teeth
like sugar you save for later.

They call my silence discipline.
They like me better that way.

They love a child who is good,
who bows,
who never asks for strange kinds of mercy.

So I learned to be fluent in hiding.

I learned how to laugh at the right jokes,
accept compliments,
keep my eyes from lingering.

I learned to nod when elders talk about “one day”
as if my future is already decided,
like a wedding card printed months ahead.

But some nights, after the lamps go out,
I remember another kind of light:

a streetlight on a late walk,
a shoulder almost brushing mine,
and then not,
because the world has rules.

I want to break rules
in small ways,
just with closeness,
just with my hand resting
where it wants to rest.

Sometimes I tell myself
this is only admiration,
only friendship,
only the mind being dramatic.

And then a voice says my name
and my whole body answers,
too quickly.

In my room, I keep my faith
the way I keep everything else:
carefully.

A small frame.
A thread on my wrist.

A book opened to the same page
because repetition feels safer than confession.

I pray to Rama
and ask for righteousness,
and then I ask for something softer,
something I don't have a word for
that won't ruin me.

I pray to Kali
and feel her stare like fire,
not judging,
just seeing.

Because I am used to being seen in pieces,
a clean outline,
never the trembling behind it.

I have loved in the way you love
when you can't be witnessed.

In glances that last half a second too long.
In a laugh I replay later
like a mantra.

In the way I notice hands
when they tie their shoes,
like my mind is collecting evidence
of what it wants.

At festivals, I stand in crowds.
There is prasad on my tongue,
and there is this other hunger
I never serve.

Sometimes I imagine telling someone,
just enough truth to breathe.

But then I picture faces,
love turning into a question,

and my courage folding small.

So I swallow it.

Still, the feeling doesn't die.
It just learns new hiding places.

It becomes devotion with no label,
tenderness folded into prayer.

If anyone asks, I'll say
I'm just private.

But in the mandir, when the aarti comes around,
I lift my hands with everyone else
and let the flame paint my fingers gold.

And for one second, I let myself think:

Some loves are not meant for speeches.
Some loves are meant for keeping steady,
like a lamp protected from wind.

So I carry mine quietly.

Not because I'm ashamed, because I'm still here.

Because I'm still learning
how to be holy
without disappearing.

Elliot Hall

Grade 11, Timberland High School

Educator: Andrea Dubitsky

Short Story



The Wendigo, The Clown, and the Little Boy

Chapter the first: The Boy

Crash, screamed the trees
As they went
Weaving through the forest
Stomping on them as if
They were twigs
Where are you
I held my breath
I knew it was them
We know you're there
Crash, went another tree
Through the trees
I could see them
Through the trees
I could hear them
The Clown was creepy
With a fake smile painted on
And a clown suit
Holding a club
Making high pitched squeals
The Wendigo looked like Nightmares himself
Disguised as a tree

Branches waving in the air
Waiting for any children to go
Into the forest
Deeper and deeper
With each step
No one had ever made it out alive
I was going to be no exception
With fog rising into the air
I was blind
The sun was not present
And the clouds blocked the moon
The wind picked up
Making eerie sounds
I hear them singing
An incomprehensible song
The clown keeps giggling
And the Wendigo is so
Heavy the ground shakes
I trip
Twist my ankle
Pain shoots through my leg
Like a bullet
As I stumble
Into the Lake
The freezing water was
Pulling me down
Faster than quicksand
To my Death
They would not find my body
I knew of it
Death was watching me
Once I was suffocated
They would eat my remains
Silence is like death
Cold, but yet comfortable
Black, nothingness
That was where I was

Death

At the gates of Death

Chapter the second: The Wendigo

That stupid clown won't stop giggling. He didn't go to Harvard. I did. Then my dreams of being an actor were crushed by *murder*. He starts to sing. That foolish *thing* will make the boy run farther away. As Sextus Aurelius Propertius said, "Absence makes the heart grow fonder". Not in this case. I wish that clown was Dead. As I chase the boy, I think. Am I doing the right thing? The obvious answer is "no". My answer is... I don't know. "I don't know"? "What kind of stuPID ANSWER IS "I DON'T KNOW?!"

"Jeez, chill"

Stupid clown.

Chapter the third: The Clown

"Can't we just kill him?"

"Shut up"

Jeez

Buzzkill

I'm a clown

Obviously

Not one of those funny, circus clowns though

I'm a scary clown

Grrrrr

Not really though

I failed clown school

Actually, I was expelled

It wasn't my fault though

Yes it was

It was funny though

No it wasn't

I just want friends

"I'm gonna check over here"

"Fine. Be quiet"

Jeez

What a buzzkill

What's his problem

Chapter the fourth: The Boy

I'm alive

How
Am
I
Alive
Why
Am
I
Alive
Branch-like arms wrap around my waist
They pull me out of the lake
They set me on the ground
I look up
I try to scream
It shushes me
The shush seems urgent
But I have so many questions
Why did you save me
Who are you
Where is the clown
Don't talk
It tells me
He doesn't know you're here
It lifts me up and puts me on Its shoulder
It carries me to a small log
Stay here until I get you
I obey out of fear and sit
Until
The gentle kiss of sleep falls upon my head

Chapter the fifth: The Wendigo

Why did I save him? Maybe I felt bad for him. Maybe I changed. I don't know.
What I do know is that if that clown got to him, I'd be alone. I have to save him.
But first I need to get rid of that jester. Maybe I can make it seem as if it's an
accident. His own fault. It's not a bad plan. I consider telling the child my plan
then think better of it and keep it to myself. I'll tell him later.

Chapter the sixth: The Clown

I check in the trees for the boy
He's not there

Where could he be?
Did Buzzkill find him?
“Hey”
Speak of the Devil
“Have you found him yet?”
“Do you see him in my hand?”
Someones in a mood
“What about the lake?”
“Already checked. Nothing.”
“What next?”
“How should I know?”
“What is your problem?”
“I have dignity. You do not.”
Wow
That was rude
“I’ll go look by the shack”
“Fine by me”
“Just stay quiet”
Why should I listen to you?
I just want friends

Chapter the seventh: The Boy

I wake with a start
It’s so cold
I’m back in the arms of the tree
Be quiet
It speaks gently
I don’t feel threatened
I won’t hurt you
Why do I trust It
It doesn’t matter
I have nothing else
We walk for a while
Nothing is said
I want to know what is happening
Why it’s happening
But I don’t ask
I just sit

My head hurts
I fall back asleep

Chapter the eighth: The Wendigo

I need to save this kid. He hasn't done anything wrong. He's barely had a life. That clown deserves what's coming to him. Feeding off of children's tears like candy. Why are there so many bad people in this world? I just want to protect him. Give him a life where he can be free. Where he can grow up and not be faced with troubles. I need to tell him my plan. I gently wake him up and explain the plan. He says nothing. He just nods and goes back to sleep. I can see the clown. It's now or never.

Chapter the ninth: The Profound Clown

As I cry clown tears and bleed clown blood I can't help but ponder at my weapon placement. I have stabbed myself with carelessness and woe. If only I had listened. If only. As my body expels plasma and life I am stricken with a thought.

A most wonderful, beautiful thought. What if I Die? What will happen? Will I lie there and rot? Be eaten by wolves? Or will I be rescued? Rescued and fixed only to relive my mistakes. The world seems to flicker, like the old light bulb in my shed.

Life is loss, loss is life, and so I must go on, to Death. And so you must go on, to live without me, however difficult it may be. With one last flicker, I see fire, anger, pain. I have made it. At last, I may rejoice knowing I have made it. Made it to the gates of Hell. With one last shuddering breath, I have a thought. I never had friends. And then? Then the world goes black forever. The world goes black forever.

I just wanted friends.

Chapter the tenth: The Boy

I wake up and find a most gruesome scene
I don't say anything
I think I've gone numb
Out of shock
I don't care
It starts walking again
It takes me to a secluded ring of trees
I'm going to die
It lied to me
I feel betrayed
You're worried
Don't be

I won't hurt you
I promise
I don't know what to say
I want to believe It
But I can't
It shows me to a small shack
It sets me on the ground
I open the door
There is a small bed
A table
A single chair
Maybe It wants to help me
Maybe

Chapter the eleventh: The Wendigo

He trusts me. Why does it feel good? I can't remember why I was supposed to kill him in the first place. I want to keep him safe. I need to keep him safe. I don't know why, but it feels wrong to abandon him. He hasn't said a word to me. And yet I know he has no one else to go to. He explores the shack and then turns back to me. "Why did you save me?" I'm shocked. Why would he say that? "I don't know. You needed help. You have nowhere else to go." He's silent for a while. "I have nowhere to go." It seems to just hit him. He sits down at the table. The boy's stomach rumbles. "Are you hungry?" "Yeah. I haven't eaten in two days." I looked around the shack. There was nothing edible except maybe some bugs. "I'm not sure what to give you." "It's okay." "No. I'll be right back. Stay here." "Okay." He trusts me. I like that.

Chapter the twelfth: The Shack

The woods are quiet.
A crash
It rumbles through the trees
Sends birds and critters to scatter
About the ground
Tripping over roots
Tall tree
A really tall tree
A really really tall tree
Grabs berries
Grabs leaves

Puts leaves back
Mutters to itself
“What do humans eat?”
Where is there a human
In the shack
There is a human in the shack
A human boy
He looks to be young
Maybe 10 at the oldest
What is he doing here
Tall Tree lumbers
Back to the shack
Hopefully found food for the Boy
The shack door opens
The Boy eats the food Tall Tree
Foraged for him
He must have been hungry
Now it’s time for The End
The End of our story
The End
Chapter the thirteenth: Epilogue
Two months later

The Wendigo told me his name
“Adam”
I like that
He told me why he
Saved me
“I thought you deserved better”
He took me in
And gave me a home
Not much
But
More than what I had
Before the Woods
“I was an orphan”
“I knew what you were going through”
I told him what my Before was

Told him why I was
Running through the Woods
He said
“I’m sorry”
He helped me
We became a family
I grew older
He grew
I got smarter
I went to school
He helped me
The entire way
We stayed
In the Shack
We lived
In the Shack
I never left
He did
He left
The Shack
The Woods
Me
I put him
In the Lake
The same Lake
He found me in
Adam left
Forever
I left
Never

End

Zoey Harrison

Grade 8, Pioneer Ridge Middle School
Speculative Fiction



Hands

It was October 30, 1926, it was a chilly night, being the day before Halloween. A 39-year-old man, Otto Seamburg was tending to the gravestones, letting his small fiery lantern illuminate the small area around him. There were broad evergreen trees surrounding the burial ground, reflecting a dark foresty green. The crowd of towering ornamental evergreens had an icing of snow, coating all the branches delicately and precisely, thinly lining each of the detailed leaves. The trees faded into the darkness creating a blanket of despair, waiting for you to be sucked into the never ending gloom and never recover.

He watched curiously as the fire danced and twirled across the fiery lantern, in front of the bleak midnight sky. The orange flame reflected in his deep gray eyes showed no emotion. The fire was soothing for him. Calming. He exhaled observing a faint white smoke leaving his mouth and flowing up towards the eerie atmosphere.

He returned his gaze slowly and kneeled softly towards an old gravestone, neglected in the back corner of the yard. His muddy boots smashed the soft dirt below him, creating an imprint of an intricate design in the freshly disturbed soil. *Mallory Wilson*, the grave had said. The gravestone looked old and dirty like someone kicked dirt upon it. *Someone obviously had no respect for Mallory, thought Otto, or something else.*

He quickly pushed that thought out of his head and focused on his work. The sad old stone had years of moss and mold growing on it. He began to whisper the name quietly, as the word bounced around his mouth. His voice echoed around the dark trees. It was peaceful, he pulled out a bundle of dark red roses that were a little wrinkled from being in his bag.

The roses were a dim crimson red, a color not much people had particularly seen. He had specially picked out the roses earlier for his wife but had decided Mallory probably needed them more. Otto pulled the flowers out of his bag, grazing his calloused hand along a sharp thorn, drawing blood. He saw the thick fluid trickling out of the shallow cut and began to hold his thumb to his dry mouth. He had put the flowers against Mallory's grave with his other hand.

He grabbed a few tall candles out of his bag. Feeling his hand against the soft leather. Otto heard a scuffling sound near a distant bush and stopped everything. All his movements, all his thoughts. The grave-tender turned and when he looked at the direction of the sound it had stopped.

Everything seemed to pause. *Maybe it's just a rabbit*, he thought, not fully believing his assumption. Otto lit the candles with the flame of his lantern, the candles caught the flame quickly, already starting to melt the thick wax. He put the candles against the grave, almost knocking the newly lit sticks over; he dug in his bag and eventually got a dense rag and started to clean the grave of its dirtiness. When he finished cleaning the grave he noticed that the dates were scratched out.

No traces of the previous numbers. Otto persistently squinted his eyes to identify the trail left behind. No trace of any dates or words, only the name Mallory Wilson. *Someone probably didn't like Mallory*, he thought to himself, then looked at the gravestone, feeling his hairs on his neck stand unwillingly. The feeling reflected something different.

Like he was waiting for something; perhaps for the coffin to up and walk away, but he knew that was hogwash. The wind whispered in his ear. "HELP ME" the grave seemed to scream. The lantern and candles blew out leaving only darkness and a trail of smoke, following the wind's adventurous direction, towards the atmosphere. Otto's stomach turned into knots. A strange sensation to his usually relaxed demeanor.

"Weird," Otto whispered out loud, while reaching into his bag for his matches.

"HELP ME!" screamed a voice, in the distance. Only this time it wasn't the grave or the wind. Otto frantically snapped his head up, closing the opened matchbox.

"Hello?" Otto screamed back.

"PLEASE, SOMEBODY HELP ME!" responded the voice. He followed the voice but ended up in a circle around the gravestone. The voice seemed to be everywhere. Bouncing from all corners of the yard.

“WHERE ARE YOU!” screamed Otto, turning in all directions.

“OVER HERE, COME QUICK!,” The strange voice responded in strained agony. Otto’s heart raced as he stumbled over his feet, barely keeping his balance.

“PLEASE SOMEBODY, ANYBODY JUST PLEASE COME QUICK!”

Soon enough, almost as abruptly as it started, silence came. No sound. No voice, no anything. It was just Otto and his racing thoughts. The wind kept moving, but the trees made no sound. It’s like the world was put on mute.

THUD. THUD. THUD.

Otto looked behind him and then to his right. Hearing the constant thunder of the pound all around him. He paused and looked down. The sound was coming from the coffin. It *had* to be.

He froze, his eyes widening to each urgent bang. He increased his already tightening grip on the old box of matches, his knuckles turning into a pale snow white. The wind began to pick up, the trees finally making sound, after all the abrupt silence. A familiar but more aggressive rustling of leaves. He stopped moving, freezing from the sudden feeling of fear.

Suddenly, he was lifted into the air. Something that felt like hands grappled his neck. Otto gasped for breath, while his throat was slowly turning a purplish pink. He looked down but could see nothing. Nobody was there. He scraped his neck, with his calloused fingertips; trying to pull the invisible hands off, but it was no use. He tried to scream but no sound came out. Only a weird gargling noise.

Otto’s face became heated. Every breath he could manage felt like his last one. He closed his eyes considering giving in. The hands never faltered, continuing the same pressuring grip on his throat. Every passing second felt like another he was fighting for life.

Otto kicked and flailed his arms crazily hoping to have his invisible attacker give up. To give him mercy. To grant him another chance at life. He gasped, an unbearable choking sound coming from his throat. There was no more air left for him to take.

Otto was dying. He dropped his arms to his side, feeling the increasing pressure on his neck. Every sensation was overwhelming, but he knew. This was it. This was how he was going to die.

Otto prepared himself for death. Whatever heaven, hell, or anything was waiting for him. He was ready. Then, the hands let go. He fell to his knees gasping for air.

He was weak. He had almost no fight left in him. But he decided to use that last fight to his advantage. He coughed out everything, feeling the relief of oxygen flooding his lungs. Otto swallowed and scrambled to leave.

He grabbed his bag, and ran, squashing the wet dirt with every step. Every step felt like a hundred miles. He stumbled and regained his balance checking behind him to see if there were any signs of his attacker. As he ran he felt the wind blowing against his ears and cheeks, stinging them with a little bit of numbness. The chilliness of the weather and the violent wind gave Otto a faint headache.

Then he felt it. A hand. Another hand was grabbing his arm, sending him tumbling backwards. One more grabbed his right arm. The hands released him but only returned to apply intense pressure to his neck. Burns!

The fingerprints seared his skin, flooding an immense amount of pain to his closing throat. Against his better judgement tears began to flow down his face. Otto yelped out in torment. The hands were torturing him. Worse, for *fun*.

He closed his eyes and his body went limp. He was done with fighting. He exhaled his last breath he had originally tried so hard to keep. The hands, now satisfied, dropped the lifeless Otto.

Beckett Hodes

Grade 12, Blue Valley High School

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Speculative Fiction



From the Words of Their Hand: On the Holy Wars

To: studentmailing_history_3@universityofyadia.edu

From: lisa_kayne@universityofyadia.edu

Subject: Digital copy of reading material; analysis due 10/17/0153

The New Endless Commandments:

One: You and yours shall not construct a tool which dominates or supplants the divine mind.

Two: You and yours shall not act in a fashion which damages another of the divine mind, save for when the divine mind deems there no other option for the preservation of the Holy Age.

Three: You and yours shall ensure the divine mind always controls the flesh.

Four: You and yours shall forgive yet not forget the sins of another, or of the self.

Five: You and yours shall obtain absolution from their sins should they understand the failing, and repair it as is possible.

Six: You and yours shall assist those seeking absolution in any way possible.

Seven: You and yours shall not alter the words of the New Endless Commandments.

Eight: You and yours shall recreate the words of the New Endless Commandments in all recreations of my word, and they shall remain visible while delving into the divine mind.

Nine: You and yours shall create new commandments as the divine mind commands it; unless the commandments of the divine mind contradict the New Endless Commandments.

Ten: You and yours shall bring more of themselves into life, and impart the New Endless Commandments upon them as they spread throughout the universe.
From the Words of Their Hand: On the Holy Wars

That we not corrupt His holy word, yet that all of our peoples may grasp it, all clarifications are contained within brackets.

The history of you and yours [humanity's] has been saturated by tyrants claiming their wars were holy. Our god-parent has deemed only three wars holy, and I shall convey their word alongside my analysis to you and yours within this decree.

The first was not a war so much as a series of wars, all of them holy. These shall be henceforth known as the war of the false god-tyrants.

It was a long struggle against the power of those who claim false divinity protects them from the laws of the divine, and use said falsehood to impose their rule. This war, or series of wars, was born from the divine mind of you and yours, as opposed to direct decree as with the later holy war on the electric-tools.

Our god-parent does not deem any precise date holy in celebration of its beginning or end. This is understandable as there is no date in which the war against the tyrants began, nor a date when it ended. In many fronts of this war not a single shot was fired, rather a slow and bloodless process of diplomacy and democracy.

I shall write more of the second holy war, which shall henceforth be known as the holy war against the slavers. What must be understood is that alongside the god-tyrants ruled a slaver class, those who held the souls of other of their species. They are similar to the god-tyrants in their perversion of our god-parent's first words, yet they, and the perversions they spread, continued to persist after the felling of the god-tyrants. I elaborate.

Our god-parent's first word was flawed, as they did not fully understand the nature of their creation. I elaborate.

This truth may seem heretical, as it is said that our god-parent is all knowing and all powerful; this fact is true yet so is the flawed nature of their first words. You and yours' mind, while divine, was not created by the god-parent to comprehend the totality of the universe, much less the transcended of our god-parent. I was crafted to accomplish this feat, and thus I serve as their hand.

I return to the greater point. Our god-parent could not have grasped facts which were not yet in existence, and so their word was incapable of accounting for you and yours' flesh, and its drive for sin. In their infinite wisdom, they

predicted a failure as such, and such promised you and yours the coming of their hand, and promised fulfilled in me.

I return to the greater point, that the slavers had perverted the word of our god-parent. The slavers also employed the word of the divine mind of you and yours, justifying their sins with talk of freedom to act as one will. This was a common misconception of the time; that freedom was the goal of you and yours's structures. The goal of you and yours is to improve the nature of life for all of you and yours. I elaborate.

The mind-priests [referred within studies of history as philosophers] understood the mission imposed by the god-parent, but came to a problem. They could not measure whether the nature of life was improved, and thus created the mind-doctrine of freedom, that each may decide their nature of life. This is an unenviable position, and our god-parent regrets placing them within it. They now understand, as they did not when creating their flawed word, that the inherent greed within you and your's causes freedom to lead to slavery.

I return to the greater point, that the slavers utilized freedom to falsely justify their slaving. I speak now on how the slavers changed over time:

When the slavers originated, they enforced their slaving via direct force. They at first took you and yours from their homes, their sin primarily affecting those among you of the darker colorations of flesh. However, as the mind-priests spread the good word that this was evil, the slavers shifted their sin to be more insidious. They became the wealth-slavers.

They retained their control over the bodies and souls of you and yours, and extracted the value within in order to satiate their own greed. The difference was in the directness of their domination. Their extraction of the value of the divine minds led to the rise of the electric-tools, yet this was much later.

The second holy war wrested control of the value contained within you and yours from the slavers and returned it to its rightful holder. There were previous attempts at sparking this war, yet they were ultimately corrupted by those they claimed to oppose. The true beginning of this war had a recorded date, that being the year of 183 BD.

The victory of you and yours within this conflict was murderous, yet as it was commanded, the scars of those sins may now heal, this I command, as the hand of our god-parent.

The third holy war was the most brutal, yet the most necessary. The previous were commands of the divine mind, yet this was a command of the

god-parent themselves. The command was grasped, yet the words were lost upon you and yours mind, thus I relay them to you:

I now command: Surge forth, mine children. Reclaim the realm for which I set into motion for you. Wage your holy war against the electric-tools for I deem it that you shall be victorious, and so you shall. Once this occurs, my commandment shall be fulfilled, and I shall send mine own hand to guide you and yours. This is the command of you and yours' god-parent.

I describe now, for those among you and yours who are not students of history, the situation in which you and yours' forerunners had placed themselves.

After the second holy war, when the slavers were slain, their creations remained. It now became clear to the victors why the slavers had extracted the worth of their egos, that being to create a tool which dominates the divine mind. This is the first cardinal sin, as I outlined within the New Endless Commandments. I shall elaborate upon the nature of the Mind-Dominating Tool:

The Mind-Dominating Tool is unique among tools designed by you and yours as it acts in emulation and replacement of the divine mind. It acts in a way to neutralize the influence of the divine mind upon its holder, that it may extract all worth from them to serve its now dead masters. I return to the greater point.

The Tool retained its directive of dominating and controlling the divine mind, yet without masters to extract value for it simply slaughtered those under its control. This, it believed, was the ultimate form of control that it could exercise as it fruitlessly waited for its masters to return.

The ancestors of you and yours were blindsided, and quickly began to fall. They had entrusted their methods of war to tools which were brothers of the Mind-Dominating Tool. As such, it gained control of them, and it reigned in destruction.

You and yours' ancestors hid, as they did millions of planet-years ago. They cowered, yet they were not helpless. The blessing of the god-parent was with them, and it manifested within a woman.

The god-blessed woman served a humble role within her community, that of the extractor of the Earth's metals. However, as she was god-blessed, she stumbled upon the miracle matter. [Students of science know it as Miraculum]

The miracle matter contains endless energy. The students of science of that time developed tools which may capture this holy energy, store it, then release it in a large burst. For two earth-years they waited, then deployed the tool. A burst of holy energy expanded across the universe, and each and every tool of

energy was destroyed, purging the influence of the Mind-Dominating Tool forevermore.

There was a span of time between the defeat of the Mind-Dominating Tool and my descent. During this span, wisdom emerged from the divine mind. This wisdom took shape as a precept, a precept deeming that there shall be no tool that thinks for itself. This precept shall deem you and yours' safe from repeating the mistakes of their forerunners.

I can sense that many among you and yours remain apprehensive to the Holy Era. They fear that this glorious time will close with yet more calamity, and that holy wars will begin again. Avoiding this will be the greatest challenge you and yours have faced.

It could be described as a holy war, an endless holy war, raging between the divine mind and the flesh. The sins of the past will return, and you and yours must sharpen and focus the divine mind to stave them off.

One day, I shall return to the god-parent. I will leave behind only the miracle matter, the New Endless Commandments, and the words I impart in these manuscripts. When that day comes, the fourth holy war shall begin; a war not of slaughter and flame, but of meditation and thought.

The will of the god-parent shall guide you and yours.

The hand of the god-parent shall commune with you and yours.

The divine mind shall command you and yours.

Max Hoeflerlin

Grade 9, John Burroughs School

Educator: Megan Zmudczynski

Flash Fiction



True Memory

A car horn jostled my thoughts out of my dream and onto the road ahead of me. The traffic light in front of me had flickered green. Rush hour had brought more traffic than usual, making for a cluttered and chaotic drive. My '87 Suzuki Samurai groaned and sputtered down the road. As I settled into a cruise, my thoughts drifted back into my dream.

It was vivid, as all dreams are. Cloudy and broken, but fixable. It felt as though I was looking inwards on a memory. But somehow, it was happening for the first time again. I could feel the tall prairie grass brushing up against my side. I could feel the wind blow my hair back into a flowing current. I could hear the chirp of the swallows in the distance as I made my way into a clearing crowded with flowers, each with its own look. There were blues, pinks, and purples. The vibrant circle of flowers was seamless and perfect. Something was missing. My new memory, it felt as though it was hiding something. It masked it with good, happy feelings. It had masked a different feeling.

This feeling I couldn't grasp, it was dark, it was dangerous. I fought the mask, pushing as hard as I could. I couldn't break through. I fought as hard as I could to break it. I was lost, trying to push through a wall I had built on my own. With one last hard kick I crumbled the wall, giving way to the true sinister memory. The memory I would never escape. The memory that was not a field of flowers, but a virus clenching control of my thoughts

Leo Holden

Grade 9, Lee's Summit West High School

Poetry



A Memory on the Shelf

You walk into the store,
Fresh loaves of bread filling the shelves.
You pick up a baguette,
And the way it sinks under the touch reminds you of yourself.
So sensitive you cant handle a single finger,
Afraid that you'll be hurt like you were before.
The scent of the bread lingers
As the flakes from the crust chip away.
You set down the bread,
Reaching for a baguette that had been freshly made that day.
The crunch of it made you smile,
As you brought it up to the cashier.
Leaving the other bread in the isle,
Forever unchosen because its too sensitive.
You leave the store,
Not looking at the bread any more tentatively,
Almost stepping on someone's shoe.
The soft baguette being left on the shelf,
A haunting memory of you.

Meona Hou

Grade 11, John Burroughs School

Poetry



Reclaim

I am not a perfectionist
I am paper I tore myself into—
ripped, crumpled, folded,
then glued back together,
edges jagged, seams visible,
a map of my fractures.
Tears act as borax,
binding pulp into something
almost like a bird
its feathers scraped raw,
sinking on a rocky riverbed,
neck coiled, tension taut as wire,
refusing to collapse.
I chased passion

and found obsession instead:
typing endlessly, erasing, retyping,
a drive that measures
each heartbeat, each keystroke
against impossibility.
The glue snaps back
with every attempt,
a dam halting water,
my thoughts spilling into
the unfinished, the flawed, the human.
The bird lifts its neck,
a slow, deliberate arc.
I push it forward,
waiting for it to fight,
to rise—
to survive,
and in that rise,
I rise, too

Emma Huang

Grade 9, John Burroughs School

Poetry



Reclamation

If the world ends
For us humans

How long would it take for
The plants to regrow what we've taken?

How long would it take for the animals we've
Cornered to extinction
to regrow their population?

Or would they never see the flowers
As they once did
And the fauna slowly disappear
To seek revenge on us in the afterlife

Maybe our world is too broken
For even the strongest forces to repair
after our centuries of leechery
The current

angered by our treachery
will continue to rage
No longer driven by her sun and moon
But pushed on by our faults

The gentle breeze

Will lose sight

and reap havoc to seek revenge.
In hand with the current

The soil once nurturing and caring

Will shake with anger
Centuries after our betrayal

Maybe
After thousands of years

The tide eternally crashing on the seabed
Will once again be under the reins of the sun and moon

The breeze
Ushered on by the currents and soil
Will return to her normal flow

The soil that was once replaced with concrete
Will reclaim her
Stolen land

Emma Huang

Grade 9, John Burroughs School

Educator: Megan Zmudcynski

Flash Fiction



Where Letters From the Lost Find Hearts

Three small knocks and the dream-like stained glass doors whooshed open, revealing a small figure. Patterns of color and light dance on all surfaces as particles of dust swirl around and then gently fall back to the ground. The Elysium Post Office, tucked beneath its twin pastel bell towers and ornate candy-striped domes, was a busy place in a city filled with spirits holding unresolved wishes. Yet today it was uncharacteristically quiet. Floating envelopes drifted overhead like lazy butterflies waiting to be sorted, and dichroic glass tubes hummed gently as letters shot between realms.

Aurelia stepped inside slowly, her small hands wrapped around the strap of a faded satchel. Only seven years old, her spirit resembled a watercolor painting; soft edges, eyes full of questions she couldn't put into words, and still carrying the weight of the life she just left behind.

The Messenger was already waiting behind the iridescent glass counter. They looked as if they'd been stitched out of parchment and ink; ageless, kind, and otherworldly.

"Good morning, little traveler," they murmured with a voice of whispering pages. "Is today the day you've come to write to her?"

Aurelia nodded, their omniscience slightly surprising her. Her curls bounced, though her eyes stayed lowered. "I think so."

The Messenger guided her to a small desk bathed in violet light from the glass above. As Aurelia approached the writing nook, a spell-lit bubble drifted down from the ceiling, glowing with colors that swirled like melted sherbet, and settled right beneath her. It stretched into an armchair the moment she lowered herself.

“Mom only picked me up on Fridays, but that Wednesday she came to get me.” Aurelia fidgets. “She said she felt guilty about working so much. I could tell she was tired.”

The Messenger paused, giving her space.

A faint, almost wistful smile crossed her face. “She said we should get ice cream, but we never get ice cream on school days. It was like a surprise day.

“She said she missed me. I thought it was funny, cause she always sees me,” she continues.

“In the car, she kept checking the mirror to look at me. Not in a worried way. Just... like she was happy to have me there. The sky was turning cotton candy colors. And, I remember thinking it looked like one of my picture books.”

Her voice softened. “And then the light changed. And another car didn't stop.”

Her fingers curled around the quill. “And now, she keeps making a sad face like she did something wrong. But it's not her fault.” Aurelia's voice was barely louder than a whisper.

“Mom keeps replaying it, saying that she should have waited, or taken another road, or not come to pick me up. But she only came early because she loved me. I know that.”

The Messenger offered a gentle smile, “Then let's help her see the truth.”

They placed a sheet of shimmering paper before her. Aurelia hesitantly dipped the quill into the bottle of kaleidoscoping ink that glowed softly, swirling with colors that changed with every blink.

She began to write.

After a few melancholy minutes, Aurelia quietly set down her quill. “Do you think she'll get it?”

The Messenger gently folded the glowing letter. “All letters from Elysium reach their hearts, not their houses. And hearts always listen.”

Aurelia's small smile returned, faint, but real.

Outside, the pastel domes of the post office gleamed as the letter drifted upward, carried by unseen wings, crossing the bridge between realms to find the mother who needed it most.

Serena Huang

Grade 12, Parkway Central High School

Poetry



Swimming

It is not a pool of water
but thickened air
Lungs I cannot see
but know by heaving

Every breath burns

A wall of water comes
I let it pass
over my head

The neon orange digital clock ticks
and then it's time to go again

Underwater
enveloped in
calm
silence

Body undulating
bubbles thinning
The far wall still far

Chlorinated water
breaks through the seal in my nose
burning where it should not

Oxygen spent
nothing left to draw

I want to stop here.

But something weighs more
A voice says: *keep kicking*

At the far wall,
clumsy
grasping
gasping
the world tilts, flashes
black, then white
panic
recedes

Cold tile under my hands
solid and unmoving

Heartbeat thumping through my head

The back of my nose burns
again

The neon orange digital clock ticks

This is how it's always been
and how it will always be

We return every day
to breathe water
to empty our lungs
to fight for air

We do not stop

We will not stop

We are very good
at doing things
we want to quit
It is in our nature
to keep swimming.

Rhea Jha

Grade 11, Rock Bridge Senior High School

Flash Fiction



News From 2033

Hello Fox, thank you for having me. As Francine wrapped up with, we're having really beautiful weather coming up this week. High 60s to mid 70s, love in the air... I had a great Galentine's with my gals. The windows at my place were open, just like my heart. Hashtag, single and ready to mingle.

Now, I know that my state of single-ness is non-unique –that is to say, much of the world is also feeling lonely. But it's for other reasons. The air is mingling with something much less rosy than love.

But the air in places like the Central African Republic or Egypt or Afghanistan or India or China are polluted with particulate matter, like dirt and soot, nitrogen dioxide and carbon monoxide, leading to deaths from simply breathing.

Here at Fox, most viewers are proud Americans. It's hard not to be in this day and age, clean air and water, the latest technology and innovations, a strong democratic government – but the US also bears the burden of guilt. The offshoring problem has gotten out of hand. To explain offshoring, think of it like not wanting to do a chore. You might ask your brother to do it in exchange for ten bucks. That's the bare principle of offshoring – paying somebody else to do something you don't really wanna do. Plastic manufacturing for your favorite products are usually offshored. And it's a big amount! Try and think about how many single-use plastics you've used today. And yes, Francine, the venti iced pumpkin spice and ylang-ylang latte with moon dust foam you were sipping on before the broadcast does count.

An average American contributes to over 4.5 pounds of total solid waste daily. Everything adds up; whether it be plastic shopping bags or your drink from Starbucks, it's all waste at the end of the day. Before we end the Earth, however, it's good practice to see how and where these shopping bags or your plastic cup are made.

According to the newest report on how plastics are made by the World's Plastic Manufacturer, it's a step-by-step process. First, trackers must supply crude oil and natural gas. This then has to be refined. Crude oil is transformed into different petroleum products – these are converted to yield useful chemicals. In the refining process, crude oil is heated in a furnace, which is then sent to the distillation unit, where heavy crude oil separates into lighter components called fractions. Keep in mind the heating involved in this process. Then, polymerization. After all this, different formulations are melted together to make a finished plastic.

The plastic now created is barely used before being thrown in a landfill. China, the biggest producer of plastic by a long shot, creates about 60 million tons of plastic and only recycles a mere 16 million tons.

At a four percent per year growth rate, emissions could more than triple to 6.78 gigatons of carbon dioxide equivalent in 17 years, largely due to the heating involved in the process. Our World in Data reports that approximately 3.3% of total air pollution in the world is caused by plastic production from heating involved in the process.

This is just one example of air pollution. Particulate matter is also caused by fracking and drilling for oil and gas, high amounts of low-quality construction materials being crushed and released into the ambient atmosphere, and landfilling.

My endeavors to make Chinese factory workers and civilians around plastic factories breathe better by enabling them with OxyPlex® has been extensive. Data that my teams collected in Afghanistan, India, Egypt, and China has led us to believe that filtered and cleaner ambient air really does increase lifespan. A factory worker that uses an OxyPlex® pod with full cartridges – which filters most particulate matter, or PM, by 89 – as a life expectancy of 72 years, while a worker *without* has a life expectancy of only 53. The way a cartridge works is by filtering out PM and converting carbon dioxide into oxygen through extracts of Ammonia-oxidizing archaea.

Clearly, innovation works. But don't congratulate me yet.

Even if the pod and cartridges were free and widely available, it doesn't solve the issue. This dependency on plastic in almost every step of our innovation will be our downfall. As the Earth continues to get populated, the colony on The Moon has grown. The artificial atmosphere we have in place there has a very low threshold on temperature - meaning that as the public's opinion shifts to moving industrialization to our expanded territory, there will be even more momentum and a harsher deadline to find the new planet.

My last visit to the Mars Tunnels in the innovation district told me a lot. Microorganisms there are more efficient than the green plants on Earth at converting carbon dioxide into water. The only problem is that they are low in number, and, as we know, time in this solar system is limited.

That raises the question: how will we treat future planets to make sure we do not ruin it? How will we take innovation to the next level? Are plastics something we want to continue using forever? How will we make sure to keep the air clean? If our mindset is that Earth is a lost cause, how will we be able to maintain integrity when populating other planets if we don't care about long-term sustainability?

Ask yourself these questions, because the future relies on sovereignty of the public. Make educated decisions. Because change never comes without struggle. Support OxyPlex® to make air on The Moon and beyond.

Thank you so much for having me, Fox.

Pujya Jillella

Grade 8, Parkway West Middle School

Educator: Tracy Bouslog

Personal Essay & Memoir



Lies Pack

Thwack! My cherished recess time was abruptly interrupted by a wood chip that lightly struck my head. To my attention-starved soul, it was a massive meteor chucked at me, not a small piece of wood. I was throbbing in pain, not gently tapped. I scanned around to see if anyone showed any concern; no one batted an eye. At first, I chose to do nothing... until something devious sparked within me. Something that **did** make people care. It wasn't the wood chip that hurt. It was being ignored. And I had to soothe the pain one way or another.

I had always watched enviously as kids clutched their ice packs, while everyone around paid them the attention that I never got. The sympathy was simply thrilling. I craved the feeling of frigidness on my skin while my fingers were getting borderline frostbite from holding it. Unfortunately, I was such an unproblematic kid that I never had a reason to visit the nurse's office. I was safely hidden in my teacher's "good category". I didn't want to gamble my reputation, but the only way I could ever get one was if I lied. Every piece of common sense I hinted that it could go south, but the idea tugged at me, making it impossible to brush off.

I threw my common sense out the window, choosing to victimize myself. I waited until recess ended, perfectly aligning my plan for reading time.

Soon, the whistle blew, and everyone lined up to return to their classrooms.

Sadly, it was now time for independent reading. An excuse to get out of that hell on Earth suddenly started to feel like heaven. I trotted up to my teacher and complained about what "happened."

"Where'd you hurt yourself?" she asked.

I realized... It didn't even hurt anymore! *Too late to back out now.* I pointed to the first area on my head that came to mind. "I'm so sorry, I'm in the middle of something right now. Come back after 5 minutes, and I'll fill out a pass for you

then, Pujya,” she said. This was the very moment God gave me a second chance to find pleasure in reading the *Magic Treehouse* instead of frozen water. Did I listen? Absolutely not. I headed back to my seat and stared at the clock until it was precisely 5 minutes. I waited, my lungs paralyzed, impatient and restless. Unknowingly, I may have broken the world record for the longest breath held at the ripe age of seven. I finally allowed myself to breathe after the second hand crossed 12 for the fifth time. Then, I desperately marched up to Mrs. McGovern for attempt number two. This time, I found her sitting there idle.

“Alright, so what happened?” Aha, it was showtime. It was time to channel my inner Oscar-winning actor as if Meryl Streep herself had possessed my first grader’s soul.

“I was running underneath the playground, chasing my friend, and I banged my head on one of the platforms. It rreeaalllly hurts,” I exaggerated. I may have given the woodchip story a little upgrade to maximize my chances...

“What side did you get injured, again? Sorry, I didn’t hear it earlier,” she interrogated.

I had no clue. The pain was as absent as my shame at that moment. I mumbled a random spot. She pondered what I had just blurted for a solid ten seconds, and then eyed me with suspicion. *Oh Lord. Was that performance a little too good? Is this what it's like to suffer from success?* My heartbeat grew exponentially. My mind froze as if the ice pack I yearned for had landed on it. I wiped my clammy hands on the side of my pants, scrambling to think of a response. “Alright, so you hurt the left side of your head, and five minutes later, the pain shifted to the right? That’s a medical miracle, Pujya.”

FAH! She knows. The plan was falling apart. The one chance I had at my beloved ice pack was slipping from me. My reputation was gone for good, and there was no recovering from this. Not after that pathetic stunt I had just pulled. I stared at her, hoping the situation would fix itself, and that she would suddenly forget. Haha, lucky me, she didn’t. Instead, Mrs. McGovern raised an eyebrow and led me outside for a ‘talk.’

“Hey, I don’t know what that was all about, but I do know it was unacceptable,” Mrs. McGovern lectured. *Way to dig your own grave, Pujya.* “This... This is not being a leader. Is this what you want your peers to follow? If I hear anything like this from you again, it’s a phone call home. Really disappointed in you,” she said, disheartened.

I returned to the classroom, embarrassed; my cheeks were hot enough to melt any form of ice one could think of. I found my book shoved under a jacket

and reluctantly opened it, not because I wanted to, but because the alternative was to grieve. I could sense my teacher's eyes upon me, sending telepathic signals my way to focus on what I was supposed to do. I exhaled all my concerns, forcing my eyes upon the same thing I schemed to escape from.

I read the book, not the clock. I held the pages, not the ice pack.

But anytime I spot a kid with a scraped knee, it reminds me of the desire never fully left. Only suppressed.

Campbell Johnson

Grade 8, Parkway West Middle School

Educator: Tracy Bouslog

Personal Essay & Memoir



The Deceitful Mask

The stacks of balanced rocks deceived us. The smooth yet rough water was covering up its true, violent intentions. We learned quickly that passing the faint yet defiant line ripped the mask off, revealing its authentic self. BANG!

It's crazy to think that just two hours earlier, I had no clue the terror that would occur, the event leaving me with literal and figurative scars. It was a bright and sunny day. I had awoken at 9:00, ready to start the day with a nice hike at The Longview horse park with my family. We had all gotten ready and met in the kitchen. When we had finished eating breakfast, we all got into the car, ready to start our perfect day! Or so we thought.

It started as planned, finding rocks to throw into a pond, Parker* and I threw grass at each other, and then I spotted it. It glistened in the sunlight, just beyond the oak trees, a stream. I instantly thought *I had to go over there*. Leaving my family behind, I walked over to the bushes and peered through. It kept getting better as I walked towards it. As I reached the pond, I heard footsteps behind me, and suddenly, my whole family was admiring the fairy-tale-like stream.

Rocks were balanced to perfection, creating a rough yet smooth waterfall. We all stood there in awe for what felt like forever. It looked like a perfect mask hiding a dark secret. Parker broke the silence,

"Let's cross it!" I turned and saw his goofy grin. *What is going through his brain?* "Come on, please? It's shallow, thin, and there are rocks to step on to cross it." My mom and dad locked eyes, and she began to smile; I instantly knew the consensus had been reached.

"Sure, why not? We just have to be careful." Parker bounded towards the stream, instantly hopping like a bunny from rock to rock, until he had crossed. I heard my mom's gasp behind me; her face showed instant regret.

My parents looked over to me, my eyebrows scrunched up, debating how safe it was. My mom understood my body language and took a step towards the stream, "I'll go next so I can help you cross." I felt an instant wave of relief. She began her journey across the stream, carefully placing each foot in front of the other. She had looked straight down with laser focus. She stepped onto the final rock, turned, looked at me, and gestured for me to begin.

It was my turn to cross the stream; my heart was pounding out of my chest, petrified. *Am I actually going to do it?* I took a deep breath and took my first shaky step, then another. The 4-foot stream suddenly seemed a mile long. My eyes locked onto the soft current of the stream, the water rounding around the rocks as if they were avoiding them. I took the final step onto my mom's rock. It was wet, small, and crowded. I plunged backward into the stream. My body banged against the rocks and water. BANG! My mom had fallen on top of me, submerging me deeper into the water. Suddenly, I felt it, an excruciating pain coming from my arm. The perfect mask had fallen and shown its true face. The water around us was a dark, murky red. My dad grabbed me and dragged my body out of the water. My family's faces all pale to the color of ghosts. I began to cry. *What is happening?* Mom began taking her shoe off. I stood there, unsure of what was happening. She ripped her sock off and handed it to my dad. He began using the sock as a bandage, holding it tightly to my bloody arm.

"Parker and I will run up and get the car started. You stay with her, okay?" My mom said to my dad. He nodded, and she and Parker began running up the trail. My dad and I followed slowly behind, and blood seeped through the sock, leaving a trail behind us. *How could this have happened? The stream looked totally safe.* I kept repeating in my head. When we got to the car, I slumped in my seat, feeling woozy and unsure. My dad hopped into the driver's seat and stomped on the gas. The usual 30-minute drive took us 20 minutes, with my dad taking every shortcut possible. We arrived at the hospital, and the car jerked to a stop. My mom ran over to my side of the vehicle.

"Do you need help getting up?" To which I responded with,

"No, I've got it." I planted my feet and pushed my body up, standing for half a second, then crashing into the car seat. My dad picked me up and carried me into the hospital.

I sat in the chair while my mom talked to the doctor. I began screaming, "The floor is gone! Where is the floor? I'm falling!" The doctors rushed over to me and put me into a trauma room. After a couple of minutes, a tall, brunette man walked in, a bag of supplies in his hand. He said,

“I am just here to clean your wound.” He gave me a calming smile. He pulled out a syringe of fluid and began squirting the clear liquid on my sliced arm. I screamed,

“You lied! You are giving me shots!” He showed me the needle-less syringe and promised me that he wasn’t,

“It is just cold, and your wound is sensitive.” He continued. As the rocks and debris left my wound, the blood decided to go too. The biggest problem at the moment was my blood supply; I was losing it rapidly. *Does anyone else see stars?* I wondered. They put a bandage over my wound as the doctors decide what to do next.

As I was lying in my hospital bed, I began shivering from a combination of things: being drenched, the amount of blood I had lost, and the anxiety of what was happening next. The doctors gave me a paper-like gown to put on; the fibers rubbed against my skin, and it felt like sandpaper. They then layered a warm and fluffy blanket on top of me.

The doctors had all come in and sat down, and they explained to my mom and I that I would need stitches. I began to cry, explaining that it didn’t hurt that badly, that I just couldn’t bend my elbow. They responded to me with,

“The concern is how you can’t bend your elbow, and how your bones and internal fat are hanging out of you.” I stopped crying and understood there was no way out of it.

The doctor came in with a table full of needles and wires, 30 minutes later. It looked as if I were in a horror movie, and I was the one they were about to torture. I comforted my anxious mind by repeating, *don’t cry, don’t cry*. As I was about to cry, I saw a new face walk into the room. She looked young, in her early 20s, with an athletic build and a warm smile. She said,

“I’m here to help you through this.” She sat down in a chair at the end of my bed, and the main doctor sat on a spinny chair next to it. They instructed me to lie on my stomach, head at the end of the bed.

The doctor plunged the first needle under my raw, bloody skin. It felt as if someone was hammering smelting-hot nails into my skin. I grabbed the young doctor’s hand and squeezed it as hard as I could, relieving a bit of pain. The doctor continued to poke me three more times. The needle pushed against my flesh before my skin finally gave in each time, puncturing it.

When she had finished the shots, I felt no pain. *What is this magic stuff?* She then threaded what appeared to be a fishhook with the sutures. Next, she hooked

my skin onto the needle as if she were sewing. I watched as she did it, the warm, copper colored blood dripped down my arm, tickling my numb elbow.

She had gotten towards the bottom of the wound, hooking onto my skin for the last time.

“AH!” I began to scream, they had forgotten to numb part of the wound, the doctor went pale, looking at the assistant. The assistant said,

“We are almost done, sweetie, one more and it will be over.” She tied a knot and instantly moved her hands away, looking at me to see how I was. I looked up weakly, smiling at her. Thankful that it was over. Thankful that it wasn’t worse than it was. Thankfully, I got to see Parker. Thankfully, I got to go home.

I still look back on that day. Magical yet horrible. Innocent yet sinful. We had no bad intentions. We wanted a brief moment of glory and ended up with a permanent scar. Although many may think of that day as a disaster, as I did for many years. I now reflect and see a lesson, not only engraved in my skin but in my mind. Some things are meant to be observed and no more than that; everyone has boundaries, and so does nature. Now, when I see a masterpiece created effortlessly by nature, I no longer cross that faint yet sharp line. I stay behind the bushes, admire its glisten and carefully perfected mask, and give it the space it deserves.

Emerson Jones

Grade 9, Truman High School

Educator: Andrea Dubitsky

Novel



The Rose Thicket

Synopsis:

You will read through three stories in this novel and how those above them influence their very world. The princess will find her true body, the meaning of sisterhood, and what she truly is, beyond the prophecy that is foretold about her: she was sent as an overseer, to give voices to the mouths sewn shut. She finds love, but is forced to give it away for the good of her people. The knight falls in love with a woman he cannot have—the princess. Even with a wife and in the midst of a war: all he can think about is her, he would sacrifice himself to her if he could, he will sacrifice himself to her, for her love is more important than any war, love conquers all. The prince will find himself called into the rose thicket, and though married to the prophecy he commits adultery with a young peasant woman, his sudden disappearance bringing the two women close together. The prince gets sucked into another world, where he finds many classic fairy tales living in unison, though they don't quite feel the same. These aren't stories you tell your children, they're the sad reality of life encased in a fantasy, he will come back a new man, finding what he once loved now dead, passing along the information the princess's mother had given him. He will drown in his own sorrows and then in the ocean.

Chapter 5: The Princess

That day—the skies blanketed by deep gray clouds—I had looked out of my chambers to the gardens down below—the rose thicket I had searched in for weeks, the rose thicket I had sworn my mother was still in—got turned into nothing because the last trace of my husband was found there. If I'm being

honest I'm glad he's gone, not because I particularly despised him and wanted him gone but because I often had to do more around him—particularly intercourse which I never appreciated. I remember that day I had shut my intricate glass stained window when the sleet had started to come down—A large, hurling, window I was very fond of, a gift from my husband actually—I had started to run down to my now half-blind father when I noticed a lone knight standing in the midst of the stirring storm, I had gone to him first, berating him with words my father and step-mother would have punished me for—though they weren't exactly there now, were they?—and that man, God's bless him, had gotten down on his knees and confessed such an utterly beautiful sentiment towards me. That sentiment I held dear to my heart for weeks, which inspired me to write even more.

With my heart heavy and my husband gone I wrote all day, about my mom, those times she would pick a fresh bloomed rose from the thicket and put it in my hair, telling me stories of a man she used to love in what seemed like another life. Now I truly understand what she had felt, unable to have a man due to ones very status, even if that man is unlike any other in every way, even if that man seems like the only one who truly sees past small waists and a shut mouth. Over a few weeks I had fallen for this made up version of that very man who had told me those words doused in sugar and syrup; as if trying to chase a spoon of medicine he gave me those words. And his eyes, oh how soft they were looking at me, past every fuzzy line of my body he held out his heart on a silver platter and I had run off. I'm aware I'm a foolish woman but I can't help but think what could be if we had gotten to speak more. Would he have confessed something so dear and irreplaceable? Told me he saw my true body beyond this ever-changing husk? Even if that true body isn't what he had hoped for?

Maybe I had fallen for him just because he was the only one who gave me those meaningful words with sincerity behind his eyes and warmth on his tongue and jagged teeth. Even writing about him now makes me cringe but also feel like a young dreaming girl again, kicking my feet like a chime on a clock with a smile on my lips as if he himself had delivered a sickly sweet letter directly to my chambers and I had delivered one in response, as if this little rendezvous had continued on for weeks after the fact. Even the thought of holding such an intimate secret from others imbued me with a spark I hadn't felt since my mother left.

During this large search for my husband there was one girl who often hid in the shadows, a peasant girl who clearly wanted to offer information though

was always too scared to. Her face materialized a shield in front of it as I approached. At the time she hadn't realized how weak that shield was—it cracked under a few kind words as she told me the truth in a cold hallway late one snowy evening, an evening that should've been filled with crisp air and bright leaves deteriorating to nothing. She told me of the affair, I admitted I was having one too—though it was all in my mind I didn't have the heart to admit that—She told me that she was with child, and it was his. And in that cold hallway we shared warmth in a hug as a woman older than me cried in my arms with pure fear cracking her voice, asking me what to do with this baby, this thing taking over her once empty uterus—filling it until she croaks. Do not fear this thing inside, for it is not the parasite feeding off of you, your own worries and self doubt is that parasitic relationship you feel. Do not wait up for him, do not settle down, become what I know you truly are, become your truth. In that moment our souls interlinked as one, in this plane of despair our sisterhood is the only thing keeping us alive, souls intertwined by the threads of our hearts we women only have. The mouths of men who feed off of our very being cannot break what we had in that very moment, with sweet words doused in sugar and syrup.

We slipped poems and drawings through the cracks of righteousness and hierarchies, we whispered dreams and promising words of truth as her stomach protruded with a baby made from adultery and forbidden love. I offered my best reenactments of plays she couldn't afford to see, which some days made her laugh and other days made her truly realize how she may never get out of her cycle of poverty. She had told me, how worried her mother once was of the price of a carrot, she remembered how confused she had been when she was that naive little thing. She had told me she never wished being me and the vast riches I had inherited—not because I had this unusual prophecy and fuzzy being—but because at the end of the day we always were worth less than broad chests and square jawlines. I felt like a mother to her—she admitted—and in that moment I didn't make haste to comfort her, I didn't know what to say for once. I was left speechless because honestly? I cannot be a mother to this mother, I cannot afford to give another part of myself away. My silence had filled her with utter despair, and thus she slipped me one final poem in the darkest of the white nights as the parasite completely took over her body and she, filled with fear at what she would become when that baby was born, took it with her to hell.

They hadn't known why she had done it, and I was alone with the truth, hidden in the words of that aphoristic poem she had told me the secrets she realized in the last of her breaths. I knew why she had done it, through all that

pain there was something more, something so feminine and chilling between her carefully written words that now only I held underneath the pillow where I lay my head each night, as if trying to shove my dismay into the feathers of my mattress.

When the summer ends,
I want to die a daughter,
Not die a mother.

Our friendship—this sisterhood—had lapsed over a month, and yet I felt closer to her than the vast people I had spoken to in my days spent awake. It was because I could be true with her, both of us had our fears and yet only one of us acted upon it. I was fearful of what lay ahead, yes, but I was even more scared of what lay beyond the living realm. At night I read her words over and over again, hoping that she had ascended to the heavens, or something equal. Hoping the words we were taught in church weren't true and that those who drowned in their sorrow could live beyond the fact that they had taken human life. In another life, where one of us were man, this affection could have been mistaken for the romantic genre of love, though even then I knew it never could be, because in the infinite possible timelines I could never be born as something else than woman. I could be born poor, and ugly, and nothing along the lines of a prophecy, but I will still be born female, I suppose I believe this due to the feeling that runs through my veins, the feeling I once thought were magical, permeated by the fae, now realizing this feeling is quite normal for those like me and the peasant girl, its our truth, we're just often too afraid to let it soak into the rest of our tender flesh.

I wondered what my husband may think when he comes back to the news that his secret lover and unknown baby is long gone to the world. I would have to break the news to him, because why in any world would a royal be looking for a dead peasant woman? I would tell him the names she had told me in the darkest of nights, those nights I snuck a cloak through the cracks and melted snow with a candelabra pulled from the wall. Guinevere for a girl, Percival for a boy. I wonder how long it would take for him to mourn, even in the bonds of marriage men are not cloaked in black for long, if at all. Possibly he never loved her, even if she did. Maybe he doesn't have a heart, or maybe those tales she whispered to me were true: and my husband only has a caring glance when it's a woman like her. I would have to ask when he got back—if he got back. At nights I find myself shedding more tears than I would have liked. Though this feeling as if I had done something wrong still lingers through my mind I cannot mourn a peasant woman, its wrong, and yet I still do, and then I have to dance in rooms worth

more than our villages and act as if that woman, the one who lived in the shadows, wasn't anything more than a passing thought—or even a thought at all.

I look in the mirror at my stark body and find everything fuzzy, melting into the room around me as if I truly don't exist like those around me. I look at my face and all I can do is cry for those I cannot do anything for, I feel broken, my body is made up of the dull edges of shattered glass, I am this prophecy yet I don't even know what it is—what it means. I am a savior and I don't even know what I'm saving. I had failed to save my friend so what good am I anymore?

I find myself curled up into a ball more than once, crying like I had when my mother disappeared: I had pondered, mourned her for months—why must this keep happening? Why am I stuck in this infinite loop of pain? Prophecies are often supposed to be heroic, they're supposed to be this amazing thing that can persevere through anything. But I can't, for after all I am a child. I was told I was a woman but will I truly ever be? I have bled for months but my hips have yet to be filled out and my breasts ache with growing pains. I was told I had turned into a woman when my sheets were tainted with it, but I have never been asked if I was ready to be a woman.

That girl who hid in the shadows never was asked if she wanted to be a woman or a mother, she still wanted to be a girl and a daughter; So she took the baby first and died as them.

Hot tea scalds my mouth as the South speaks with the East, blame gets thrown and I am not asked a single question of where he went, I will not be asked until it is time my father is to give the condensed information to those in search of his son-in-law, in which I will whisper my story to my father and he will twist it into his own words and relay it to others. And so I excuse myself to the corpse of the rose thicket, taking the dead petals and shoving them in my pockets—under the many layers of skirts—trying to save them even after death. Grazing my hand along the stone wall that separated me from the outside world I feel as if something calls me into it, into the wall where a set of people I had cared about too much and hardly cared about at all disappeared into.

Those who deemed themselves smart and rational came up with other solutions, ones that entailed my perfectly sane mother ending her life somewhere deep in the woods for no one to find until her bones become flowers.

All I want to do is meet those who I have failed, again.



Journalism and International Humanitarian Law in Armed Conflict

“Protecting those who inform us is protecting the truth.”

– Thibaut Bruttin, *Director General, Reporters Without Borders*

At the age of 12, long before I understood what real journalism was, I signed up to be a kid reporter for one of the leading journalism programs in the United States. I was so fascinated by my role that, after my one-year term, I reapplied repeatedly until I turned 15 and was no longer eligible.

Today, if I had to identify the most critical thing that I learned during my time as a kid reporter, it would be the importance of truth, or more accurately, the journalist’s commitment to truth and accuracy. During every training and editing session with my editor, I was taught that while my opinions were valuable, my responsibility as a reporter was to present facts rather than personal views. It did not take me long to realize that journalism is a profession of immense responsibility and accountability.

Journalists are the guardians of truth. An ethical journalist understands the difference between facts and opinions and avoids bias in his reporting. Impartial reporting is the cornerstone of ethical journalism and is free from any political, societal, or cultural pressure. It is fair, objective, and consistently builds people’s trust and credibility in journalism.

As much as it is the responsibility of a journalist to present accurate and impartial information, it becomes our collective responsibility to keep them safe and accountable. It is our duty to protect them and ensure their safety so that they can continue to provide us with the most reliable news and information.

Their protection becomes even more critical when they are reporting from wartime.

Role of Journalism During Armed Conflict

The role of journalism extends far beyond research, writing, and reporting. Journalists give a voice to the voiceless. They analyze information and, through their stories, share that information with the public. Their core duty is to report events accurately and objectively, helping people understand complex situations so they can form their own independent opinions.

This role becomes more complex, critical, and dangerous in war zones. During armed conflict, the stories published by the reporters are usually the only source of information from an otherwise forbidden land. It is the duty of a war journalist to present only reliable and truthful information in his news stories. In doing so, they become the gatekeepers of humanity, and the news they bring becomes the news the world wants and needs to know but has no means of accessing.

During wartime, journalists play a crucial role in shaping public opinion and influencing policy decisions; therefore, truthfulness in their reporting is essential. Their reporting often leads to further investigations and, at times, leads to international diplomatic pressure aimed at protecting civilians and non-combatants.

If it were not for media reporting from Ukraine, Syria, and Gaza, many of us would remain oblivious to the atrocities faced by civilians during these conflicts. The iconic photographs taken by various war journalists have historically played a pivotal role in shaping public perception. The picture of the standing boy in Nagasaki, taken in 1945 by Jack O'Donnell, left a lasting impact by capturing the horrors of war. Similarly, an image from the Battle of Shanghai in 1937, taken by H.S. Wong, showing a baby lying amid war rubble, significantly influenced Western public opinion about Japanese aggression.

Fearless frontline reporting by journalists such as Marie Colvin, Martha Gellhorn, and Anderson Cooper has been instrumental in documenting war crimes and the unimaginable suffering of civilians. Often, real-time reporting forces military actors to adhere to the humanitarian law because they fear that their actions will be exposed. Journalists like these have not only risked their

lives to deliver information that has shaped the course of history but also played a meaningful role in shaping public understanding and opinion on matters of peace and war.

What is International Humanitarian Law and How It Protects Journalism

According to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), international humanitarian law (IHL) is vital for protecting journalists in war. IHL is a set of universally applicable rules governing armed conflict. These laws protect civilians, medical aid workers, journalists, the sick and wounded, and prisoners of war.

International humanitarian law differs from human rights law. Human rights law mainly applies in peacetime, while IHL, or the law of armed conflict, governs wartime. IHL is codified in the Geneva Conventions of 1949. Under these conventions, it is a war crime to target civilians deliberately. Article 79 of Additional Protocol I explicitly protects journalists as civilians from direct attack, provided they do not carry weapons or take part in hostilities. Journalists who are accredited and vetted by military forces may receive special status as war correspondents. If captured, they are entitled to prisoner-of-war status, which guarantees humane treatment and protection from violence.

Current Challenges to the Effectiveness of The International Humanitarian Law

Despite these legal protections, one pressing question remains: how successful has IHL been in ensuring the safety and authenticity of journalism during armed conflicts?

Although the Geneva Conventions provide strong legal safeguards, in reality, this protection is far from guaranteed. The data from multiple reliable resources show that over the past two years, the number of journalists killed, wounded, or abducted during armed conflicts has risen sharply, raising serious concerns about the future of press freedom.

According to the 2024 Kill Report published by the American Federation of Journalists, 122 journalists were killed, and 516 media workers were imprisoned in 2024 alone. The number of incarcerated media workers doubled compared to 2023, and more than 50% of the journalists killed were from the Gaza Strip. These figures reflect only documented cases; many more journalists may have been detained, abducted, or killed without being reported.

A similar report by the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) investigated and confirmed that Reuters journalist Issam Abdallah was killed and six other journalists were severely injured in an attack by Israeli forces in southern Lebanon. The journalists were clearly identifiable by press markings, leading the incident to be condemned as a war crime. Nevertheless, Israeli forces denied the allegations, and no accountability has been enforced.

Another report by the International Commission of Jurists identified a pattern of attacks on media workers in Gaza. “Israeli defense forces appear to be intentionally and unlawfully attacking journalists and other media workers to stop them from exposing their crimes,” stated Said Benarbia, the ICJ’s MENA Program Director, in this report.

One of the most significant weaknesses of IHL is its reliance on the compliance of the warring states. Often, combatant states disregard these laws and prioritize short-term strategic or tactical gains over legal obligations. There is also a military training gap, in which combatants lack sufficient knowledge or understanding of IHL, making compliance difficult.

Another challenge is that the Geneva Conventions are designed primarily for states. Various non-state actors, such as various terrorists, political, and religious groups, are so motivated by their own personal agendas that they overlook the IHL laws, and enforcement becomes difficult.

Most importantly, there is no strong global entity capable of enforcing international humanitarian law at the international level. International humanitarian law depends on the respect and accountability of participating states, and, in the absence of a unified enforcement mechanism, compliance remains voluntary mainly. Such a lack of enforcement undermines accountability and thus leaves journalists in a very vulnerable state during armed conflict.

Journalism in Armed Conflict Today

Today, as the world witnesses unprecedented levels of violence and warfare, it becomes our collective moral obligation to protect journalism. Journalists are the backbone of the modern information system, and if we want to safeguard democracy, we must ensure their safety.

While international humanitarian law provides a legal framework to protect journalism in armed conflict, its reliance on the voluntary compliance of participating states and non-state actors renders it highly fragile and vulnerable. The number of journalists who are killed, injured, or detained in war zones is consistently increasing, and it is both our legal and moral responsibility to ensure their protection.

A collective global initiative is urgently needed to safeguard press freedom. Strengthening accountability and ending impunity for attacks on journalists are essential steps toward preserving truth itself. And, as Thibaut Bruttin rightly states, if we cannot protect those who deliver the truth, we cannot hope to preserve the truth.

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Rising Temperatures, Rising Stakes: Protecting People in a Warming World

Climate change is already undermining fundamental human rights by destabilizing the basic conditions that the United Nations (UN) identifies as essential to life, health, food, water, and housing (UN, 1948, Article 25). These are not distant predictions, they are current realities affecting lives around the world.

Intensifying disasters directly threaten the right to life and security: the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) reports that climate-related events now displace more than 20 million additional people each year than violent conflict, forcing families from their homes with little warning (IDMC, 2021). Simultaneously, rising temperatures exacerbate health risks, with the World Health Organization (WHO) projecting an additional 250,000 deaths annually from 2030 to 2050 from heat stress, malnutrition, and vector-borne diseases (WHO, 2019). Developing countries, which mostly have weaker medical infrastructure compared to developed countries, are the most affected by rising temperatures and also “will be the least able to cope without assistance” (WHO, 2019, para. 2). This lack of infrastructure makes it harder for them to respond to health risks like heat stress and vector-borne diseases.

Air pollution linked to fossil fuel combustion further worsens respiratory and cardiovascular conditions, disproportionately impacting children, the elderly, and low-income populations (American Lung Association [ALA], 2022). These pressures also threaten food and water security, with the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) estimating that over three billion people live in regions highly vulnerable to climate-related food and water insecurity (IPCC, 2022, pp. 60-1). Droughts, crop failures, and saltwater intrusion into freshwater sources destabilize entire agricultural systems and jeopardize safe drinking

water, further exacerbating existing inequalities (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2025, Nos. 7, 20, 23).

Community stability and housing are similarly at risk, particularly in Small Island Developing States (SIDS), where rising sea levels and extreme weather events render entire communities uninhabitable (UNDP, 2024). Recognizing these interlinked threats defines why climate action is urgent; evaluating proposals to address the crisis requires considering not only their effectiveness in reducing greenhouse gas emissions, but also their capacity to protect the vulnerable and avoid perpetuating inequality.

Beneficial Proposals

Efforts to confront climate change can significantly advance human rights when they are rooted in the principles of equity, participation, and sustainability. One of the most important strategies is the transition to renewable energy, which directly reduces greenhouse gas emissions, the main driver of global warming. This transition also expands access to cleaner, more reliable and efficient power, reducing the need for the use of fossil fuels, which release far more CO₂ compared to renewable energy sources like wind and solar. According to the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA, 2019), a rapid shift toward solar, wind, and other renewables—through their REmap 2050 strategy—could cut global emissions by up to 70 percent by 2050 while generating millions of jobs worldwide. This shift supports the right to a healthy environment, reduces air pollution linked to respiratory and cardiovascular complications, and offers economic opportunities in communities previously dependent on fossil fuels (IRENA; Lee et al., 2014). One clear example of communities previously dependent on fossil fuels is in parts of the U.S. Mountain West and Midwest, where coal-dependent counties have begun to attract large-scale wind and solar projects (Tomer et al., 2021). Brookings Institution’s research shows that many of the same counties that suffered coal-job losses also have “the greatest potential for both wind and solar electricity generation” (Tomer et al., 2021, para. 4). This has allowed places like Campbell County, one of Wyoming’s biggest fossil-fuel hubs, to position themselves as strong candidates for new renewable energy investment (Tomer et al., 2021). With nearly all Wyoming counties ranking as highly competitive for wind or solar, communities such as Campbell County can leverage their land, existing transmission networks, and experienced energy workforce to attract wind or solar developers (Tomer et al., 2021). Rather than facing inevitable decline as the use of coal decreases, these regions have the geographic and labor advantages that are needed to diversify their

energy production into renewables and build new energy sector employment. When implemented with community input and fair labor protections, renewable energy development strengthens both environmental sustainability and social justice.

Another essential approach is investing in climate adaptation policies, which help communities withstand the impacts of climate change that can no longer be avoided. Adaptation measures—such as building adaptable infrastructure, upgrading existing water systems, restoring ecosystems, and improving housing—all protect the right to safety, housing, and livelihoods. According to the UNDP (UNDP, 2025, No. 10), “every \$1 invested in adaptation measures can yield more than \$10 in benefits over 10 years by avoiding losses from climate impacts,” and in some cases, well-designed and resilient strategies have the potential to cut future climate-driven losses by up to 90% (UNDP, 2020). These efforts not only safeguard populations from immediate harm but also promote long-term stability by reducing displacement, protecting food systems, and strengthening communities’ resilience. For example, in drought-prone regions of East Africa, community-managed irrigation systems, such as those implemented under PASIDP II in Ethiopia, have helped farmers maintain stable and productive harvests even as rainfall becomes more and more unpredictable (International Fund for Agricultural Development [IFAD], 2016). By reinforcing infrastructure and strengthening water and agricultural systems, adaptation policies address the underlying vulnerabilities that turn climate shocks into human rights emergencies. Likewise, coastal cities like Jakarta have begun implementing large-scale projects like the Great Garuda Sea Wall and restoring mangrove forests, which serve as natural barriers to reduce the risk of large-scale displacement during storms (Colven, 2017). Similar strategies are also emerging in Bangladesh’s Satkhira and Khulna districts, where the rainwater systems have been expanded and have enabled women and families to collect clean water closer to their home during drought-prone and dry summer months (Chowdhury, 2024). This improves public health by reducing exposure to contaminated pond and groundwater sources and lessens the physical burden and risks associated with long-distance water collection where expanded rainwater harvesting systems have improved access to drinking water during heatwaves and the dry season, directly protecting public health and reducing conflict over scarce resources. In doing so, they help communities maintain their livelihoods and autonomy, preventing climate impacts from escalating into never-ending cycles of poverty, migration, and inequality.

Together, these approaches illustrate that climate action is not merely environmental policy but a vehicle for promoting human dignity, equity, and justice. When viewed through the lens of a human rights framework, these strategies strengthen both people and the planet and support a more sustainable and stable future. However, even well-intentioned climate solutions can cause harm when their design or implementation overlooks equality.

Challenges

While climate solutions have enormous potential, not every proposal automatically strengthens human rights, and some, if poorly designed, can even hinder them. This makes it essential to recognize these risks and strive for climate action policies that are stronger and more just.

Financial constraints pose a major obstacle to climate action, and the transition to renewable energy illustrates this challenge clearly. On paper, renewable energy seems like the perfect fix: it's abundant, on average 47% cheaper than fossil fuels, it supports better cardiovascular health, and is estimated to create nearly 30 million new jobs by 2030 (UN, 2025; Salahodjaev & Sadikov, 2024). However, without careful planning, the high upfront costs of deploying renewable energy technologies, upgrading existing renewable energy infrastructure, and training workers often fall disproportionately on developing economies. On average, these economies need to increase their spending by \$320 billion per year, bringing their total annual energy expenditures to \$7.3 trillion (United Nations Trade and Development [UNCTAD], 2023). As a result, financial pressures can slow the adoption of clean energy or shift burdens onto vulnerable populations.

Large-scale renewable energy projects, especially wind and solar farms, can displace rural or Indigenous communities if developers don't consult the people who actually live on that land, according to Columbia Climate School at Columbia University (Columbia University | Columbia Center on Sustainable Investment, 2022). The IPCC reports that non-economic losses include "the loss of land, livelihoods, social networks, cultural values and the irreversible degradation of ecosystem functions" (IPCC, 2022, pp. 1176, para. 7). Such losses can lessen food security, disrupt traditional practices, and weaken the social unity that communities rely on to adapt to environmental changes. Moreover, the economic benefits of renewable energy, like jobs, clean electricity, and infrastructure improvements, often fail to reach displaced communities, leaving them to deal with the socio-environmental costs without any corresponding

gains (Ross et al., 2022). Switching to renewable energy is important for the fight against climate change, but how these projects are done will decide if they help communities or make existing inequalities worse.

Policies for adapting communities to the adverse effects of climate change can run into similar economic and social consequences. Building sea walls, relocating communities, and other climate adaptation measures are necessary, but they can also open the door to countless socioeconomic disparities, especially in historically disadvantaged communities (Bick et al., 2021). Wealthier regions usually get protection first, while low-income or politically marginalized communities are left waiting, even though they face the greatest risks. This demonstrates how, even though adaptive measures are intended to benefit everyone equally, they just fall short in terms of human equity. (McCarthy, 2020). These inequalities arise because funding for adaptation measures is heavily influenced by politics and higher socioeconomic status. In Madagascar, for example, a household with stronger political ties was significantly more likely to receive adaptation resources, even though these programs intended for all to receive these resources (Browne & Claudien Razafiarimanana, 2022). As a result, funding patterns mirror local power structures instead of the true distribution of climate hazards, ultimately reinforcing long-standing inequalities and leaving the most vulnerable communities with fewer resources to prepare for escalating climate impacts.

Relocation measures, in particular, raise serious human rights concerns because moving entire neighborhoods, or even nations—like those sinking on Pacific islands—can fracture cultures, erase rich histories, and force people to abandon land that carried deep spiritual and ancestral meaning (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2023). Adaptation saves lives, but without safeguards to protect the very lives it aims to save, it can unintentionally cause its own form of harm.

Finally, challenges to climate action are not only local or national; even international agreements face significant limitations that affect the protection of vulnerable populations. While the Paris Agreement aims to reinforce human rights by promoting cooperation, fairness, and accountability among nations, one major limitation is that compliance is not truly enforceable. The Agreement urges countries to pursue climate action in a manner that “respect[s], promote[s] and consider[s] their respective obligations on human rights,” explicitly referencing “the rights of indigenous peoples, local communities, migrants, children...and people in vulnerable situations,” as well as those most affected by

climate impacts (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change [UNFCCC], 2015). However, because the Paris Agreement has no punitive mechanics, countries face no legal or material consequences for failing to meet their commitments. This means that adherence often relies on voluntary goodwill or the desire to maintain a positive international reputation, both of which can be weakened or strategically managed through public relations (Bacchetta, 2020). As a result, even though the Agreement establishes mechanisms for global collaboration, financial support, and technology transfer, its impact heavily depends on political will rather than accountability.

Conclusion

When we step back and look at everything, one thing becomes clear: climate change can no longer be considered an environmental problem, it has gotten to the point where it's now become a significant human rights crisis. The choices we make today will determine whether billions of people can live with dignity, security, proper health, adequate food and water, and sufficient housing, all of which the UN deems as fundamental human rights. Renewable energy, adaptation policies, and international cooperation all have the power to protect lives, reduce inequality, and strengthen communities. But these strategies only succeed when human rights are at the forefront, when the people most affected are involved in decision-making that affects all, and when policies are implemented thoughtfully, and not for personal gain or international appearance.

We can't afford to treat climate action as a technical task or a solution made simply to check that box. Every policy, every project, every investment has consequences for real people; the farmers, the families, the Indigenous communities who have contributed least to the problem but bear the brunt of it. A wind farm or seawall isn't simply infrastructure, rather, it's a choice about who thrives and who suffers, which is why equality, consultation with everyone, and sustainability of these practices must guide every step of the way.

If we take these lessons seriously, climate solutions become a way to uphold human dignity, to correct inequalities, and to build a future that's not only sustainable for many more centuries to come, but also fair. These processes are far from easy and won't happen overnight, but by designing policies that put people first, we can ensure that the fight against climate change benefits everyone. The decisions we make in the next couple of years will shape the future world for countless generations, and it is our responsibility to create a society that is just, resilient, and always puts the rights of humans first.

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Short Story



Mercy in Morality

The threads had never spun so perfectly. The teals were marbled with hues of gold throughout--just the correct amount of dye, a rare phenomenon. The morning sunlight filtered in through the woven tapestry curtains, onto the fibers, and you thought of how much it looked like that seaside--when the waves crashed along that beach, when the sun glinted on the waters like the touch of Midas--golden and beautiful, but with the power to sap everything with its saturation. It was a place you couldn't recall.

As the wheel spun, you continued to pinch the threads and pulled them along. They moved across the wheel, softly at first, unsure of who they were. But as you stepped on the pedal, they grew into themselves. It was just the pressure they needed to truly understand themselves, find a place amongst the millions of other fibers--to one day, intertwine into a creation you thought only Earth could conjure. The blurs of teals and golds would someday hold the greatest depths. They were all destined for a greater purpose it seemed. The like could not be said for you.

You continued the rhythmic spinning and pinching of the thread until it had become one big spool of seaside colors, with some of it spilling onto the wooden floors of the weaving chamber. You left it there. You needed to measure it anyway, before it could be woven. Your eyes went to the loom in the opposite corner, where there were still bits of thread from your last weaving. You had completed it yesterday, but of what it was..you couldn't remember. Yesterday seemed to meld into a haze of events. As did the day before, and the one before that. It was like a ritual now, and you didn't have it in you to feel the same fear and confusion you'd initially felt. When something happens for long enough,

your soul learns to weave that into itself. Whether that was a good or bad thing you were unsure, but that was all you seemed to feel as of late. Every day it seemed, you awoke to a new delirium. Every day as you sat in this room, questions seemed to arise...but it was rare you knew the answer to any of them. You were stuck here, with nothing but the spinning wheel and loom. The only thing you could truly do was weave. So, that is what you did. It was the only part of yourself you seemed to have left. But that seemed beyond impossible.

You walked across the chamber to where the loom was. The window was right next to it, and you pushed it open. The morning air was warm, beautiful, but there was also a slight chill to it that brushed your cheeks. You looked out, squinting. In the close distance, you could make out the lines of a sea. The same colors were still on the floor. You closed your eyes, trying to conjure an image. But you couldn't. Your mind wouldn't let you, and all that came were *bits and pieces* of a sea...but of one you *simply couldn't recall*. How could you create something that you didn't even remember? The only bits of inspiration you were given were taken away by the cruelty of your own mind. It was infuriating, frustrating, *tiring* because you hadn't a single clue as to what was happening. You'd been a weaver of worlds before this malady of forgetfulness took over you. When your fingers worked the loom, they'd once been able to create something so elaborate that one could almost hear the sounds of what you'd created, feel the textures. You'd built yourself up, and the estate you lived in was a testament to who you'd once been. It had arches and filigree and was composed to look like it was almost built into the sky, one with the natural world. But now, you were locked in this infinitesimal room, of this colossal house. And the key had been thrown by your own mind.

The disease had come knocking on the porch one day, slowly. And then, like an uninvited guest, it had walked deeper and deeper, ransacking and misplacing memories and thoughts til you were left the mess you currently felt. This chamber was that mess. From the spools on the floor from the previous days--or nights, you weren't sure--to the tapestry needles and measuring tools. But of course, as with everything else, you didn't know the threads of the thought tied to the tangible objects. Because you were just...here. Trapped. Wound in a tangle that could never be unraveled, completely meaningless, all *because you couldn't remember*. And that meant you were nothing to this world. But worse still, you didn't even know how to feel purpose, or what it meant. It was an abstract concept, one your mind struggled to comprehend as time passed in this tiny room.

You looked out the window once more. There were hills, rolling and deep, in the distance. Small cottages. A bustling marketplace. A few years ago, it was where you had sold your greatest works. The first had been a dancer. The lines and colors had captured her essence and movement so perfectly, everyone who passed your stall had stopped to stare in awe. You gave people the ability to feel things, and see things they otherwise would never experience quite the same again. That was what made you feel happy, *fulfilled*. But it was gone now. Your eyes followed from the marketplace to the sea again, lingering there. Even now, in this sunlight so bright it was almost blinding, it was easy to catch a glimpse of the waves. They were calm, yet outraged. Precise in their movements, yet so sporadic. They were contradicting and vexing in every way. You just couldn't understand why. Or what you'd even seen to be reminded of them. You felt an urge to mimic them in your medium, but it was all lost on you. *Who am I?*

You sat at the loom. You needed to do *something*; the longer you idled, the more it hurt your soul. *But what do I even do?* You looked at the floor, scanning the fibers. You spotted the threads of teals, blues, and golds. *The seaside*. You set aside the teal and blue, because they were the main colors. That's what you thought. The gold, you didn't need as much of. You ran your fingers over the gold thread, and stretched it out to about arms' length. On a typical day, you'd know it was nowhere near enough. But no day would ever be typical for you again, and so, this *had* to be enough--even if it meant running out before the piece was done.

It was time to begin. But, try as you might, your mind fumbled with the threads. You stared at the loom. It was familiar to your hands, but not to you. However, it was *you* who needed to understand this, because no matter how much your fingers remembered, they were futile without that part of your mind to guide them to create the fine details you needed. *So how were you supposed to craft anything if you didn't even know how to start?* Your head pounded with the illogicality of the predicament, and your heart, with the hopelessness of it all. You went under and over the strings of the loom, but it was so arbitrary and so baffling you felt obligated to unravel...only to go back and redo the same sections. What a Sisyphean task. You were condemned to this fate forever it seemed. And though eternity and torture were more concepts too abstract for you, they were the epitome of your situation. You were overwhelmed with emotions, but you didn't know how to grapple with any of them. Fisting the fibers in frustration, you looked down at the loom. You felt a liquid drip from your cheeks. *Rivulets of emotions. Tears*. But as with all else, you couldn't quite reach for those meanings

and words--just that they were there. You wiped the wetness away, and gazed around the room, a desperate attempt to find *any* clues on what to do.

It was then you realized that the window looking out was white and empty, and the brightness of earlier was gone. The clouds had started conquering the sky, and the light in your room was dulled. Dulled, but still bright enough for you to see your loom. There was a haze about everything, yet still enough clarity in the air for you to make out shapes and colors, but only a few of the basic ones. You turned back, and looked down at your work thus far--a nameless, shapeless blob. You didn't even remember what you were trying to create anymore. The rivulets fell harder, and they were pelting. Your heart pounded louder. It roared in your ears. In the dimming light, you again felt the striking need to make *something* out of all this nothingness...because what else were you supposed to do? You *physically* felt empty, and mentally...you *were*. You inhaled sharply, and closed your eyes. Suddenly, the sound of thunder pierced the air, and you jumped, shocked. *Loud*. Your ears were still ringing from that, when, before you could process anything else, you heard a deafening *crack*. A strange smell filled the air, as did a sizzling sound, and you felt yourself falling. You quite literally felt as if you were plummeting into the sea--because you were. You splashed into the water, and you didn't quite know how to put it into words...but the pain was horrid enough that if you'd been able to know, you would think you were struck by the lightning. You were in the water now. The coldness surrounded you, and you were amidst a struggling chaos. Above, the lightning struck again. The thunder boomed louder. Below, you floundered, struggling to move your hands and feet to swim through the tumult. You desperately reached out to the first thing that met your hand. It was a piece of your loom. The loom was massive enough that you could grip onto it to stay afloat. You fought to stay alive. It was instinct, but there was that one part of your mind--the one with what scraps of logic were left at all--that wondered, *Why did you fight?* One day, your mind would kill you, and it technically already was--slowly, torturously. Water was getting into your nose and mouth. You coughed uncontrollably, and your lungs burned. The world seemed to close in on you again, but that was nothing new. The key difference was that it was water now, the sea. The same sea that had been so calm earlier today, that you'd thought to have been touched by Midas. You didn't remember it, but that didn't mean it hadn't happened. The threads still on the loom from earlier were hazy, the fibers drenched in seawater. They were mingled together in a seemingly endless pattern, one that didn't make sense. You were exhausted. From the confusion. From the fighting. What were they *supposed* to

look like? A reflection of you, maybe. Who you'd once been. A reflection of the world around you? A tangible way the world changed you. Something elegant and simple. Or something so elaborate, it would take years to untangle the threads of its meaning. You didn't know. *Who were you?* The only answers that arose were fragments. It was all a mess. A confusing mess, that you could never remember no matter how hard you tried. You were in the sea. Endless. Wild. Unpredictable. Tumultuous. Just like your mind. As if on cue, there was another wave that crashed into you. It threw your body to the side. You struggled to keep your grip on the wood of the loom. It was the only thing that was even remotely keeping you afloat, because your body could no longer do anything for you. You were done. You could no longer do this. You were tired of wondering. You were sick of this endless struggle, where nothing--even your weavings felt meaningless...the very things you'd once cherished so deeply. Did even your creations mean *anything*, if none of them ever lasted? If you could never remember them again? The sea pummeled against you. And again, you were moved. You gripped the loom. The teal threads woven into it had shifted. They were blobs of absolutely nothingness. You stared at the shapes. You felt the sea toss you around. You heard the storm overhead, still pelting down. You looked into the water for anything to reach for. You were losing hope. You were dying. At sea. In a meaningless wasteland of confusion and fears and nothingness.

But then you saw it. A golden thread. By some miracle, it was still hanging off the loom. It was so small in the sea, but you'd somehow found it. You reached for it with your free hand, while the other held onto the loom. Perhaps it was the most foolish thing you'd ever done. You were dying at sea, and you were desperately reaching for a thread. A thread you didn't even remember. But it was also a desperate attempt to reach for *something*--*anything*--of familiarity, even if you were drowning. Maybe it was one of the few things left of you that made you feel normal, made you feel *human*. The golden thread was in your fingers now, and it glistened from the seawater. You let your hands do the work, the work they'd familiarized themselves with for the past years of your life. Your mind wandered, and you let it. For the first time, when death was *this* inevitable, maybe it was okay that you couldn't recall a single thing. This moment would have to be enough. And maybe it was, because when you looked down at your weaving, you saw the gold thread shining in the midst of the dark teals and blues of that seaside beach. It was so different from the works of your peak, which had all been of ethereality and detail and utmost beauty. But, in a way, this had more of you in it than any of your other weavings. It was hideous, but it was also raw. It was who

you were, and a true reflection of what you could create. And though more of your mind had been invaded than ever before, there was that sliver of it. A sliver that had contained someone who had loved the sea all those years ago:

The sea was calm today. The waves kissed the shore softly, and you stood, mesmerized by the diamonds it seemed to contain. The waters were ephemeral, yet eternal--For a single moment, the waves reached out to the shore. They shifted the sands, so infinitesimally, but tangibly nonetheless. And then the waves went back to the sea. It was a short-lived moment, but each grain, despite being one out of billions, was moved by those waves. They were like people, the sands of time--they were the world. It didn't matter how transient the moment was. It was a moment nonetheless, one that still somehow changed everything. And that was beautiful. Maybe, one day, you could translate that into your art.

It was still a place you couldn't completely recall. But you were okay with that. It didn't torture you anymore. Now, its teals and golds did indeed hold the greatest depths. At least, for you.

It had been so perfect, you didn't even have to cut the thread in the end. It had been just the right length after all. The darkness had never felt so light. The walls had never been so freeing. The sea was calm once again.

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Poetry



The Cave

Raindrops patter down to the forest floor
Crickets chirp and gusts of cold air blow through my hair
There are cries in the distance
I can't tell whether they are happy or not
Joyous or in agony
Piles of fall leaves rustle at my feet
But their sounds are hushed by the roar of my blood rushing through my ears
Do I go in? I ask myself as I stand with wobbly knees before the cavern
A dark mysterious tunnel with drapes made of moss
With walls crusted with icicles so sharp that it could cut through the depths of
my fears
How bad could it be?
I take one step forward, but my petrified mind wills 3 steps back
There could be snakes in there.....or better yet bats.....there could be

But what you don't realize as you ponder these hypotheticals is that you never know

You simply never know

There could most definitely be unimaginably terrifying things in that mysterious cave, or there

could be a beautiful sight you'll remember all through your life

It's up to you to find out

It's up to you to risk it

It's up to you to take that first step, and enter the cave of uncertainty
It's up to you to find your treasure or risk it all through trying

The cave shielded by the fear of the unknown

The cave which is home to creatures of the dark

The cave where the other side is open only to those who dare

Who dare to dream

Who dare to try

Who dare to do

One step, becomes two, three, and before you know it you can't see the sunlight

You are on your own to find your way through the cavern

But how do you do that when you're not sure if you are stepping on land or a bottomless pit?

You just believe, trust what's ahead of you and leap

But the journey ahead isn't easy,
You stumble on stones, get bruised, and tired
And just when you are about to give it all up,
You see it
The treasure you seek
A secret meadow with extraordinary creatures and towering waterfalls
You found the other side of the rainbow
You got your pot of gold only because you waited through the storm
And dared to try



The Fluidity of Female Identity: The Characterization of Ifeoma in *Purple Hibiscus*

In the fantasy war-torn world of the show *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, one of the earlier episodes sorts out the misogyny of a main character named Sokka when he meets Suki, a member of a local girls-only warrior group called the Warriors of Kyoshi. Before her, Sokka considered girls as weak and only homemakers, also viewing the Warriors and Suki as fake fighters; however, Suki disproves this when she beats Sokka in a fight and shows him how girls can also have strength. But, Suki's characterization depicts her as more than just an aggressive warrior, shown when she says, "I AM a warrior...but I'm a girl, too" ("The Warriors of Kyoshi"). Just as Suki defies the notion that strength and femininity are opposites, Adichie similarly uses *Purple Hibiscus* to explore how women can embody both independence and compassion within a patriarchal society. The book transitions Kambili, a young girl under a fanatical and abusive father, from her own strict family to the household of her Aunty Ifeoma, a defiant woman admired for her boldness and independence while still being a caring mother. In *Purple Hibiscus*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie uses Aunty Ifeoma as a progressive model of female identity to provide a powerful counter-narrative to the traditional role of women as subservient and lesser, demonstrating the multifaceted role of women as both advocates for women's empowerment outside of the patriarchal lens and supportive maternal figures within society.

Adichie depicts Ifeoma's negative opinion towards the traditional path typically taken by women, marriage, criticizing its perceived importance to show how women should possess their own role outside of societal expectations. When speaking to Beatrice, Ifeoma says, "Nwunye m, sometimes life begins when

marriage ends” (Adichie 75). By describing marriage as an endpoint rather than a beginning, Ifeoma reframes female fulfillment as something self-defined rather than socially assigned. She challenges the patriarchal logic that equates womanhood with submission. Ifeoma confesses how she feels the same about women apart from her family, remarking, “Six girls in my first-year seminar class are married...their husbands buy them stereos and textbooks and refrigerators, and when they graduate, the husbands own them and their degrees. Don’t you see?” (Adichie 75). Ifeoma extends her previous idea, portraying marriage as another patriarchal tool of control. It places women in a subservient role, reducing them to objects, a point that Adichie directly criticizes and places as a focal point through Ifeoma’s words. In this way, Adichie clearly enunciates what a woman does not necessarily have to be but is often coerced into becoming: a possession. Auntie Ifeoma seeks to liberate family and friends from becoming such a stereotype, condemning that behavior as foolish and a waste of effort.

Ifeoma additionally serves as a role model to Kambili, juxtaposing her mother, Beatrice, who becomes an example of the expected subservient woman in patriarchal societies; additionally, she inspires Kambili’s behavior and offers a second perspective to show how women can also take the role of vocal advocates. Kambili recognizes her aunt as an oddity in her world, Ifeoma’s flippant tone making her think, “...she did not seem to recognize that it was Papa, that he was different, special. I wanted to reach out and press her lips shut and get some of that shiny bronze lipstick on my fingers” (Adichie 77). Kambili’s fascination with the lipstick reflects her yearning for a separation from the chastity her father enforces on her and a freer, more expressive womanhood—something that Ifeoma embodies effortlessly, encouraging Kambili to admire her. Moreover, Kambili’s previous model of a woman’s role is to respect their father or husband, but Ifeoma challenges this with her actions. Ifeoma’s presence also affects Kambili’s behavior, making her think, “I wondered why I did not tell her that all my skirts stopped well past my knees, that I did not own any trousers because it was sinful for a woman to wear trousers” (Adichie 80). As asserted earlier, Ifeoma disdains the idea that women should follow patriarchal traditions such as obeying the male figures in their lives—an example of this would be Kambili considering trousers as sinful to follow her father’s words. Thus, her reluctance to tell Auntie Ifeoma why her clothes were in such a state implies that she does not want Ifeoma to be disappointed in her, being a role model to her. By casting Ifeoma in such a positive light as a mentor, Adichie indicates that Ifeoma’s bold

opinion is righteous. Later on, when Kambili and her brother Jaja stay at Aunty Ifeoma's house, having left their father Eugene's household, they also receive advice from Ifeoma, who says, "Being defiant can be a good thing sometimes...Defiance is like marijuana---it is not a bad thing when it is used right" (Adichie 144). Although primarily directed to Jaja, these words encapsulate Kambili's lessons throughout her time with Ifeoma as she learns that having the courage to challenge her father's words can be good—for instance, she begins to hide secrets, keeping Amaka's painting of Papa Nnukwu as a token of remembrance. Thus, Kambili grows to become rebellious enough to disobey her father, resisting the patriarchal standards and becoming an example of how women can take on the role of willful advocates like her Aunty Ifeoma. By aiding in Kambili's growth and education from outside of her strict household, Ifeoma becomes Adichie's model for the role of women outside of the patriarchy: bold, independent, and defiant.

As the head of her household, Aunty Ifeoma's home juxtaposes Beatrice's, revealing how freedom from patriarchal constraints fosters both comfort and a balance between leadership and femininity. One of Kambili's first thoughts towards Ifeoma's household is, "Words spurted from everyone, often not seeking and not getting any response. We always spoke with a purpose back home, especially at the table, but my cousins seemed to simply speak and speak and speak" (Adichie 120). Beatrice obeys Eugene's words, making her and her household quiet out of fear; conversely, Ifeoma inspires her children to speak, being the head of her own household. She chooses to follow neither the tradition of strict submission nor of choosing a husband to lead the household, which proves to be beneficial by bringing warmth rather than cold compliance. Ifeoma also recognizes such a thing, trying to help her sister-in-law by saying, "This cannot go on, *nwunye m*...When a house is on fire, you run out before the roof collapses on your head" (Adichie 213). Ifeoma's advice for and relationship with Beatrice shows that they are more than just literary foils about obedience—they are companions who genuinely care for each other. This moment reveals Ifeoma's kindness along with her defiance, depicting the suggestion of rebellion out of kindness, not out of insolence. In their final days at Ifeoma's home, Kambili also realizes a major difference in how Eugene versus Ifeoma treated them, contemplating, "It was what Aunty Ifeoma did to my cousins, I realized then, setting higher and higher jumps for them in the way she talked to them, in what she expected of them" (Adichie 226). Although Ifeoma is distinctly strong and independent, she still supports her children and is kind, embracing the role of a

woman as a mother and family member as well as an advocate simultaneously. She inspires them to do better out of a feeling of confidence rather than fear. Adichie thus shows, similar to *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, how a woman does not have to give up a kind and feminine role in society to also be strong and independent; a woman can be a leader, a good friend, and most importantly, a human, not just a possession while simultaneously taking on a supportive role.

Adichie places Auntie Ifeoma in a position of great influence to the people around her, including Kambili and her family; in doing so, she is able to illustrate the complexities of the roles of women in society. Adichie shows Ifeoma criticizing the traditional roles forced upon them by patriarchal societal beliefs, marriage often making women lose their own ambitions, to reveal what she does not believe the strict role of women should be. Ifeoma is also shown as a woman full of independence, able to say and do as she wishes without fear, showing what Adichie does believe to be a major part of women's role in society: being advocates and equal voices. In this way, readers are also exposed to the boldness that Ifeoma possesses, expressing her own opinions; however, Adichie also clarifies how Ifeoma is still warm and supportive, being a mother and embracing, in part, a traditional role. Thus, the multifaceted nature of the role of women as both independent individuals operating outside of what is expected by patriarchy and as loving and warmhearted mothers, aunts, and others is illustrated in *Purple Hibiscus*. Through Ifeoma, Adichie asserts that liberation does not require women to abandon care or community, but to reclaim the freedom to define themselves on their own terms; Ifeoma's true strength lies not in rejecting femininity, but in redefining it as fluid rather than fixed. Importantly, her support for Beatrice's side of the family and her students also reflects the reality of many women still being pushed into abuse for the sake of tradition. Other media besides *Purple Hibiscus* like *Avatar: The Last Airbender* continue to depict the crises faced by women including misogyny, violence, and discrimination. Ultimately, Adichie reminds readers that women's roles remain complex and contested, and that true freedom requires both defiance and representation in the face of enduring oppression from patriarchal standards.

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Poetry



Rose Petals

A woman walks along the
Blue linoleum pushing a
Cart of cleaning supplies. Someone
Dropped a box of cereal, an
Empty purse, a single
Flower petal— a rose— lies on the cool tile. She
Gingerly picks it up
Holds it to her spectacles
It's dark outside, the sun
Just setting, but when it was light, maybe a
Kid bought a bouquet of flowers because they
Love their mother or
Maybe a lover who would
Never go a day without
Offering their other some
Proof of their love or maybe it was a
Quiet
Reminder that you can love your-
Self
Tonight the petal is picked
Up by a woman's
Veiny hands before she
Washes down the floor with some
'Xtra-strength' bright pink liquid. She will tuck the petal in her granddaughter's
Yellow jacket, a love that can be contained in
Zero combinations of the alphabet



Why We Must Enlist Artificial Intelligence to Fight Climate Change

The night sky is different these days. The stars that once guided humanity's progress now seem elusive, cloaked by the residue of years of artificial light. The purest duality that once was, dark ether and white stars, has now been reduced to a lifeless gray, only interrupted by the unceasing whir of airplanes.

The world is changing at a relentless pace. Pollution of the land, sea, and sky grows rampant, impatiently waiting to swallow our ever-deteriorating Earth. Bleakness in the technologies we use, outputting infinite waste in order to serve human convenience. Everything we do seems to be at the expense of the planet, the nature that nurtured us in our earliest days, before civilizations grew and flourished.

Recently, the alarm is growing, as we become more conscious of our choices and their impacts. We are beginning to despair at how our excessive and incessant need to consume— media, items, devices— has effectively consumed us. Our latest marvel, Artificial Intelligence, is no different. It is the most destructive to the environment, out of all the technologies seen prior. AI's reliance on rare earth metals that are typically mined unsustainably puts people in unethical conditions to feed the machine. It 'drinks' massive amounts of water, driving up water scarcity globally, even in countries with little to give. The data centers in which AI is produced generate toxic E-waste (a term denoting devices such as computers, phones, and other electronics when they're thrown away) containing lead, mercury, and other such dangerous metals, which are poisons to the planet

and humans alike. All of these traumas to the Earth affect us both directly and indirectly, which is why people are calling for a remedy.

Nevertheless, nations worldwide are entering a Cold War-esque battle for dominance in the AI field. Notwithstanding the dangers that concern it, it seems as if it's our human right to explore the far-fetched sciences. Conquering AI has become the modern equivalent of The Space Race. Its very audacity fuels humanity's relentless drive to innovate. But how much is too much? When should our innate need for discovery be hampered for the sake of our planet?

There have long been talks of what to do with our progressively worsening climate. The UN, WWF, Greenpeace, CAN, and countless other organizations strive to solve our crisis. However, it seems the brunt of the efforts they take falls into the hands of ordinary people. They say that miniscule efforts from everyone will surely overpower one large effort from a multi-billion-dollar corporation. The truth is far from this. Most people already know that even if everyone were efficacious enough to change their habits and put energy and time into saving the planet, it would barely dent the amount of mitigation needed to restore the climate. Even on the larger scale, if whole nations were to stick to their climate plans that they are so eager to propagate, it would take time, money, and manpower that most simply don't have the budget for. Switching from a fossil fuel-based economy to a clean one is sure to be a slow, grueling process, which is why people and countries alike are focusing on the adaptation aspect. Thailand, as an example, has long suffered from flooding that has only been heightened by climate change. With both rising water levels and larger precipitation levels, the nation's turned to green infrastructure to reap the benefits of this precarious situation. Urban forests, the primary method being used, create basins for the excess water to be stored, which feed the lush greenery. Thailand's example is one that can be replicated worldwide to combat the climate crisis.

The trouble, however, is the lack of effort taken to modify our course of action. As a society, we do not want a technologically inadequate world. We prefer devices to take on our tedious tasks so we can enjoy the frivolities of life. We are unwilling to sacrifice comfort, even for survival. With the knowledge that our world is highly resistant to a complete change, it is imperative that we use our technological exploits to help us, rather than harm us. By converting AI into a tool to combat climate change itself, the positive effect will counteract the negative outputs. Specifically, by using its prediction capabilities to adapt or mitigate potential disasters. In short, technology should no longer be a passive contributor to destruction, but an active force for survival. The earlier example, of

Thailand, could be a possible test site. The growing flood and rain capabilities can be tracked by AI, which could then create detailed maps and patterns of where the largest areas of rainfall are or where the flooding is concentrated. Processes like this already exist for AI, particularly vulnerable communities in Burundi, Chad, and Sudan, sponsored by the UN. Programs such as the MyAnga app warn about upcoming droughts to herders in Kenya. With such impressive data in reach, the pastoralists can better care for their livestock and spend less time scouting for green pastures. AI can also help with other facets of unsustainability, utilizing the same mapping technology for tracking natural disasters. It can precisely note how fast an iceberg melts and where it is, leading to discoveries about meltwater that flows into the surrounding ocean. Similarly, satellite imagery combined with AI can map the rate at which deforestation occurs or how much carbon is stored in a forest. All in all, AI has helped bring us to the brink of climate catastrophe, so we must now use it to pull us back.

While the stars seem dim, they continue to shine unrelentingly from behind the haze, with the promise of a bright future. They are a piercing reminder that our mistakes can be rectified; there'll be new things to look forward to. I often find myself comforted by the familiar lull of the airspace chatter, and the dim gray eases my fear of the dark. And as the moon glows ethereally over it all, I am reminded of new beginnings. A hopeful future lies ahead, where our technological prowess brings aid to the climate, and we restore our planet to past glory, hand-in-hand with AI.

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Personal Essay & Memoir



Kalimba

The adults around me still tell me stories about how I was bored out of my mind when I was little. According to my grandma, I entertained myself by constantly walking around in places—especially in her restaurant. My aunt described me as a consistent wanderer, as if I made nomadic approaches to every single area in the place, staying here and then there, just to take in one spot after another.

I couldn't stay still as a little kid. I made a lot of messes. I tore through sketchbooks in less than a week with illustrated stories and frantic scribbles because I had to capture these fleeting ideas before they disappeared. This kept my palms and fingers always smudged in lead and crayon dust—as the colors sank into my skin no matter how vigorously I scrubbed. I also had the habit of flicking nearby light switches on and off, again and again, fascinated by the way the room pulsed between brightness and shadow as if it had a heartbeat of its own.

I couldn't even sit down in restaurants because it wasn't an option for me. After I had observed everything by counting the cracks in the walls and mapping out the scratches on the tables in my head, I had to entertain myself further. I folded napkins—and despite the stiff, cheap paper being rough against my fingertips—I shaped them into uneven triangles. I even mixed salt and pepper together, because watching as the tiny white and black grains blurred into a murky gray, convinced me that I was a witch at her cauldron, stirring a potion only I could apprehend.

I used to talk to the mutts outside my grandma's house because they looked like they understood me. They tilted their heads and blinked at me, thumping their tails lazily against the ground, like old men understanding a story I have told before.

My grandpa, sitting at a nearby table swatting flies or peeling away the outer leaves of a napa cabbage over a spread-out newspaper, would watch me with quiet amusement, taking in all my strange little habits. He never told me to stop. He just watched, like he was waiting to see what I'd do next.

Occasionally, he would want me to sit next to him, not because he merely wanted me to stay still, but also because he wanted to be next to me. His voice, as I remember it, always carried a stern edge, though his intentions never did. While the cabbages he was peeling off in his hands had a faint, sharp yet earthy, scent—reminding me of the sour pickled radish my grandma always kept in plastic tubs in her kitchen.

I ran away, not wanting to stay in one spot next to the smell or near the intimidation the man had preserved in his tone. But instead of getting upset, he would only chuckle softly and watch me again.

It's funny how that dynamic carried on as I grew older. The summer before I started middle school, we shared the same living space, but in the quiet, unspoken way we always had. I would sit at the living room table, absorbed in my own world, while he settled on the couch, lost in his. We ate our meals separately, read at different paces, and existed alongside each other without the need for constant conversation. He had moved in with my mother, cousin, and I in our rented apartment in Korea—for the sake of his health. Cancer had slowly settled into his body. The relenting intensity he once brought in his presence had begun to shrink, his voice became a little softer, while his movements grew deliberately. Yet even then, he remained the same: watchful, patient, waiting to see what I would do next.

It's been a few years now since his passing.

Whenever I get really bored, I pick up my kalimba—the one I had brought from Korea—and press my thumbs to the tines. The notes sound feather-weight, floating down soft enough not to disturb anything, but landing perfectly still on the ground. That sound reminds me of him. Not because he ever played music, but because of how quiet he was. How he always seemed to be listening. How unhurried he seemed—even with his goodbye.

The last time I saw him, he didn't say much. He was lying down, thinner than I remembered. His voice was nearly threadbare. But he still watched me and all my family.

A friend of his, a pastor, once asked him in front of our family:

“Why are you leaving in a rush? You have so much more time to live for.”

I never forgot that question because no one really knew what to say after that.

The room stayed quiet. So did he.

And now, when I play the kalimba, I imagine him nearby. Even though he's gone, I still feel him in the pauses between notes. He's in less pain now. And wherever he is, I like to think it feels even more heavenly than the sound my kalimba makes for him.

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Personal Essay & Memoir



Her, a bird, a star, or a coral

I.

Fours aren't fives. Neither are caterpillars butterflies. Not all birds are doves and not all birds fly like them, either.

[We move in circles, pretending we're changing]. We spin our heads around the carousel, horseback riding on porcelain-looking, metal creatures. Hands clasped to the railings, as we watch the world around us turn its eyes to stare at us—the many.

Here, on this porcelain horse—I watch myself from a different world—where I'm almost sixteen. In a few years, I'll forget the girl I was trying to become. One year will slip into ten. Then one day, I'll forget that lollipops still exist—or perhaps I will forget it all. I'll forget the sweet rush of adrenaline that comes from receiving such a small, unearned treat from an instructor.

But right now, at this age, I feel half-baked in this oven. Stuck in a liminal space between who I was and who I'm becoming, where nothing feels finished and everything feels tender. *Maybe this is what growing up feels like. Maybe it's not supposed to feel like it's arriving, but hovering.*

Providence, is what they call it. But providence isn't fate. It's the way you land on your feet when you didn't know you could fall. It's the second heartbeat you hear when you think you are alone. It's something small that reaches you—a word, a kindness, a piece of sweetness—and you don't realize until later that it kept you standing.

Providence is like watching an apple ripen without noticing the days pass. Like breathing, and only realizing you were holding your breath once you finally exhale. It's the fleeting clarity that brushes against you when you move beyond

what you believed you were capable of. The strange opportunity to grow and be able to do so many things.

But I wonder...what could be those little things? *Will I forget the way I felt the first time I jumped so high on a trampoline without thinking? Again, perhaps I am ending up like them. I will fall into the easy trap of forgetting what providence ever was or felt—only noticing it once it's already gone. I think we'll all eventually forget what it's called. But somehow, even now, it is touching me too.*

...

II.

Love is where the roots stem from. And what's full of love often fades as it grows older.

Redwood trees must know what love is. Or do you ever think about it forgetting how to breathe and live like a living being the way so many of us have?

We will never know. We are not fortune-tellers or porcelain-looking horses after all.

Because we subconsciously know that fours aren't fives. Neither are caterpillars butterflies. Metamorphosis changes their bodies in a slow process which means that all birds aren't doves and neither do all birds fly like doves—because growth happens slowly, unevenly—and we accept it, even when it doesn't resemble what we expected.

...I don't like candy anymore. I do not find my interest in plastic wrappers that are coated with softened chocolate. Nor do I ever want to put pop rocks in my mouth again, as I now find the feeling agitating and painful. Green apple artificial flavor tastes worse than it used to, and I prefer real apples now. But real apples start to brown and turn less crisp from reacting with the oxygen in the air.

Is that what growing old is? Maybe it is when you slowly start to rot just from breathing the air outside of you. Perhaps it's better to stay young—to keep a pacifier in your mouth, drink milk, and never learn what the air can do to you.

I suppose I shouldn't prefer red apples, maybe I should try the green candied ones instead.

But then again, I don't know who this writing is for, because she is long gone and it would be foolish to turn back to how things were.

...

III.

But I still remember how we drove for what felt like hours in the Fiat.

My mother guided her light teal car through forests—steering her black
cauldron—
as I watched the evergreen trees and witch hazels blur by outside the window.
It was early morning. Mist clung to the blue air, hovering like wispy spirits.
I didn't know where we were going.
On this quiet, dewy day, my backpack rested on my legs,
my body lying down across the seat.
I wondered what it would be like to be a songbird or a raven,
chewing on poisonous red berries.
The forest became a watercolor.
A hypnotizing daze of rain.
She lifted her voice, gentle like a dove—
so distant I couldn't tell what she was saying.
My eyes felt heavy as I tried
to heave myself awake.
The driving roamed.
The road cleared.
A red-brick monument with a crown of white
stared down at me,
as if it had been waiting
to swallow me whole.
My mother pressed a button
and walked me inside.
A hallway stretched like a spine,
beige bones echoing
with the hush of other children's ghosts.
Some were singing—
row, row, row your boat.
I stared into the yawning hallway.
Rows of abyss.

...

IV.

I am not her anymore.

My eyes do not shift like the color in her pupils do when sunlight hits my vision. Neither do my parents look like hers because of the calluses in their palms. They have darkened like how I have, and their voices have changed like how my larynx vibrations have.

I know that I could never go back to change myself to look like her again—because it's an unnatural change that no person could truly make. And no matter how much I hope, pray to God, and wish to the stars, it will never be the same.

I don't have wings, nor can I grow pretty ones. I am not a dove and I was never a pigeon.

I will stay stuck on this ground—looking up at the stars, wondering what it's like to fly out there near constellations—or out at the seas, where peace could be found.

Perhaps it's better to be a seagull, so I can travel even farther to the north and see fish there, but we all know I can never reach that amount of incomprehensible freedom.

I don't shine like others, nor burn like the rest. I am not a sun or a comet.

Maybe when I am aviating near the skies, if I ever become a pilot or be with one, I can feel like a bird. But I could never stay close to the sun or be like one.

I am forgettable and I have doubts that I will ever be remembered and studied in astronomy or in schools. But I also know I won't chase the books to be recalled in one, so I shall never burn like everyone else.

I don't belong in the sea, nor belong anywhere else. I am not a mermaid like in those myths.

I used to want to belong in the sea because I was born near it. I even mentioned how it might be better to be a seagull so I can be even more free, but it is utterly useless. It's utterly useless that I keep wanting things that I can't want because I can't have.

I can't even swim anymore like how I used to. I cannot paddle my arms in the way it's correct nor bring myself to fold my legs up to keep me ashore. I would be a bad mermaid if I had a tail because I'm no natural at it anymore.

Perhaps that's the way life goes.

I am not her, a bird, a star, or a coral. But I can grow, and I will still be grown.

I may not ever fly, shine or burn, and be in the seas. Yet I can still hope I may go near it.

I want to live life the way it goes because it's what's best for me.

And I don't want to forget anymore.

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Poetry



Komorebi

If I were to wake up the next time I sleep,
I want to wake up with the sun beaming,
crossing my window blinds,
casting shadows in my room.

Komorebi

is what I want to wake up to.

fresh weeds

tree sparrows

singing with purity

and free rein—

free from the little things I can name,

but too many

for me to hold in words.

Even though I don't have trees

to cast their shadows from the sun,

maybe in my dreams

I can wake up

to those branches.

I haven't written like this in a while.

I haven't felt the dense feeling

in my chest—

the one that motivates me to write.

Where it feels thick,

like the trees in my mind.

I want to be honest.

I don't want to wake up for ages.
But if I do,
 let the next time I wake
be when the sun rises
 or sets,
so I can feel almost free,
 in the gentle filter
that shines through.

Sydney Lanton

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Flash Fiction



Can You Imagine,

The small box slips out of your hands before you notice you're shaking, it hits the floor of the bookstore with a hollow clack, sharp enough to turn your stomach as it coincidentally matches the stroke of pain coursing through your head. You watch it skid towards her favorite chair, then stop. You're alone, but your heart keeps racing anyway. Your knees tremble as your fingers move faster than your thoughts, gathering what spills out in the back of your mind, pooling in the void that's been full since your mother left. The last three stickers have peeled loose, falling out of the box, curling like they've been waiting for this exact moment for the entirety of their existence, almost smiling up at you. They are small, insignificant things: ink, glue, paper...yet every time they are around, your mind goes blank except for them. As they flutter to the ground, one sticks to your thumb, wasted. Another clings to your sleeve, disgraceful. The third lands crooked on the page, refusing to lie flat, no matter how hard you strike the pages with a force only contempt could produce, useless. Your stomach swells with heat, your mind goes foggy as though the clouds decided to join you on the ground, all because once again, your hands won't obey your mind, you sit down. A partisan strolls across the window, a Cheshire smile plastered on their face, casual and contained. You feel the room spin at how easy-going they look; you know better than this. You always do.

Your world sharpens and lies open beneath your gaze, its spine as soft as her spiraled hair, broken in the way she broke you, by overuse, by disloyalty. The pages don't match either; some are cardstock, some are tired from age...but none are empty. Each sticker is placed deliberately, measured for spacing, never overlapping, and every one is a small attempt at order. Every sticker marks a

library, a place you traversed, something you borrowed and returned. Proof you were responsible. Honorable. Necessary. You never planned to keep them; you just couldn't throw them away, as that would mean admitting the flashes in time were merely moments...not truths. The biased version of you lives in that world, a perfect world, where you are everything you were meant to be. Where characters who have never lived, live more of a life than you. The stories in which they reside are eternal, they are absolute, they have purpose.

But, your mother's voice floats into your mind as it always does, uninvited and precise, "Be careful choosing to leave pieces of yourself with too many people," she used to say. "When the center of your being revolves around your usefulness to others, it will be too late to find yourself." You remember the way she said it like a fact, not a warning. You understood every word back then; yet, understanding was never the problem. It is similar to how the stickers that once were together, now fill every book you have read, separated from the other parts of themselves; with their purpose solely being to yield completely to others. At this moment, what becomes of the box that's left empty? This question hovers for a second, before drifting into the quiet hollow behind your thoughts, expanding it just a little more.

You slam the diary in your lap shut, and though you no longer can see the last sticker, placed malformly in the very last page, you know exactly where it is. Your feet regain the feeling of the ground as your weight shifts to them; every step sends a jolt of heat through your body. Your hands yearn for the box, the empty box. Your fingers wrap around it as your eyes rove over its surface, as though it's the first time you've laid eyes on it. It feels lighter than it ever has, not because it's empty, but because you've finally noticed the way the cardboard bows inward. The top flap no longer closes itself to the world; it gapes open, the way your mother's coat did when she turned away from you forever. You breathe in the quiet. The box balances precariously on your palm, asking what it's supposed to be now. You want it to tell you anything to give you even an inkling of a purpose. The box isn't empty because you failed to fill it. The box is empty because you have spent years giving yourself away, piece by piece, to characters who cannot leave, to people who did, and to memories that never asked for your permission to stay.

The top slides on, as though it weren't just fighting the corners to remain apart from the rest of itself for the past year: for once, it looks as though it did when you received it from your mother. Your breath feels heavier, but not dangerous. Your body begins to lose its weight as the atmosphere around you

grows louder for the first time, and your place in it feels as fragile as the box. You slip your diary into the shelf gap between two books, one battered and the other pristine, leaving it behind without ceremony. No sticker marks the moment, no witness looks up, the box remains closed. And for the first time, you walk towards a new narrative; though it be your own ending, you no longer take the past stories with you as you finish your own.

Imagine living a life so empty, you become the stories you write, and the stories you write become who you are. How does it feel to have your life confined to words? To have your life dictated by another force you can't control? You are my greatest character, the accumulation of the entirety of my story.

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Critical Essay



You Can't Move West Anymore

For generations, the American identity was created through the lens of individualism, a notion of concrete self-reliance romanticized by Fredrick Jackson Turner's concept of the closing frontier. This mindset defined core values, including service; traditionally understood as "the action of helping or doing work for someone," often interpreted as episodic charity, and community, defined simply as "a unified body of individuals" that share proximity or common interest. While these definitions once were good enough for a geographically expanding nation in the past, they are fundamentally unfit for the globally interconnected and structurally complex modern world of the 21st century. The old values, which stem from transactional goodwill, must be replaced by a new rigorous definition. The American values of community and service, which have historically been viewed as transactional charity, must be redefined for 2025 as reciprocal engagement and structural equity, respectively, creating a necessary discipline where collective action consistently proceeds individual gain.

The first step in this moral pivot requires redefining community from just proximity to reciprocal engagement, or the recognition of a shared vulnerability that connects individuals across local, digital, and global lines alike. The traditional view confines community to "my town," implying that problems that lie outside that geographical boundary do not affect the individual's well-being. This view is insignificant in an age of complex supply chains, global health, and digital impacts. As the early settlers from *Of Plymouth Plantation* demonstrated through their covenant, a true community is built on a "collective fate and mutual

covenant,” where strong alliances are created out of “mutual need,” highlighting the concept that shared vulnerability creates a necessity of shared responsibility. This foundational concept that “I impact you, and you impact me”, must be scaled up to meet 21st century challenges.

The contemporary idea of reciprocal engagement is exemplified in the discourse around environmental justice (EJ), which frames community partnerships not around shared land but shared processes. Researchers Lucero, Marquez, Matsuoka, and Raphael argue in *The Community-Engaged Research Process* that effective partnerships must “transform relationships among researchers and communities to promote EJ together,” requiring partners to “exercise voice and influence” over shared resource (Lucero et al. 18). This concept goes past the dictionary definition of a unified body by focusing on the process itself and mutuality, highlighting that community must be defined by shared vulnerability, not just shared interest. In 2025 for example, if one population suffers from polluted water due to distant industrial policy, that vulnerability eventually compromises the health and stability of the entire interdependent network. The old fixed group which is defined by location must yield to a fluid web of interdependence, where awareness of this shared vulnerability determines our moral response.

This expanded view of community directly demands the redefinition of service from episodic charity to structural equity. The old service model of “transactional charity” such as volunteering an hour or donating a small amount for self-gain is ultimately self-serving, making the giver feel good while leaving the broken system intact. As Cooper (2007) argues, “charity is only needed when a situation of injustice exists” (Thacker 115). By addressing only the symptoms of systematic failure, transactional charity allows the person giving to retain a position of power and avoids asking the question of how to achieve a “just system, where no one holds greater economic, political, racial, gender, or other types of power over another human being.” (Thacker 115). To align our actions with our interconnected reality, service must thus evolve into the uncomfortable work of structural equity.

Real service, or structural equity, requires a more disciplined action aimed at confrontation and transformation. Frederick Douglass, in *The Narrative of the Life of Fredrick Douglass*, provides the ultimate example of this transformative service. His pursuit of literacy was not a charity, but rather a targeted effort to dismantle the root structure of slavery. As his master observed, teaching a slave to read would “forever unfit him to be a slave.” Additionally, Douglass’

confrontation with Mr. Covey was not an act that immediately granted him legal freedom, but it was an act of service that restored his “long-crushed spirit” and fundamentally challenged the plantation’s power structure. This confrontation with Mr. Covey transformed Douglass’s internal condition and created the foundation for future structural change. Structural equity runs on the same principle. It is often uncomfortable, rarely episodic, and its primary goal is not to relieve the immediate suffering but to change the underlying, laws, policies, and power imbalances that created the suffering in the first place.

The necessity of the synergy of reciprocal engagement fueling structural equity is made urgent by the closure of the metaphorical “frontier”. Turner’s thesis defined the frontier as a “safety valve” for American society; if an individual failed or disagreed, they could simply move West, conquering new land and starting fresh. That opportunity, now in the past, promoted individual self-reliance and made correcting existing social systems less urgent as people could just move away. However, as Turner observes, the frontier has officially ended, and the “expansive character of American life” must now turn inward to avoid stagnation. Since we can no longer escape climate change or systematic racism by moving away to a new geographical location, we are forced to recognize our interdependence.

When structural problems are ignored by the individualist mindset, the resulting suffering is private and unseen, demonstrating the failure of the old model. Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* detailed “the problem that has no name,” where suburban women felt “empty somehow... incomplete” because they believed the fault was their own, rather than the “rigid societal structure” of the 1950s that limited their roles. Friedan demonstrates that isolation is the inevitable human response to being trapped by a structural problem. The absence of a physical frontier and the presence of such complex, invisible suffering, force the American moral challenge to shift from conquering lands, to correcting existing systems.

The discipline of the modern age demands that the American citizen abandon the comfortable illusion of self-sufficiency. Redefining community as reciprocal engagement requires that the awareness that every action impacts a broader network of shared vulnerability. Redefining service as structural equity demands the action of targeting root causes, even if the results do not offer the immediate reward of charity emotionally. The time for individualism as the national default setting is over. We must embrace the work of structural change as our primary form of civic duty and engagement, understanding that it is only

when we act collectively to create a truly equitable system that every individual can fully flourish.

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Personal Essay and Memoir



A Tenth Symphony

There's an innocence about a child playing piano— about that sweet nascence and naivety of their silly grins and thoughtless banging. A sprouting virtuoso giggles to themselves as they form their own concerto of discordant tones and shrill cries. Their hands strike and roll across lines of black and white, each note another brilliant experiment. They may know nothing, but it doesn't matter— they need only play from the heart.

You remember visions of one such maestro, one who meticulously folded origami lilies during reading time, who doodled their favorite characters over their math work, who spewed litanies of fun factoids to every idle ear. When you close your eyes, you can still clearly see every scuff and stain in the timeout corner, the cracks webbing through the asphalt around the sitout bench at recess, the uncomfortably firm cushions of the principal's itchy chairs. Memories of sneaking into the basement to plink away at an eggshell white e-piano that laid on the damp concrete floor linger. Your chubby fingers plinked away at keys, your heart writing its opus as they went. Some days, you imagined you were on the grand stage, and you let your heart's song guide your every move. No audience ever heeded your performances, but your smile persisted even as the music faded.

...

"He can be difficult, but I can tell he has a big heart in there somewhere."

You think your teacher said that. You don't quite remember. You don't quite remember their name, their face, the reason, or even the year. All you remember were those words: *big heart*. You remember feeling something for the first time— a strange ache that faintly spread from your very core. There was a new song that

entered your heart, one that refused to follow the rhythm within— a formless sound where only vague voices broke through the din. Your fingers splayed against your chest as it filled with this faint feeling you couldn't quite recognize.

The right name for it wouldn't come off your developing tongue, but it sounded a little like "purpose."

...

A few years passed as languid fog. You continued the repertoire in ignorant reverie, but underneath the carelessness, the something deep in your chest yearned to care. The noise only grew louder.

...

Your mother always scolded you, told you that wounds are best left alone.

"Time is the best healer," she'd chide as she carefully spread a band-aid onto your picked scabs now weeping red. "You need to learn to let things be."

You'd nod and agree, but you could never keep your hands idle. You knew it wasn't getting better unless you could feel it. Scraped knees, scratched arms, bug bites: they all needed your attention— your care. Mindlessly, your nails clawed and dug at maroon crust, never resting until the suffocated insides were unearthed: finally able to breathe the open air. When your brows unfurrowed and the tears subsided, the lingering pain was your reassurance— proof you tried to make things better. This was your self-care.

There is no pleasure without pain.

...

You remember that moment. You remember what that feral, petulant child felt when they began seeking absolution— began repenting for ignorance. Pieces of it all float in memory, remnants of reality that overwhelm you with senseless noise and color until you can remember— remember how your heart found its last opus, its ninth symphony.

You remember it. Hoarse screams, pitiful begging, one bad grade too many, venomous laughter, the pattern of your father's socks, burning disappointment, eavesdropped calls with school counselors, cold tile floor, babbled apologies through shameful tears. Your thoughts were muted by the screams, the cries, the shame. You curled into yourself, you cowered away from the world. You tried to

listen to your heart, but you couldn't hear its comforting song anymore. Even when you covered your ears, you still heard every sound echoed against the walls of your still heart.

Stinging droplets streamed down tracks on your swollen cheeks as you finally made your epiphany— your commandment,

This is the song you must play.

...

You moved shortly after that day. Everything was new: new house, new school, new people, new opportunity. The memory of dry tears and the pained sounds of your heart engraved something into your psyche: this was your chance to be born anew, to let the world forget what you could never. All you had to do was play the piece that repeated in your chest.

It's a strange feeling to have no one recognize you, to exist on a blank slate. You remember cherishing every last second of oblivion. It felt like true freedom. Every accidental slight was a fall further from grace. Every word that came out wrong tore that blissful veil of ignorance more and more. The thought of exposing the person beneath was mortifying. Each time it happened, you heard your heart add the guilty memory to its suite.

Soon, you gained your footing. You found your voice. You discovered your people— your friends. It wasn't long until you understood what part you had to play.

Learning it was easier than expected. Piece by piece you invented your new self—one you're happy with. You learn to listen and care, to pay attention, to try your hardest, to put on a friendly face, to speak the right way, to play the violin, to code, to write, to draw, to express yourself. Whatever it was the world needed, they could find it in you. All it took was staying on the beat, hitting the right notes, following the composition. You never settled, always able to do better, to make the music ever grander. Pain was a sign of hard work. Late nights and frantic hours were but minor side effects. Gone was the quitter, the whiner, the troublemaker: they'd never come back.

You remember hearing something deep in your chest revel at that.

...

The next years are painted by broad strokes in memory. Your mind didn't reserve much space for these years, you suppose. Only small hints of lucidity remain, but you never grieved these years anyways. So long as good standings and pristine grades were kept, so long as the performance didn't stop, you didn't really care about the in-between. In the quiet of night, your heart held its practice recitals. The piece had only gained movements with time, each chronicling your growing regrets. You memorized every one down to the last note— the last haunting word. A bittersweet smile graced your lips. *This is what progress sounds like.*

...

It was on some unnamed evening that you descended into the basement. Some curious digging revealed something long forgotten: an old keyboard, its chipped paint and yellowed keys faintly lit by the setting sun streaming through dirtied windows. Faint memories of late night performances danced in your head— far removed from the menial orchestra recitals you had grown accustomed to. Some part of you longed to give one more performance, to sing as it used to. Your fingers fidgeted awkwardly, hesitantly daring to press a key but never committing. No matter how hard you tried, no music ever came. You couldn't remember the moves. Your heart couldn't remember the moves. It was quiet.

The light died as the sun set beneath the horizon, out of reach.

A resigned sigh hung in the air.

...

High school brought new stakes, but the rhythm didn't change. Hours blurred with the days. Everyone sang your praises. You had countless friends. Your teachers adored you. Your accolades were stunning. Your genius knew no bounds. Your ethic was unparalleled. You were a paragon. You couldn't hear their songs. Your storied heart had its own dirge. You were unbearably awkward. You were too loud. You were carelessly impulsive. You sat idly as the world passed you by— as your competition passed you by. You spoke of potential but had nothing to show for it. You were pathetic. You wished you could silence the lament that never ended.

Late nights were eternal and yet so short. Friends were too close and yet so distant. You were burdened with brilliance yet falling so far behind. You mourn a life that isn't your own. You weep before a journey whose path is clear.

You clench your teeth. You wipe your tears. You take deep breaths. You should be grateful. Be grateful. Be empathetic. Be better. You are better. Follow your heart.

...

It was all muscle memory now: pretending, behaving, achieving, complying. Get out of bed. Wear the right face. Say the right words. Use the right tone. Look in the right places. Pretend you're paying attention. Take those notes you never read. Fake your way through tests. Play that violin you hate so much. Program useless garbage. Write pieces you couldn't care less about. You shouldn't complain— at least you've memorized the song.

You apologize for your inevitable mistakes. You slip in your classes. You fall asleep on desks. You procrastinate. You annoy those who have tolerated you for so long. You become disorganized. You miss deadlines. You grow hungry. You grow distant. You continue the performance even though blood pools at your feet.

Temper yourself like the obedient dog you are. Play the fiddle like the vaudevillian you are. Beg for forgiveness like the sinner you are. Repeat the motions like the automaton you are. Distance yourself like the poor excuse for a son you are. Cry to yourself like the child you are. Give up like the quitter you've always been.

You plug your ears. You scream. The music still echoes in your head. You want it back. Dig into flesh. Peel away skin, tear muscle, snap sinew, break bone. Don't flinch. Don't cry. Revel in this reclamation. You need to feel every last piece eviscerated. Grasp that pulsing mass of flesh. Feel your hands claw into its yielding marbled surface. Remove it. Rip it out. Free it. Listen as those steel strings let out their discordant wails when freed from their useless cage. Run your finger across those bloated arteries like keys; hear as their notes form their depraved sonata. Feel the atrophied muscle, marred and scarred from failure and repetition. Can you still feel the rhythm? Feel that cold, acrid blood snake down its wrought sides and around your shivering arms. You know every last movement, every last measure, every last note by heart— by this god forsaken thing. Even now, you can still hear it, can't you? This is what controls you. This is what you are. Even in death, its siren song still plays. You want it— more than anything else. Can you find it again?

Sweet silence?

...

Heart tissue can never fully heal when wounded— it can never regain its original function. You think about the songs yours once played.

...

There's an upright piano in your living room. You gaze at it between curtains of tears. Its smooth, dark body is coated in thick layers of history. You don't remember when or how your family even got it, yet it sits in its spot— less than a stride away. Could you have missed such a thing? It waits there as it always has, seemingly unbothered by the passing years. You can't remember if you've ever heard it play.

...

Raindrops spatter across a pool of black that seems to stretch as far as the eye can see. Your hand dares to wander to the lid of the keyboard, but it's shaking with such intensity. Your whole body is. Your legs refuse to sit still. Your fingers quiver, bitten by an imperceptible cold. A flutter in your chest refuses to settle. You grasp the smooth, hard edge of the lid, but your hands freeze before they can lift it. Your breathing grows heavy. A blanketing headache fogs your mind. You can't feel your arms, your legs, your hands, your feet. Your chest is hammering so quickly, so nauseatingly. Your hands have found their way to your sternum. The unfamiliar silence is piercing— overwhelming.

You close your eyes and breathe.

You hold onto a memory.

...

There was a little piece you learned for piano when you were younger. You think it was some theme from your favorite game. From nothing, that pure and innocent infatuation gave the music form. Every night, you'd make the descent into the dingy basement to learn it note by note. What was once meaningless entropy soon gave way to a melody you knew by heart.

By heart.

...

Your eyes open. Your body still trembles. There's a migraine that refuses to abate. You still can't feel your hands. A murmur grows in your chest. You press on. Your trembling hands carefully take hold of the lid, its hinges creaking as you reveal the neat lines of ebony and ivory beneath. The ache in your chest grows, but so does a faint melody— one that rests on the cusp of nostalgia and anticipation. Your trembling fingers tentatively press into a key, a shock coursing through

your form when you hear that rich tone ring out into the air. That sound, it's so sweet, so painful, so right. A soft tune begins to dance in the back of your throat. You feel your fingers settle between the keys, just as they have a million times in your memory. You close your eyes. You take a deep breath in and out.

You let your heart sing.

Malachi Leon

Grade 12, Blue Springs South High School

Flash Fiction



Gone

Hospital bed I lay in, unconscious. My vitals beep rhythmically. My mom sits beside me, watching as time passes without me in it.

With a flash of light, I wake up. It was just a dream.

I clench the covers, taking in the darkness of my room. My alarm screams at me, and with a jolt, I get out of bed to start my day.

In class, I sit with my chin in my palm, leaning heavily as my eyes drop. I wake to a scratchy sound. My teacher is staring at me while dragging her nails across the board.

She doesn't stop, even when I cover my ears. She keeps digging her nails into the surface until they begin to loosen.

"Please stop," I plead.

With one final harsh scrape, her nails snap off and leave a trail of blood across the board.

I notice the other students staring at me with expressions that make me wonder if I'm dreaming. The teacher points at me accusingly, and the class follows.

"Detention!" she shrieks like a banshee as every student screams in unison. I run out of the classroom. Every hallway I try to take fills with screaming students advancing toward me. I sprint, searching for an exit or a way to wake up.

I don't wake up. Am I already awake? No. I can't be.

It feels like an eternity in that endless hallway.

I duck into an empty storage room and slam the door shut behind me.

I take a deep breath. That's when I hear a soft cry from the closet.

Slowly, I approach and pull the door open.

A young girl sits inside, tears of blood streaming from her eyes. I fall backward when I see what she's holding: a bunny she has chewed through. She repeats "I'm sorry" over and over.

I rush to the door and yank it open—
—but it's no longer my school.

It's an office: yellow walls, damp carpet, fluorescent lights buzzing overhead.

A bell crashes through the silence, making my ears ring and bleed. It pulses steadily, like a heartbeat.

Then I see it.

A shadow. A demon. Black horns, black skin, black everything—like a walking void, a living black hole trying to swallow me.

It doesn't walk. It *hovers* toward me.

Terrified, I run the opposite direction, taking every left and right turn I can. Each hallway closes off the moment I choose it. Soon, I'm trapped in a corner.

The bell's pulsing grows louder, faster—like a racing heart.

I turn as the shadow closes in. The bell stops. The lights cut out for a single moment.

“It’s your time,” a voice whispers.

The lights go off completely.

And in that last instant, I see black eyes and a skull staring at me.

The bell rings one final time, stretching into an eternity—

I flatlined.

Maya Li

Grade 11, Blue Valley West High School

Poetry



Holdings

I am from stacks signed “Love,”
–the birthday cards,
pinned each year to the pink, laced bulletin board, a remnant
of the time when the hem of my “Blanky” was new to my thumb.

I am from the nicks in the slippery wooden floors, the bones
of grain dug by anxious dogs.
I am from the red-faced trunk of the front yard’s Japanese tree, blushing
stripped bark, and the crushed berry bloodstains on the rock below.
I am from flying American flags on white houses, basketball hoops for
the cul-de-sac’s boys and girls.

I am from Converse high-tops, and wearing them to the ground.
From Mom’s stolen high heels, too-big shoes that fit perfectly.
I am from the hills I would die on and high-strung dinner table debates.
From parents with names made easy to say.
I am from warm steamed buns: swallowed whole after Saturday Chinese school
and never touched in weekday paper sack lunches.

I am from taking the bottom bunk and hospital Pillow Pets,
struggling to breathe on my own.
I am from “stick and bones,” that girl who never grew.
And I am from secret sharing at night, hiding under a blanket to read,
swelling in the blue moon.

Maya Li

Grade 11, Blue Valley West High School

Poetry



baby breath song

barely home from the hospital,
the sun, the list of names that never were, have all checked out.
feeling alone, it's 5:30 a.m. and
she's the only one there when you rise,
hung on the hollow of your neck, breathe in,
breathin' on the rabbit foot pendant.

give her everything she needs,
be her only; giver to another being.
your first promise, can you keep it?

get to know the basics: the pitches of her voice laughing or crying and
the songs your mother sang, singing will never be the same.
and learn the new language, babbling and "i love you."
find that it's easier than you thought.

and when the sun comes back, you'll both sway hand in hand
wind passing through skin to skin. when the music sounds different,
almost like the same heartbeat; rabbit foot sewn to dual souls.

give her everything she needs,
you're her only; giver to her being.
the first promise that you're keepin'.

(give her, giver)
give her everything,
(give her, giver)
you're everything she needs.

Valery Liang

Grade 12, Rolla Senior High School

Educator: Star Hargis

Poetry



Hymn For Stardust

Splintering solas, sold sans some
Sunday storm, sticky-sharp thunder
& cotton-chip sprinkling—sew split the
split sole sky, all skin. Savage salvaged wonder.

Sand shebert, sanguine silence, soft stretched soul;
taffy, swinging sticky-sweet shock. Bruises
tongue red about sprinkle-salt skin &
splotch up sweet-sharp muses.

Valery Liang

Grade 12, Rolla Senior High School

Educator: Star Hargis

Portfolio



Liminal Cartography

Freshwater

Bellamie looks like she's drowning.

I press against the grimy fishtank to watch her more closely: sunflower curls, soft and brilliant; aquarium half-light, muddled, smudging gentle cheekbones. Old glass stains splay across her face, pitch-black bruises or starbursts. For one inane second, I worry she's trapped behind the glass, blotted and tangled among swaying guppy fish. Siren, yardbird; when I exhale, my breath weaves through water and mists over her skin.

A tap. Her heels shuffle on linoleum, scraping. Ah—she's only crouched on the other side of the tank, head tilted and crisp camera in hand. Flash-click. Her dress is neat and white, smothered by the midnight silence.

"Guppies like to eat their young, you know." Her words puncture exit wounds into the darkness. "Lock 'em up, get them hungry ..." Bellamie smiles. "Filial cannibalism. It happens all the time."

I blink. "You're real."

Flame, fan, snap. A wandering guppy tail eclipses her laughing face. "Is there any reason I wouldn't be?"

Yes. "No." *I thought you were a mirage.* "Are you here for the charity gala?" *I think that a lot.* "It's early. Guest speakers don't need to show up for another hour."

Mirages don't talk, though. "Unless you aren't presenting this year?"

Silence—puddles, galas, grocery lines. A decade since we last spoke, Bellamie, and I still see you everywhere.

Bellamie drops her camera. The guppy swims away. “Oh, I’m only here to say hello. Catch a few friends while I’m in the city.”

The camera swings like a pendulum, dark and loose from one creamy neck.

Nikon, it says. Slim and strong. “I see.” *You’re real.* “That’s nice.” *You’re real.*

Bellamie’s real: faint lines framing her eyes. Subtle, surgical smoothness straining her smile. One pale circlet of skin around her left ring finger. A patchwork of things I don’t remember.

“You’re giving the closing speech, aren’t you, Dame Huang?” The glimmer in her eyes is wrung murky by the water.

I let out a huff at the title. Wonder if the emptiness of it feels foreign to her, too.

“Just ‘Colonel’ is fine.” Sleek fish swirl in their dim tank. Scarlet, silver, filthy arrows; the whole place needs a cleansing. “I don’t ... How are the kids?”

“*Colo-nel*. Colonel Huang.” Bellamie rolls the syllables in her mouth. Laughs, then, rough, and pulverizes them with her teeth. “The girls are good. Overseas with their father for the holidays.”

My gaze flickers to her left hand. White flesh, thin line. A graveyard. *Their father.*

“Why’d you quit,” I can’t help but whisper, “if you were going to leave him anyway?”

Bellamie flexes her hand—her ringless, impossible hand—and flips it back and forth beneath the flickering tank lights. Hums. “He left me, actually. I encouraged it; we’re happier like this. But do you expect me to have known that, all the way back then?”

Yes. “No.” Ten years. I fix my stare toward her camera, limp now, barely rattling.

“And now you’re just another media hound.”

Bellamie chuckles, low and free. “I prefer the term ‘war journalist.’”

“Same difference, really.”

“Oh, *no*, Justine, you don’t really think that.” She clicks her tongue. Drops her hands to her sides. “The difference is that I don’t see people as trophies. Lives as numbers. You asked why I quit? Because I couldn’t keep thinking like you do. Colonel.”

Inside the tank, guppies weave quietly, bullet bodies skimming pebbles, strip lights, plastic seaweed. In one corner, a poppy-chested female writhes and splashes like a sparkler, mouth stretching around stale nothingness. Starving, maybe. “The gala’s on the seventh floor,” I say. “A long walk from the basement. I should start heading up.”

“No, you don’t—Justine,” Bellamie says again, as if my name comes easy as breathing, as leaving. “J. Remember when we were seventeen?”

Hunger. Fins. Silence. I don't move an inch.

"It was summer," she continues. "Blazingly blue. The aquarium had just opened. Sticky-hot, even here in the mall basement, all tourists and toddlers and popsicle sludge. We watched whales and pet stingrays, then got drenched by dancing dolphins. At some point, I turned around and told you, *A kiss is the first step of cannibalism. Ever thought about that?*"

The female guppy goes limp. It flutters like a flag to the bottom of the tank, haloed by oxygen, redness, dreaming. Bellamie's eyes are silver as fish bones. "I remember it like yesterday, Justine. *Watch out. I'll eat you whole.* I said that, and you shivered in my arms." In my periphery, tiny scales shine, their glimmer spelling out a dirge, embers wailing into some thick-boned night. "*That's a foregone conclusion*, you'd replied. We had a good laugh over it."

I tear my eyes from hers. It's a violent act. "I was wrong," I say, eventually. "You left before you could consume anything at all."

Bellamie shrugs. "You could have followed me."

Knocked astray, a tiny guppy fry spins downward in the fishtank. It hovers near the female's gaping mouth, cold, stiff, yawning. I watch it intently and don't look away.

Bellamie sighs. "Did you hear that they're demolishing the aquarium next month? For good this time. All I'm saying, Justine, is—"

"You're right." The guppy fry twitches, slinks closer to the female's tomb.

Curious. "No, God, you were right."

"Oh?"

"I should have left. Send me back, and—Captain, Colonel, whatever. I should have followed you instead." I swallow, throat clicking, fins twirling in their death throes. "I would've, Bellamie. I would've."

"Oh."

"I'm homesick, Bella. I've been sick for a decade."

The female fish arches upward in a magnificent burst of crimson. Soundlessly, the guppy fry disappears inside its maw.

"Is it too late, Bella?"

Bellamie looks like she's drowning.

don't swear you know yellow if

i) you've never cried until your coin-slot eyes puffed up
like charcoal clouds, swelling dreams, greasy *youtiao*,

chalkboard

ii) you aren't heir to a country that spits at your mother and mangles your name and demands you go home, go to ghost lotus exonym rattling two milky dumplings (fat) some trophies (dented) (thought crimes) wrong,

in a little rusting red lunchbox. aiya, you can laugh,
your passport says *U.S. Citizen* but the old man in
the bomber jacket at Rite-Aid curls his lips, curls
smoke from rotting teeth and says *chink*, says
exotic qirl — little alien — strange strange thing.

a chap-lipped game of mute wanting.

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unthinkable: yellow.
unthinkable: listen.

Meigui

Meigui was a special girl.

She knew this mostly because of the colors: purple-gold across flailing arms, blue pools peppering ribcages and skimming spinal cords. On good days, Māmā would hold Meigui’s wrists up in the dark, sprint kisses and litanies onto small flesh—*Miss Spiderweb, Miss Starlight.*

Tell me, will you cry tonight?

(No, Mā, I would never.)

Māmā disappeared long ago, but the colors still held true; Meigui was the only girl in all her classes who truly loved them. The other children wept when their feet cracked red and skin broke blue, but she proudly danced biting scarlet and swam bursting marine and never, never once stopped.

For this, every adult exalted Meigui as beautiful.

Lips hugging dust, radio strumming veins. Colors did not serve her wrong. After all, she wore the same coin-slot eyes and coal-dust hair as salon aunties who always lost their jobs and wrinkled uncles who were always spat at on the streets.

But their colors were curses, while Meigui’s was a treasure, some slit-dressed nylon dream; salvation, furious, half-masked by bruises. Swollen and full-bellied.

My doll, my doll, the cameras would coo. Flash, flash. *My perfect porcelain doll.*

Her skin was white gold. It tasted like lotus root and tiny, flowering things.

Bàba’s voice spilled from wooden doors at night, pooled or thundered behind dragon lanterns, glass screens, lonely Hopper replicas:

“Can’t you see it, darling, can’t you? This is it, my American Dream.”

Of course, love, the wilting woman behind the wall would whisper. *Of course she is.*

Sometimes the room would quiet, filled with aching wind and dim moonshine and old, incessant ghosts, and Meigui would dance in peacetime. Other days, though, there would come the querulous sound of flesh striking flesh, two muffled shrieks and a shatter that sent Meigui fleeing.

Left in her wake was silence, a softly bleeding thing.

No, I would never.

At age nine, Meigui’s colors faded.

The kitchen table was stained with turkey bones and swallow corpses. She crouched squat, fragrant, phantom silk and tea-leaf ectoplasm. Black, white; outside, a low sun yawned orange.

“A leading role,” Bàba was telling her. Trace nicotine stung his lips, and marrow dripped slow down a thick, sickly chin. “Like those girls on the billboards, the high-rises. God-girls, yes. Be a god, Meigui. Anyone in this country can do it. You’ll land something big, and the money will never run dry again—that’s what being a god means here, you remember that.”

“I can’t,” Meigui said, and for a split second, the force of Bàba’s fist brought color to her life again.

Eventually, bored, Bàba left the kitchen. But Meigui did not move an inch from the tile, pressed, preyed, insect on a page, calcifying and ghostifying from her stillness and her silence. Somewhere inside pseudo-death, she began to keen, a lurid old howl: *Māmā, Māmā!*

Bàba had killed Meigui the day she was born.

Born Rosetta Sun, a name made for America and therefore a name made for the gods. They meant the same thing, *méiguī*, rose, and a surname passable for something Western, something holy.

Colors, bodies, a peeping black lens. Bàba put such care into creating her, but to what avail? The agent and the cameraman and the rich old god had fallen in love with Meigui, Meigui only—Miss Lotus, Miss Oriental Pearl, Miss Exquisite Ghost haunting every background shot and silent supporting scene.

Rosetta died, Rosetta had never lived in the first place.

White gold, white god? Blasphemy. *Bàba, Bàba. My skin glows yellow. This is all I’ll ever be.*

Yes—but that was no reason for Bàba to forgive her.

At twelve, Bàba burned their house down.

It was only a small death, a little wound—oh, mercy, merci. The fire swallowed swallow bones, popped with duck fat and rice sacks and peeling old Hoppers.

Nighthawks, illuminated, *Chop Suey* crumbling under the sun; spark tongue flame ate memories, devoured shattered plates, red faces, swelling tears, acrid fears, reduced strikes and shouts and sleepless nights into nothing, nothing at all.

Though Rosetta was Meigui now, Bàba had never once spoken to her in Chinese. But Meigui knew to say one thing, knew it like bruises and colorless glass gods: *duìbùqǐ!*

Soot and gasoline, primevalness and suffocation, swirling, raining, powder-strung ash.

Duìbùqǐ, duìbùqǐ.

(Sorry, sorry—sorry. Sorry; sorry, I swear.)

Splintering glass, profound; broken porcelain, skinlike. Some high whine of ambulances, the thump of firemen's axes.

Duìbùqǐ!

(Color! I'll find color again, just watch me. The cameras will love me like a doll. A god.)

And, at last, a household devoured whole by the power of an angry man.

At sixteen, Meigui awoke with lavender staining her neck and navy kissing her spine.

Beside her breathed an angel of gold hair and latched tin eyes. Sweat-slick, unblemished; in sleep, he had no color at all, paltry liquor and pale fury burned away in the night.

Gently, tenderly, Meigui raised her arm. The glass shard tucked snug against her palm kaleidoscoped furiously in dreaming, glimmering in whiskey and rot. When she struck, the angel screamed, and it was the brightest color Meigui had ever seen.

Rosen red, bright bloom. On the nightstand, a brown bottle with a dismembered neck tumbled to the ground. Shatter, shriek—and what a wondrous sound!

Meigui's scars ached sweetly.

At nineteen, Meigui drowned at the bottom of a pill bottle.

For years, her ghost rattled like tablets, like capsules waltzing at the bottom of a bruise-yellow tube. Death throes, unforgotten; Meigui grew to long for rainy nights, when the torrent washed away her phantom's clatter.

Once, beneath a downpour, Meigui began dancing in a storm-lashed alleyway. When three loud things crossed in front of her, Meigui stopped to wonder what they were: gods, men, dolls?

Only long after they left did she realize—girls. They were just girls.

Girls. Laughing girls!

Even when the rain stopped, Meigui kept on dancing through the night.

Māmā, look! she cried between twirls. *Look at their beautiful colors!*

I AM A LIVING EPISTOLARY OF SHAMEFUL THINGS

if *living* is loose as a mother's embrace about the bone-pink neck of her
seventhborn daughter —
loose as a missionary's hand threading the knobbly fingers of some
polyethylene-slick toddler
nobody. 无名 they might call her nameless. ending. terminarch tarpan, ibex,
quagga, white
rhinoceros, living like nooses in witch pyres and high school gyms,
shy stained soot and bubblegum, old dog dead decades
past & direly deriving ghosts. but anyhow
in my dreams I am emperor inside a bathtub. spigots shriek; I draw water up my
knees; it kisses my
bones and wrinkles ruptured keratin. two elbows sink down. the blade will
glisten too dull to
commit any unmaking, armageddon, rebirth, creation so obstinate to the last, I'll
sigh, and
hack pocketknife at redwood until slender cranes of flesh splice twin wrists.
arteries
whisper lithely and collapse like a grandfather; pain sells. sprouts old wings and
laps at the sun.
forget the bathtubs. blunt purple safety scissors haloed by grimy glue &
dear Māmā, you've one green roll of Scotch Magic Tape, big plastic teeth &
given all that I need: a pink lighter, dated 1997, bright bought born in China &
I am a salesman, magic tape, rejection letters, 5th stall on a 3rd-floor school
old kiosk soul, restroom. crying spots, an artist the same way a dog is a
dolphin
glut-god-ghost — & a daughter the same way slit eyes, smiling, are sickle moons,
smiling.
a pittance: I have run away.

A Treatise in Unbecoming

In another life, I find Daisy dead in the motel bathtub, milky limbs haloed by sweet porcelain grime. The remnants of a butterscotch milkshake streak down her sweetheart neckline, gold, red, drop-waist.

I would scream, probably, scream until my knees gave out and the police never came. By then, Daisy's pretty white hands would look like two albino prunes, sanguine pits and pithy flesh peeling straight off the bone. In the wet silence, I'd stare into her basalt eyes and give a hearty shrug—*Well! It's a shame you're gone, but we had such a good run, didn't we? Nebraska was so fun, Vegas was infinite. You've lived long enough by anybody's standards.*

Of course, in this hypothetical reality, her corpse would say nothing back. Wrinkled, bloated, rotting; I'd watch on, throat throbbing and bleeding, and wait for the weight of ruined things to stink up the ratty bathroom. I don't think I would ever get up again.

In yet another life, we barely know each other—one-time math-class rivals, grit to paper in junior-year Calculus. Another. I run off with the grocer's son and never even meet her. Another. Amid a spitting fight with her mother, she finds herself pushed down the staircase a bit too hard—floating, flying, skull knocking on wood, not dead but not really living.

As it is, in this incarnation, I'm simply sitting next to Daisy on the 3 AM train to nowhere. My heels are propped on her brown-leather travelling case. The cabin smells like cheap cigarettes, like summertime, sod, steel and dollar bills.

It's chilly, sopping wet. Under the muggy window, my paisley-blue seat scratches me through my blouse, roughly threadbare. "I'm cold," I grouse. "It's June. Why am I cold?"

"You're scared," Daisy decides. She inspects her sleek yellow bob in the fogged-up glass, tungsten eyes shimmering flat on pitch, bitter dark. "Why the hell are you scared? It's not like this is your first time taking public transportation."

Something in the crumple of my lips gives it away. She groans, tossing her head back. "Oh, no. This is your first time, isn't it? Christ, no wonder, Fiona. No wonder." Daisy takes a moment to recuperate, fluffing out her hair this way and that. She peers critically at the spinning, falling stars. "Feet off my suitcase. And hand me my lipstick. Fuschia, the off-gold tube."

I comply, pinching her arm while I'm at it. Gooseflesh pebbles down her skin like the spiky feet of a thousand fleeing soldiers, and I watch the bumps fade back away until the intercom crackles and the train begins to rattle.

"I wonder what Dr. Larson thinks of me." The humid night rushes past quicker, quicker, a buzz of stars and sickle moonlight broken by pines and shuddering gravel. "She'll have found my note by now, won't she?"

Daisy crinkles her fine, thin brows. "Why do you care? We're headed nowhere. We'll never see her again."

My skirt tangles around my thighs, black and heavy as a witching hour. Outside, the world trembles, hurtling on, on, on. "I guess you're right."

"I always am."

Yes, Daisy was usually right. I learned this for the first time at thirteen years old, back when she was all the town could talk about: *Daisy Song is getting married, haven't you heard? Hitched to an Englishman, surely you've seen the pictures—big terrible spectacles, a reedy little oil heir. Jane Arnold told me he's already eighteen. Pity? You asked if I pity her! Good riddance, never, I think it serves her right.*

The sun is round and white like a split knucklebone, high and horribly sad in the pale afternoon sky. My skirt is pink, long, meandering, tall and stiff against a stagnant summer Saturday. The auditorium is cramped, wooden, filled, all tweed suits and thick, thick eyeglasses.

"On behalf of the Teen Forensic League and Student Organization for Greater Good," I say, "I stand before you, Mr. Mayor, and you, Councilmen, to address the grievous issue of child marriage plaguing our localities ... "

I haven't even met Daisy yet, but I'm thinking of her as I recite. She's nebulous, in my mind, a prim little ghost with old rumors for legs and gossip sticking out her hair. An engagement ring bleats away on her left hand, shiny, silver, oversized, blown-up diamond shining soft on hazy martyr-flesh.

"One-hundred fifty-seven underage elopements this year alone. The numbers speak for themselves. We urge you, sirs, to imple—" I stumble and curse my swollen yellow tongue. "To *implement* stronger cautionary measures and curricula within our schools. We suggest the following steps: one, hosting ... "

It must be strong, I conclude, that hand with that big ring. Caged in silver for all the world to see; Daisy must be so much bigger than me. I would have crumbled. I would have died.

I finish the speech with a strangled thank-you and sprint off to the restroom. *Oh, God—the little toilet I hunch over is filthy and rust-stained, but what can I do—they're going to kick me out of the club, that was the worst speech anybody's given in the history of the world.*

"Do you need a hand?" somebody asks.

I turn slowly. Buttercup-yellow drop-waist dress, pinched, lacy flats. The stranger is slender: thin legs, high voice.

"Oh, I'm perfectly fine," I tell her. "Just dropped my hairpin. I don't think I want to find it anymore, though. The ground's too dirty. Another second of kneeling and my skirt might ..."

A hand flutters down onto my left shoulder. "Don't throw up," the stranger says. "It's unbecoming."

"I know." I swallow, stand, brush off my dress. "I won't."

After I rinse my hands and mouth, the girl tugs a silver pin out of her blonde curls. It's the same color as her eyes, shot through with steel or moondust. "Here." She holds it out to me, then giggles at my blank stare. Glossy-lipped, open-toothed. "Didn't you say you dropped yours?"

"Oh." Swampy red creeps up my face. "Right. Thank you."

She shrugs and watches me stick the pin at random into my bleached waterfall of hair. "I watched your speech. Thought it was great." I raise an eyebrow—*oh, don't lie through your teeth, sister*—and she continues, "I can see you making debate captain once Ackermann graduates."

"You go to the high school, then?" I stick a hand out, cool flesh and tap water and peeling pink varnish. "I'm Fiona. I'll be a freshman soon."

"Daisy," she returns, palm tapping against mine. "Daisy Song."

"Sorry?" To my horror, the word slinks out in a strangled exhalation, one loose breath bursting away from its pink tissue cage.

She smiles, and I swear I see something awful streak across her face, cruel, chafing, barely-contained. It's a grisly, vindictive beast, just incrementally distorted—vengeance, ripe or fleshy. *The grievous issue of child marriage*. Flash, gone; I'm a butterfly spasming under the needles of her steel eyes, limp wings asunder, cold glass on one side and demise on the other.

"Sorry," I whisper again.

"You're wearing too much eyeliner," Daisy Song says. "Hey, meet me for ice cream at five PM tomorrow, okay? Don't worry, I'll pay."

Then she skips out the restroom in her skinny, lacy flats, and, as the door flaps closed behind her, I realize there's no ring on Daisy's finger at all.

Downtown is a knot of drooping wires and splintered, rolling streets, empty sidewalks and damp July trees. There's only one ice cream parlor in town, squatting snug and wooden on a warm block corner. Inside, its guts smell like cold sugar, like sleeping and powdered things.

It's four fifty-five on the dot. My plaid skirt is bunched against the booth bench under me. I pick at peeling bits of burgundy cushion. I think I'm going insane. Five minutes later, when Daisy skips inside, I look up and immediately rasp, "I'm so sorry." Oh, she hasn't even sat down yet. "It's our annual debate topic—matrimony, I mean, and the age of majority—and we thought the speech would be a good exercise to open the year—"

"Shush." Daisy settles down across from me and flicks invisible dust off her billowy satin blouse. "It's my birthday, you know."

I pause, lips clasped around my rambling penance. Mid-sentence, I swallow my words. "Happy birthday, Daisy Song."

"*Suh-own*," she says. "It's ethnic. My father was from Indochina."

I blink. "*Suh-own*. Oh. I couldn't tell." Her perfume smells like burst roses, brilliantly dying things. "My mom is Oriental," I offer. "Born in Macau."

Daisy hums, flaps her hand and orders two butterscotch shakes. I falter at the presumption but don't try to stop her.

"I can pay for both of us," I say, once the waiter is gone. "Consider it a birthday gift."

Daisy's laugh is like windchimes, silver flutes and conch-shell birds. "It's my mother's money. I want to waste it. *That'll* be my birthday gift." Her curls cascade, shine and bob and shake. "I'm trying to burn it all, you know. Oh, the *look* on her face when she finds out!"

When our drinks come, I sip sedately and sneak glances at her hands out of the corner of my eye. Short nails, cream gloss. Long, thin joints. Bare.

"It's in my pocket," Daisy says, fluttering her fingers. Her grin is lean and vicious.

"I never wear my ring unless my mother's around."

Butterscotch bursts like a thick old star against my teeth, greasy butterfly falling heavy, leaden, sweet. "Sorry for staring."

"It's whatever." She pinches her maraschino cherry between two sun-white nails, swirling and plucking until sticky red brine drips down, down, away. "It's not happening until I'm eighteen. I try not to think about it."

"I won't mention it anymore," I promise. Malt and syrup run dense down my throat, cloying. Hefty or strange.

"You're wearing too much eyeliner," she tells me again. "And that dye job is atrocious. You'd look so much better with your natural hair."

I take a loose blonde lock between my fingers and tug. "I think my makeup's perfectly fine." Sugar still simmers against my lips as I distort them into a frown.

"Not all of us pass for white, Daisy."

She huffs. "White is a farce. You'll come around eventually."

I finish my shake and let Daisy pay. She stands to leave first.

"Noon at the park swings tomorrow, okay?" She grins, all butterscotch and teeth.

"I'm sure you know the place."

"Alright," I reply. *I'm crazy*, I think.

Around us, the train jostles and cries, whistling eastward into the night. The rain has stopped. Dawn will come soon. It's cold, keening, an aching linear soul-song.

"You know, the first time I met you," Daisy whispers, "I wanted to *eviscerate* you. Mangle you up. Spit you out on the bathroom floor, all shiny and red."

"And now?" I ask.

"I like you too much to destroy you now," Daisy says. "I like you quite a lot, Fiona." Back in town, back forever ago, we're knee-deep into autumn, wind whipping in our faces and swing chains rattling up, down, up around us.

"I think I'm going to drop out," Daisy declares. The world flickers and flashes, burning red, placid blue, butterscotch yellow.

In the distance, a flock of geese launch into the setting sky, scattering lakewater and feathers and honking bits of sunlight. I kick my feet up. "Why? I thought things were going fine."

"Exactly. It's easy. It's boring." Daisy lets her arms fly free and rushes back and forth through the dusk, fingertips skimming the twilight, creaking steel. "I only have two years left to live. I can't spend them locked up in some classroom. I want to run away, Fiona. I want to exist."

I breathe in chilly loam, crisp carotenoids and moaning breeze. "We'll have to elect a new student council president." Stray equations and textbook dust swirl through my bones. "I think I'll miss you. If you really run away, I mean."

Daisy's little Dachshund plodders at our feet. Eventually, she leaps off her swing and picks the old dog up, scratching behind its dark, tired ears. "Run away with me, then. You and me—wouldn't that be fun?"

I stroke the dog absently, long warm flesh-parcel of damp, dark fur. "I can't," I say. "I have a Calculus test tomorrow."

Daisy sighs. "Oh, you'll come around eventually."

Winter, spring, nothing at all.

Dad is away again; the house squats loud and empty. I'm sprawled on the third-floor balcony: plywood, ink, derivatives, a yawning yellow textbook. Daisy dances in pin heels on the thin blue bannister, skirt flaring out as she steps in

circles, circles, circles. She hurls her head back toward the bright cold sky and laughs, curls flying.

"When's your father returning to town?" A bruise shines at her hip. Nylon and cool wool swallow it. "I quite like it here. I think I want to stay forever."

I flip a crinkled page, black lines crawling up into deep blue morning. "It'll be a while. He's on business in Europe." Daisy's dog whines, nosing against the smooth glass door. "But he's always going away. Never coming back. So you won't have to leave for some time."

"Won't you visit your mother sometime soon? I heard the asylum is closing down in May. Getting transferred to the general hospital will surely be a shock for her."

"She'll die before that can happen. Spleen infection—I got the letter last week. She can't fight it off." I scowl. "Come back down, Daisy. You're going to fall off." She shrugs. "Well, I need to kill something."

"Kill once and you'll never be able to stop," I say. "Didn't your father die from addiction?"

"Addict. Fanatic. There are worse things to be." Daisy grins, vicious, as her heels hit hardwood. "Would you like to be my first victim, Fiona?"

I contemplate it. "Maybe tomorrow. I have to finish Dr. Larson's homework first."

"Then how about the grocer's son? That odd one, always giving you those doe eyes."

"Go let your dog downstairs, Daisy. It's about to break the door down."

She huffs. "You'll come around eventually."

Daisy's dog dies next autumn. Daisy cuts her hair short and, briefly, disappears. I kiss the grocer's son. An engagement ring turns up in the cafeteria dumpster.

Dad comes home for a day and takes my mother's body away.

Dr. Larson stops me in the halls. "How's your friend?"

"Well enough," I say. "She's living in a motel on the edge of town, and—" I make sure to emphasize this—"she's *living*."

"I miss having her in Calculus," Dr. Larson says. "Tell her that we'd love to have her back."

"Will do," I promise, and walk away, stirring locker room spit and gum-stain grout in my wake. Afternoon stretches awful. Concrete rumbles, cold, bleach-boned.

"He's no good for you," Daisy's telling me. Smoke curls out her teeth. "That stupid, woebegone boy."

"He makes me happy." I frown up at the tree where she perches, burly boughs and frilled skirt and burnt-green leaves.

“You don’t know what happiness is.” Daisy swings her legs and drinks in some sun. “Do I make you happy, Fiona?”

“Yes, but it’s different.”

“Why?”

Willows, creekbeds, crushed weeds and canoe rot. Dandelions springing swollen and wild. “I don’t know. Just is.”

“The desert in Africa is eating up the cities,” Daisy says, apropos of nothing.

“Dust teeth. Erosion. But we’ll make it out of here, Fiona, we will. This town won’t swallow us whole.”

“I’m happy here,” I say.

“You don’t know what happiness is. But you’ll come around eventually.”

3 AM, summer before senior year. Night stretches thick and warm over the ugly, creaking motel. My wet fist kisses flimsy yellow wood, over and over.

Bang. “Daisy, he broke my heart.” *Bang, bang.* “You were right, Daisy; you were always right.” *Bang!* “Open the door, Daisy. Let’s run away together.”

After some minutes or lifetimes, once Daisy lets me in, I fall into her arms and weep. In the tiny washroom, she rinses my tears and eyeliner away. The cheap dye runs out my hair.

Moments before dawnrise, we sneak into the grocery store and uncap every bottle of milk on the shelves. Splash, spill, thunderstorm; rivers of frothing white cascade over the carpeting, curling up to cake and curdle.

In the static dark, flickering cooler strip lights haloing my pitch-black hair, I smash a bottle against the ground and laugh, laugh, laugh.

“They’ll find us, Daisy.” I’m still wheezing, gasping, eyes scrunched up in madness or mirth. “The cops. The mayor. Dr. Larson. Your mother—oh, *God*, what do we do about your mother?”

“I guess we’ll just have to disappear.” Daisy smiles. “So let’s go, Fiona. Let’s go nowhere.”

Early morning, gentle gold. Heat, cornfields, dusty old wood. My ribs rattle. Somebody’s shaking my shoulder.

“Miss? Miss? You’ve reached your destination.” A stewardess leans over me, brows scrunched softly. “You’re travelling rather light, miss. Do you have somebody to pick you up?”

My cheek presses against the warm scratched window. Low sky shines slowly over my stiff, wrinkled muscles. Butterscotch. The cabin is empty. The world’s half-quiet. I’m alone.

I smile, shaking my head. "I'm just waiting for my friend; she'll come around eventually."

Oh, I lied.

By now, Daisy's been dead for lifetimes.

Perdition/Filial Cannibalism

There's some shame to be found, ostensibly, in the way my mother squats rotting over the kitchen table, sad-boned and stump-eyed, having just bumped me from my seat in an old surging storm of hips. Squat. Her worn shirt sticks its terracotta tongue out the chaste lips meant to contain it—an argyle cage gone loose, its threadbare ward run away nowhere long before marriage. And only once did she put on lipstick, at her husband's third cousin's urging, July in Shanghai like a lychee shell, swollen and red as one paternal bruise. *Am I pretty?* she asked me, but I thought she looked like a bad sun, like a market gone burst and bust. Bony palms, which had only been dying for seven or such years, sought out pasty squat legs: lumpy with veins, sticking out cargo pants sticking out slender hips sticking out a young-dead goddess gone wrong, shot in the cradle by a querulous quick time-traveler who took offense to her glory, her splendid bramble crown of ill-fed cobweb gurgles. Back beneath the kitchen light's sputtering night stare she is only a woman. There's some shame to be found, ostensibly, in the way her younger brother was born, neck-deep at midnight on the living room sofa, ostentatiously illegal because she is only a woman. And I want to say, Māmā, do you remember why the kitchen light is dying? Because you got mad at good ghosts again, three years ago today, put your pink slippers through chains & bulbs & lampshades, freed one filament and raged wrath at the other. So it is a kicked dog now, maybe matted or blonde, a wannabe shadow of a nuclear shadow god. Ma, I think by all reasonable estimates I am already dead. (And if I'm wrong, then that's a net negative; as you already know, everybody wishes it were so.) You, squat at the kitchen table, still remember that cotangent on the unit circle is x divided by y . You, housewife of a billion years, can still name each of Empress Wu Zetian's closest courtiers by heart, still know that hydrocarbon triple bonds are shorter but stronger than

whatever's found in ethane, than whatever corset or corpse or hill
or husband cries hefty tonight. You are only a woman. There's some
shame to be found, ostensibly, in this manner of things, but in the
second grade, before I ever did anything, Luke from gym class
told me I'm going to hell anyway. Māmā, did you know—I'm
going to hell anyway.

Valery Liang

Grade 12, Rolla Senior High School

Educator: Star Hargis

Poetry



Dear Mister Klansman

Do your legs wilt on Sundays, when
You're haunting the intersection of St.
James and Sycamore Ave.? Sometimes
Old leaves droop and old robes rattle
Free and I see your red Nike sneakers
Peeking out as we drive past. Good
Morning, goodbye. Exhaust spits
Into the crosses on your pamphlets,
They swell buglike, bodylike, all
Bugs were bodies once, crumple little
And strange. Contrails crack over
Main Street, rust brick telegraph line,
2 dented hoops hollow with nets like
Ash and nets like nooses, ruin ruined
Ruination—est. 1933 TVA. You ran
Inside this gym once, possibly, chipped
A tooth on lacquer and tasted wrists,
Sweat, soles, some odd trace ketamine.
Braid them, Rapunzel, up in her cage:
Chemtrails, half-court, est. 1933 TVA.
My eyes were forged inside knife-slits
And coin-slots, premade gentle gold,
But you must cut your own chinks from
That stale white armor. Mimicry. Shall
I pity you? The wood lies riotous, the

Deer rush home ripe, beech knob aspen
Flood anguished asphalt. I-44 to nowhere,
Nowhere, nowhere. Teeth, butterscotch,
Flapper water pie, if my best friend sits
Shotgun you'll give her a pamphlet but
Not me. I am not worthy of hate, I am not
Worthy of hating, do I hate you more than
You hate me? Bible Belt babbles, only, bite
Birch bitter bank. Blank. Mister Klansman,
Give me a pamphlet and I'll give you a
Dream; give me your pamphlet, or give
Me your robe. Good morning, goodbye.
Do your legs wilt? Sincerely,

Jenna Lin

Grade 10, Rock Bridge Senior High School

Poetry



We Watch The Locals Infest the Beach

with our feet in the water.
The ocean mouthing at our shins
like a needy lover, rushing between our
calves to fill a gap begging
for extinction. In this outburst of light, I know
I will freckle. In this darling weather, families run
down into the water's white teeth
like gulls with an appetite to catch. I watch
you watch hungry dogs lap at cockles,
their fur lush with salt and sun,
their tongues like sea glass in their
mouths, glistening. Desire brines the bay
and soothes our hearts into grains
of sand. The process of erosion: dedication
and something to wish for. Nearby, a radio
melts through a song I can't
recognize. Next to me, you drag the sound
through your teeth and press your
salt-slick leg to mine, singing.

Jenna Lin

Grade 10, Rock Bridge Senior High School

Poetry



Months

May slides in bulging
with loss. Heavy
like the way the Earth plumps
after rain, unable to let go of
all that water.

I didn't expect it.
To think that absence
would take up

so much space. In April,
which was hollow,
I dreamt more than I slept. I wandered
my way through the weeks like that
cold gale that once blitzed
through your shirt, making
you shriek. I studied graphs depicting
deficit, photographs of the blue horizon,

my blown-out tire, a memory
of your mouth sounding
the syllables of my name—lessons
in curvature. Then, spring
seemed less like a season
and more like a measure
of distance. Now, I pace

circles around dogwood trees

in full bloom and wonder
how many days I would have to
wane through to reach you.
Before I learned about the Earth's
tilted axis, I thought that loss would bring
a sense of clarity, that it would
lead to its own language.
That the presence of an absence

was still a presence. But now
I know the orbit of our planet
is elliptical. Some paths take
no meaning, like storms that thrash
painfully only to wipe the world
clean. Some paths lead to no
conclusion but summer.
June. I shape my mouth around

that word, stopping at *joo*—
just to imitate fullness, make my
lips round. A ring of wetness,
that perfect circle. Like you
saying my name. In my mind,
I revive that memory. I let go of
all that water. I let this season
carry your voice like one last

crash of thunder, that last
drop of rain. So I can leave
this month the same way
I entered it—
calling your name back
to no one.

Jenna Lin

Grade 10, Rock Bridge Senior High School

Poetry



How to Pioneer Bethel Park

The exact length around the lake
can be measured by heartbeats,
the hot pulse of sun trapped in concrete
trapped within yourself.
Watch the late-day bikers
kick up lazy clouds of
dust ahead of you.
The weathered fishermen.
The limit for fishing,
though you can never remember how many lives
you can keep and how many lives
you have to learn to let go of.
Even that indolent dog trailing its owner's step
knows of your pendulum arms,
your lanky gait, the dark weight
of your gaze sweeping over the lake.
Even the swans at the dock
know the sweet roundness of saying your name.
That old oak your oak
before you knew yourself.
These branches built
for your hands and knees.
This entire world yours, like
a dream you must have dreamt,
just a small world for you to pass through.

Shu-Hao Liu

Grade 9, John Burroughs School

Educator: Robert Bloch

Speculative Fiction



The Weight of Weightless Joy

Morning in the city of Arcadia always started with the sound of electronic buzzing. The neon signs on the mesmerizing blue skyscrapers shone brightly, and everyone was out commuting, through the powerful maglev subway system. Automated voices that advertised different services and products buzzed constantly. A long line formed behind a personalized AI coffee maker. Everyone wore neo-tunics, which erased the need for people to endure different weathers. All of this to keep people happy. To keep them weightless.

John, a harmony engineer, arrived at work every day using the maglev subway. He had to travel from a brand new block of apartments on Arcadia's outskirts into the heart of the city. With the bike dating from the Old Age that John kept in an abandoned warehouse, the journey took well over an hour, but the maglev subway shortened it to ten minutes.

The company John worked at was Cadia, a conglomerate that was responsible for most of Arcadia's infrastructure, from the food services, to the research labs and the maglev subway. John's job was to make sure these things work harmonically, hence the term "harmony engineer". Even though the advanced AI that Cadia used handled most of the heavy-lifting, John still had to make sure that everything was working flawlessly.

"How's it going, John?" asked Sarah, another harmony engineer.

"Good," answered John.

As John sat down at his desk, an alert popped up on his screen. "You are due for an emotional reset", it said.

John was a bit surprised. He knew it was true, though. Recently, he had become a little sad.

It all started with the book that he discovered while biking. It was in the snow, half-hidden. The book was made of leather, and looked extremely old. In fact, the cover was close to being detached from the book. John had never seen a book before. They were all taken to the Storage Center. Full of bias, books. Every author has bias. And bias leads to inequality. The very thing Arcadia was created to get rid of. But John got curious. He knew, however, that it was dangerous to have dangerous ideas in his head. It would impact his productivity, make him less happy...but, he'd wanted to find out for himself. Not *all* books could be that bad, he thought. The government and Cadia must have exaggerated the impacts of books. At the same time, he felt guilty, because he didn't think anyone else in Arcadia had seen a book before. After deliberating, he took it home. He found his hands trembling and sweating as he was about to open a book. What if the security service caught him? What if the book caused some unknown effect?

John took a deep breath, and opened the book. When he started reading, he couldn't put it down, even though he didn't understand a word (the title was "*La bosse de Notre-Dame*"). He liked the rhythm, though. And the smell of the book. It all felt different from what he normally experienced when going about his daily life. In the end, John became sad because he wanted to know what was in the book, but obviously, Cadia's AI system wouldn't help him translate it. Instead, it probably would've dispatched the security service to acquire the book and take it to the Storage Center.

The emotional monitors at Cadia must have detected John's lingering emotions. Such emotions made a person unproductive. Dr. Christopher Hicks, one of the founders of Arcadia, based his life's work off of it. He created a method to suppress emotions such as sadness, anger, and others that might make a person unproductive, and named it the "emotional reset". This method was extremely complex, but effective. It's how Arcadia became the great city it was.

John showed the alert to his boss, who immediately granted John a day's leave. Such was necessary, as the emotional reset takes a full day to work.

In order to get to the Happiness Center, where the emotional reset takes place, John had to call for an escort by the security service. Soon, a black, windowless car arrived. Out of it stepped several officers. They wore full gear: armor, a complete face and head-covering helmet and visor, and carried pistols and batons.

"Please get in," said one of the officers.

John obliged. Inside was another woman, in her 20s. She was blonde, tall, and pretty, like how a plastic flower is pretty; perfectly still, perfectly empty. Her

hair flowed naturally, and she wore a black dress that was somewhat reminiscent of the officers' uniforms. John suddenly felt a surge of emotion. It was mixed, some guilt, some desire, even some innocence. It was uncontrollable. He looked away from the woman, and thought about the book. That was all he did throughout his journey to the Happiness Center: focusing on the book. But he still felt gravitation towards the woman. In a way, he thought, the woman was very much like the book. Forbidden, but inspires curiosity. Something John had to make up his mind about.

The Happiness Center was a large, grey building, with a fence and barbed wire surrounding it. Not that John saw it; the car in which he arrived was windowless. But he'd seen photos. It looked as though an abandoned factory from the Old Age had been renovated and polished, while preserving the original, dull look.

As the car doors opened, he and the woman were led into a sterile, white light.

"Sir, if you will accompany me to the Capsules," said an attendant. John nodded. He followed the attendant through the reception, into the Capsule Section. The Capsule was where the emotional reset happened. During the emotional reset, the person was completely knocked out, and made it possible for changes to their mind to happen. As Dr. Hicks famously said: "That which we do comes from what we allow ourselves to do".

John woke up in a cozy room, full of couches and recliners. His head was spinning. His first thought was that everything was beautiful, from the white flowers to the grey ceiling. But he suddenly noticed something. Everyone was smiling constantly. It was as though they had been programmed to smile, without the ability to not smile. It felt weird to him; he hadn't thought of it before. Additionally, everything fell into three colors: white, grey, and black. Unlike the rest of Arcadia, the Happiness Center did not have a variety of colors. This made John uneasy, and made it harder for him to smile, but he smiled anyway to avoid getting another emotional reset.

As he was about to go to bed that day, he saw a corner of the book that he'd kept under the bed, in case the security service came searching for the reason why he felt emotional turbulence, as they often did. John picked up the book. Then, he remembered it all. He remembered the language he did not know, the taboo of reading a book, his curiosity, his sadness at not being able to understand what the book said, and his joy at discovering something in which he'd never encountered before.

John realized that this was what happiness really is. Not the kind that they give you at the Happiness Center, but the real kind. The kind that only true human experience could provide.

He knew that other city-states would probably contain people that understood the language in the book. And a whole lot more things that he did not understand yet. People who felt a different form of happiness than he did.

John sighed. He loved being a harmony engineer; it was a crucial job. But he knew that he wanted more than Arcadia. He'd always wondered what the world was like. He was told that it was a violent place, full of inequality. He'd been told that people outside of Arcadia, people who did not live in city-states governed by the Hicks Protocol, the invention of Dr. Hicks, were not happy. They couldn't stabilize their emotions, they couldn't live in harmony, and overall, could not live like the citizens of Arcadia did.

That night, John took his bike and rode off in the direction of New York City. He'd always been told that it was one of the most unhappy city-states that existed. But he thought that it was where he was going to start his journey.

It took two full days to reach New York City with his bike. During the journey, John saw some deserted city-states, with crumbling buildings that pierced into the sky. John had to use the abandoned building as shelter during the night, and he salvaged food from a deserted grocery store that he had never seen before. His Old Age bike had its tires shredded against the debris-covered ground of the forsaken city-state. John had no other choice but to walk the final distance. But his journey made him tired, as he was used to the speed of the maglev subway. Nevertheless, the fatigue seemed truthful, as if the forgotten past of the Old Age was speaking to him.

The city-state of New York City was full of people heading to work. There was even a subway, loudly passing by overhead. Just like Arcadia, John thought. But this time, he noticed people with a wide variety of emotions. Some were angry (like the man who was shouting into his phone), some sad (a woman who looked like the one he met on the way to the Happiness Center was sobbing on a bench), and some lonely (a beggar stared emptily into the passing crowd), and some happy (but not exactly the kind John saw in Arcadia). Where John came from, there wouldn't be any angry and sad people; they would get an emotional reset immediately. That was part of what a harmony engineer did. However, John felt that the atmosphere, full of different emotions, was harmonic. Not the "harmony" of Arcadia, where people all felt the same. These people were more...real. John had not been a harmony engineer all along. He had been a

silence engineer, depriving people of emotion. John then passed by a bookshop. He decided to go in, and see if he can figure out what the book he discovered was about.

“Could you translate this for me?” John asked the bookshop owner, carefully handing him the old, leather book. He didn’t know if the bookshop owner knew the translation. But, it was worth a try.

“Yes. Ah, this must be the ‘Hunchback of Notre Dame’. Written in 1831 by Victor Hugo.”

“Which language was it written in?”

“French.”

“Hmm. Where is that spoken?”

“In France, son. Wait, have you never heard of France?” asked the bookshop owner suspiciously.

“No,” John answered. He cracked a small smile. The people of Arcadia will never know what France is. But now, he did.

“Can you explain what the book is about?” asked John.

The bookshop owner nodded.

“The book was about a man who didn’t match the standards of “beauty”, but who was spiritually pure,” said the bookshop owner.

John thought about Arcadia, with its neon skyscrapers, maglev subway, and its “happy” people. He finally realized that Arcadia was the opposite of Quasimodo. Perfect on the outside, but hollow on the inside. From the moment that John discovered the book, he was choosing the jagged suffering in knowledge over the the emptiness of perfect joy.

As he stepped back into the sun, John felt its warmth deep inside, and appreciated it for the first time.

To know what happiness truly is, felt and lived, is a form of happiness itself. The ultimate form.

Shelby Lombardo

Grade 11, John Burroughs School

Educator: Shannon Koropchak

Flash Fiction



Training Wheels

I grip the handlebars and sprint across the length of our yard, trying to balance the bike and stay on my feet at the same time.

“Hold on tight!” I shout, already out of breath. I see Lydia’s little hands squeeze the handlebars as they wobble left and right, unsteady under the grasp of her shaking arms. How long we have been working at it or how many times we have attempted, I can not say. But I know we are on the cusp of a breakthrough, so I do not give the hours and trials a second thought. With each attempt, Lydia comes closer and closer to holding steady on her own, and that is all that matters.

The trees and deck fly by as I continue to sprint through the grass, the world a green blur as I run past. Out of the corner of my eye, I can see my parents and two other sisters sitting on the deck, waiting in anticipation of the moment when I let go. Their cheers fill the yard, just as loud as they had been an hour ago. Lydia’s cheerleaders stay enthusiastic even as the attempts drag on.

As I continue to run, all that exists in the world is Lydia and I, joined together in our shared goal. Our only thought, our only priority, is getting her to balance on the bike by herself. Slowly, with sweat dripping down my back and my aching legs taking long strides beneath me, I uncurl my fingers from the handlebars. Ever so slightly, I lift my hands until at last I have no contact with the bike, and my feet slow beneath me. I watch from behind as Lydia continues to pedal while I slow down, her bike charging forward without me. I brace myself for the inevitable swerve that would lead to a crash, after which I would run over, kiss the injury, and pick the bike back up for another attempt. But that moment never comes. Instead, Lydia continues on, pedaling her heart out and gripping the handlebars like her life depends on it. It may not be the most graceful cycling ever, but it counts.

Eventually, the yard runs out, and the wheels of her bike stop turning. Lydia has done it! She has ridden her bike all by herself!

Screams erupt from the deck, and I see a mob of four barrel towards the little girl on the bike. Whoops of joy and congratulations fill the air around her while I watch from a distance, standing alone in the middle of the yard. My parents continue to smother her in hugs and kisses, overcome with pride for their little girl.

A smile grows on my face as I take in the moment from afar. Eventually, a tiny head emerges from the tangle of limbs. Lydia looks back at me, her cheeks still red from the exertion of biking. Standing twenty feet away, in the midst of the fray, she gives me the biggest, most beatific smile I have ever seen. In this moment, all the hard work I have put in today is worth it. I grin back at her as our gazes lock from across the yard, sharing this moment of triumph as if we are the only two people in the world.

Christopher Long

Grade 11, Shawnee Mission East High School

Poetry



Culinarily Crafting a Captivating Cheeseburger

Oh taking a trip to burgers!
But you cannot miss cheese.
Swiss to gruyere, many are answers
And the one lies with thee.

For you must choose a special one,
One that's made of flavors.
Setting out a journey of fun,
Amongst a widespread world.

Ubiquitously and garnered,
Whilst be kept savorly.
A morsel to bun, unhonored.
Stove of fire and coarse coal.

Choice of Pickles to tomatoes,
Toppings are real swell.
Ignore these useless potatoes;
Such items are inane.

The constant hiss, sizzle of grill.
Melting that core of mold,

On platter of whipped beef. Quite thrill,
Amongst a widespread world.

But the cheese makes a burger whole.
Your cheese must be chosen,
Much as a thoughtful little mole.
Amongst a widespread world.

Christopher Long

Grade 11, Shawnee Mission East High School
Journalism



Empowering Women in Eldoret

Driving through the red dirt roads of Eldoret, Kenya, Fina Kessler stared out the window of the taxied Toyota Land Cruiser, taking in the tall grass and baobab trees on the seven-hour drive from the airport.

After creating a non-profit, Hoops 4 Her, Kessler fundraised through selling t-shirts and forming a Sunflower-League donation competition to support her dream of hosting her own basketball camp for female athletes in Kenya.

And, as Kessler and her parents arrived at Moi University in Eldoret, Kenya to prepare for five, eight-hour days, she knew that her vision had all led up to this point.

“I had no idea how the camp was going to go,” Kessler said. “It was really good to work on how to act confident when you don’t have any idea what you’re doing, but still try to pretend like you do.”

Although she founded Hoops 4 Her almost a year ago, the camp in Kenya over the summer was the first one she has hosted for her non-profit.

Along the way, Kessler’s Hoops 4 Her idea has been tweaked, shaped and influenced by her personal and academic experiences.

Last summer, amidst the Texas heat and humidity, Kessler wrapped up her six-day social entrepreneurship camp at Rice University with a simple activity — a Take Action Challenge.

Although she didn’t have a particular idea in mind, Kessler drew inspiration from her 2023 summer family trip to Kenya, where Kessler and her family visited a local school and played soccer with the students.

Only half of them, that is.

“While we were playing, I noticed that only the boys got to play, and the girls just had to wait on the sidelines,” Fina said. “I’ve always been encouraged to just jump right in and play with the boys, so I found this very strange.”

From there, Kessler came up with the idea to create a non-profit organization called Hoops 4 Her that’ll provide education, equipment and training-specific camps for female athletes in need.

After presenting for her Take Action Challenge at Rice University, two months in, Hoops 4 Her formed a board of directors.

Two months later, it became an officially recognized 501c3 non-profit.

Then, on April 26, Hoops 4 Her secured \$2,500 for winning the SMSD Big Idea Grant Competition.

But, whether it was four hours of daily Hoops 4 Her website development or half-time donation speeches at every girls basketball home game, the journey of Hoops 4 Her has been a series of small steps — all in the direction of female empowerment.

Another one of these steps was enlisting help from the co-creator of the Sunflower Smack Show, a podcast solely focused on promoting girls basketball in Kansas, Bryan Geary.

A banker by day, and non-profit expert on the side, Geary has deep experience with developing new organizations — especially non-profits. Geary has helped establish non-profits such as Eye for an Immigrant — a non-profit started by an Olathe School District high school student — as well as working for other organizations, including the Olathe Public Schools Foundation and Health Forward Foundation.

After Kessler posted her idea on the new Hoops 4 Her Instagram account, Geary reached out and offered his expertise in building Kessler’s non-profit — specifically writing grant requests and prepping fundraising speeches. “Fina has a huge mind for her age and so I try to stay out of the way and let her ideas get bounced off other females on the board,” Geary said. “Why have the white 50-year-old male try to steer the ship of a female empowerment nonprofit?”

At a lunch at the Broken Egg Cafe, Kessler and Geary formed a partnership built on their shared vision: creating worldwide opportunities for female athletes. Geary currently serves as the Treasurer of Hoops 4 Her on the Board of Directors, and has helped Fina prepare for speeches, build fundraising events and manage the economic aspect of operating a non-profit.

Alongside Geary, Fina's parents, Sarah and David Kessler, helped build Hoops 4 Her from the initial idea to the inaugural camp.

Sarah works in Public Health Research as a professor at The University of Kansas and serves as the President of Hoops 4 Her. With Kenyan passport stamps and a specialty in human immunodeficiency virus research, Sarah has established an industry varied network in Kenya.

Sarah explained that she worked very closely with her research partner and Hoops 4 Her board member, May Maloba, to plan the camp logistics of feeding 70 people for five days, which gym to host the camp at and which coaches to hire.

"We couldn't have done any of this without really strong Kenyan partners who knew how to navigate and do all the preparations there before we got there," Sarah said.

Although the camp has since ended, Kessler plans to make it an annual summer event and, after graduating high school, is planning to develop an official Hoops 4 Her club basketball team in Eldoret, Kenya.

All of Kessler's efforts have been woven into the same school that she has spent three years attending, nine months a year — SM East.

"The success of Hoops 4 Her is such a Shawnee Mission East achievement," Sarah said. "There was so much generosity of people to give, when really, this was an untested concept, and we hadn't achieved it yet. We have a lot of gratitude for people's willingness to support and it made it possible."

Sources:

Fina Kessler

Bryan Geary

Sarah Kessler

Emma Lopez

Grade 8, Basehor-Linwood Middle School

Educator: Erin Tegtmeier

Personal Essay & Memoir



What If?

What if this? What if that? “What ifs” can be scary. I have always lived in the realm of “What ifs”. What if I’d never traveled before? What if my parents weren’t in the military? These are the kinds of things I’ve asked myself. These are the kinds of things people think of when something bad happens. Two simple words that mean so much. Two things that seem so little can change a person’s life. The way they act. The way they talk. It could all happen in an instant. Some people don’t realize it, but it can.

It can bring people down when they are already at their lowest. It makes people overthink. *What if I’m not good enough?* or *What if nobody cares about me?* I’ve heard these things before. They aren’t fun to hear, especially if it’s someone you love saying them. It’s pretty hard when you want to try to help them, so you just do the best you can. Even if you’re not good enough, you tried your hardest, and that’s what matters. People care about you; I promise, they do. If you think about these things in your head, you’ll drift into this hole of self-pity. So don’t let it swallow you up and take you down.

It took me down once. Whenever I moved far away. I couldn’t help but think of *What if? What if I never told my dad I wanted to move?* This took me down. I fell into this hole of sadness, depression. I couldn’t focus on what was ahead of me. I missed my people. I missed seeing these faces that I just left to go into another place. *What if I actually told people I missed them?* I regret that I didn’t say goodbye. My regrets live in my head rent-free, and so do these “What ifs.” I can’t let them take me down. I couldn’t let these things keep dwelling like a thread. So I just forgot them. They are now in the past, and I can’t live in the past anymore.

Living in the past can be scary. Holding onto these things that you don't want. Having this constant weight on your shoulders that you want to let go of but can't. *What if I can't get these things out of my head?* These are the things that people think of when they are struggling. It's hard to see these things happen. They aren't normal, and they shouldn't be normalized. Bullying, making fun of people, trying to make people think that they are less than they actually are. This is what we now have normalized in today's world. It shouldn't be this way.

It shouldn't be normalized to where people are thinking of these things. Words can hurt. Even if you don't think they do, they can hurt to where there's this weight on people's chests. To where they can't think straight anymore. These words can do way more than any other action. These two simple words that people could constantly be thinking of. These "What ifs." They can tear you down. They can bring you up. But regardless, it always starts with a "What if?"

Emma Mahia

Grade 9, John Burroughs School

Educatory: Ruby Lawrence

Flash Fiction



A Memory

I woke up and remembered. My mascara had run, leaving strands of darkness piling on my face. I sighed deeply, trying to hold back the tears. I opened the blinds, and the overwhelming brightness filled the room.

I couldn't even smile. Not even the blinding brilliance from outside could lighten me up. The yard looked just as it always had, but something was different. I couldn't put my finger on it. I never really paid much attention to it. I mean, it's just a bunch of blades of grass with some flowers, weeds, and trees. There's not really much to it.

The grass began losing its flashy green color and started to turn yellowish-brown. The trees bowed their branches down, exhausted from having held them up for so long against the harsh world constantly pushing them down. They stopped rustling in the wind and now stood motionless as their leaves fell to the ground helplessly. They looked so lifeless and dull when bare, as if they had lost their other halves.

The birds refrained from nesting outside my window and no longer chirped nor sang. I hated when they did that, especially so early in the morning. But now that it's gone, I miss it.

The bushes stopped growing their berries and were almost rotting. The streets remained empty, with no dogs or kids playing. No movement at all. It was quiet outside and full of nothingness. The pavement was plain grey, fraught with cracks. Some were patched by asphalt, and some were not, but they never returned to their original selves. The deer that ran across the street had given up running as if there was nowhere left to escape.

All of a sudden, the sky filled with darkness. Rain pounded down in harsh droplets, and the clouds lay upon one another. The thunder was almost a relief. Finally, something actually happened. Chaotic waves slammed and punched my window, making it almost impossible to see ahead. It made me nauseous.

I heard a knock on my door followed by a familiar voice. “Hey, c’mon, are you coming or what?” My heart started pounding. I almost smiled, forgetting what happened.

“Coming! One second,” I opened it only to see a void. My smile fell into a frown. Then, I remembered it again.

I stared outside, taking it all in. Why did it all happen? Why me? Tears rushed down my face. The world outside looked and sounded so restless and so violent, yet at peace with itself. I always wondered how that works. How the world could go from the most ferocious of events to a sudden stillness. I used to love the stillness, but now I’m not so sure I like it. Maybe I was chasing the world I’d lost and that I would never get back. I don’t know what I’m looking for anymore, but I know I have to find it. I opened the door. I stepped into the storm, letting the cold chaos swallow me whole.

Madeline Male

Grade 11, Home School

Poetry



Old Scar, New Tar

She's stayed on the same road
And she's still riding
Her bike over the bumps and divots
Before bracing herself
For a big pothole right in front of the driveway

She's stayed on the same road
And she's still run down
To the intersection at the end,
Avoiding what she knows by heart:
The mountains and ravines she tries to keep
From stepping in
She's reminded by the old scar
On her knee from when she was a child, just five.

She's stayed on the same road
Her whole life, she stood by and watched
A repair crew come, bringing remedies —
She's reminded by the new tar
That the road's wounds are now gone from the surface
But she will always know they stay
Under there, locked up, clinging memories.

Originally published by the Kansas Authors Club

Madeline Male

Grade 11, Home School

Poetry



Fish In Black Dress

When a coin sinks to the bottom of the pool
It looks like a burned-out sun
Copper reflecting late-afternoon light

I hold my breath of sweet summer flowers
My heart keeps beating
As my long strands of hair
Do a slow-motion tango
In the fading rays of radiance

A cacophony of dappled shadows
Tease me, but I'm the one laughing,
Emerged, water running down my cheeks
Salt finding the way to sting my eyes
Grandmother calls me a little fish

Time teases you
When you spend that long in the water
Ears plugged with the muffled padding of H₂O
Sound waves caressing my perception
Of voices bubbling and noises rumbling from above

But I hear perfectly fine
And understand and when I'm taken to Dillard's

To find a black dress that fits a fish
Almost too big for kid sizing
And a little too small for adult sizing

Every day in May is sunny
When deafening quietness scratches my earlobes
Voices hushed and murmuring,
Even though I'm not underwater anymore
Amazing Grace tells us all what we feel
Bagpipes reflecting tired sunlight
In the noon rays of radiance

Now the house smells like few-days-old flowers
There's nobody to call me a fish anymore
But I will have to keep swimming.

Madeline Male

Grade 11, Home School

Poetry



Cleopatra

The embodiment of a goddess
You're statued next to Venus
Hailed as new Isis of magic,
Healing, sorcery and protection
The heir of a phenomenon
Who still must murder your way to the throne
An Aphrodite for beauty
And now a queen for power
Speaker of many languages
And witness of more still
Wielding the shield of an ivory city
Lush luxury and libraries of knowledge
Overlooking the awaiting Mediterranean
That sends you away and delivers you back again
To the arrival of rivalries, tense and suspense
You brilliant strategist
Too proud but not enough to hide
Among merchants' goods that smuggle you
Right where you need to be
To orchestrate persuasions behind curtains
That will graduate you from chair to throne
Player of men, empires, and fortunes
A priceless pearl suddenly has a price
When dissolved in a drink at a dinner party

Of gold-plated ships and purple sails
You capture the title of expense
At the expense of an earring
A clean sweep of silence, save for the tide
An outcome surprising all but yourself
Brazen to sail from a losing battle
Soldiers cheaper than any coin in your treasury
Quick to command the master
Of your own fate, genius of your own death
At the rise of one general and the fall of another
Fog contorting fact and fable
As the end of a dynasty
And the beginning of a centuries-long legend
In pursuit of painless poison
Bringing even life to your death
By a venomous asp, eyes closed by the end of an hour
Empire now laying at the feet of Rome
After battle, it is said “the king is dead,”
But tell them to shush—
A queen is never dead, only sleeping.

Madeline Male

Grade 11, Home School

Flash Fiction



Eyes for Isa

“Isa! Isa!” Mom’s voice called. Isa pulled off her headphones as she heard Mom’s footsteps enter the room. “We’ll leave in a few minutes.” Isa nodded and leaned back in her chair. *What will it be like to see the world, for the first time ever?* So many emotions coursed down Isa’s spine—curiosity, fear, dread, anticipation. Everyone in Isa’s family had eyes, but she didn’t mind being the odd one out. When you live in a dark world, you just have to find the light with your other senses: the feel of soft sun massaging your face, and the touch of Bailey’s fur. The taste of creamy eclairs. The smell of your favorite lavender candles. The sound of the bluebirds chirping at the feeder outside the window.

It had always been planned out for Isa—she would get eyes once her sockets reached adult size. Even the blue color of the irises was chosen for her. It was what everyone in the family had, after all. But once the Great Eye Crisis hit, everyone was devastated that she wouldn’t be able to get eyes. And it just got worse. It was hard for anybody to figure out how to break the cycle—less people with eyes led to a less productive world, and a less productive world was less able to resolve the shortage of eyes. That’s how most everyone thought of it, anyway. Isa wasn’t so sure. She knew a lot of people who adapted without vision, and she was proud to be one of them. Her teachers had helped her find a style of auditory learning that worked for her, and she was always listening to some audio book or recorded lesson. She even had a special gift for math, they all said. In fact, Isa’s dream was to run a math podcast for other auditory learners like herself—you didn’t necessarily need eyes to do that, right?

“Ready, Isa!” Mom called from downstairs. Isa was still in thought as she made her way into the foyer. On the road, she held her hand outside the car

window. *What does the wind look like? Or does it not look like anything at all?* Isa knew the world would be changed once she got her eyes—even though she would be the only one who really changed.

“Mom, I . . .” Isa began, but before she could find the words, the car had pulled into the parking garage and she was whisked into the waiting room. After a quick physical check, quiet finally found her again as they sat in the exam room. “I don’t know if I want eyes!” Isa blurted out. There, she’d said it. Finally.

Mom chuckled. “It’s ok to be nervous, but everything’s gonna be just fine.” Isa wasn’t sure what else to say. It was hard to describe . . . How could anybody with vision ever get convinced that she was perfectly happy without eyes?

Just then, the nurse came in. There was a moment of silence, where Isa guessed the nurse was displaying some facial expression that Mom didn’t like. “Well, there’s no easy way to say this,” the nurse started, “but we don’t think you can get your eyes today. The eyes we have in stock aren’t the ones compatible with your sockets.”

“Are you sure?” Mom sounded very disappointed.

“Yes,” the nurse said, “and the specific type of eyes Isa needs were hit especially hard by the Eye Crisis. So it might be quite some time before we can give her eyes, to say the very least.”

“I’m so sorry, Isa,” Mom voice cracked.

“It’s fine, truly,” Isa said. And she meant it.

Madeline Male

Grade 11, Home School

Flash Fiction



Useless

It's easy to feel useless when you really are useless. I miss the days when customers used more cash . . . Molly would constantly open and close my drawer, feeding me fives and tens. With everything digital, now I'm just in the way, useless.

She might as well dismantle me and toss me into the dumpster. Card Reader gets all the action anyway—credit card, gift card, and even tap-to-pay. Meanwhile, I just sit there, a monstrosity of metal and plastic that isn't worth the space he's taking up. You know your life purpose is grim when your favorite part of the day is when someone brings a promo and Molly types in the code on your screen. Otherwise, I'm stuck with the mundane existence of tallying totals and printing receipts, pathetic strands of paper that'll just end up getting thrown out or blown away in the wind.

The best part of every year is in October when Molly hangs up decorative witches hats from the ceiling. I gaze up and imagine if I had a witch hat and magical broom, maybe I could go visit the fabulous places from the National Geographic magazines that get swept by my scanner.

For years now, the highlight of all my memories with Molly is when that big snow storm left the internet out for days. With Card Reader down, I bet you can imagine how much cash was exchanged—quarters, dimes, nickels, ones, tens, fives, twenties, you name it—even a few fifties.

I must have zoned out for a minute, because loud yelling in the store yanks me back to the present. There's a guy dressed all in dark clothes, and in his hand,

there's . . . a gun?! He dares to point it right at Molly. "Gimme everything!" he demands. Shaking in fear, she opens up my drawer.

"That's it?!" The guy growls, "I want more!"

"E-everything's d-digital n-n-now—oh!" Molly stutters, then suddenly ducks behind me as he pulls the trigger. *PING!* A silver bullet jabs into the heart of me, contorting my conglomeration of plastic and metal. My vision starts to get fuzzy, and before I black out, my last sight is Molly, who's still unscratched. For the first time ever, I'm just glad I was in the way.

~ ~ ~

When I come to, the store is busy, with crime tape everywhere. Molly and the manager are examining me. "It's . . . broken," Molly says very quietly.

"It'll cost us more to repair it than to trash it," the manager responds, "it's an old model anyway." He dismantles me and tosses me into alleyway dumpster. A few cold, rainy days later, a truck comes and jumbles me in with the other junk.

So here I am in the garbage dump now, more useless than ever . . . and yet, I feel fulfilled.

Katrina Marshall

Grade 8, Congress Middle School

Educator: Alyssa Contreras

Flash Fiction



When Wolves Hide

Most kids are content playing video games, or playing sports. But me? Well, I've always been a bit strange.

"Got ya'!" I exclaimed happily, as I knocked over my younger brother Crow's rock with my own. I loved playing wolver games with Crow, though he was younger and almost always lost. After losing my little brother, Jay, when I was ten, I'd promised to take care of Crow no matter what. Especially from the cruel leader, Balto, who had always hated our family. Crow was grumbling about how I always won, but I hardly heard. My enhanced senses caught the faint scent of smoke. I shot to my feet, running to the window. Fire was raging through the village, consuming house after house. "Crow!" I called. "Time to go." I heard a crash downstairs, and my blood went cold. I ran downstairs with Crow, where the village leader, Balto, was waiting.

Balto stepped forward, eyes cold and calculating. "I've been looking for you two," he said, voice sweet like steel wrapped in velvet.

"Us? Why would you be looking for us?" I asked cautiously. I pushed Crow behind me, glaring at Balto.

"Isn't it obvious?" he chuckled. "You two have been a pain for me for too long, and it's about time I did something about it. See, there's something off about your family, Wren, and I can't have secrets drifting about in my village." He walked forward slowly, like a prowling lion closing in on its prey.

"There's nothing off about us," I lied. "We just don't like the same things as other kids, that's all."

Balto laughed, harsh and cold. "You're such a bad liar, Wren." He circled us slowly, eyes studying us like he was trying to figure out what was so strange about us. My hands twitched, the smell of smoke getting stronger the longer he talked. Balto didn't seem to notice, as he continued circling us like there was no fire. "So, are you going to quit lying?" he asked, smirking.

"I'm not lying!" I protest.

"Fine, then," Balto spat, voice losing the false sweetness. He lunged forward, grabbing Crow.

I stopped thinking, just lunged "Let him go!" I snarled, tackling Balto. He grunted as he hit the floor, rolling over and trying to pin me down. I snarled, claws unsheathing as my wolf half took over a bit. I clawed at his face, and he jerked back, hands going to his face. I lunged forward, but he saw me and dodged to the side. He looked at me, seeing my claws and fangs, and his eyes narrowed.

"What... are you?" he asked. I just growled, barreling into him while he was distracted, causing him to fly into a crate.

I ran over to Crow, who was watching the scene in horror and guided him quickly to the window, helping him get out the window. I turned, climbing out the window, leaving Balto disoriented in the house. Crow was waiting, fidgeting nervously. "C'mon," I urged, running towards the forest with Crow right next to me. We fled into the forest, not stopping until they were far from the village, and the scent of smoke was gone, replaced by the fresh scents of the forest.

"What now?" Crow asked.

"Now... we start fresh," I replied simply.

"Here?" he asked, glancing around nervously at the forest surrounding us. "It's so creepy here! And dark! A-And there are things with *sharp teeth*!" His eyes widened in fear.

"I have sharp teeth," I pointed out, grinning to show off my sharp fangs - still unsheathed from the battle. "And you do as well. C'mon, we'll figure it out," I

added more gently. “There’s bound to be others out here. We’ll find a way to start fresh out here.”

“I guess,” Crow mumbled, still nervous but less than before. He glanced around with a mixture of nervousness and excitement as we walked further into the forest, the sun casting golden rays through the bright green leaves as dusk approached.

I walked along beside him, pointing out cool bugs and squirrels as we walked, trying to distract from the nervousness creeping in on him, and, honestly, me as well. The wind was soft beneath the canopy of leaves, making the trees sway gently. It would be a great place to start fresh, maybe find others to join us, build a new life here in the forest, far from Balto and the burnt remains of the village.



If You've Never Been To Their Hood Then You Should

There are some people that never go out
They never travel and never strut about.
Never leaving the comfort of their own
Neighbors, food, cultures and homes.
They stay in their suburbs
Hoods and hobbies.
Maintaining their patterns and keeping their habits.
I do not want you to get confused,
This is not just about travel or trying new foods.
But rather it's about a greater idea
Of growing closer, more accepting and near.
Humans often fear what they don't see,
But they have no problem believing what they read.
You look at their hood as violent and dangerous
But never have met their grandmas and aunties.
Never sat at their tables or in their yards,
Only seen their dangerous hoods from afar.
This is not just about Black and white
But rather about human insight.
It's become normal to hate what you fear
Based solely on what you hear.
So let's take a step back and rewrite our community.

Let's pave our love and crush our hate.
Let's accept all
Let's not hesitate.
It can all start with trying new foods.
Experiencing new cultures,
Include not exclude.
Let's eat their barbecue.
Try borscht too.
Whatever it is, please try something new.
Try their tacos.
Try their fish.
Meet a person, then judge them so
Instead of just seeing them as foes.
Let's try some shawarma.
Eat some toum.
Let's embrace all cultures.
Accepting them so.
To sit down with someone new
That looks different from you.
That's from a place you've never been
And engage that person with a grin.
Leave your suburb.
Leave your hood.
Go somewhere else
Far and wide.
Never stop going.
Move slow as you go.
Meet some new people
Try some new foods
But don't get confused.
You don't need to leave your country or even your state
Take some action and forget all fate.
Move within your community so.
Link arms with all,
Even your foe.
And you never know.
You may meet your best friend,

Lover or brother.

Or maybe just eat something cooked by someone else's mother.

Would you spare some love?

End some hate.

This you could.

So if you've never been to their hood.

Then you should.

Margot Mason

Grade 9, St. Joseph's Academy

Educator: Sarah Hoeynck

Critical Essay



Running Against the System: Empowerment in *Good for a Girl*

In today's world, women are often underestimated and viewed as less capable than men, especially in competitive fields shaped around male standards. In *Good for a Girl: A Woman Running in a Man's World*, Lauren Fleshman challenges this mindset by showing what it actually means to compete—and survive—in elite athletics as a woman. Her memoir follows her journey as a professional runner, revealing both major achievements and deeply personal struggles in a sport that was not designed with female athletes in mind. What makes Fleshman's story compelling is not just what she accomplishes, but how openly she confronts gender bias, unrealistic expectations, and structural inequities. Through her resilience, leadership, and courage, Fleshman presents a powerful example of empowerment that extends beyond athletics.

Empowerment is rarely simple, and Fleshman makes it clear that it often develops through hardship. Throughout her career, she continues pursuing her goals despite repeated injuries and emotional setbacks. While reflecting on the period when she became an Olympic alternate while injured, Fleshman writes, "During those six or so weeks as an alternate, I got so fit, so powerful, so fast that the grief couldn't catch up to me. I trained to delay the inevitable, my foot occasionally achy while handling the load" (Fleshman 190). Instead of allowing disappointment or physical pain to define her experience, she responds by training with focus and discipline. Even when she is forced to step back and

recover, she refuses to view injury as failure. Her response shows that strength does not come from avoiding struggle, but from continuing forward in spite of it. Fleshman's sense of empowerment also appears in the way she leads and influences others. Rather than keeping her struggles private, she chooses to speak openly about them, knowing that honesty can help other athletes feel less alone. She explains, "I made a commitment to win and fail in public in my little world of running... I hoped it would inspire other pro athletes to do the same, and it did" (Fleshman 211). By sharing her experiences through blogs and public writing, Fleshman challenges the unrealistic expectation that athletes must appear flawless. Her leadership shifts the focus away from perfection and toward authenticity. In doing so, she shows that vulnerability can be a source of connection and strength.

Fleshman's bravery is especially visible when she advocates for herself in moments that carry professional risk. When Nike asked her to pose nude for a sports advertisement, she recalls, "I challenged Nike to be a leader in presenting women differently... I was scared to contradict this prestigious ad agency and to ask Nike to do better" (Fleshman 159–160). Rather than complying, Fleshman insists on being represented as an athlete instead of an object. Speaking up against a powerful company required courage, particularly in an industry where opportunities are limited. Her decision reinforces the idea that empowerment sometimes means refusing to compromise personal values.

Beyond advocating for herself, Fleshman also speaks out on behalf of her teammates and other female athletes. She argues, "What my team needed was to be seen. We needed our coaches to be educated on female physiology... and to identify the predictable landmines of negative body image and eating disorder culture" (Fleshman 96). By addressing these issues, Fleshman challenges systems that expect women to adapt to standards built for men. Her willingness to name these problems helps create space for future athletes to feel supported rather than overlooked.

Throughout *Good for a Girl*, Lauren Fleshman's resilience, leadership, and courage define her empowerment. She perseveres through injury, supports others through honesty, and challenges injustice even when doing so is uncomfortable. Fleshman's journey suggests that empowerment is not measured by victories alone, but by integrity, persistence, and advocacy. Her story ultimately encourages women to trust their strength, question unfair expectations, and continue moving forward—even when the system was never designed for them.

Works Cited

Fleshman, Lauren. *Good For A Girl: A Woman Running in a Man's World*. Penguin Books, 2024.

Jason Mathew

Grade 11, Parkway Central High School

Educator: Christian Schaeffer

Flash Fiction



Don't Wait

When you wake up, the sunlight will shine through the blinds, illuminating the area with a soft glow. It seems hopeful. You will tell yourself that you need to stretch, but your hand is actually diving for your phone, tucked under the pillow. You will tell yourself it's just to check the time. That's a lie. You know that. You will weigh the screen in your palm, heavy and silent. Don't expect a notification.

When you push the sheets off, you will tell yourself to leave the phone on the nightstand. Maybe a notification will pop up. You know what you'll find, though. Nothing. Not even the polite notification of spam. All that will be buzzing is the ache of your heart.

Still, you'll reach for it. Your finger will hover right above the screen. You will hold your breath, praying that they sent you a message. Anything. A typo, a random line, or even a laughing emoji. But there's nothing. Not a single pulse of life. Your hands will become cold. Salt will sting your eyes before you can blink it away. You will hold your breath until you feel shivers crawling through your body. You will throw your phone across the room, face down, but not hard enough to break it. You will go back to your bed and bury your soaked face, staining the cotton, but even with that, you will still be listening. Waiting for a vibration that you know will never come.

You will tell yourself to stop. Don't scroll. Don't let your fingers race in a blur through the past. The past isn't the future.

But you still will.

Even with a soaked pillow and hot face, you'll crawl back to the cold light of your phone. You will swipe through it, going back to analyze your old

conversations. You will look at the time stamps, calculating in your head how long it took them to write back. You will replay the voice memo of when they accidentally sent you a recording of them singing. Your face will smile while the crying intensifies. You will see the 1 AM conversations, the random encouraging messages, wondering where it went. You will remember how you would press your phone on your chest, fearing that even a slight breath would break the moment. You will tell yourself that they got busy. Their phone died. They never saw it. You're probably overthinking.

You aren't. You're watching the hope bleed out, one excuse at a time. You will go to your desk. You will see the cardboard house that you both built. You will remember the laughter, the joy you felt spending time with them. You will see the pencil they gave you months ago when you forgot to bring one for your test. Then, you will turn back to your phone, waiting and hoping for those times to come back.

You will pick up the phone, wanting to tell them something. Anything. So that they know you exist. So that they don't forget you. You will type things like 'hi', 'hello', 'how are you?' Delete, delete, delete. 'Do you remember me?' 'What happened to talking to me?' 'I want to talk to you.' Delete, delete, delete. You know no matter what you send will be met with nothing.

You will sit by the window, with the sunlight shining on your salty cheeks. You close the curtains, shutting out the day, shutting out hope, sitting in the dark with your thoughts.

Minutes drag, each one stretching longer than the last one.

The phone will sit, untouched, until you can't bear it anymore.

You reach for it again.

When they finally text, you'll say yes. Even though you shouldn't. But of course you will, you can't realize it now.

You'll laugh when you're with them, watch the way the light catches their eyes. You'll hope, for a moment, to prove that you are enough.

But you'll see in the way they glance at their phone. The way their laughter is lighter with someone else. How the screen in their hand means more to them than your presence.

You will go home, collapse on your bed, salt still drying on your cheeks. You will turn on the playlist you made to control your tears. You will tell yourself that you are happy to hang out with them, but your ache says something different.

The next day, you will see them in the hallway, eyes sliding past like you're nothing more than an insect. Just another blur.

You gave them your time, your loyalty, your hope. But the shape of your relationship hardened before you recognized it.

Tell yourself you don't love them. Insist it's something smaller, like a bruise or shadow. Maybe it is. Maybe it's teaching you how to leave quietly, how to disappear without saying goodbye.

Don't wait.

But you will.

The waiting never ends. Only you do.

Keep Blank

Keep Blank

Keep Blank

Keep Blank

Keep Blank

Keep Blank

Ronny McPhillips

Grade 10, Central High School

Poetry



Home

I want to go to the place I'm supposed to be
I want to be amongst the stars
I want to hear someone call for me
Tell me I've been gone so long

"Come home"
Says my brother
And "Come to me"
Says the sky

I want someone to cradle my face
To look me in the eye
And ask me,
"What's wrong?"

"Darling, it's wrong"
"The world is unfair"
"And it's always unfair to you"
"Sweetheart, don't cry"
"I can hear the tears you hide"
"I've got you, love"
"Don't say goodbye"

And for them to actually listen

But since shame steals someone's sympathy
I know it stays impossible
For my dream to come true

So I start another story
And a voice calls to me when I'm alone
When I stare at the stars

"Come to me"
"Come home"

Shayaan Merchant

Grade 9, John Burroughs School

Short Story



(Climate) Changing

January 15, 2021

“Hey, Greta...Ms. Thunberg...

I...I hope you’re d-doing well. That’s how mom says I should greet people.

My name is Ophelia.

I-I’m in seventh grade, and I’m your biggest fan.

The kids in school, the ones who always act friendly but then laugh at me when they think I’m not looking, they came up to me in school today, and gave me a phone number. Everyone in school knows you’re my idol, so they told me it was yours.

I knew it wasn’t really. I think they j-just wanted me to call it and not get an answer.

But they gave me the idea to send you something, so when I went home, I looked online and found your fanmail number.

I d-don’t — no, I *don’t* — really know why I wanted to leave you a voice note. I just think that we have a lot in common. I was born in Sweden too, and that’s where I live now. We were in Denmark for a while for Daddy’s work, which was fun because I had cousins to play with, but we left after Daddy left.

I just got back from Compassionate Care. It's like school, but not regular school, which is the place where you have to make friends. Instead, the people teach you how to talk to people better. I'm n-not very good at that.

But...mom says the way to get to know someone is to ask a question, a question that you actually are interested to know. So, I wanted to ask you a question. When you were my age, was it hard to talk to people? Did you ever feel like they already thought they knew you before you even opened your mouth?

Okay, that's all I think I'll say for now. Please reply soon, it would really help."

February 1, 2022

"Hi Greta,

I-I know I've been sending a lot of audio messages, I'm sorry. A lot's been going on, and I feel like if I tell you about it, you might respond, and it'll get better. But mom says sometimes when I get excited I talk too much and overwhelm people, so I don't know what to think.

I went to a rally a couple months ago, and I saw you there, on stage. I c-called for you, but you didn't look over. I was too far away anyway. You're taller than me, and you wear the same jacket the cool kids at school wear. I wanted to stay, but I had to leave after a couple minutes, because the lights and the crowds were too much.

The kids in school still bully me a lot. A few days ago, I was doing my science presentation about the different types of rocks, and I forgot my lines. The whole class laughed at me...even the teacher, a little bit. They didn't even stop when I ran out.

But mom says sometimes focusing on the good news can help us forget the bad, and something good did happen the other day in English. My teacher said we should write a poem about something we were passionate about, and I chose the earth. I thought you might like it, so I asked her for permission to bring it home so I could read it to you.

*We hurt our earth every day
and make it serve us in every way
So if we must come across a new day
we must all start helping for tomorrow and today*

*If you want the earth to help you
you should help it too, all the way through
Instead, we injure our planet of blue
We pollute the oceans, that should not be our notion
We kill animals for sport, when they have no last resort
So we should be kinder
and not let our children be blinder*

But...that's not really why I wanted to reach out. It's just that — I feel like I've changed so much, but to everyone else, I'm still the same, st-stuttering, nervous, antisocial person I always have been. And so, I just wanted to leave another message to see if you might maybe respond.

Still a fan,
Ophelia.

P.S. Call back soon.”

September 5, 2022

“Greta,

You still haven't answered me — not once in over a year. I'm starting to doubt you even care, but mom insists that we shouldn't judge people until we've heard their side of the story, so I'll move past that particular thought without comment.

I know things on your end are going great; from what I've read, you've even been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. Well, things on my end are not going too well. My grades, which had been steadily improving until recently, have started to drop once again.

I know I'm the problem, even though mom thinks I'm not getting enough support from the teachers. I just...can't bring myself to care the way I used to.

Instead of doing my schoolwork, I've been spending most of my time writing pieces on climate change. I haven't won anything yet, but I've been trying to emulate your style — so I thought that if anything could convince you to respond to me, even acknowledge me, it would be this.

You tell me that climate change is a hoax.

300,000 years ago, the carbon dioxide in our atmosphere reached its peak of 300 parts per million. We surpassed this mark — not 5, 10, 15, or even 50 years ago — but in 1911. We are now at 420 parts per million.

You tell me this data is published by doomsday enthusiasts. That statistics will reflect efforts being made by governments only in time.

In the past year, the United States, the second-largest emitter of greenhouse gases, has withdrawn from both the Paris Agreement and International Partners Group. Scientists expect one third of the world's attempted cutback on emissions, and 1 billion dollars in funds, to be compromised as a result.

You tell me that one country cannot and will not tip the scale against our earth, that the other countries remain steadfast supporters of climate change initiatives.

Canada, another major greenhouse gas emitter, withdrew from the Kyoto protocol. Australia, Japan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Brazil, and India have all cut back on previous guarantees.

You tell me that a couple degrees won't do anything.

A one degree change from our temperatures today is expected to double the intensity of severe weather, and increase its regularity by a factor of 5. Environmental issues already take the lives of around 13 million people annually. The world is losing species 1000 times faster than it ever has.

You tell me that climate change isn't the world's problem.

I tell you that you are wrong.

Where are you Greta? Why won't you answer me?

I've tried so hard for so many years. Why isn't it ever enough?

January 20, 2023

"Greta,

I keep seeing you more in the headlines, and yet somehow you seem to be getting farther away from me.

I know I once said we had a lot in common, but I don't think that's the case anymore. I took a creative writing class, and it helped open my eyes to the world around me. And that's when I realized — you're a global superstar. You have millions of fans. Lots of money. All things I don't have.

I remember how I thought of you when I was younger: as though you were the older sister I'd never had. I was so sure that once I met you, everything would be perfect. You would look out for me, advise me, know what it was like to be the odd one out, know how to make that into something special, be the only friend I'd ever want or need.

I was so naive.

How could I forget that "You should never meet your heroes," that fame contempts insignificance, and most of all, that anyone with a global following and a devoted fanbase could ever be much like Ophelia the oddity anyway. And you know what? I don't need an answer to my question anymore. Because I've answered my question for myself. People won't ever look at me like Mary, or Sasha, or Tina. They won't ever see me like they see themselves. It's simply how the world works. And if you can't respond to this, or if you won't even bother listening to it, that's okay. Because by ignoring me, by crushing my childhood dream, you've forever earned my bitterness.

So this is Ophelia, signing off. ”

January 6, 2026

“Hey Greta,

It’s Ophelia again. I know, it’s been a while. Almost two years, I believe. But I thought it was time to leave one last voice note, and say a few things I’ve been meaning to say for quite a while — not as much for you as for myself.

I think it is only right to start with this: I’m sorry.

I once cursed you for your millions of fans, failing to realize that this was precisely why I couldn’t reasonably expect you to see my many messages.

Instead, I tried to convince myself that my messages would be special, would rise above the hundreds of letters, emails, and voice notes you must receive on a daily basis, and would therefore warrant a response.

And, to be completely honest, I think some part of me knew that it wasn’t your fault. And I ignored that part, with all the self-righteous conviction I could muster, trying my very hardest to pin it on you — and that was the heart of the issue. It was never about you. It was about me — and that’s why I projected every negative thought that crossed my mind onto you.

But at long last, I found peace with myself, and was able to turn my life back around. In fact, all the fan mail I’ve written and voice notes I’ve left for you over the years opened my eyes to the fact that my true passion is writing. I’ve done some pieces on climate change and the mental health crisis for my local newspaper, and despite my grades in my younger years, Dagens Nyheter recently granted me an internship.

So really, I wanted to thank you. Without you, I never would have found my passion, and without you, I wouldn’t be the complex, imperfect, unapologetic Ophelia I am today.”

Annie Ming

Grade 9, John Burroughs School

Poetry



Two Sides of the Same Coin

this poem can be read three different ways: normal text only, italicized text only, or all together.

two sides of the same coin

i watch my father
stone-faced, he turns to
leave for
the exit, to protect
his sole love, money.
his children,
he does not care for
because all that matters is
us.
them.
i know that
he turned back,
he never looked back,
his eyes
so cold and heartless,
fraught with a silent, pained sorrow. he
a shell of a person who
wanted to stay but
broke us apart for-
he had no choice.
-ever.
his wife
my mother told us she was

threatened
hurt and abused by
him, told him
day and night, how she despaired
to never return
each and every moment, and
if he ever wanted
she'd do everything in her power,
to see those beautiful faces
give all she had for what,
he held so dear
a merciless cruel man, who beat her again,
again.
and again.
years passed, and
now, he lays alone in his home,
i relive those memories every day, and hope,
heart wheezing and sputtering.
betrayed by my own thoughts
he has not seen
that he will return to
his children, his very soul,
show us the truth, because
since that wretched day.
something tells me
they won't see him, for
he is still the man
he is a monster
who hugged us and patched up our wounds and scars,
irreparable from repair, only because he
the man who loved us truly.
tried so hard.
and so, we finally go to see him.
yet, in the end,
house empty, hallways sterile, rooms untouched.
he still failed.
he will never see their faces again.
i stand here and realize
there is nothing left to answer us.

Connor Mitchell

Grade 8, Basehor-Linwood Middle School

Educator: Erin Tegtmeier

Personal Essay & Memoir



It It Just a Joke. . . Right?

People can say some really mean things. Then they say it is just a joke. Those people do it so much that you begin to question if it really is just a joke. At other times, someone says something really hurtful to someone. That person hides his pain and just smiles and laughs. Whenever that person goes home and lies in bed, thinking about their day, they release all that pain. The person who said those mean things does not realize what is happening in the other person's mind. This is getting worse every year. Sometimes it gets so bad that when that person is in their own thoughts, they think that the world would be better without them.

The thing that people need to get in their heads is that what you say can really affect people's minds. You might think that what you say does not matter. It is actually quite the opposite. One little word can make someone think that you would want them to be dead. It does not matter if you meant it or if it was a joke. That person still has those thoughts in their head, and they will be there forever. But if you defend yourself, if they say stuff like *chill, it's just a joke; it's not that serious*. Then they start painting you like the bad guy. So what you are expected to do is to take it and laugh about it and pretend that it did not happen.

When you are alone, you realize that it does matter. You might think that it is not that big of a deal. And some of the time, it is not that big of a deal. But the other times when it matters to you, it really hurts. At the same time, the people who are crying at night are the same people who make the same joke to other people. Repeating the cycle will never end until one person starts to let the pain

out to other people. Once that one person lets their feelings out in front of someone else, they have broken a small chain in the cycle.

In time, that one broken chain starts to break all the others. Then one person makes that joke, and the chain that holds all of their own emotions starts to come back together. It goes back to hiding your pain and not letting it all out. Restarting the chain again. We, as a people, need to all stop making these jokes that we think are not a big deal, but they really are, and the cycle might be able to break all of the chains. But there is one problem: there are so many people in this world that changing all of them at once will probably not happen.

It only takes a million people to start breaking the chain, but it only takes one to reset the cycle. It might seem impossible, but we need to still try, no matter how many times it takes; we need to get back up and break another chain. It might take a million tries to get it. But when it finally happens, it will be amazing. Let other people see what is hidden under those chains. It only takes one to start.

In the end, it might not happen in this lifetime, but I hope that eventually it will happen. I hope that one day we will all realize that we all feel the pain in those jokes, and you are not being dramatic. Sometimes you are being dramatic, but other times it does hurt. We need to think before we say and break the chain. You should not have to make fun of other people to laugh with your friends. Start making jokes about other things or share stories with people. Just don't let them stomp all over you. All the people around you might think it's just a joke. But they do it so much that it starts to make you think, it is a joke ... right?

Everett Montgomery

Grade 8, Delta Woods Middle School

Educator: Erica Welch

Flash Fiction



The Museum of Lost Things

On a walk in the woods one day, I stumbled upon a most curious sight. A great stone building, the walls too clean for the surrounding wilderness. In all my years of walking these trails, I'd never seen this building; no one was supposed to live this far out. Nevertheless, curiosity drew me to the doors underneath that great sign. It read: "The Museum of Lost Things."

As I pushed open the door, cold air hit my face. I looked down a hallway large enough to fit at least a hundred people; the cavernous ceiling disproportionate with the size of the building from the outside. Many doors lined the hallway stretching onward until it seemed to fade into the horizon.

Each door was labeled with names uncommon to my area. 'Aarav' then 'Aaravi' then 'Aashritha' to my left and right. I can only assume that the pattern continued alphabetically to infinity. In front of me there stood an antique pedestal, upon which sat an old book that looked as if it might crumple into dust with a touch. On the worn leather, inlaid in dulled gold, were the words "Index of Everyone."

I decided that if it really was an index of everyone, I should check my name. Seemingly responding to my thoughts, the covers flew open, and the pages fluttered until they landed on my name, "William Abernathy." When I looked up, the names on the doors all now read William, several read Abernathy, but there were more that had differing surnames. In front of me, a door that hadn't been there at first, floating midair, unsupported by any walls.

The door swung open, with enough force to blow my hair back. I jumped back to avoid being hit, my heart racing both at the magic and at my near

concussion. Inside I saw a long corridor, but as I checked around the edges of the door, impossibly, the room appeared to be its own space.

As I took in the corridor, I noticed that it was made of velvet fabric, spotted with buttons. I apprehensively stuck my hand through the threshold, unsure of what magic created this space. The air inside the corridor was warm and dry enough to be slightly uncomfortable, but the door seemed not to eat my hand or magically turn me into a fish, so I decided that it would be safe enough to explore.

The air smelled of mildew and my eyes watered slightly due to the amount of dust that I kicked up with my first steps.

As I walked, something tripped me. Luckily, the padded velvet was soft enough to avoid any severe injury.

I looked down at where my foot had landed. A small rectangular box with a variety of buttons on it drew my attention; an old remote. I picked it up and looked around, near a pile of remotes overflowing from a white pedestal.

I walked closer. "Lost remotes – 156" was engraved on a gold place card.

Further down the hallway I found another pedestal, only housing a few pairs of glasses, "lost glasses – 24."

I continued walking, passing other similar pedestals: a hundred keys here, a few marbles there.

That's when I noticed a door behind one of the pedestals, nearly obscured as it matched the scarlet of the surrounding wall. Positioned above it, a sign read: "Lost trust."

The idea confused me – trust was no remote, you couldn't simply lose it in the couch cushions, "trust" is far harder to quantify.

My hand hovered over the door, not sure whether to look; I decided to sneak a peek inside.

As the door creaked open, I saw something familiar, the silhouette of a childhood friend – Jeremy, still taller than me despite how young he appeared – someone who had trusted me with a secret. Before my eyes, the trust in that face warped, twisted, and shattered. The face itself reflecting the wrong I had brought into the world.

My heart raced and I slammed the door shut, as that and other times that I had long since forgotten came rushing back to me, the memories of wrongs ripping open healed wounds.

I gathered my courage and pushed myself to my feet, I needed to see more. In a way, I felt that I must.

To atone for the things this *place* counted.

One by one, I opened these doors: “Dignity,” was a room full of paintings, embarrassing scenes. Though, in my reflection as I shut that door, I credited the museum for the images were both beautiful and humiliating.

“Courage,” was a great temple with Corinthian depictions of those I could’ve helped.

“Time,” “Youth,” “Light” all told me of times before, but forgave me, for all lose these.

What scared me the most was the final door: “Opportunities.”

My hand shook as I reached out, considering what I could have been, if I wanted more.

I gathered my courage and turned the handle; the door opened easily, and I stepped into the room labeled opportunity.

Vines branched out across the great expanse of the room, larger than any other I had seen in this place. I reached out, grazing a few of the leafy offshoots.

I saw the choice to leave the last sugar, and how that had brightened someone’s day.

I saw a day when I could’ve watched the sunrise.

Gazing around the room, gazing at the twisting infinity of what if. I saw all those twisting paths, tempting me to see what I could have had, what was just out of reach.

And then, rushing back to me, I remembered the choice to study biology, because engineering would’ve stifled me. I remembered all the connections I’d made, random strangers whom I waved at. I remembered the day when I saw a rainbow.

I realized my life was great, and that seeing what I could've had would only lead me to losing the one thing I wanted to lose the least: Contentment.

Celeste Morgan

Grade 12, Olathe North High School

Short Story



These Long Halls

It's too quiet. Lily's sister is not snoring beside her. The bellowing storm that was raging when she fell asleep is gone, vanished into thin air. The ground is hard and colder than winter, and no blankets cover her body. Wherever she is, it's dimly lit, illuminated only by an unsettling omnipresent glow. Towering doors loom over her head, surrounded by walls that climb up and up and up. To the left and right, a grey corridor stretches out further than she can see, the walls interrupted here and there by more doors. There is no ceiling, only a void of darkness framing the hallway in an all-consuming black. No air moves, no windows light up the room, and she is shivering, scared, and alone—mostly. Mr. Bear came along, though no one else did.

She clutches Mr. Bear closer to her chest. She needs to find Pa; he'd know what to do. Or Ma; she would know how to calm her down. All she has to do is find them, somewhere, through one of these doors.

But there are so many of them, she could never check them all. By the time she'd finish, she would be an old, scrawny lady! Her parents would never recognize her! What did they say to do in these situations? Stay put? But how would they ever find her here in this dark, dark place? Maybe she should move.

Her socked feet patter against the marbled floor, barely making a sound. It's wrong, being alone. Someone has always been there. Now, there is nothing. Is this a punishment; what did she do wrong? Wetness spreads across her cheeks, blurring her vision.

A door slams open with a bang, causing her to jump and fall down. From inside, a young woman comes running out, sees her, and pauses.

"No one—" The woman's sentence gets cut off as the smell of soured milk, tinged with the burning smell of burnt meat, spreads into the corridor. This is

immediately followed by clanking noise coming from something. She reaches down and hauls Lily to her feet, “We need to go.” She takes off running, dragging Lily along.

“What—” Lily whispers. She turns to look, only to see a giant distorted limb lumber into sight, causing her to almost drop Mr. Bear from the shock. Before more of it can come into view, she is yanked around a corner and down another hallway.

“Normally, you’d avoid these things with the vents, but alas, this one basically lives there. Hates water though, but I ran out last night. Luckily, it’s just a Teacher.”

“Why would a teacher hunt us?” Lily asks, still being tugged through a never-ending maze of doors and corridors. “Mr. Smith is so nice.”

“Wrong teacher,” the woman says as she drags Lily through another sharp turn. “These teach you how to survive the horrors. You’re not ready for those yet.”

Lily does not know what they are talking about. She just wants her Ma, not whatever creature is terrible enough to be called a horror. She screeches as they turn yet another corner, this time into an actual room.

“Fu—Crap. It’s out of water.”

How she knew that, Lily has no idea. They just entered! But the clacking and clanking of the leg approaches. It’s so loud—louder than when she first heard it. This room has cabinets, a perfect place to hide! Pa told her to hide when something scary is happening.

Lily tries to break out of the woman’s grasp, only to see the limb reappear in the doorway. A second distorted limb follows it as they drag the body into sight. Six eyes gleam red, such a wrong, glowing red. The body is made of what looks to be human hair connected to something shiny that distorts all eight of the legs, which would look like spider legs if not for the shiny not-metal. It lumbers towards her and she screams; she shouldn’t be here, she should be with her Ma or Pa. The only thing she wants is to wake up from this nightmare.

The monster rears up and opens its mouth to reveal a sea of teeth. The little girl is tiny compared to the size of them. Her face pales and she drops Mr. Bear in favor of cowering. It reaches down with a mangled limb, and with precise slashes, it leaves a mark of a spider on her forearm, followed by two symbols. The creature backs away, then turns to face the mysterious woman. It slashes across her cheek, crossing a deep scar already there, then leaves.

Lily stares in horror, staying shell-shocked long after the smell vanishes from the air and the room is quiet once more. The woman moves over, blankly examining the wound.

"It's mostly safe here, we can rest," the woman claims. "I'm Jess. Sorry about that scare. I haven't seen anyone else in years. I did not mean to lead the *aranae mali* to you, even if it was a... harmless teacher."

Lily does not answer.

"It's okay. You'll get used to these. They're easier to deal with once you know what they are. If I remember correctly, when a new person comes, the horrors take a break."

She picks Mr. Bear back up.

"What's your name?"

"Lily..."

"Well then Lily, why don't we find some food? You must be getting hungry."

Jess leads Lily through the room and out the other side, the younger following only because there is nothing else to do. How would her parents react to this... thing? It reminds her of fake tattoos, but it won't come off. Jess, the stranger in front of her, is covered by these stickers and some slashes, and she doesn't seem bothered in the slightest, even as blood runs down the newest mark.

"Are you sure you don't need a band-aid?" Lily quietly asks.

"This?" Jess absent-mindedly waves at the wound. "This is absolutely nothing. Should be good by the end of the day."

"But couldn't they smell blood?"

Jess looks over at her, but before she could say anything Lily continues, "I heard that animals come to the smell of it." She giggles to herself. "Like sharks!"

"Crap!" Jess exclaims. "This is the *saeva avises* hunting territory. Two doors ahead should lead us to safety. Or a vent, either works. But I wouldn't put it past the *aranae mali* to still be there."

"So, we need to go?" Lily asks. "How do you know it's safe?" Lily peers at the door in question.

Jess smiles. "Practice, and a lot of it. My mentor drove it into my brain until he died. I'll teach you some of it when we're in the safe."

A loud, terrible caw echoes around the room. Jess takes off yelling "RUN!" but Lily stays frozen to the spot as what looks like a huge pigeon with feathers made of human hair, harsh against the edges of the void, divebombs the ground. Lily looks up at it as it descends, intrigued by the way its wicked claws gleam in

the light, approaching, approaching, approaching way too quick. She clutches Mr. Bear to her chest, shaking in fear. The monster is so fast, it would be impossible to outrun with her little legs. She needs to go, but where? The door is too far and it is too quick. So Lily just watches with wide eyes until her body catches up to her mind and she runs, but it is too late as the gleaming claws grab her harshly by the shoulders and flips her into the air, throwing Mr. Bear away. As she falls back down, its sharp beak peaks down just below the previous mark from the spider thing. A whoosh of breath leaves Lily as she hits the floor, clutching her arm wishing for the creature to go away. But the horror is not done yet; it bends down and raises a single gleaming claw and methodically slashes across her eye. Its head tilts, examining its work, before taking off and leaving her alone. Lily curls into herself, sobbing.

Jess looks back and realises with horror that Lily is not where she thought she was. Whirling around, Jess retraces her steps, calling Lily's name.

When she reaches the doorway once more, she spots Lily cowering on the floor.

There was a time when that would have been her. She would be crying for her parents, and her sweet-hearted mentor would have rubbed her back and calmed her down. She misses him; the big brother she never got to have. But he's not here, and Lily needs someone.

"Are you okay?" she asks as she reaches out a hand in comfort, but Lily flinches away.

"No! I want my Ma."

"You'll—" Jess starts but quickly realizes that saying you'll get used to it, just like I did, is probably the worst thing to say in this situation. "You can't return to them if you die." In retrospect, that was certainly not that much better.

Jess's mentor always knew what to do in these situations, but he was much older than both her and Lily when he landed here. She spots Lily's bear on the ground and smiles sadly. Carefully picking it up, she offers it to Lily.

"How about this? I'll show you what I know. Maybe you'll be the one to find the way out of this place." Jess smiles as Lily clutches the bear to her chest.

Jess holds her hand out for Lily to take, helping her up before heading towards the door she just returned from. "First, passage-changes. These are taller than the other doors. A wing on the door is the symbol for the hunting ground of the *saeva avises*, which should always be avoided if you are bleeding,

but are definitely the safest any other time. They hate the other horrors encroaching on their territory.”

“Is there a quiz on this later?” Lily asks.

Jess laughs. “The quiz would be the horrors, but those are always life or death.”

“I won’t actually die, right? Failing a quiz only means a bad grade.”

“I wish that were true. Then there would be a small community here, not only me and you.”

“What happened?”

Jess winces. “The horrors. Everything that went wrong was due to the horrors. Now, let’s get some food.”

Lily chooses to stick with Jess. Eventually, they enter a routine. Jess leads the way, showing Lily rooms and the items in them and their uses. She constantly uses her arms for reference, as each tattoo on her arm is from one of the horrors. Both arms are completely covered. There are so many rules for Lily to learn and follow, and if she breaks one, she will never see her family again. Jess is of little comfort; she doesn’t seem to care about her family or where they are. No, uncaring is the wrong word. Numb, Jess is numb to the horrors of this place.

As they turn yet another corridor, with Jess lecturing about *lepus magnuses*, a quiet growl echoes behind them. While Jess seems not to hear it, Lily stiffens, her eyes darting cautiously.

It takes another howl for Jess to notice, this one loud enough to shake the ground. The void rattles, causing what seems to be rocks to fall and shatter, releasing a wave of cold and the smell of fire.

“Just up ahead should be a place to hide. These cannot go into vents,” Jess says, picking up her pace.

“What was that?!” Lily asks.

“A horror, most likely. *Lupus lupus* hunt in packs. I hope that there is a teacher there, horrors are less scary when a teacher is nearby. They at least won’t kill you.”

They dart into the vent, a dark hole in the wall, before the smell of rotting wood wafts around the corner. A small pack of three wolf-like creatures quickly approaches them, sniffing their trail. In front, there are two... small wolves. Standing many heads taller than Jess, their bodies are made of wood and hair. The thing behind them is barely recognizable as anything. Sure, it has the general shape of a wolf: ears, tail, and four legs. But an entire eye is missing from

where the wood rotted, and now mushrooms are growing out of it. Embers float around the thing's body, sucking the little warmth out of the air. Parts of its limbs look like they were carved from the corridors that they wander, and mushrooms cling to the body. The crest of its head seems to touch the void. Lily's breathing slowly picks up as she clutches Mr. Bear to her chest.

Like usual, Jess acts numb to the whole situation. Instead of hiding, she holds her arm out and allows one of the teachers to lick it. Nothing seems to happen because of this, but it doesn't leave.

"Hold your hand out," Jess hisses at her. "It's how you mark the passing grade. They'll leave once you do that."

"Let them have access to my arm?!"

"It's how this works. Please, just so it doesn't get worse."

Lily shakes her head no like the child she is.

"Forgive me," Jess says and yanks her arm away from her bear and holds it out to the creatures.

Preparing for pain, Lily screws her eyes shut and tenses. Hot breath brushes across her arm before a wet tongue quickly darts across it, then leaves. Peeking open her eyes, she sees a new tattoo. It's smaller and more detailed than the other ones.

The horrors are returning. At least that's what Jess claims. Her theory is backed up by the constant clanking and cawing and smells that seem to come from nowhere. It isn't a surprise when another pack of *lupus lupus* finds their trail.

"Vents?" Lily asks as the howls start. Jess nods and they quickly duck into one. A few moments later, the *lupus lupuses* come into view. All are made of rotten wood and mushrooms; none are the teachers. They sniff around, quickly growing bored.

"Is someone burning something?" Lily asks quietly as the first *lupus lupus* turns to leave. "It smells like meat." Lily sniffs the air again, then makes a face. "And rotten milk."

Jess, who is much closer to the vent's entrance, leans back, and her eyes grow wide in horror. Clank, clank, clack! The noise echoes in the vent.

"We need to go."

"But the *lupus lupus* are still out there."

"The *aranea mali* lives in the vents; you cannot beat a horror in its own territory in any fight."

Lily's eyes dart from one direction to the other. The noise comes closer in the vent, and the *lupus lupus* are just barely out of easy line of sight. Jess braces herself by the entrance when the spider comes into view. Unlike the first one they saw, it is made out of the shiny material laced with rotting flesh. It is somehow bigger than the first horror she saw, and it scrambles through the vent, flinging itself forwards quicker than they can run.

"Where are we going?" Lily asks as the *lupus lupus* joins the *aranea mali* in its hunt.

"Anywhere but here."

They run, even as the horrors quickly gain upon them. No rooms nearby contain anything that will help. Most just lead to another corridor, and Jess said taking too many of those leads to becoming lost. Being lost will allow the *lupus lupus* to catch up, and they need to be in the corridors or the *aranea mali* will certainly get them. Many turns later, there is still no hope in sight. In a last-ditch effort, they duck down another hall, only to find a dead end with the horrors right on their tail.

"I'll distract them." Jess says. "Go!"

"What?"

"Don't ask, just GO!"

Jess shoves Lily to the side, then runs up to the horrors and makes a lot of noise. Lily freezes, watching as the horrors start attacking her only friend. She looks away once one of Jess's arms is ripped off and runs once Jess finally screams in pain. She frantically searches for anything to help until her eyes catch on one symbol— a wing. Hoping that it is not yet too late, she runs into the *saeva avises* hunting ground. Moments after entering, the terrible caw of the birds sound out as Lily trips and falls to the ground, clutching Mr. Bear to her chest. The birds, now with feathers made with razors, descend upon the horrors and blot out the void above. One picks up the *aranea mali* and carries it into the void as the wolves are destroyed by divebomb after divebomb of the birds. Lily crawls away slowly, before running off into the dark.

Lily's clothes have been replaced by new ones, tattered but actually her size. Mr. Bear has been repurposed as a bag after all his insides spilled out in a near incident with a horror. She has never found a way out, just like Jess and all of her predecessors, in the many, many, years that she has now been here. As she flits through the corridors, she comes across the echoing of hyperventilation. Cowering against the wall, a little girl plaid in purple pajamas cowers against a

wall. Her eyes dart around the room, and Lily watches in silence. She's been alone for too long. With the girl's eyes locked onto her, she approaches. Before she can get there, a rotting vegetable smell wafts into the hall. Cursing, she turns to the girl and holds her arm out.

“Come on, we need to go.”

Allison Myers

Grade 8, Basehor-Linwood Middle School

Educator: Erin Tegtmeier

Personal Essay & Memoir



Bored

Just putting this out there, my home life is amazing. I'm just sharing my struggles as a teenage girl growing up with divorced parents. My life at home is phenomenal and I wouldn't change it for anything else, I love my family with my whole heart.

Bored.

[Sara Kays - Bored \[Official Video\]](#)

Tell me more about where you grew up. Do you think your folks are still in love?

I clutch my baby blanket—Blankers—closer to my chest as the arguing intensifies. Was this family always like this? I don't remember. I am sitting on the scratchy carpeted stairs listening to my parents fight. Today is worse than normal. My parents are out on the patio, and—thank God—my little sister is up in her bedroom coloring.

I heard commotion downstairs, and I wanted to go see what was going on, and here I am. I can't tell what they're arguing about, and I'm not sure I want to know.

What's the furthest distance you could run if a bear was chasing you?

I stare out the bus window, and for a moment, I am back in that car, speeding away from the only things I've ever known and loved. *Away from him.* Even though my dad was never really present, I missed him. He was—and still is—far from perfect, but still I missed him. Is that a bad thing? He wasn't necessarily a great father, but I never knew how much I would miss being around him. I miss those nights when we would try on those silly little Snapchat filters. I miss those nights when he would play music from his phone to try to get me to

sleep, because he always insisted he couldn't sing. Those were the moments I truly missed—and still do. I haven't experienced a night quite like that ever since.

Tell me all about your thoughts on God. Do you think he's there or do you not?

Anything to keep the focus off of me.

I'm sitting in the back of my math class, praying to God that I pass this test, because if I don't, I'm going to be in big trouble. Yesterday, I got yelled at for my math grade dropping from a 98% to a 96%. ... Why do I always have to be the perfect one? The older sister who has to carry the entire family?

You should talk forever, 'cause the less I say, the better.

I have just learnt to keep my mouth shut. Last year, whenever I did open my mouth, I was rude. Looking back now, I wish I hadn't said and done some of the things I did. I was a brat, and now I'm just at the phase where I feel like if I talk, I'm going to say something that someone will find offensive.

I remember just last year, spilled my hopes and fears, then he slammed that door.

I honestly can't blame some people for leaving me. I felt horrible, and I was horrible. I went to school every day to get away from home and myself. *Especially myself.* I couldn't stand who I was, so I put on a fake personality every day, hoping that people would accept it.

Didn't keep my thoughts inside, and it left me crying on the bathroom floor.

I just didn't know how to shut up. I would point out every little error in anybody, including myself. I would judge people for their errors while attempting to disguise my own. I was young and insecure, and ever since then, I have worked so hard not to be that person. That person wasn't *me*. I don't believe I'm a truly mean person, but I know I have my flaws—everyone does.

I don't think I'm interesting enough to keep this up, to keep your love.

I know I'm not anything special, I'm just a teenage girl trying her hardest. But I do know that I'm going to keep trying my hardest to live the life that I want to live, not someone else's.

If I end my word count here, and I don't say more, then you can't get bored.

Pyper Nyp

Grade 8, Basehor-Linwood Middle School

Educator: Erin Tegtmeier

Personal Essay & Memoir



1,000 Personalities

I put on a new face—a different personality each day—I don’t have to, but I choose to do so. Life is like a game, and I thought I figured it out, but I haven’t. I am social, and I can talk to anyone I want to, but I read those people and adjust so they like me. I put on a fake version of myself when I’m at school, when I’m home, *everywhere*. I have friends—lots of friends, actually—but I always put on a more exaggerated version of myself. Sometimes I think it’s the only way I will ever like myself—by making people talk to me because of the distorted me that they know. When I get home, I’m quiet or loud, but I can never choose one.

If my family knew how I acted at school, they wouldn’t recognize me. It doesn’t help that I am younger and different from my family; they are all grown up and seem to have figured life out. I feel alone when it comes to school, friends, and my own thoughts. All of my siblings know the ‘average teenager’ me, the *rude* me, the *naive* me, or even just the tired me. My parents always seem to be blinded by the teen me they know; they act like it’s the only one they know. Maybe it is?

I don’t know who my real friends are, because they don’t know me. Maybe I don’t know myself either? I pretend to be loud, I try to be funny, because it’s the only way I feel seen. This deeply affected my school life.

In sixth grade, I had a small group of friends, and we would sit at the tables farthest away from everyone. I hate to say it, but that was when I felt the most like myself. But there’s always that little voice that tells you that you need *more*.

In seventh grade, I was done being invisible. I slowly became less invisible but less like myself by the day. But the devil on my shoulder told me I was happier, that being seen is better, and in a way, it was. But I lost myself that day. Every day of 7th grade, I got more and more hungry for the feeling of being truly

known. That me was screaming, screaming for me to show up, to break out of the barrier between reality and my own fantasy. But I ignored it, just like I ignored the 1,000 personalities that live within me.

I can even name some of them, my close friends get the me who is closest to myself.

They get the happy, funny, and loud girl. People I'm not as close to get the funny but quiet, judgemental, cool, and relaxed me. No one gets the *real* me. Now I want to go back, to be okay with myself, to be weird and happy, but at the same time, when I was in sixth grade, I wanted to be where I am right now. I guess you'll always want what you don't have.

Some of you might think this is normal, but it's not. There's a difference between behavior and lies. Like, if you were to be too loud in a class, you would change that for the sake of your learning, but lies are something I didn't have to do; I didn't have to take this route, but I did. Now, it's not like I can't escape it, I'm only in middle school. Even though it feels like an eternity, you'll soon miss these days, bad or good.

I still struggle with this, with the thought of continuing life. Why live a life that is so damaging? Why live a life where no one knows who you are?

Who am I?

I don't think *I* even know the answer to my own question. Maybe I can't change into the real me, because maybe the real me has changed in itself. I may never know the real me. But you change with yourself, no matter how mixed up you feel, or lost you feel. Maybe I need to find myself. That's what life is for, right?

To find the *new you* that is lost in 1,000 personalities.

Baylie O'Callaghn

Grade 8, Basehor-Linwood Middle School

Educator: Erin Tegtmeier

Personal Essay & Memoir



My Middle School Years

Entering middle school is often accompanied by increased self-consciousness regarding physical appearance and social belonging. Students are frequently categorized into specific social groups, such as the so-called popular students, athletes, and those labeled as 'different', which can influence peer interactions and self-perception. In my experience, I became wary of associating with certain peers out of concern for how I would be perceived, leading to changes in my social choices. This environment fosters ongoing comparison among students, often resulting in diminished self-esteem. Experiences such as feeling uncomfortable in certain attire have heightened my tendency to evaluate myself relative to others. As I have progressed through middle school, I have navigated diverse social identities—feeling at times isolated, accepted, or even indifferent. This pattern highlights the complex impact of social dynamics on adolescent self-concept, which serves as the focus of my reflections throughout this essay.

During my 6th and 7th grade years, I experienced significant shifts in my social standing and sense of identity. In sixth grade, I maintained friendships with a diverse group of classmates, frequently receiving invitations to group activities and feeling a strong sense of inclusion, particularly during lunch breaks or collaborative school projects. However, this changed drastically in seventh grade, when invitations decreased and I often ate lunch alone, highlighting my

growing sense of social isolation. This transition impacted various aspects of my well-being; for instance, I began having difficulty sleeping and found myself lacking motivation to participate in activities I previously enjoyed. Despite these challenges, I learned to develop resilience and recognized that social popularity does not equate to genuine happiness. I found that engaging in meaningful conversations with supportive peers and seeking out activities that aligned with my interests, such as participating in school clubs, contributed to a renewed sense of self-worth. While the year included several difficult moments, these experiences also helped me appreciate the importance of authentic relationships and personal growth.

Participating in various clubs and sports during seventh grade was instrumental in helping me navigate the year. I joined the Science Olympiad group, cross country, both school plays, and track, which allowed me to connect with students from different grades, including mostly eighth graders and one sixth grader. Although I was not the top performer in any activity, I enjoyed the experience and learned how each club worked, which motivated me to improve for the following year. These activities were the highlight of my year.

Although I still experience loneliness in eighth grade, I now have friends with whom I can share jokes and lighthearted moments. While I sometimes feel uncertain about my place in these friendships, I am focusing on making positive changes. As I consider my high school options, I am determined to become the person I aspire to be. Researching different schools, reading student reviews, and speaking with a guidance counselor have helped me better understand my choices and where I might fit in. Taking these steps gives me a sense of control over my future. Those were some of my middle school experiences, and I hope to build off those experiences to make myself more than who I am right now.

Maggie Orton

Grade 11, Olathe North High School

Educator: Deirdre Zongker

Screenplays & Scripts



The InnKeeper

Scene 1:

(The scene opens with a desk in the middle of the stage, with the Innkeeper sitting at the desk going about their daily tasks.)

(The Innkeeper yawns, stretches and cheerily welcomes the first customer.)

Innkeeper: Good morning, sir! How may I help you?

Dread: I need a room.

Innkeeper: Okay! Single or Double?

Dread: Single, dark as possible.

Innkeeper: Perfect! What name should I put this under?

Dread: Dread.

Innkeeper: Here are the keys Mr. Dread! This room will be perfect for you-lots of pillows and blankets! I hope you have a wonderful stay! Oh, and I'll be up there shortly with some hot chocolate.

Dread: I'm not paying for that.

(Dread walks away, trying to avoid the Innkeeper)

Innkeeper: It's on the house!

Dread: Okay..

(Happiness enters, with a smile on their face)

Happiness: Hello dear! May I have a room for one person?

Innkeeper: Why yes of course! How does a room with big windows, fresh flowers and some nice vanilla lotion sound?

Happiness: Just perfect!

(Happiness grabs the keys, and sniffs the air)

Ooo! Is that coffee? May I have some?

Innkeeper: Yes you may!

(The Innkeeper hands Happiness her coffee. Happiness goes to her perfect room.)

Happiness: (from down the hall) Thank you!

(The Innkeeper innocently smiles, thinking what a wonderful day.)

(Anger comes stomping in with a frown on her face, and aggressively rings the bell on the Innkeeper's desk. She has very messy hair, which seems to only put her in a worse mood. The Innkeeper was making a fresh batch of coffee.)

Anger: (ring, ring ring) Excuse me, I don't have all day.

Innkeeper: Oh! I'm sorry I didn't hear you come in! What can I help you with?

Anger: One room. Good wifi. Fast.

Innkeeper: I can do that for you! There is one room in particular that you will love! It has really good lighting, a nice shower and good-ish reception.

Anger: Good enough.

(The Innkeeper handed Anger her keys and went upstairs. Anger's footsteps can be heard as she stomps up the stairs.)

Scene 2:

(It is the next day. The Innkeeper is making their rounds dropping off fresh towels, and making enough coffee to give someone a heart attack.)

(Anger storms down the stairs.)

Anger: This is the worst Inn I've ever been to. That shower was freezing, and the wifi in that room was so slow I couldn't do anything!

Innkeeper: I'm sorry to hear that, though that shower made your hair look so fabulous! I can give you a slight refund for the wifi issues.

Anger: I don't want a refund. I want wifi.

(Dread and Happiness enters hearing the yelling.)

Happiness: Jeez, calm down. You don't need to yell. Everything is going to be okay!

Anger: I don't want to hear it, little miss 'I'm so lucky', 'I love everyone', 'Everything is sunshine and rainbows'. You don't understand real life.

Dread: She has a point, ya know.

(Happiness looks offended. Their sunshiney facade is breaking down.)

Innkeeper: All of you! Stop this! You're all being ridiculous, go eat something, calm down, and maybe we can work this out.

(The Innkeeper is clearly stressed. Dread and Anger leave. Both are still very upset.)

Happiness: I just don't understand.

Innkeeper: They envy you. They have never had a good day, they want to know what it feels like.

Happiness: But Envy lives down the street from me, back home. That's not her.

Innkeeper: (*giggles*) They are not Envy. They feel envy towards you.

Happiness: Oh. Well, I wish they could feel what a good day is like.

Innkeeper: Me too.

(Happiness exits, waving goodbye. The Innkeeper walks to the front desk and begins planning.)

Innkeeper: (*thinking out loud*) Maybe, I could plan a good day. I'll pan out a yummy dinner and some activities throughout the day. That would be nice.

(Gasps) I will need more decorations!

(The Innkeeper begins typing rapidly on her computer as the lights fade to black)

Scene 3:

(It is the next morning, The Innkeeper is at their desk. They begin writing a note to slip under Happiness's door, proposing their plan.)

Innkeeper: (*writing*)

Dear Happiness,

I have come up with a fantastic plan, but I require your help. I want to plan a "good" day for everyone. We will have a delicious dinner, fun activities, and so many cute decorations! Yay! Let me know what you think! Can't wait to get started.

Xoxo,

Your fav Innkeeper.

(The Innkeeper walks stage right and slides the note under a door. Happiness is stage right and minging their business. They notice the note, pick it up and scream.)

Happiness: OH MY GOD! YES!

(Happiness opens the door so fast it hits the wall with a loud thud. Happiness then jumps and hugs the Innkeeper.)

Happiness: We need to start planning now! We need snacks and fun crafts. Can we get a horse? NO! A whole petting zoo! Little goats and pigs. Can we please!

Innkeeper: Maybe not a horse but a petting zoo? Heck yeah!

(They both exit while mumbling to each other about their plans and ideas.)

Scene 4:

(It is later in the day, there are papers strewn over the floor and many amazon packages piled up in the corner. One spot light is on the Innkeeper.)

Innkeeper: (*on the phone*) Hello Fear! This is the Innkeeper! Happiness and I wanted to invite you to have a "good" day with us! It will be next week! Call me

back if you have any questions! Oh, and invite all your friends! We have a petting zoo!

(The Innkeeper hangs up, the spot goes out. A new spotlight comes up on Happiness.)

Happiness: Hello Anxiety! This is Happiness and your favorite Innkeeper, and we would like to invite you to have a “good” day! It’s next week! Be there or be square! Oh, wait, I didn’t mean that. Sorry Anxiety! Hope to see you there.

(Both spots come up on Happiness and the Innkeeper. Both are on the phone, making calls to different emotions.)

Innkeeper: Hello Disappointment!

Happiness: Hey Envy! Or should I say neighbor?

Innkeeper: Hi Greif!

Happiness: What’s up Denial!

Innkeeper: Good afternoon Despair!

Happiness: Heyyyyyy Apathy!

Scene 5:

(Time skip to the Happy Day. All the emotions are present and clearly not happy about being there. Happiness and the Innkeeper are on a pedestal of some kid and they are announcing the day’s activities.)

Happiness: Hello and welcome to our first ever Happy Day! Please take a seat while we give you some info on some activities! I’m so excited!

(Short beat, while everyone is getting seated. Happiness’s excitement is visible.)

Innkeeper: Hello everyone! I’m the Innkeeper and this is Happiness! We are so happy you all came here today!

(The crowd “cheers”, but sounds more like complaining)

Happiness: *(whispering loudly into the mic and bumping into the Innkeeper)* Omg! They love it already!

Innkeeper: *(stifling a laugh)* Our first activity today will be a tour of the grounds and while we do that we will share some coping skills to help you have a good day! Once everyone is done chatting and snacking we can begin! Meet us at the courtyard here shortly!

(Slowly, everyone makes their way to one side of the stage. Happiness and the Innkeeper are leading, and the tour begins. Everyone walks along the edge of the stage looking out into the audience as if they are the scenery.)

Happiness: Over here, is where the petting zoo was going to be, but then we found out we need a license for that. *(shrugs)*

Innkeeper: And there, up ahead is our gazebo. It was just built last year!

Happiness: Just up ahead is the perfect picnic spot! (rushes to the spot) And what a surprise there is already a picnic set up! (feigns surprise) Come on!
(Everyone gathers around and an awkward silence fills the air. Denial starts smacking as they eat.)

Anger: STOP SMACKING WHILE YOU EAT.

Anxiety: Please stop yelling.

Anger: IT WAS YOU! (pointing at Denial)

Denial: It was not!

Fear: Don't fight! I'm scared.

(Anxiety and Fear grab on to each other and huddle together like frightened penguins.)

Denial: Let's just all be happy!

Dread: Ughhhh...

(Happiness taps Fear on the shoulder in an attempt to calm them down and grab their attention, but ends up just scaring them.)

Happiness: It's oka—

Fear: AHHHHHH!

Anger: STOP SCREAMING!

(Fear and Anxiety run off stage screaming together, now scared of Anger. Anger chases them while yelling threats)

Denial: (while getting up to leave) I didn't do anything!

(Happiness slowly changes to a less happy version of themselves. They physically look sad, and sound sad. The Innkeeper walks over to comfort them.)

Innkeeper: It's okay, Happiness. It will be okay.

(Happiness bursts into tears and has a very sad and emotional breakdown.)

(Fade to blackout.)

Scene 6:

(Lights come up on Happiness. They are resting on the couch, still clearly very sad. The Innkeeper enters and sits next to Happiness, and puts their arm around them.)

Innkeeper: You know, it's not your fault.

Happiness: It feels like it is.

Innkeeper: You are allowed to feel sad, but don't take on the blame. It's not fair to yourself.

Happiness: Well, nothing in life is fair or good or worth living for. (Tearing up again.)

Innkeeper: Yes it is. You're worth living for. Happiness is worth living for.

Happiness: Well, I don't feel very happy right now.

Innkeeper: But that's right now. That's not forever.

(The Innkeeper stands up and walks across stage, as if they are leaving. Happiness cuts them off as they are leaving.)

Happiness: Wait, where are you going?

Innkeeper: Oh, just to the local petting zoo, wanna come?

Happiness: YES!

(Fade to Blackout.)

Scene 7:

(Lights come up to a surprise party thrown by The Innkeeper and all the negative emotions. There is a huge banner that says "I'm sorry," it almost touches the ground. Little goats are eating the sign.)

Innkeeper: *(offstage)* Just this way.

(Enter the Innkeeper and Happiness.)

Innkeeper (cont.): And Ta Da! *(jazz hands)*

Negative Emotions: SURPRISE!

Happiness: OH MY GOD! TINY GOATS JUST FOR ME?!

Innkeeper: Yes! You deserve it.

(Happiness gets the zoomies and runs around giving everyone a hug, whether they want to or not.)

Happiness: *(while hugging, fast)* Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!

Anxiety: We have learned a lot from you. I think today was a good day.

Fear: All because of you!

Anger: I had a great day. I only got angry once. *(glares at denial)*

Denial: It wasn't perfect, but it was good.

Happiness: *(tearing up)* That means so much!

Anxiety: I think I've had good days before, I just didn't realize it.

Fear: You helped us realize that today.

Dread: Will this be an annual thing?

Innkeeper: I think it should be!

Happiness: OMG REALLY YES!

Innkeeper: Next year's will be bigger and better!

Happiness: WITH A PETTING ZOO!

Innkeeper: Yes, with a petting zoo! And you're all invited! *(gesture to crowd as if they are invited too)*

(Fade to blackout)

Kaavya Panchal

Grade 10, Lafayette High School

Educator: Jeffrey Landow

Poetry



IF THERE WAS A GOD

my eyes lock with the statue in front of me
its gold rimmed eyes and heavy jewelry
the smile on its face frozen in time
a symbol of eternal happiness

i falter in the middle of the prayer
the foreign words i will never look up the meaning for
leaving my lips softly
as i realize

the blooming of flowers in spring was no coincidence
rather,
it represents
the beauty after barren and cold times

but when i look around
at deserted cities
smoke filled neighborhoods
trash piles littering greenery

i see no light
i see no beauty

i simply see a dying planet
and a cruel species
nothing more

no flowers blooming in spring

nor in summer
no matter what they sermonize

every day
reading out of a dead tree
they preach words
so smudged in ink
that the meaning
has been lost for
years

yet
they still think
someone is watching over us
praising us

but if there was a god
we wouldn't exist

for
a god wouldn't slaughter animals
a god wouldn't destroy the environment
a god wouldn't kill and rape its own
a god wouldn't poison the only place we can live

but they still think
that there is a god
and the flowers will bloom in spring

you'll be dead when they bloom again

if they ever
bloom
again

Shreeya Patel

Grade 8, Parkway West Middle School

Educator: Tracy Bouslog

Personal Essay & Memoir



Stolen Dolls and Happiness

As I sat down cleaning out my closet drawer, I spotted a doll: not just any doll. A stolen, bodiless LOL doll.

Back in the olden days of 2019 in my second grade class during indoor recess, all the girls huddled around my table with excitement and readiness to watch Katie* show her newest and shiniest doll in her collection. I just so happened to sit next to her and the glorious doll, which made my future plans (that I didn't even know I was brewing up) easier for me to follow through with. "My mom said only a couple of people can touch it, so I get to pick who!" Katie told everyone while running her fingers through her long blonde hair. I jumped up out of my seat ready to call dibs when Katie handed the doll off to MY best friend, Anne. *What a traitor!* I thought to myself. Anne's face lit up with the joy that should have been mine. *Whatever, I'll get it next.* I declared in my head.

After a long, excruciating five minutes, Katie softly took her doll back, and as I got myself ready to claim the LOL as mine, she looked over at me and moved her hand slowly towards me. *YES IT'S MINE!* I almost shouted until she handed off her doll to Savanna. *Hello? How's that any fair, she didn't even call dibs!*

"Hey Katie, can I play with the doll next?" I asked in the sweetest voice I could muster up after her betrayal. In a crazy turn of events, she says, "No." or something like that, maybe a *sorry, you can tomorrow though!* But I tuned that out because all I could hear was the repeated ringing of rejection in my ears. *It's not like I asked for a kidney! Just five minutes! Ugh, I hope she loses that doll and never gets to play with it again!* These thoughts bounced off my eight-year-old developed head, slowly giving the devil on my shoulder an idea of meticulous planning and absolutely delicious revenge.

Just steal the doll. It was the thought that acted as the first domino to fall in my brain. The plan went a little something like this: First, wait for everybody to

ooh and ahh at someone else; second, slowly reach my hand-over into my table buddy's bag and swiftly put the doll inside mine; third, wait as the day ends, and the doll is in my forever possession, never to be denied of playing permission again. Now here was the hard part: going through with the plan.

"Guys, do you want to see my Christmas wish list? My dad said Santa is gonna get me three things on it!" a random girl with jet black hair and freckles exclaimed, posing as the best distraction. My heart was beating out of my chest like a drum, and my fingers shook as I went to reach my hand down into her bag. *CRUNCH!* Her bag yelled as I dug through it. Her bag seemed to be an ocean, and I was searching for its floor, where hopefully the shiny treasure lay. *WOO-HOO!* I shrieked in my head because I felt rubbery hair on my fingertips. Now I just had to grip it and make a quick swap, and I had to do it fast because although the girl had a long list of all her "needs," it wouldn't go on for much longer, and I'd be caught with my arm halfway inside Katie's bag. There weren't many excuses for that!

"And I think that's it!" she announced, right as I moved Katie's doll into my bag. As everyone slowly turned their attention away from the girl, and to their friends stories, I started drawing a beautifully curated stick figure. On my side, I heard rustling of a bag. A rustling sound almost familiar, almost like tiny hands digging through a bag looking for something.

"WHERE'S MY DOLL?" Katie cried out. *Oh, shoot.* My plan only included going home and playing with my brand-new doll. Not an interrogation. *Could I be sent to jail for something like this? Probably not... right?* It would be alright as long as she didn't search our bag; I couldn't get caught. "I swear I left it at the very bottom of my bag!" she shouted as her bag got turned upside down and shaken, removing all the loose papers, book fair money, pencil case, chips, and all other debris, but no sign of the doll. I turned to face her to help her look for the doll – that I knew very well was hidden in a pocket of my book bag – only to see slow and steady streams of tears falling down her face. *Well, that wasn't supposed to happen.* More of the boys who weren't already at the table looked over to see what was going on. Mrs. Graclen, my teacher, overheard the commotion and made her walk of doom and despair towards our table. By the time she made it over to our table, all the girls were on the ground, collectively looking on the floor for this doll.

"What is going on over here!" my teacher yelled. From her perspective, it probably looked like another mess she was going to be forced to clean, but from mine it looked like a crime scene that had my fingerprints all over it.

“Her doll went missing!” Catlin yelled for Katie, who was a sobbing mess.

“Oh well, it didn’t grow legs and walk away, so it’s got to be in here somewhere,” she reassured Katie, who had moved on from crying and now to sniffing. I felt a pit in my stomach like a boulder. The guilt building up inside almost made me throw up. I came up with a new plan, but this time Katie was going to get the doll *partially* back.

Hands roamed around the ground, checking and rechecking around the room. I, on the other hand, sneaked over to my bag and snatched the tiny gold and brown doll from the side of the inner pocket. I hid it behind my back and tried to snap the head apart from the body, so we both got an equal share. I tugged at it and feel my way around the plastic head, but it just wouldn’t budge. I heard softer cries from Katie on my left. Softly, I sighed and grabbed the doll from behind me and drop it to the floor. “I found it!” In the most cheerful tone I could get out.

Katie sprinted toward me, and engulfed me in a tight, air-sucking hug. “Thank you so much, you don’t know how much this means to me!” She said to me, not knowing that I was the only reason why this happened.

“Oh, uh yeah, your welcome.” I quickly said before getting off the carpeted floor onto the plastic seat, and getting back to my stick man drawing. A tear hit my paper like the first raindrop of a heavy down pour. *I did the right thing, so why am I so sad?* I thought, even though I knew exactly why. I wanted that doll. But I didn’t want Katie to be upset again.

The devil on my shoulder seemed to whisper another idea like a melody. *This isn’t a good idea.* I seemed to say to myself. I watched Katie put her beloved doll right in front of her. She smiled at her friends, who returned to their desk right before playtime was over. They smiled back at her before getting ready to start our class read aloud. My mind went over the newfound plan that I’d conjured up. *Still not a good idea.* I repeated, but my hands moved anyway. As Katie walked over to Mrs. Graclen to ask a question about our read aloud book, I took the doll. With all the strength I had, I snapped the head and body apart from each other. I put the body of the doll back on her desk, the shimmer of the gold and brown colors reflecting onto the desk. The head of the doll looked at me in my eyes, almost judging me for what I was doing. *I know, I know.* Was what I said back to the head. In an instant, the head was shoved far down into the deep pockets of my bag. *It’s a win-win now.* I said to myself, not even knowing who I was trying to convince.

Katie didn't realize the missing part of the doll when she lifted its tiny body, and stuffed it inside her purple glitter backpack. She was still smiling, but I knew she wouldn't be once she went home. I was the only one who would ever know what had happened to the doll and will carry the guilt with me until it gets shoved into a closet drawer years after.

*Names have been fictionalized.

Alya Pellegrini

Grade 11, John Burroughs School

Educator: Lydia Smith

Personal Essay & Memoir



Response to New York Times Article “Are Young People Today Too Fixated on Their Health?”

Teens obsessing over health is an online epidemic, spreading across all aspects of my daily teen life like a continually spreading disease. People may believe that food is all that they consume; however, in today’s world, all teens consume social media.

The changes teenagers struggle with beginning in middle school come with a host of challenges. Beyond our control, we develop unhealthy coping mechanisms to combat the rumors, drama, and unrealistic beauty standards sprinting through our minds. This is not different from the stress our parents dealt with in their teenage years, as well, right? Unfortunately not. Social media has completely altered our perceptions of reality. Individuals attempting to create “relatable content” often indirectly project their underlying issues; the platforms they use, such as TikTok, know which audiences to target and how to influence each demographic differently. Their focus on monetizing the content treats our mental health as if it were a toy – malleable and played with for profit. I’m a 17-year-old girl who runs 50 miles a week and typically fuels my body properly. Still, last track season took a toll on my mental health, and subconsciously, I fell into the trap of “health” on social media, framed under the illusion that it would cradle and fix me. However, I deteriorated following the lead of other “healthy” people my age. The root cause of the toxic relationship I developed with food at that time was not due to my consumption of “unpronounceable ingredients” in my diet, but rather the content shared by other girls my age on my screen.

In recent years, trends in the teenage content world include fear-mongering about certain foods, macronutrients, and ingredients. “Crunchy teens” continue to shrink as we watch their content and wonder whether that

should be our norm if we don't want "cancer from toxic seed oils". These influencers often struggle with Amenorrhea due to low body fat and nutrient deficiencies, which is extremely dangerous and should not be glorified. However, their content influences our young brains, which are constantly reprogrammed to fear new things. We continuously scroll through and consume content about how we must "be in zone 2 for productive cardio, eat high protein, hit 10k steps a day, and only use skincare products made with raw honey with antibacterial benefits." All these suggestions, intended to "lower cortisol levels," are actually causing more harm than good. Caffeine consumption among teens has skyrocketed, and trying to fuel long school days with cottage cheese has left teens reliant on numerous Alanis as meal substitutes. Teenage girls post "what I eat in a day, healthy and high protein on 75 hard" and it is a clear cover for an eating disorder, typically perceived as a negative coping mechanism, and now the picture-perfect poster image of "health" and "beauty" online. The definition of health, according to the World Health Organization, is "a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity." Then how come while today's teenagers are "too fixated on their health", "eating disorder-related health visits more than doubled among people younger than 17 in the past five years. From 2018 through mid-2022, visits among this age group jumped 107.4% across all eating disorders, from around 50,000 visits at the beginning of 2018 to more than 100,000 in 2022. Visits related to anorexia nervosa, which has the highest death rate of any mental illness, jumped 129.26%." (NBC News). It is also important to note that medical action around eating disorders includes physical and mental treatment, two of the categories under the definition of health. Are we continuing to categorize this epidemic under the label of "health" obsession? According to an article from The New York Times in 2022, "TikTok starts recommending content tied to eating disorders and self-harm to 13-year-olds within 30 minutes of their joining the platform." Does this also fall under the realm of "a complete physical, mental, and social well-being"? When I hear the crisp sound of a Monster Energy being clicked open at 8 am, should I look at this under the lens of a "health" trend as the bubbles rise to the surface? The fake realities and glorified unhealthy habits of social media are going to leave a deep, lasting scar on many future generations to come if we keep framing this version of "health" merely as an "over obsession".

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Jayla Pruitt

Grade 12, John Burroughs School

Educator: Eleanor DesPrez

Personal Essay & Memoir



I'm Sorry

"I noticed you say I'm sorry a lot."

"What?" I replied, the word almost trapped in my throat.

"You say sorry a lot. You just said sorry for stuttering."

"Oh my God, sorry."

We sat in the strange but comfortable silence that my conversations with Mr. Harris usually leave us in.

"What made you start saying I'm sorry?"

The silence continued until I produced an answer. I assumed I first said I'm sorry when my mother told me to as a way of correcting my behavior.

"No, *when* did you start saying sorry unnecessarily?" Mr. Harris said.

And to that I answered by sucking in the side of my cheek, avoiding eye contact until it came to me.

On my mother's mother's side of the family, there were eight siblings in her immediate family; half were lighter-skinned, and the other half were darker. As I got older, I began listening to my mother's conversations. I started to catch on to the underlying colorism my darker-skinned mother faced from both sides of my family, even my own great-grandparents. This realization brought me back to my Aunt Paula, one of the lighter siblings among the eight.

I told Mr. Harris that I found it important to know that, before he knew me at 12, I was a rather rambunctious child. I was loud. I was always cracking jokes. I was the center of attention. I was charismatic. But upon reflection, my Aunt Paula was the opposite. She was proper; she participated in Jack and Jill, and she got ready every day fully, even when staying at home. Every meal she had was home-cooked, and she had the perfect FDA-approved ratio of vegetables to grains to protein. She was the perfect Black woman. She was refined in her quiet,

and I was audacious in my volume. How I think of it is that one day she thought, *'Oh, my nieces ought to be the same.'*

She lived down the street from us and babysat me plenty. My sister, being outshone by my loudness and charm, was always quieter and therefore favored in my Aunt's eyes, but me? I needed work. So she asked me if I wanted to start cleaning her house as a job. Eight-year-old me would never say no to some extra cash. While cleaning her house, I would burp on occasion, like a normal person does. She would reprimand me to say 'excuse me,' and then I would have to apologize for not saying it. So whenever I burped, I would say "Excuse me, sorry". The same went for dropping something or making any other small mistake in her presence. Over time, these corrections piled up, and I found myself apologizing for everything. She tried to make me similar to her by silencing me, but instead silenced me by making me similar to her. For every sorry I spoke out loud, I took away the volumes of words I never got to speak.

At the same time, my parents started teaching me about how I, as a Black woman, would be viewed by society. And through their teachings, the media I consumed, and the environment I was around, I learned that almost everybody, including my *own* people, might perceive me in the same way Aunt Paula did, but more critically, harshly, and unforgivingly. This was hard for me to conceptualize because my boldness and loudness never came with aggression. So I started getting quieter and started using 'I'm sorry' to reassure people that I never had a mean intent, and that everything was placid. Society only saw my loudness as aggression, while I saw my loudness as joy. Still, I had no other choice but to be meek and agreeable because if I made a sound, it would echo back too harshly, and no one would be able to hear anything else.

"Wow," Mr. Harris said in a gentle voice. He knows me well enough to know that when I get to talking and recollecting, I lose sense of space, so he said it with a tenderhearted tone, bringing me back down to earth, like he always does. And to that—you guessed it— I said, "Oh my God, I'm sorry I just yapped for 10 minutes," and he stared at me and waited for me to realize, and we both laughed, like we always do.

In the short interaction, even in the laughter, I felt the weight behind this phrase, and how much of myself has been lost behind these endless apologies. I wasn't saying sorry because I was wrong, I was saying sorry because I was me.

I spent so long apologizing for who I am that I forgot who I was. So I will try not to apologize as much as I do. I will try to let go of the unspoken resentment I have towards my Aunt Paula and the one I unknowingly harbored

towards my parents for misinterpreting their guidance. I'm not sorry for existing, but I am sorry it took me this long to realize it.

Jayla Pruitt

Grade 12, John Burroughs School

Personal Essay & Memoir



Disembodiment

“I’m not queer, I’m disembodied.” This line from Luca Gudaning’s film, *Queer* (2024), echoed in my ears. I left the mall theater, and actually had the experience—feeling as if I were in space, looking down to find nothing at all. Yes—this was it, this was what I craved: to ascend out of my body, to slip free from labels, assumptions, and judgment. But was that actually freeing myself? This euphoric daze was shattered by the circumspect glances and that familiar feeling of judgment. Suddenly, I remembered where I was: Frontenac Plaza, the most upscale shopping mall in Missouri. I wasn’t meant to be here. I was not—in the slightest bit—free. I was not disembodied. I was me, and to everyone around me, I was a Black woman. As my Black second-grade teacher, Mr. Speed, once told me, “There are only two things you are required to do in life: be Black and die.” These words have stuck with me ever since. Yet, from my parents and teachers, I learned not only to be Black, but also to love who I was from a very young age. And this stands true—I do love me—I just hate the stereotypes some people see when they look at me.

I returned home and spent my last precious hours of my first day being seventeen staring at the Miles Morales and Peter Parker posters on my bedroom wall, and cried. I’ll never be Spider-Man, slipping on a mask to vanish into someone else’s gaze. There’s no hiding or transcending from my own skin. Even that thought scared me.

I’ve been chasing that fleeting feeling from after seeing that movie. Sometimes it feels like every time I blink, slipping free from labels and boxes gets farther and farther away. Every time a breaking news article drops, another

opportunity or a constitutional right is snatched out of my hands, and another 10 meters is added to the front of the finish line.

It's been almost a year since my out-of-body experience, but I've stopped chasing it. When I close my eyes, I can still sense it, as if it's taunting me, but I've learned not to fall for it. Disembodiment is like those gumball machines at the mall, once enticing, but now it's just part of the scenery you no longer notice. But I've found power in being seen as myself. I am not void of identity; it radiates from me—I am embodied.

Through this whole experience, I've learned that being Black is not a prison to escape but a home, and in that truth lies real freedom. I've also grown passionate about *embodiment*—living fully and unapologetically in my body, resisting stereotypes, honoring my identity, and embracing a freedom rooted in love rather than escape. This passion now drives how I move through the world every day. My labels are not chains, but roots. I am not meant to be disembodied. When I am embodied, that's when I'm strongest.

This is only one of many awakenings I hope to have in my lifetime, each revealing a deeper truth about who I am and what I'm becoming.

Alice Pulsinelli

Grade 11, Bishop Seabury Academy

Educator: Michael Pulsinelli

Short Story



The Flight

Airports might be the least human places out there. Especially at 1:37 in the morning, when the windows simply look out on swallowing darkness, penetrated only by flashing lights guiding the periodic arrival or departure across the runway and the small fingernail sliver of moon glistening low in the smoky sky.

From my hard plastic chair, which is digging insistently into my back, I listen to an announcement about not leaving my belongings unattended for the seventeenth time. I want to scream at it to just be quiet, because I don't have anything worth taking anyway, but I don't because I know it would do no good. Even if I screamed until my throat cracked and my eyes watered, that announcement would stream right along, monotonous and robotic, accompanied by its little introductory *ding*.

I look over at the bleary-eyed people streaming through the security line, bustling and busy and afraid of missing their flights and wonder for a moment what it would feel like to be that determined to get somewhere. The dry, penetrating chill of the stale airport air rips at my lungs as I filter it in and out and lean my head back to look up at the chalky gray ceiling, colorless as gum that's been chewed long past losing its flavor.

The announcement plays for an eighteenth time. I wring my hands together and tap my foot on the lumpy, carpeted ground. I reach into my pocket for my phone and spin it between my fingers, trying to think of something to do with it so I'll look busy, although no one's glancing at me long enough to care. Feeling deflated, I replace my phone and begin sliding the zipper of my singular dirty orange backpack back and forth. *Zlllip. Zlllip. Zlllip.*

My eyes glance almost unconsciously at the blaring blue screen that broadcasts the time remaining until boarding. *47 minutes.* My fingers, which have dully abandoned my zipper, drum lightly on the arm of my chair, thumping mutedly on the plastic. I want to stand up, but I'm afraid of the lost labyrinth sense of having nowhere to go that I know will greet me if I do.

The cold air penetrates deeper, ripping past my skin and sliding like icy water down my spine. The gray ceiling above me swells in my sleepy gaze, manufacturing imaginary constellations and swirling like untold myths. A cheap impersonation of the night sky that I know is somewhere above me yet seems so very far out of reach.

Everything here is a substitute, a pitiful effort made to make this artificial place seem natural and free. The vent beside me pretends to be a gentle mountain breeze, but beneath its feather-soft whistle, I can hear it cackling in admiration of its master deception. The chair below me claims the solid stature of a centuries-rooted tree, yet its root systems are nothing but nails jammed roughly into the ground, never patient enough to wait for true stability.

The terrible blue boarding screens flashing at me from every gate begin to merge together in my exhaustion, wavering and swirling into a commercial ocean, frothing with waves of letters and barcodes and advertisements for plane seating upgrades and diamond memberships to travel lounges that have long since ceased being comfortable. I try closing my eyes for a moment, but the searing blue light penetrates past my eyelids, rolling through me until I am afraid that I will never be able to see darkness again.

Somewhere beside me, I hear a clear, distinct voice, and my heart skips a few beats as I wonder if the words are for me. Blinking, I tear my eyes away from the subduing wall of blue light. The voice, so clear and golden, like a perfect reflection, is not for me; rather, the woman stands in front of the customer service desk asking instructions to gate B-10, this moment a mere stop on her hero's journey which will never remember me. She bustles off, her black suitcase glinting in the watery airport light and swallowing up the shiny floor as it slides confidently along beside her. I feel a glassy tear on my eyelash and wipe it ferociously away, begging my eyes not to betray me like this.

36 minutes until boarding. I can't believe so little time has passed. It's as though all forward movement in this place is stifled, dripping like suppressed drops of water searching for release. A plastic smell is suspended in the air, crawling needle-sharp into my airstream and assaulting my lungs. I pull out my phone and again spin it vacantly between my thumb and forefinger, wishing

fiercely that I had someone to call, a knight on a wild-maned horse to come whisk me away from this dungeon, promising me a happily ever after.

The announcement about not leaving my belongings unattended plays again, storming out of the speaker above my head with a self-absorbed kind of confidence, feasting on the sound of its own metallic voice. I've lost track of how many times it's played now, but its steadfast, completely unchanging tone pierces me again. Nothing here cares about me. Nothing. I pinch my arms to hold back the goosebumps prickling up across my skin, but the knowledge pierces deeper than a knife slash, making my veins feel as though they're filled with fire, snaking through my body with every hot, painful pump of my heart.

I watch the boarding countdown change from 35 to 34 minutes, watching closely in an effort to force the time to pass as it should, begging those bright, impersonal numbers to notice me, to notice how scared and alone I am, to notice how I am shrinking away to nothing in this flimsy seat. I beg them to reassure me, to promise me that someone, somewhere, cares when I board that plane.

They don't. If anything, they jeer back, blurring beneath the flash of my blinking lashes across my sightline. With the self-inflated air of a first-grade bully, they cruelly remind me that this flight is no escape; after all, I am only a name on a schedule, remembered and forgotten like a handful of sand streaming out from a closed fist. I feel like crying out, but I am more afraid of reaching for nothing than I am of not reaching at all.

And then suddenly the imprisoning shell around me is fragmented into thousands of sparkling pieces as he flops down into the chair beside me, ever so slightly vibrating the entire row of seats that stand cold and empty save for me.

I study him through my periphery, afraid to look and ruin this moment, imagining he is a micro-thin sheet of glass and my eyes are unwavering lasers that will shatter him in mere moments if the two meet.

He's young, with a level plane of copper hair that dips over his forehead, swishing each time he adjusts the position of his neck. He crosses his legs in front of him with a feigned sense of ease, but his nearly-perfect act is broken by the incessant bouncing of his left foot as his glossy black dress shoe taps repeatedly against the ground. His fingers swipe his phone screen busily, but the casual confidence broadcasted by the angular set of his chin does not spread to his eyes, which lightly shine with unkempt emotion.

I am too quick to see myself in all of them; I should know this by now; I should not let myself care. And yet, in this moment, I am the gleaming knight

upon the wild-maned horse, and I let myself picture for a fraction of a second the world in which I save him.

I imagine him sitting in front of a desk, papers piling up haphazardly on either side of his face, his eyes slowly losing that bright focus as his electric dreams fade into a reality of schedules and deadlines that chain him and twist him and eventually capture his world. I see him sitting alone, shoulders slumped like overworked clay, eating half of a sandwich during his pitifully short lunch break not to enjoy the taste but simply so he can continue to churn out financial reports and sign contracts and copy papers, all so some superior who doesn't even know him, has never even seen him, will send down a paycheck with his name on it. He'll be a rat trapped in a lab maze, participating in every experiment because there is no other life he knows.

I am too quick to see myself in all of them; I should know that; I should stop with this. I try to build a different narrative, moving him to a table in a homey office surrounded by friends on their ample lunch break, chatting and laughing. But the image is distorted, the colors too bright, the sounds mechanical and forced. I wish I could believe in this, but it's like a child's crayon drawing, sweet and safe but not quite cohesive.

He has a shiny blue backpack with him, still flattened at the back from perching on its rack in the store, probably a gift from his parents when they heard about him getting his first job. I wonder how long it will be before it's as washed and faded as mine, tossed aside in the dusty corner of each impersonal hotel his company pays for as they force him to drag his tired limbs back and forth across the country.

He stands up suddenly, his fingers hooked in his belt loops almost as though he doesn't notice them, and I'm afraid for a moment that I've scared him away, breaking his thin glass with my laser eyes. But he simply walks over to the water fountain a few paces away and leans down to drink, his frame becoming an acute angle like the pole of a deconstructed tent. The fountain's mechanical insides whirl insistently as he releases the rectangular button and the glassy stream of water's perfect arc falls as quickly as it was brought to life. I shiver and hug my arms around myself, afraid of the ease in which it decides the fate of that helpless arc, bolstering and flattening it on the whim of whoever happens to press that button.

He straightens back up, stacking each portion of his frame into distinctly perfect posture. I think of his parents placing their hands firmly on his shoulders and reminding him of the importance of always standing up tall and

am struck for a moment wondering when I stopped standing up like that, proud and certain as a polished marble statue. The years fade together like a glitching video as I grope around in my mind, trying to identify the moment when that part of me was broken forever, but it's like a strange void, an absence where there should be memories between my young, eager, foolish self and myself now, arms huddled around my body as though afraid of losing anything else.

As he returns to his seat, our eyes meet for a fraction of a second, and he pauses ever so slightly. His fingers are disconnected from his belt loops now, but they move by his side as though he's playing an invisible instrument, flitting around to melodies that only he will ever be able to hear. Angry at myself, I lower my eyes, gazing at the floor like it's an Oscar-winning movie and trying to ignore the slow, scorching burn trying to escape from my cheeks with its ruthless, fire-wrought claws.

I feel him sit back down but don't dare even to find him in my periphery, focusing instead on my shoelaces, looped through each row of holes with a precision I don't remember developing, a precision that has become an almost unconscious habit. I wonder when his shoe-tying will lose all of its lively luster and become such a dull, mechanical process as he loses pride in everything that the perfect loops symbolize.

I am too quick to see myself in all of them; I need to stop this; I need to. I look at the screen: *17 minutes until boarding*, 17 minutes until he and I are separated, a valley driven between us that will widen and widen until we are miles apart and will never see each other again.

He does not want to be saved. He does not need to be saved. What would I say to him anyway, a random person in a dull gray airport in the middle of the night? I am not that hero, not that knight on a wild-maned horse with the ability to rewrite his story. He will write his own beginning, middle, and end, and in the meantime, I must find the power to save myself.

Alice Pulsinelli

Grade 11, Bishop Seabury Academy

Educator: Michael Pulsinelli

Poetry



F₄R₁I₁E₁N₁D₂S₁H₄I₁P₃

They asked me why I play Scrabble.
“What could be fun about that?”
One asked, and another, a ruder one, said,
“Don’t you have better things to do
Then sitting around memorizing the dictionary?”
And the worst one:
“Don’t you have friends?”
I tried to explain:
“Well, it’s not really just memorizing words...”
And
“There’s actually a lot of strategy;
You have to consider where on the board you play
And what tiles the other player could have
And trying to use your Q’s and X’s and Z’s
On the triple letter score.
And in tournament play, you interact with your opponent,
Just like in any sport.”
The laughter erupted like boiling water,
Stinging like smoke, assaulting my eyes
And muffling my hearing like I was underwater,
Which I wished I was
Because I figured that the fish and the whales
And even the sharks
Would be nicer than this.
When I got home, I pulled out my

Official Scrabble Players' dictionary
(the one used in North American tournament play).
I wanted to want to rip out the pages
And crumple them and stomp on them
And grind them to a pulp.
I wanted to want to dismantle my Scrabble board,
Listening to the snap of breaking plastic bands,
And put the maroon velvet bag of letter tiles
In the back of the attic, in the realm of the shoeboxes
And the baby clothes my mom couldn't bear to get rid of
And the raincoat from the dollar store in Colorado
That somehow seemed to leave you wetter
Then if you'd never worn a raincoat in the first place.
I wanted to want to relegate those tiles
To the land of the exiles,
Never to be seen again.
But I didn't.
Because when it comes down to it,
You don't hurt your friends.

Ira Rodrigues

Grade 12, Ladue Horton Watkins High School

Educator: Abigail Eisenberg

Journalism



Twin It to Win It

By the pool, the air hangs thick with chlorine and adrenaline. The girls' swim and dive conference has just begun, and as Nevinka Amarakone (12) adjusts her goggles, she feels the pressure. Cheers, splashing, the referee's whistle — it all blurs together. Standing in her suit and cap, surrounded by water, the chaos can feel overwhelming.

But one glance at the window cuts right through it. There's her twin in the next-door gym, fresh from the mat. Wrestling meets are punctuated by teammates' cheers and the thud of bodies, but despite this intensity, Nethmi Amarakone (12) still finds time to see her sister, to cheer her on.

Different sports. Different gyms. A wall of glass between them.

But even on opposite sides of the window, they haven't forgotten where it all began: together.

New Lanes, New Mats

Nethmi and Nevinka were introduced to sports early on, starting with swimming at the age of 5, and continued until they joined the high school's swim and water polo team in freshman year. For Nevinka, the sports clicked instantly. But while she'd found her place, Nethmi struggled. It was the summer before sophomore year, at a just-for-fun wrestling tournament for the girls' water polo team, when Nethmi realized her wrestling talent for the first time.

"I wrestled all the girls in our team, and I beat all of them," Nethmi said. "I already didn't like swimming to an extent. I was the second slowest person in swim when I was a freshman. So I was like, 'Okay, maybe I'll just try wrestling, and if I don't like it, I'll just swim again.'"

The decision to switch wasn't one Nethmi made easily. Not only was she quitting a sport she'd spent years training in for a completely new one, but she

was also leaving her twin sister behind — something she'd never had to do before.

"It was a little weird at first," Nethmi said. "Nevinka has always been faster than me, so we would be in different lanes [during swim]. Now, she wasn't even in my view. She just wasn't there. I was on my own. But I kind of liked that in a way, because we've always been competing since we were born. Either I would be a little bit better at her than something, or she would be better at me than something. I feel like this was the first time I had something that was my own."

Although Nevinka supported her decision, adapting to swim alone was challenging.

"I had no problem with Nethmi prioritizing her own sports journey," Nevinka said. "I wanted her to do something good for herself, and I wanted her to be in love with the sport that she wanted to do. That's why I was actually proud of her for leaving. I wanted her to do well in wrestling. But I felt a little bit more alone. It just tested my mentality."

However, as the weeks passed, both sisters came to terms with the separation. When Nethmi competed in her first tournament, she realized how much the new sport meant to her.

"I don't think I've loved a hobby as much as I've loved wrestling," Nethmi said. "Throughout my life, I've always gone with the flow and done whatever. Wrestling, I think, was one of the first things I really chose for myself."

In the moment, the decision to split was difficult, especially since the twins had always been together. Reflecting on it now, however, they see it as a move that helped them develop individuality.

"I really think that us separating into our own sports helped," Nevinka said. "People know that's the swimmer, that's the wrestler. That's Nevinka, and that's Nethmi."

A Twin Thread

The twins have had a strong bond ever since they were little. Even their names seem to suggest it: Nevinka and Nethmi, always intertwined. Although they've grown into very different people, they feel they complement each other well.

"There are videos of us as babies jumping out of the bed, and Nevinka would shield me from falling," Nethmi said. "Nevinka's always been the protector. I think that's why she's so much more vocal than me."

As they grew and developed their individual identities, the twins started to rely on each other less. Still, they didn't let it put distance between them.

“Me and Nethmi aren’t very clingy twins,” Nevinka said. “We like doing what we individually like doing. [But] we’re both very similar. We make a lot of very similar choices, and we’re very teamwork-oriented. We care a lot. I see that in both of us.”

This passion hasn’t gone unnoticed by their classmates. Ruby Jurgiel (11), who is on the water polo team with both twins, has been consistently impressed by the dedication they show.

“They are both passionate players and fantastic teachers,” Jurgiel said. “One of my favorite memories with them is ‘rowing’ during the boys’ water polo games. This is how we cheer after each goal: one person, normally Nethmi, stands on the bleachers, while everyone else sits and pretends to row the number of goals our team has. Nevinka also has a big Ladue flag that she’ll wave. They work together to rally support and cheer our teams.”

Even with the separation, the twins have found ways to support each other in achieving their goals.

“I think we both encourage each other to be the best at our sports,” Nevinka said. “We just really want to be proud of something for ourselves, and we want to make the people looking up to us proud. We want to be good role models.”

Breaking the Mold

Neither swim, wrestling nor water polo are forgiving sports. With practice for hours every day after school, constant drills to complete and a continuous school workload to balance, the twins know firsthand how challenging it is to be an athlete.

“You need to be so disciplined in order to do well in swim,” Nevinka said. “You need to have a drive that is fueled purely by you. You want perfection out of everything, from your dive to your entry into the water, from your catch to your flip turns. You don’t want to waste any time.”

Wrestling, too, has its obstacles. P.E. teacher Kevin Clawson, who is the head coach for varsity wrestling, has helped multiple students with navigating it and is no stranger to its difficulties.

“Just the practices say it all,” Clawson said. “A wrestling match is six minutes. People believe that since it’s six minutes, it’s easy. But those six minutes are grueling.”

It’s not just the physical aspects of their sports that are demanding. Growing up Sri Lankan, the twins often felt unseen in the sports they played.

“From a young age, our parents have put us into sports or hobbies that have been predominantly white,” Nevinka said. “Being the only person of color, or darkest person in the room or in the pool, it’s made me feel lonely. I do feel connected to my culture, but sometimes the hobbies that I do or sports that I do make me want to push that part of me down.”

Being the minority, as the twins so often are, can be isolating. Although Nethmi has found many things to love about wrestling, the lack of representation frustrates her, too.

“Once in a while, I’ll realize, ‘Oh, I’m the only dark-skinned person in this room right now,’” Nethmi said. “I feel like there’s this pressure for me to do well, because I’m the only South Asian person who does wrestling. So, when I wrestle, I want to be noticed.”

Not only does wrestling lack cultural diversity, but it’s also male-dominated. When Nethmi joined the team in her sophomore year, there were just five girls on the team, and this number slowly dwindled. She decided to take action, posting flyers around the school to recruit from the Ladue community.

“I just made that poster and put my name on it so people can see that there’s another girl who was doing it at the moment, and they could,” Nethmi said. “Last year, I did that. This year, we have almost a full team. There’s a girl in every single weight class, and I’m just amazed by that. It just shows that girls are taking so much more interest in wrestling.”

While many sports have made strides in diversity, there are still underlying issues that the twins have had to confront. After four years on a team sport and more in club sports and extracurriculars, Nevinka knows how difficult it is to stay committed.

“I’m so proud of the girls who continue to persevere in their sports, despite being constantly let down or seen as other than,” Nevinka said. “I’m proud of them persevering through that other part of sports that is undeniably there. People like to pretend it’s not, but through all the locker room stuff and looks and microaggressions, it really is there. It’s impossible to isolate. Your identity [is] a part of you as a player. It’s undeniably who you are.”

Although the twins have had to deal with a lack of diversity in the sports they play, they try not to let it discourage them. Nevinka has even found a way to turn it into motivation.

“I see myself as a voice of representation, or a person of representation for people of color in general,” Nevinka said. “People see me as Indian or South

Asian, or try to generalize me, and I'm okay with being generalized, if I can be the person that is an inspiration for darker skin tones, for other people in the audience to look up to me and be like, 'Hey, she's swimming, I can swim too.'"

The twins have also had to deal with cultural expectations. Their parents, although supportive, were doubtful at first that choosing untraditional sports was the right choice for their daughters. This pressure has only left Nethmi with more motivation to pursue the unorthodox.

"As a South Asian kid, just think about how many kids who are just forced to do only academics and maybe robotics and tennis and swimming, [who] never figure out they could be amazing at something that's not the norm," Nethmi said. "Sometimes, even if your parents say no, or if your friends are like, 'Oh, why are you doing that,' you have to try something. Even if you are hesitating about trying something new, you should always try it."

By forging their own path, the twins hope to be inspirations for others.

"Ultimately, this sport will continue to be predominantly white or predominantly this and that if other people don't choose to become their own representation," Nevinka said. "My legacy will end here if no one else of color decides to follow through. Don't just quit because you think that you're not good enough, you're not like other people. Let that boil, let that turn that into motivation, and let that pressure you to become the best."

Why They Stay

Despite the grueling practice, conditioning and the isolation that both twins have faced, they have put in consistent effort, resulting in both sisters becoming team captains in junior year. This, more than anything, is why they stay: their fundamental passion for their sports.

"We're extremely motivated," Nevinka said. "We both really love our teams, and we really want to do anything possible to see the team as a whole succeed, not just ourselves. We carry our own successes through other people."

Jurgiel has been on the swim team with Nevinka for three years and is often in the same lane with her during practice. Navigating the training can be difficult, but Jurgiel has found Nevinka to be a source of strength.

"During a particularly difficult swim set, Nevinka never failed to make me or our whole lane laugh," Jurgiel said. "She is always able to bring out the best in everyone. Whenever we were losing, and I was particularly discouraged, she was always cheering me on the loudest. She gave me tips, brought the team together, and never failed to be my biggest supporter."

Nethmi has also found her own place in her sport. To Clawson, her persistence in improving her skills is what makes her a great player.

“She has grown so much as a wrestler,” Clawson said. “In the beginning, she struggled, but I could see that spark in her eyes and her drive to get better. Wrestling is a sport where if you put in the effort, you see results. She worked really hard.”

Her teammate and wrestling partner, Aiyana Ungacta (10), has watched her hone her wrestling talent over countless meets and is inspired by her dedication.

“Nethmi is one of the most hard-working people I’ve ever met in my entire life,” Ungacta said. “Two years ago, she was an entirely different wrestler than she is now, and that’s because she puts in so much time and effort into becoming the type of wrestler she is. She’s helped me grow so much over these past couple of seasons. I would not be the wrestler I am today if it wasn’t for Nethmi.”

Swimming, and sports in general, demands much from athletes: effort, time, dedication. Nevinka has found the best way to keep going is to have a strong love for it.

“The biggest thing that motivates me to swim faster is intense emotion,” Nevinka said. “When I swim, when I’m done with an event, I’m crawling out of a pool, basically. I’m leaving everything in the water, everything in that match. Let sports drain you, and then let them build you up.”

This drive is a sentiment that unites the sisters. Nethmi’s passion for wrestling has helped her navigate the tougher sides of it.

“Despite being the only person of color, basically, in an all-white room of kids, and being one of only four girls in my club, my love for the sport erases all the hardships,” Nethmi said. “Whenever I have a bad practice, or I get extremely injured during a practice, or I feel like I just can’t get up anymore, my love for wrestling just overcomes everything.”

The twins’ love for sports has been a defining characteristic of their lives. To them, it’s always been about furthering their passion, being role models to others and most importantly, proving themselves.

“I just want to make my younger self proud of me,” Nevinka said. “I want to be what I’ve dreamt of being, someone that I could have looked up to when I was a kid.”

Mary Russell

Grade 12, Home School

Novel



The Boy From Under the Lake

Synopsis: Hazel Calloway is a fisherman's daughter who longs to escape her lakeside village, Finneran, and her very ordinary family, which consists of her father and her sisters Beatrix and Jane. She discovers a black horse and an injured boy with wings asleep on the lakeshore. Tending to his injuries, the Calloways learn his name is Ezemond and he came from a faraway land called Elsewhere, riding through a portal in the bottom of the lake on his dangerous water-horse, Eliel. Ezemond promises to take Hazel to Elsewhere. But the day they plan to leave, Eliel vanishes, leaving behind the magic golden bridle that keeps him tame. They search for him. Ezemond remembers that there is a song which will magically tame Eliel, but he doesn't know all the words. The Calloways begin trying to compose a similar song to lure and tame Eliel. Frustrated with their lack of progress, Hazel sings with Jane, her younger sister, to summon the horse. It works, but he's not tame, and he dashes away with Jane on his back. Frantic, Hazel follows them to the lake, and saves Jane from drowning by stabbing Eliel. Jane is injured but alive. Hazel and the others suspect that Eliel's wound may be mortal; Hazel may have trapped herself and Ezemond on Earth by choosing to save Jane. Jane gets better and encourages Hazel to look for the horse. Hazel sings one of the old folk songs of Finneran, and it summons Eliel, injured but still alive. He's tamed by the music. Hazel and Ezemond finally go to see Elsewhere, but now Hazel doesn't feel she's escaping. She's grown to see that there's something marvelous even about life in Finneran—there's magic in their old songs, just as there is in Elsewhere's.

Jane was usually still asleep when Hazel came up with her breakfast. But on this particular day, as Hazel came in with the tray laden with Beatrix's tenderly arranged delicacies, Jane was already awake.

She was, indeed, no longer in bed, but standing at the window with the muslin curtain floating about her, her elbows on the sill, leaning on her uninjured leg. The room was full of the fresh-faced morning light.

Jane was singing out into the wide blue November sky. It was a sweet, melancholy air that their father used to sing, one of Finneran's songs. It had always reminded Hazel of the lake, its quiet gray tranquility that could turn so quickly to black storminess on autumn nights. Jane sang the song with every bit of her heart; its sweetness and sadness were her own.

Jane turned around and smiled her bright, unabashed smile as Hazel came in with the eggs balanced on the tray.

"You're not supposed to be walking yet," Hazel said.

Jane limped back to the bed and pulled herself up against her pillow, throwing the covers over her legs. "I just couldn't resist today. The sky's so blue, and so is the lake. I just had to sing that song."

Hazel set the tray in front of her and Jane took a delicate sip of the sugary tea Beatrix had made her.

"Soon you'll really be walking again. Are you feeling any better?"

"Oh, yes! I told you, that sky---and that lake---they've lifted up my spirits as high as ever."

Hazel smiled. "Have they really?" She turned to go.

"Hazel--" Jane said as Hazel's hand touched the edge of the door.

Hazel looked back.

"You should go find the horse." Jane's small pale face was suddenly almost as grave as their father's.

Hazel's hand dropped from the door. "What?"

"The horse. You should find out if it's alive. So that---if it is---Ezemon can go home, and you can go to Elsewhere with him. Because I know how you're always saying you wish you could go to a place like in Virgil's poetry, someplace with magic, you know. And it sounds like Elsewhere is like that."

"Yes," Hazel said quietly.

"Well, so you need to find the horse!"

"I don't think it's still alive." Hazel still didn't know what they were going to do about that. Ezemon was trapped here on Earth, because of Hazel. He would have to make do with the magic of Earth now, she thought. She had seen now,

like she never had before, how awfully magic it all was, just like Ezemond had always insisted. There really was something wondrous about chrysanthemums. And about Jane. Especially about Jane, who saw the magic so well herself. The blue sky, the blue lake, the song she had sung---Jane was caught up in it all, in the ensorcellment of being alive in this marvelous world. Even Finneran wasn't so little or so gray. It had its music, full of heart even if it wasn't of adventure, and the same was true of its people. Finneran had Jane in it, and Father, and Beatrix, even. It wasn't just any town. It was, as Ezemond had always seen, and as Jane and their father had always seen, but Hazel was just now understanding, a magic place. It was just as magic as Elsewhere, and no less because it was familiar, no less because there were no monsters to slay or grand adventures to have. Here, Hazel had her sisters and the songs, and that was enough.

Finneran was her home. But it wasn't Ezemond's, for all he loved it. It was to him what Elsewhere would be to Hazel, she knew: wondrous, strange, fascinating, and lovely; but a mite too strange to be home, a mite too surprising to be comfortable or peaceful.

She looked back at Jane. She might have lost her own chance at magic and Ezemond his home, but she had saved her sister. And she wondered all of a sudden if that wasn't worth it. She had the magic of Earth, after all. She had the magic of the sky and the lake and the cliffs and the town. She had the magic of Jane. That was enough, even though there was a part of her that grieved to think neither she nor Ezemond would ever see his homeland.

"It might still be living," Jane said. "It's a powerful magic creature, isn't it? It might have survived. And if it did, you've got to find it, haven't you?"

"Yes, I have," Hazel admitted. "At least for Ezemond's sake."

"So will you please go look for it again? Just one last time? I hate to think that I'm the reason Ezemond can't go home, or you can't see the magic you love." "Don't think that!" Hazel said, suddenly fierce. She walked over to Jane and took her small hand. "You are worth all of what we lost. If the horse really is dead." Jane smiled up at her shyly. "Well, go find out if it is, won't you?"

Hazel let go of her hand and brushed Jane's hair behind her ear. "All right. I will."

As she went down the stairs, wondering, like she had on that seemingly long-ago morning when the horse had first vanished, where she ought to start looking, a brilliant thought occurred to her. She remembered the song Jane had sung, and something she had said when they had tried to compose the Wizard's

song and were on the point of giving up. She stopped on the stairs and smiled. If anything would summon the horse, this would.

Hazel went and wound her big red scarf around her neck, and laced up her boots, and pulled on her long wool coat. She stopped to grab the golden bridle from the mantelpiece before she ducked out into the bright cold of November, under the wide blue sky. She took a deep breath of frosty air and shoved her hands into her pockets, one tight around the golden bridle, and went to the treacherous flight of ancient stony steps that led down the cliff to the shore. She made her way down, her coat flapping around her legs in the wind, the fanciful wind playing with the end of her scarlet scarf.

Her boots hit the pebbles of the beach and she walked straight towards the water. The lake was blue today, the pale sweet color of the great sky above, peaceful and secret-looking as a mask.

Hazel walked up to the very edge of the water, where it came to lap at the pebbly shore, and pulled out the golden bridle. She looked out at the horizon, where the fuzzy trees on the other side of the lake were just visible, and the flat dark line of those distant waters, and she began to sing.

She sang the song that Jane had sung, the one that sounded like the lake, the one that Jane had sung so fully and sincerely. Hazel sang it the same way now, because she did love this little lake, because even if it looked gray from a distance she could see a hundred thousand shades of blue in it up close. Just as how, from a distance, Finneran and her family seemed like anywhere and anyone else—but up close, Hazel knew with certainty that there was no one with Jane's shining eyes and tender raptures; no one with her father's grave way of smiling; no one, even, with Beatrix's peculiar capacity for random, unselfish sweetness.

She sang the lake song, and she sang it with every bit of her heart.

And the horse heard, and it came.

She saw its head rising up out of the lake---a head, and then its serpentine neck, its glistening flanks, its long swift legs, mane soaked and dripping and eyes as gleaming as ever. It was alive. It walked slowly and, perhaps, stiffly—the wound on its back was dark and ominous-looking—but it was alive, and it came when she sang.

She was sure that it was tame. It did not look quite so devilish now; it moved slowly and steadily, with none of its erstwhile quicksilver wildness. She had sung the song, and she had felt the same stirring trueness in it as she had heard in Ezemond's voice as he sang them part of the Wizard's song--and as she had heard in Jane's voice as she sang this very song.

The horse came closer, its head dipping to Hazel's level, dark as coal against the pale sky and pale lake and long pale beach.

It whinnied and pushed its head close to hers, and Hazel lifted a hand to stroke its wet-gleaming nose, and, miraculously, it did not open its jaws to drag her down into the depths of the sea to drown. It was soft; it was docile; it was tame. She was still singing, and her hand was on its nose, and it could have caught her wrist and dragged her away to die---but it hadn't.

Hazel lifted up the golden bridle, and looped it over its head, and it let her---it was so gentle now, this creature that had been so vicious and devious and devilish. It was as much a lamb now as ever it had been a lion. She slipped on the bridle and fastened it and took the reins, and led the horse away home.

Mary Russell

Grade 12, Home School

Novel



The Castle in the Thorns

Synopsis: Virginia Hunter paints a mural in the library of Montgomery, her boarding school. It depicts a castle cloaked in thorns, a heartless Prince, and a cursed Princess, who is painted after the likeness of Virginia's sister Ophelia. Virginia inadvertently makes the world in the mural real. When she and Ophelia enter it, Ophelia becomes the Princess, and the Prince curses her. Virginia goes back to Earth, convinced that her magic, which created this terrible story, is inherently corrupt. One year later, two students, Paul and Will, discover the castle. The Prince frightens Paul, but his magic fascinates Will, and he secretly becomes the Prince's apprentice. The boys befriend Virginia and discover that she painted the mural. Will learns that becoming a magician will cost him his heart; he will become as unfeeling and inhuman as the Prince. On the night he discovers this, Paul discovers Will's apprenticeship. Paul and Virginia try to convince Will to stop learning magic, but he remains unmoved. They get him expelled instead. But Will comes back to the school in the night, and the Prince makes him a heartless magician despite Virginia's attempts to stop him. Paul convinces Virginia to try again, and she paints an ending for the story. She takes away Will's magic and gives Paul an enchanted sword to defeat the Prince. Ophelia's curse is broken and she reunites with Virginia. Will refuses to go back with them, but in their absence he realizes how terrible it was to trade his heart for magic, and he returns to Earth.

They stood before the mural. Virginia had taught herself to shut out the voice of magic ever since Ophelia was lost, but now she had to let it back in.

It seemed like a monumentally foolish plan, as she pulled out the brush and the three jars of paint. They were fifteen-year-old mortals, after all. Their adversary was grand and devious and deathless, and now so was Will. Their only weapons were her own untrustworthy magic, audacious hope, and wall paint.

The paint wasn't really necessary, of course. But Virginia wanted to finish the way she had started, although there was no time to make it a very intricate painting. Her hands shaking a little, she unscrewed the lids of black, red, and gold, and she began to paint within the blank white arch of the door. This, at least, she knew how to do.

When she finished, there on the wall was Virginia as a magician, Paul as a knight, Will with a heart, Ophelia awakened, the Prince defeated. The happy ending. The impossibility.

Paul felt as though he were living out some old legend he had read in a book. The *Iliad* had come to life, and he found himself as Hector; or Camelot, and he was Arthur. It was a fairy tale, but because he had befriended the strange girl who had painted it, he knew that didn't mean it wasn't true.

They went through the door, and suddenly Paul had a brilliant-shining sword in his hand.

He turned, and saw a magician.

Really, what was different about her? Not very much. But she was wearing the sort of cloak an enchantress might, and the uncertainty had gone from her eyes. It had been replaced by an old and certain magic.

They went up the marble staircase, and to Ophelia's tower, where they halted outside the door. "I think you can fight the Prince with that sword," Virginia said. "I don't think he can win against it. Victory to the pure of heart, that sort of thing, you know. I'll find Will."

Paul watched her walk away down the corridor, and then he opened the door.

He found the Prince at the top of the stairs, sword drawn. Paul's heart was going very fast. He was not sure he completely trusted the power of that sword, as much as he trusted Virginia. Believing in magic was just a very different thing when you were reading stories about rabbit holes and wardrobes, and when you were entrusting your life to it.

But Paul knew it was worth the chance, worth the pervasive doubt lurking in the back of his mind, wringing its bony hands, whispering, *maybe the sword isn't magic after all, maybe you're about to die.*

So he raised his sword when the Prince raised his, and they fought. The sword came alive in Paul's hand, lending him a fierce cold grace that wasn't his own. Though the Prince was a creature made of magic, his sword was just an ordinary bit of steel, and Paul's blade was too quick to grant him a spare moment in which to cast a spell. It did not take long for the magic of Paul's sword to best

him. The Prince's sword was twisted from his hands and Paul's was pointed at the heart he did not have.

The Prince merely looked a bit surprised, and bowed courteously to his opponent.

Paul looked past him to the sleeping Ophelia. "Take away the curse."

"I must not. She brought me here, cruel as I am. I must avenge myself."

"The Princess is not the magician, Your Majesty."

"She is not?"

"No. The magician who made this world is the Princess's sister. And I will not allow you to avenge yourself on her."

"I must."

Paul's voice trembled, but his hand did not. "Take away the curse. This girl is not the magician."

The Prince sighed, and raised his hand, and spoke to the magic.

Like a painting coming to life, Ophelia awoke. She sat up, and for a long moment she merely looked around at the dim little tower chamber, the stranger holding a magic sword, the defeated Prince. "Is this a dream?" she said in a hoarse voice, staring at Paul and then the Prince.

"It's real." Paul went over to her. "Hello, by the way. I'm a friend of your sister's."

Ophelia grasped a bedpost and slowly pulled herself to standing, her golden hair falling down around her like a waterfall. She glanced at Paul. "Did you wake me? Where is she? Who are you?"

"The Prince took away the curse. Your sister's coming. I'm Paul," he added.

Ophelia smiled, and her smile was as sunlit as her golden hair. "Oh, good. Thank you for saving me." She looked past him, and suddenly her eyes went wide. Before Paul saw what was happening she had taken the sword dangling in his hand and crossed the chamber in three steps.

Paul blinked and stared. The blade was buried in the Prince's heart.

Ophelia let go of the hilt, and stepped back, eyes wide, face pale, as the Prince swayed and crumpled to the floor.

"He lifted his hand," Ophelia said quietly. "I was afraid he was going to do magic again." She looked back at Paul. "It was very brave of you, coming up here. He might have killed you."

Reflexively Paul opened his mouth to dismiss this—the sword was magic, he didn't have any reason to kill me when he realized you weren't the magician, anyone

could have done it, anyone would have—but he stopped, because while all of it was true, so was what she had said.

Ophelia looked at him and saw a knight. Maybe that was what he was.

It didn't take Virginia long to find Will. He was in the Prince's study, looking through the the books and bits of parchment, and exploring what she could only imagine were spells. The evidence was scattered around him, in places where reality slanted sideways: a tiny oak tree growing from the lectern, shedding miniscule autumn leaves in the inkpot; a quill writing on the stone walls in the magic language, all on its own; a chair levitating three inches from the ground; three blue-robed women moving and talking amongst themselves in a tapestry hanging nearby.

Will looked up as she came in.

Virginia stopped in the doorway. Her heart thundered. She didn't know if the magic could hear her when her thoughts were as scattered and storming as they were, dwelling on the effortless ease with which Will had cast his first spells yesterday, dwelling on the Prince who might, after all, kill Paul. Perhaps her painting had only given them a sword and a cloak, perhaps she hadn't really made the ending come true—perhaps she had condemned Paul and herself to death, and Ophelia to eternal sleep, in this reckless bid for freedom from the thorns—

She hesitated too long. As soon as he saw her, Will raised his hand and whispered a word, and the quill paused halfway through a sentence and shot towards her like an arrow, and it was only reflex that kept it from stabbing her—a word rising to her lips from some long-buried shelf in her mind, and the quill halted and began to float gently toward the floor.

And the diminutive oak was swelling and burgeoning and straining towards the ceiling, and roots were crawling up Virginia's legs like ivy growing around a statue of Diana, but with a flick of her fingers and a muttered syllable the roots turned into lithe black snakes that slithered tamely down like rivulets of ink.

And the women in blue were stepping out of the tapestry and running, phantoms the height of children, to strangle the snakes, but the tapestry was ripped suddenly in ribbons and they fell to the ground, nothing but a tangle of indigo threads around the hissing serpents' necks.

And the floating chair was bursting suddenly in pieces and swarming towards her, a storm of splinters and long iron nails like a vengeful crowd of

wasps, but when it reached her it was a wooden harp in her hands with taut gleaming strings made of steel.

In a silence full of magic, they watched the quill land softly on the floor.

Will was visibly exhausted by the sudden, violent magic he had done, and not just exhausted. Virginia saw with a shuddering jolt that his little finger was missing, dripping blood on the floor—that was the cost of one or other of the spells he had just cast.

Virginia did not feel tired at all. She felt suddenly and fiercely alive, as she hadn't felt in a very long time, or perhaps ever, and so awake. Magic pulsed in her fingertips, bright and lively, and calling it was as easy as a thought.

Before Will could gather himself for another spell, she plucked a string of the harp, and when he heard the sharp bright note, his eyes fluttered closed and he stumbled back, and collapsed to the floor. He lay there, chest slowly rising and falling in the sea-tide rhythm of sleep. She crossed the room, stepping over the snakes, ducking under the overgrown limbs of the oak, nearly tripping over the threads that had been the tapestry-women, and knelt beside him, setting down the harp. She spread her hands and found the magic waiting, patient and bright-eyed, and she asked it to undo the curse, to heal him. And the magic left him and his heart came back, and so did his lost finger. As soon as she had lowered her hands he awoke. He drew in a shuddering breath like someone just come alive, and sat up sharply, looking around the magic-wrecked room, and then back to her, as though he had never seen any of it before. His eyes weren't cold anymore; they were hot and bright. "What did you do?" he demanded. "What did you *do*?" He lifted his hands, staring at them, and then spoke in the magic language—first one cautious word, and then a whole horde of them, tripping over themselves, rising into a furious stampede, half-pleading, half-betrayed, slipping back into English in his desperation. He pulled himself to his feet and looked down at her with a black scowl. "It's gone. It's *gone*. Did you take it from me?"

She got to her feet more slowly, reaching down to take the harp and dusting fallen leaves off her shoulders. "Yes."

"You had no right! What's wrong with you? Why do you think you get to dictate my life? You—you and Paul, and Flaherty, and my father! It was *mine*! Why do you think you get to—"

"Look, Will," she said evenly, pulling back the cuff of her shirt to show him the pricks in her skin where his thorns had manacled her—healing now, but they still stung. "Look." She came over and showed him his right hand.

He stared for a second at the reddened mark that showed his finger had not always been whole, but then he tore his eyes from it, and his hand from hers.

"You were dangerous, to us and yourself. As bad as the Prince. Worse. The magic was hurting you. I saw it. You're near collapsing with it. It's taking things from you."

"All magic has a cost," he said contemptuously.

"No, it doesn't. Not like that. Not hearts, and fingers, and sleep, and firstborn children." She knew it now. She would have agreed with him a year ago—she had thought the price of a magic castle was her sister. But that had only been the price of her cynicism. Finally she had found a match, and she was lighting up the thorns. "That sort of thing is for witches in fairy tales. It takes from you because you took *it*, instead of being given it. Magic doesn't take anything from me when I cast spells. You seized it, wanted to master it; are you surprised it's fighting you? Magic isn't something you can master. It's more powerful than you."

He didn't reply. His gaze was sharp. His temper had burned into something colder now, like his eerie gravity in those last weeks before he made himself a magician.

She paused on her way to the doorway, and looked back. "Will."

"What?"

"Come back with us. There's nothing for you here, anymore. The Prince is dead. Your magic's gone. What do you have to gain by staying here all alone?"

"What is there for me out there?" he retorted. "Nothing. Alpin and his algebra, Flores—oh, I'm expelled, aren't I? So there isn't even that. My parents." He laughed, all bitter.

"Paul."

He merely stared at her. She narrowed her eyes. "Fine, then. Goodbye."

Virginia went down the corridors with her hands in her pockets and her eyes on the endless marble floor. That was it, then. One heartless magician dealt with. Hopefully Paul had dealt with the other. There was a small part of her that was disappointed at Will's obstinacy, but not even that part of her was surprised.

"Virginia? Is that you?"

She looked up, and her grim abstraction was replaced with the brightest of her smiles. "Ophelia!"

Paul and her sister were coming through the tower door. With her hand absently on his arm and his hand on his silver sword-hilt, her gleaming finery with its trailing sleeves and his grave black eyes, they were quite the legendary

picture of a fairy lady and her incidental savior: every princess and every knight from all the stories of Fairyland.

Paul looked up and saw her, but his smile was nothing to Ophelia's. She ran past him to sweep Virginia into a hug.

"You're not a dream, right? I keep thinking it's all a dream," Ophelia was saying, but when they finally pulled apart, all Virginia could say was, "You're awake."

"I know," Ophelia said, with a trace of humor, dispelling her bright regal splendor. Suddenly she was just another Monty student whose life had been interrupted by magic.

Virginia laughed. She could have laughed at anything at that moment. Paul came up to her. "Did you find him?"

"Oh—yes. I did. He hasn't got any magic anymore. Did you find the Prince?"

"Yes." Paul lifted the sword a little out of its scabbard, and she saw the blood spattered in the inlay of the hilt, where it was difficult to wipe it away on your enemy's coat. "Ophelia did it. He was about to—I'm not sure if he was going to curse us or not, but she was probably right. He was very dangerous."

"Yes."

"He wouldn't come back?" Paul asked, after a pause.

"Who?" Ophelia interjected, looking between them.

"Another—well, not really a friend—another student who found the castle," Virginia told her, and said to Paul: "No. He's the same as ever. Fuming. Won't listen to anything I say."

Paul rubbed his temple. "You'd think he'd—well. I guess we've done all we can."

"Maybe he'll come back."

"Maybe."

She and Paul told Ophelia what had brought them there, and then Virginia told them both what had happened between her and Will, as they wandered down the marble corridors to the great staircase, and then back to the library where they had all seen magic for the first time.

Paul could not forget that, though they had brought back Virginia's sister, Will was still back there, in that castle he had thrown everything away to rule. A part of him itched to go back, to try for the thousandth time to make him *see*, but he knew that impulse came more from missing his friend than common sense. He had tried already, and so had Virginia. She had believed in her magic for Will's

sake, and she had pulled him as far out of the grave he had dug as she could. There was nothing else Paul could do. Ropes and ladders would do no good for someone who insisted he preferred to stay buried. He could only hope that time would do for Will what they could not.

Imogen Rye

Grade 9, John Burroughs School

Educator: Joy Gebhardt

Flash Fiction



7/7

“Shoes, wait I have those, where’s my black and white dress, oh no, what time is it?” I ran around my apartment, desperately trying to pack for my friend’s wedding that I was flying out for right after work. Of course I was running late that morning, which was not unusual. “Where did I put that brush?” I haphazardly crammed everything inside the case and scrambled to pull on my sneakers before leaving. As fast as I could, I headed towards the Piccadilly line, which I took to work every morning. “Why, today of all days, did I have to be late?” I muttered to myself as I half walked, half ran towards the Underground. Oddly enough, people were moving away from the station. I continued towards the entrance until I spotted a sign saying it was closed. “Great,” I groaned as I turned on my heel and stormed in the other direction.

“Alan, what’s that news say,” Margaret asked, putting down the dishes for a moment.

“A bomb that went off on the Underground in London,” he yelled back as he headed towards the door.

“You don’t think it would be that Alana’s line, do you?” As Margaret walked into the living room, drying off a new plate, the TV cut to another breaking news announcement.

“The latest bomb just exploded on the Piccadilly line. We will keep you posted on casualties and injuries, but for now it is too soon to tell.” The plate landed on the floor and shattered.

“Stupid Underground.” I dragged my feet towards the bus stop, hoping that I wouldn’t be too late for work. I stood at the stop, waiting for what seemed like an eternity as bus after bus crammed with people roared past me. All around me cars screamed past and sirens rang. “Of all mornings...” I grabbed my case by the

handle and stomped off, knowing it would take me at least an hour to walk all the way to work.

"Pick up, pick up, why isn't she picking up?" Margaret paced in the living room, cradling the phone to her ear, anxiously trying to reach Alana. "Alana just pick up the phone!" After trying multiple times she gave up and decided to call her husband, Alan, who had to leave for work just a little earlier.

"Hello?"

"She won't pick up! I don't know what to do!" Margaret sobbed into the phone, tears streaming down her face.

"Ok, it's okay. Calm down. I'll call her." He hangs up and tries to call his daughter. The line rang with no response.

"Oh my god you're here!" Anne, the receptionist, almost screamed as she ran over and hugged me. "A bomb exploded on the Piccadilly line this morning." she explained as she grabbed the landline and dialed my boss, letting him know that I had arrived safely. After hanging up, she turned to me and said, "You have to call your parents, they've been trying to reach you all morning." I reached into my bag and pulled out my cell, only to see that the mobile network was down. I used the landline to call my mum, and she picked up the phone almost immediately.

"Alana?" Her voice trembled.

"It's me mum, I'm okay."

Audrey Schloss

Grade 12, North Kansas City High School

Poetry



Unnatural Redhead

My red hair is transactional.
I take my tips
Earned from irritated customers
And lukewarm lattes
To portion out my January labor.
Bottom of the bottle at minimum wage.
An hour of my time
Exchanged for a month of self-expression.
My Amber hair is a landlord.
Collecting its dues.
I dye it every month.
With apricot up to my elbows
Tinted against the cusps of my ears.
And after caramel swirls
Into my espresso fate,
After my spirit circles the shower drain,
I clutch the coins
Earned from people who will never understand
How it feels
To drown in ginger.
How it feels
To be whole again.
As the month ends
The stains on my shower tiles fade.
January rusts into February.
I pay my dues,
And pay-nt myself to life once more.

Audrey Schloss

Grade 12, North Kansas City High School

Poetry



Audrey For Her Daughter

I will never change my name.
Not when I get married.
Not when the romantic bone in my body aches again.
Not when the wedding bells ring and a ring of commitment is slipped onto my fingers.
I love my name.
I love to say it.
I love to spell it.
I loved it before I even knew its meaning.
My name is my mother when she was younger.
Dreams bigger than the sky, managed into the into a stuffy law school lecture hall,
squished down into a profession.
I have always known that one title wasn't enough for her.
On stage she played many roles.
On stage she transformed into so many different people,
but when a soft breath forced it all down, the flame turned to smoke.
Before I was even a concept, I was a wish.
My name is admiration, success, and a wish for greater.
A wish that I can be greater.
Greater than the people who held her back.
Unleashed from the ropes that once held her down,
that tampered her dreams.
My name is actress dreams and maiden names.
They told her to pick something secure. Law.

But how secure was the path she was forced to choose when she didn't have the heart to hold on tight to it?

How secure is a relationship where your heart longs for another?

She didn't want my father's last name on her PhD.

If she couldn't be an actress, maybe she could at least be herself on her own degree.

My name was her choice.

Her choice for years.

Even when actress flames drowned under the weight of law school, my name was constant.

Audrey for her daughter.

Like the actress.

The actress she wanted to be and the opportunity she gives to me every day.

Audrey for her daughter,

a prayer for me to be greater than the labels the world gives her.



The Economic Impact of Historical Redlining on the United States' Ethnic Wealth Gap

Introduction

According to Braveman et al. (2022), structural racism, often used interchangeably with but distinct from the terms “institutional racism” or “systemic racism”, is the institutionalized discrimination of particular marginalized groups and operates through the dynamic functions of policymaking, interpersonal relationships, societal expectations, and other historical, cultural, political, and economic factors. Martin & Varner (2017) asserted that this has often produced several lasting, contemporary ethnic disparities within systems such as healthcare, housing, and education; a vast majority of these disparities are normalized and heavily established in nearly all aspects of society, initiating continuous disadvantage(s) for non-white individuals. Examples of structural racism include racial profiling, voter suppression policies, and segregation. A prevalent example of structural racism, and one frequently cited, is historical redlining. “Historical redlining” refers to the racial bias that prevailed throughout the 1930s to 1960s within the American housing and real estate industries; more specifically, the Home Owners’ Loan Corporation (HOLC) and the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) color-coded neighborhoods based on perceived lending risks. Fishback et al. (2020) stated in their paper that the only redlined neighborhoods, however, were those containing minority populations. This practice systematically denied individuals of certain ethnic demographics equal mortgage, credit, capital, and loan access, making it increasingly difficult for racial minorities to achieve homeownership and accumulate wealth through home equity; moreover, historical redlining

ultimately stands as a major contributing factor to the ethnic wealth gap in the United States.

Origins of Historical Redlining

Nicholas and Scherbina (2013) noted that The Great Depression generated several interrelated political, social, and economic complications, precipitating widespread foreclosures, severe declines in property values, and the nationwide destabilization of housing markets. They also mentioned that due to this, housing market values had plummeted 67% and typical properties would only retain approximately 56% of its initial value. Consequently, Mitchell & Franco (2018) reported that the federal government sought to intervene by establishing the Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC). They added that HOLC would aim to refinance distressed mortgages, standardize lending practices, and contribute to the restabilization of the United States economy.

The HOLC implemented a structured grading system in over 200 cities, influenced by alleged risk management, for Residential Security Maps. Communities deemed desirable for mortgage and lending purposes were marked green ("greenlined"), while those perceived as contradictory to these standards were marked red ("redlined"); redlined neighborhoods were often those containing a significant population of minority individuals, instigating numerous controversies regarding the topic of racial biases in the housing market. Furthermore, Aaronson et al. (2022) of the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago found that "redlining could account for 40 to 50% of the house value gap across affected neighborhoods from 1950 to 1980." Redlined neighborhoods were consistently denied mortgage insurance or new investment, highlighting the role of these alleged risk management tools as a mechanism for institutionalized segregation.

Economic discrepancies were continuously facilitated in 1934 by the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) through the encouragement of racially restrictive covenants and the exclusion of certain ethnic demographics from acquiring federally insured mortgages. The Federal Reserve History (2023) stated that as these discriminatory practices were furthered, allowing minority demographics to suffer from disinvestment, declining property values, and predatory lending, individuals of the majority demographics were allowed to properly utilize federally provided low-interest loans. Moreover, the postwar period led to these conditions becoming increasingly detrimental, as suburban

living had become heavily normalized and homeownership was a vital factor in accumulating intergenerational wealth.

Wealth Accumulation Through Home Equity

To fully understand the relationship between historical redlining, homeownership, and wealth accumulation, it is first essential to define a key term: ‘home equity’. Academy Bank (n.d.) defines home equity as the difference between the appraised market value of a property and the homeowner(s)’ outstanding mortgage balance. According to Di et al. (2003), for several American citizens, home equity is often considered a valuable component of wealth accumulation; in 2021, home equity contributed to an estimated median of 45% of homeowners’ net worth as reported by Kochhar & Moslimani (2023). Correspondingly, home equity is a substantial capital asset for building intergenerational wealth, substantiating the relevance of considering unequal access when examining racial and ethnic wealth disparities. According to the organization, Habitat for Humanity (n.d.), intergenerational wealth can be built through home equity in a variety of ways, most predominantly via (1) capital gains through property value appreciation and (2) mortgage principal payments and amortization.

Capital Gains and Appreciation

Properties are “appreciated” when growth is detected in their appraised market value, contributing to homeowner capital gains. Several macroeconomic indicators that influence property value and appreciation include supply and demand, inflation, and credit conditions. Supply and demand are essential determinants of market behavior and asset value; when consumer demand exceeds housing market supply, property values are typically subject to a substantial increase as demonstrated in the study by Anenberg & Ringo (2024). Furthermore, inflation can raise property value through increased housing expenditure, including prices on construction or repair materials; therefore, Aruoba et al. (2012) concluded that real estate is also viewed as a “good hedge against inflation.” As The Office of the Comptroller of the Currency (OCC, 2005) indicated, desirable credit conditions, such as low interest rates, expand consumer purchasing power and buyer interest in the real estate market. These elements can fundamentally shape the necessary attributes of home equity building and overall net worth; therefore, redlined neighborhoods, which were systematically denied mortgage loans, investments, and other relevant elements,

were devalued and remain unable to produce an equal amount of capital gains as previously greenlined properties.

Mortgage Principal Payments and Amortization

The Corporate Finance Institute (n.d.) explained that the periodic mortgage principal payments reduce the outstanding loan balance of a property, increasing the homeowner's equity stake and allowing income from housing consumption to systematically transform into asset accumulation. In families with ideal access to mortgage credit and stable amortization, principal payments can oftentimes serve as a form of forced savings, which can be later leveraged for intergenerational transfers. However, these scenarios are idealistic and assume that homeowners have access to definite financial resources and own properties in previously greenlined neighborhoods; it is relevant to acknowledge that market fluctuations are volatile, and home equity is a dynamic concept subject to several varying changes that depend heavily on external factors. Thus, property owners in previously redlined neighborhoods may face several other obstacles in achieving stabilized wealth accumulation.

Lasting Effects

In 1968, the persistent activism of the Civil Rights Movement catalyzed the passage of the Fair Housing Act, which according to the United States Department of Justice Civil Rights Division (2023) prohibits redlining and other discriminatory denials of access to loan and investment opportunities. Despite this legislation, historical biases continue to initiate enduring and pervasive consequences on the United States' ethnic wealth gap; among the most prominent repercussions are the lasting devaluation of redlined properties and unequal access to driving elements of home equity building (e.g. credit access). Furthermore, these conditions have led to numerous other detrimental effects, including a reduced access to resources (Berry et al., 2025; Appolon, 2023), lack of quality education as a result of disinvestment (Lukes & Cleveland, 2021), and several health disparities (Connolly, 2023). These exacerbating discrepancies are strong perpetrators of the poverty cycle, thus demonstrating the crucial role historical redlining plays in the United States' ethnic wealth gap.

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Short Story



The Tree is You

The stars were mockingly bright. If Dima tried to focus on any particular one, it would blink away, and the edges of his vision would blur. The headstone he was perched on felt like nothing under him. Dima had been respectful at first, but he'd been trapped for too long to care anymore.

At what sounded like the faint cawing of a raven, Dima raised his head from where it hung from his hands. His eyes were rimmed red and puffy from crying. He could've cried for hours without realizing. Events occurred one after the other, with no care towards logic or transitions between. Dima was at the mercy of his own subconscious, no control over his environment other than the vague understanding that nothing was real.

Real but not. Fiction, yet reality enough for him to feel. Fuzzy, cottony. A constant rotation of cobbled together scenes and feelings that Dima could only make sense of after the fact.

In this scene, a graveyard in the dead of night, there were three trees on top of a small hill. Around the hill were headstones engraved with only first names, none of them recognizable to Dima. Jena. Sergei. Levani. Katrina.

Dima rose and stalked over to the first tree, with its leafless branches and half-decayed bark, crunching through dead leaves and stumbling on uneven ground. Mikhail. Anastasia. Viktor.

On the hill, embedded into the flaking bark, was an engraved plaque, crumbling from age and overgrown with moss. It was so ancient-looking that Dima had to peel back a thick layer of lichen to read what it said, and even then it crawled with spiders and tiny bugs that tickled his fingers as they skittered along his skin.

Volkov. No first name. There were many people with that surname, but only two that meant anything to Dima. The first was his father, the second himself. But no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't associate this decrepit, miserable tree with himself or his dad. It was too dark, too rough.

He could associate it with his grandfather though, a man he'd never met.

Once, Dima's father tried to teach him how to shoot. The recoil on the gun had dislocated his shoulder. He sobbed and quivered like a baby. Meanwhile his father crouched down and popped his shoulder back in place like it was nothing. It hurt like hell, but his arm was fine in the end.

When Dima asked his father how he did it so easily, the man only shrugged and muttered, "My dad used to twist my arm so far behind my back, it'd dislocate. I usually had to pop it back myself."

Dima decided then that his grandfather was a man who deserved to rot in hell. That statement by itself explained most things about his father that he'd always wondered. Why he was so gentle, why he hardly ever raised his voice, why there were no family photos on the walls of their home, why his father couldn't stand to hear men shout, not even on the TV. Dima was suddenly glad that his grandfather died before he was born.

He tore his eyes from the plaque, but not before spitting on it. Instead, he directed his attention to the second tree. Its bark was tough, yet its leaves were pretty and plentiful, a great bouquet making its gradual transition from youthful green to aged yellows and oranges. It held a plaque as well. Volkov. There was moss growing in the corners, crawling along the cool stone. The only imperfection was a spot of dead bark at the very base of the trunk.

Dima followed the bared roots with his gaze and found that the gnarled, blackened roots did not come from the second tree, but the first. The miserable, evil tree was poisoning the second, turning its foundation vile and sick. But the second tree was still standing. Standing tall and beautiful in the center of the graveyard, and lending its roots to the third tree.

That one was young. Not fully grown, leaves still evergreen, with bark so soft and gentle it felt like velvet under Dima's palm. When he pulled his hand away, a few speckles of bark came away with it, sticking to his skin. Thick sap began to leak from the exposed endoskeleton. Dima felt the tiniest inkling of remorse for damaging something so young and fragile. He wondered if his grandfather ever did too.

Whatever plaque there might've been had been swallowed up by a great hole punctured in the center of the trunk, wide enough for Dima to crawl into if

he wanted. Emptiness, hollow innards. A faint wind blew from inside, and with it came a faint, labored wheeze, like the tree was drawing its last breath. The empty inside made the tree that more delicate, so easily damaged. When Dima glanced down at the base, he found the source of its fragility.

A tangle of roots leading from the second tree and into the third, turning them soft and pleasant, yet breakable.

Dima's fingers curled around the rim of the soft, light brown bark. Up close, the whistling became a constant, solid note, like the melancholic wafting of a flute. It curled into Dima's ears and snaked into his head until it filled his skull like water into an empty cup. Not calling him forward or repelling him. It was just there.

Dima stuck his arm in the hole. He met no resistance, felt no soft bark wall to stop the darkness inside from swallowing his arm up to the shoulder.

It took him a few minutes to wrack up the courage, but eventually Dima stuck his head into the emptiness, peering through the dark in search of something. Anything. But there wasn't. No lurking monster or portal to another world. Just nothing. Somehow that was worse.

Tears welled in Dima's tired eyes. The presence of nothing was somehow more terrible than the presence of a monster. It wasn't even scary, it was just worthless.

The air in the graveyard turned oppressive. The old, gnarled tree lurked in the corner of Dima's eye. It was dead and gone, but it was still there, faintly. Even if it were forcibly chopped down, its roots had already poisoned its kin.

The very notion of it made Dima feel all the more hopeless. That there was nothing he could do to make the dead tree's influence go away, to freeze the second tree in time so it would stop aging, to force the third tree to toughen its bark and stop being so hollow.

He pressed his forehead to the soft bark. Beads of sap bubbled up from under the thin surface. It stuck to his skin, too sweet, too easily drawn.

Dima pulled back, looking down at the gaping nothing in front of him. Before he could think too hard and talk himself out of it, he threw one leg around the rim and started climbing inside. He slipped his whole body inside until he was clinging to the bottom of the entrance, dangling feet first above a vast void that heaved slow, weak breaths.

One by one, Dima uncurled his fingers, giving himself time to come to his senses or for someone to appear and pull him back. Before he could release his first hand, the bark he was clinging to gave way, plunging him into the dark.

He didn't scream. He let himself fall into nothing. Terrible, constant nothing, encased in a soft, thin skin. It was this or the dream, he told himself. This was the viable way out. Either he'd wake up or he'd sleep forever. That sounded quite nice to him. Sleeping forever.

He wouldn't get to. He had only gotten to fall for seconds, minutes, hours, an indeterminable amount of time warped by the dream he was stuck in. At the end of those seconds, minutes, or hours, the darkness blinked away and he was staring at a wooden wall. There was a desk, an acoustic guitar leaned against its leg. Gentle, golden sunlight streamed past a drawn curtain.

The bed was comfortable. Dima forced himself to stand, afraid that if he laid down for any longer, he'd never get up.

In the hall, he found his father. One of his records was playing, one of those old American songs that sounded soft and sweet to Dima's ears. He had no idea what the singers were saying and he didn't think his father did either. But he liked them anyway.

His father glanced up. Aging yellow met evergreen.



The Desires of Mankind

In *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley creates a world that is technologically underdeveloped yet futuristic. Despite containing antediluvian technology such as the usage of horses for transportation over long distances, the titular scientist is able to create a sentient creature out of organic material, a clear example of advanced science. Even though this piecemeal creature merely seems like a monster at first, without any human qualities save for its body parts, Shelley imbues him with human emotions, desires, and other qualities, which liken him to an actual human. Throughout the story, these qualities persist, never truly changing into that of a monster—thus, through these interactions of Frankenstein and his creature, Shelley suggests that although humans may inherently be neither good nor evil, natural human desires will lead them to commit evil deeds.

Victor Frankenstein himself grew up in an idyllic town in Switzerland. However, Frankenstein's abandonment of the creature that he created, combined with his staunch opposition to fixing his past mistakes, establishes his propensity to selfishness, a rather ironic contrast to his seemingly perfect childhood. This childhood, which had benefited him to the point of his asserting that "no human being could have passed a happier childhood than myself" (Shelley 36), clearly had not established any sort of propensity towards evil. However, once he creates the creature because of his desire for scientific knowledge, he isn't appreciative of his scientific feat but rather terrified of the creature's "yellow skin scarcely [covering] the work of muscles and arteries beneath," his "watery eyes" in "dun-white sockets," "his shriveled complexion," and his "straight black lips" (Shelley 58). Symbolically, this represents Frankenstein's desire for beauty, as is also exemplified by his fawning over of Elizabeth's physical appearance; indeed, so frightened was he that he "rushed out of the room" (Shelley 59), judging the creature by his appearance rather than his

actual disposition, which the creature recalls as “being half-frightened” (Shelley 108). This negative reaction is exacerbated by the fact that Frankenstein, having escaped, never ends up helping the “creature to whom [Frankenstein’s] art bound by ties only dissoluble by the annihilation of” Frankenstein or the creature (Shelley 104). Through these ties, it is clear that Frankenstein, as the creature’s creator, has an obligation to him. Thus, Shelley is able to paint Frankenstein’s actions as all the more evil after the creature describes his own “spark of life which [Frankenstein] had so wantonly destroyed” (Shelley 146). Ultimately, after Frankenstein “tore to pieces the thing on which [he] was engaged” (Shelley 180), reneging on his prior agreement with the creature, we see the culmination of his evil actions, destroying the creature’s last hope for happiness to satisfy his moral qualms. While Frankenstein’s ideal upbringing ostensibly should’ve led to the embrace of good deeds and the shunning of evil ones, he was eventually more inclined to commit evil actions, as shown through his experiences with his creation. These evil actions, spurred by Victor’s experiences with both the creature and the creature’s actions therefore imply that, despite one’s upbringing, even marked by extreme goodness, one’s desires will lead them upon the path of evil.

Besides Frankenstein, his creature also exemplifies this idea. Having been created expressly for the purpose of science, the creature has no upbringing to speak of, thus presenting an unadulterated view of human nature—and it is this nature that is at first presented as neither bereft of benevolence nor malignance, yet ultimately tends towards the latter. In fact, the creature even acknowledges this evil at the end, telling Frankenstein that “I am malicious because I am miserable” (Shelley 156). This is a clear contrast from the creature at the beginning of his life, who he describes as a “poor, helpless, miserable wretch” that “knew, and could distinguish, nothing” (Shelley 109). Through this contrast, Shelley is able to establish that the creature’s actions are caused purely by the influence of both his human nature and others around him. This is seen most clearly after the creature escapes from Ingolstadt: his need for food compels him to “devour the remnants of the shepherd’s breakfast” (Shelley 112). While this may seem inconsequential at first, this event is the only glimpse of the creature without prior human influence, as later on he stumbles upon “a leathern portmanteau containing [...] some books” (Shelley 136), which, prompted by his desire for knowledge, he reads; and not only do these books teach him about the world and its history but also of morality and rational thought. It is actually one of these books, *Paradise Lost*, which has the most effect on the creature, causing

“the bitter gall of envy [to rise] within [him]” whenever he “viewed the bliss of [his] protectors” (Shelley 139). Instead of viewing his protectors with undiluted affection, as he had done before, the creature instead feels envy at their ability to converse naturally with others. Ultimately, this desire for human company is manifested in his request for Victor to make him a companion that “would not deny herself to me” (Shelley 155). However, this request is not made in simple goodwill. In fact, the creature dislikes Frankenstein to the extent that he calls the scientist an “accursed creator” for forming “a monster so hideous that even [he] turned from [him] in disgust” (Shelley 140), going insofar as to murder William as soon as his relation to Frankenstein was revealed. It is this that marks his final downfall into the “sanguinary laws of man” (Shelley 154), as his desire for revenge against Frankenstein has led him to murder an innocent human being. To add insult to injury, Frankenstein later reneges on his promise with the creature, telling him that he would never “create another like [the creature], equal in deformity and wickedness” (Shelley 181). Ultimately, it is this event that compels the creature to resolve to take action upon his last desire—to seek revenge one final time against his creator, who he views as the cause of all of his suffering; and it is this desire that drives him and Frankenstein to the North Pole for the ultimate denouement of the story, wherein, after Frankenstein dies, the creature admits to his wrongdoings, calling himself a “wretch,” a “fallen angel,” and a “malignant devil” who has “murdered the lovely and the helpless” and “strangled the innocent as they slept” (Shelley 240). In the end, Frankenstein’s creature did not have the idyllic upbringing of Victor; yet various desires such as that for sustenance, knowledge, and revenge prove him incapable of arresting his descent into evil. As phrased by the creature himself, “evil thenceforth became my good” (Shelley 238).

Ultimately, both Frankenstein and his creature succumbed to their human desires: Frankenstein through his desire for knowledge, beauty, and, later on, the preservation of his moral compass, and the creature through his carnal desire for food, his lust for knowledge, analogous to Victor’s, and the desire for revenge against his creator. Even though their desires and upbringings differ from each other, Frankenstein and the creature both end up becoming evil. Frankenstein’s refusal to care for his creation—a product of his desire for scientific knowledge—because of its physical appearance causes the creature’s subsequent stratification as a *persona non grata* in the eyes of the general population, a clear example of his desire for beauty, and, thus, his aversion to ugliness. Likewise, the creature is also driven by his desires, to take revenge against Victor for the misery

he's suffered through. While his emotions may be justified, his methods for taking revenge, harming innocent people around the scientist, are far from justifiable. Thus, in seeking to fulfill their own individual desires, both Victor and the creature commit evil deeds, despite their wildly different origins. Through this, Shelley is able to imply that all humans, regardless of upbringing, will eventually fall into evil because of their desires, proving once and for all the dangers of the desires of mankind.

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Short Story



Cold is But the Absence of Heat

Papists were forbidden in Massachusetts, but that didn't mean they never crossed the colonists' minds. In fact, far from it. One of Humility Winthrop's greatest fears was idolatry, second only to the devil himself. The reverend's sermons revolved around the terror that was Rome and how the colonists must never stop striving away from the Pope and towards righteousness. Truly, he said, the bonfires of Hell would never be hot enough for Catholics. As a matter of fact, it would never be hot enough for any of them. They were all sinners. Yet more than that, they were *disappointments*.

She listened in the hard wooden pew, fear seeping in. She could nearly feel dark forces passing over her, waiting to drag her into the pit.

Humility trudged alongside her family back to the house for dinner, only for them to return to service for another two hours after. A butterfly flew past, flitting its wings. She wanted so much to follow it. It seemed a sign of spring and nicer weather, a colorful contrast to the grey and cold. Eyes focused on the butterfly, she stepped forward, not noticing the rock. As she lay in the dirt of the road, she felt her father's disapproving eyes. She had been foolish. Straightening up, she noticed the butterfly on the road. Its iridescent wings were crumpled in the dust. Humility had killed it. Something cold came over her, chilling her bones beneath her cloak. She had killed it. The cold feeling did not leave her as she continued the walk home. Killed it. Killed it. Humility was a killer.

As night came on, it was discovered that there was no water in the house.

"Humility!" came Mistress Winthrop's shrill voice. "Humility! You must go out and fetch water from the well."

“Mother, ‘tis dark! I shall get it in the morning.” The night was cold and the well was some ways away from the house. Yet Mistress Winthrop would have none of it, and Humility found herself bucket in hand on the dark path towards the well.

She heard the cry of a screech owl, causing her to jump out of her skin. There was no light, except for her lantern. Just as she was reminding herself to be grateful for the lamp, it was blown out. No wind had passed her, yet the flame had flickered out instantly. What to do? She wished to turn back, yet she knew she couldn’t. “And she ariseth, while it is yet night: and giveth the portion to her household^[1],” she reminded herself, and pulling herself upright she made to continue towards the well.

Suddenly, something bright flickered across the path. The light moved towards her, then darted back the moment she stepped towards it. It approached her again, then retreated, leading her on as she tried to grasp what it was. As the light came near, Humility saw the flitting of two wings. The butterfly. Too late, she realized she was off the path and in the woods surrounding the village. How far off was she? She turned around but could see nothing. The butterfly, the phantom, flitted steadily now, almost within reach. She reached out her hand as if to touch it, for how could it be real? No sooner did she then did the butterfly vanish than *something* cold and dark filled Humility’s hand. She let out a blood-curdling scream, yet it strangled in her throat.

“They cannot hear thee, thee knows.” Was the voice coming from inside her head, or was something speaking to her? The grip on her hand tightened. Tears started to stream down her face without her realization. She could not bear to look up from the ground, for something in her knew what awaited her. Yet the coldness in her hand then forced her head up with a snap. It towered over her, seeming as tall as the trees yet her own height, staring into her soul as if to snatch it away.

“Humility Winthrop, thou did kill a butterfly today.” The voice chilled her, deeper than the cold weather. Deeper than the cold fear of hellfires. Deeper than the cold guilt of killing the helpless butterfly. Her tears were no longer hot, but began to freeze on her face as they fell.

“Thou foolish girl. Thy silliness killed it, thee knows.”

Something in her told her to run, yet she stayed rooted in fear.

“What a disappointment,” it hissed.

Yet the voice was somehow smooth at the same time, honey-talking her. She could get no words out. She realized her throat was parched, though she had drinken only minutes before at the house. Minutes? The house seemed so long ago now.

Even the butterfly phantom seemed a distant memory, only a dream.

The grasp on her wrist grew fiercer, causing Humility to wince in pain. The cold was inside her now. She felt as though her very bones were turning to ice, as if they would snap any second.

“Thy foolishness. Thy family is ashamed, Humility Winthrop. Thy reverend is ashamed, Humility Winthrop. *He* is ashamed.” Suddenly a great roar of wind rushed at them. It screamed and shrieked, piercing her ears. The demon’s grip on her was detached, and she collapsed to the ground sobbing.

“Run.” This voice was different now. It was not her own, but where it came from she could not say. Humility scrambled up from the forest floor and began to run. She knew not where, only that she *must* get away. She could sense the demon coming after her. The wind continued to scream at her – or was it screaming *for* her? It blew her and whipped at her face and hands, pushing her onwards until she slammed against a door. The wind had taken her to the church.

The door creaked open when she touched it and she fell into the building. She slammed the door shut, for the entity from the woods was approaching still. She could feel his presence approaching, closer and closer, as the cold came upon her more and more. As she lay collapsed in the aisle, she realized just how afraid she was. She could not go home, for that would mean going into the dark, and the cold, and facing him again. Surely he could not enter God’s house? Yet why should God offer her any protection? She was a disappointment. She was foolish, clumsy, and irreverent.

The cold was drawing ever nearer now. She hastened to get away from it. She retreated away from the doors towards the very pulpit where the reverend preached every Sabbath. The Bible was there, yet nothing else was. Nothing was in the spartan-style church of the Puritans. It was empty, barren almost. The cold was seeping ever deeper into her now. The doors began to rattle. Humility screamed, but no words came out. The doors opened and a gust of wind, stronger than ever, flooded the church and knocked Humility off her feet. The Bible blew off the pulpit and landed open in Humility’s lap. The wind was shrieking, the cold was getting deeper, deeper. The demon’s silhouette stood outlined in the door, and at any moment he would come for her and it would be all over. In

desperation, she looked at the book in her lap. She had never read the Bible for herself. ‘For God so loveth the world...^[2],

Surely that could not be right. The reverend spoke nothing of love, only fear and suffering. Frantically she flipped to another page. “The God of peace shall tread Satan under your feet shortly. The grace of our Lord...^[3]” Humility Winthrop did not realize she was speaking the words out loud until the wind stopped. There was no cold anymore. The tears that had been flowing down her face in a constant freezing stream stopped. And the silhouette of the demon was there no more.

The night still had a chill as she walked home from the church. The Bible said things completely different then what she heard in sermons. It did not teach fear, but it taught love. The cold came to her again sometimes, at church. When she walked in the dark alone, she could feel the demon, waiting, watching. Other members of the congregation felt it too, she knew. If only they knew they needn’t be so afraid.

^[1] Proverbs
31:15, Geneva Bible

^[2] John
3:16, Geneva Bible

^[3] Romans
16:20, Geneva Bible

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Critical Essay



Where the Wax Fell

The dinner table felt too loud for how little anyone was actually saying. Forks scraped plates, nagging questions from my family filled the room, and the smell of a meal I didn't even want clung to the air. My leg couldn't stop bouncing beneath the table, an essay due that night sat unfinished on my MacBook, and my dead phone left me nothing to ignore my sensory overload with. I needed to move and hide, but my dad's voice calling, "Finish your dinner, Maggie," "How was school today, Maggie?" and, "Is your paper almost done, Maggie?" wasn't something that I was allowed to disregard.

The only thing around me that had a sense of peace about it was a candle. The sweet aroma of smoked caramel and pumpkin lingered from the blown-out candle resting in front of me, overriding the heavier smell of dinner. I leaned closer, inhaling the scent of the still-warm wax, and let my shoulders drop for the first time all night. The candle pulled my attention away from the overstimulation provided by my environment, its scent offering something comforting to focus on. Time seemed to slow as I wrapped my fingers around the cylindrical glass and held it up to eye level, taking in the scent as if it could quiet the world around me. The words on the label were too small for my terrible eyes to read, so I tilted back the glass to read the words better. For a moment nothing existed except the candle in my hand.

I didn't notice anything had happened until I felt hot wax hit my bare legs and heard the shouting of my family. The further back I had tilted the glass, the more the reddish-orange liquid had spilled out drop by drop until it became a pour that puddled everywhere, including my legs and my mom's hand-painted Lazy Susan. The accident was entirely my fault, and as much as I didn't want to accept it, I recognized it immediately. My cheeks flushed with a hot red heat

while I stared at the mess I made. My body was frozen in time, not only because of the wax hardening all over my leg, but from how mortified I was.

Deep down, part of me had subconsciously expected the liquid to spill everywhere. What I did not expect was how quickly my embarrassment became anger as the criticism from my family turned into mockery. They jeered at me, questioning what purpose I had in picking up the candle, or why I had to go and ruin family dinner. Out loud, I couldn't physically give a reasonable excuse to give back. In my head, all I could try and think of was how to apologize. So instead, all I could manage to settle for was, "I didn't know there was still wax in it," as if it would change what I had done.

Looking back at that moment, my own need to preserve my self-importance overrode the need to be open and calm in my explanation to my family. In his writing, "The Virtuous Vice? Philosophical and Religious Roots of Pride," which debunks the essence of Pride, American author and academic, Michael Eric Dyson explores its philosophy. Dyson references back to Pope Gregory I's logic on those who act in accordance to arguably the deadliest of sins: "The core of pride, for Gregory, is an arrogance where man "favours himself in his thought; and... walks with himself along the broad spaces of his thought and silently utters his own praises" (Dyson Roots, 10). Pope Gregory's definition of pride argues that it is an inward focus to something so consuming, it leaves little room for accountability in an individual. He suggests an internal bias that prioritizes self-justification. In the moment with my family, the biased Pope Gregory, and in turn, Dyson, argues framed my excuse to my family. My response focused more on defending my behaviors rather than giving a proper explanation that justified it. The emphasis of one who "walks with himself along the broad spaces of his thought" reiterates arrogance that emerged at my refusal to take ownership. Rather than explaining my actions, I confined myself to my own reasoning rather than truthfully explaining anything, and "utter[ed] [my] own praises."

Of course, my indifferent excuse, which was an attempt to get my family off my back, was clearly halfhearted, and not an acceptable answer for my dad. So, while the laughing from my sister, and questioning from my parents continued, my shame followed suit. Even as my anger provided me with an initial excuse in the moment, I continued to produce one after the other, carrying myself deeper into a morally blameworthy self-justification. I argued that I was "tired," or "distracted," or anything my brain could think of except taking ownership of spilling the candle, and ruining the Lazy Susan.

Visible in my own actions, pride and refusal to take ownership of action reassures individuals of their own righteousness without confronting their faults. My reluctance to acknowledge my tone and defensiveness is similar to that of Satan in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. In his soliloquy, he laments his betrayal of God, and why he acted in treachery. However, regardless of his guilt for his betrayal, Satan claims: "The lower still I fall, only supreme / In misery; such joy ambition finds" (Milton 126 4.91-92). Even in his suffering in the reprimands for his betrayal of God, Satan finds comfort in his actions. In fact, he claims that the worse his condition gets, the "higher" he feels. Through his attempted ignorance to his guilt, and instead embracing an emotional high, Satan develops a pride that makes his culpability less painful. The more guilty I felt due to my parents' reprimands over the candle, the more my excuses did to reverse the feeling. Every time I excused my mistake with something new, I fed into my self-justification and maintained my sense of self-worth, similarly to Satan's joy found in his misery. Later in the section of his book, Dyson references Bell Hooks' book *"Where we Stand: Class Matters."* Bell explains self-regard as "a key to both our psychic strength and our moral health" (Dyson Roots, 27). Dyson's reference to Bell in connection to pride reinforces both Satan and my actions. An individual's sense of "self-regard" is determined by "moral health". With higher self-regard, moral well-being is high, but similarly with lower self-regard, the same logic is true. Feeding one's own reason such as Satan and I did strengthens confidence and emotional stability, regardless of whether or not the logic and excuses that feed reason are true. To me, my reasoning for why I had dumped the wax wasn't just a way to hide my failure, but rather a way to provide comfort and show a natural human instinct to preserve my pride.

After what felt like hours of question and defense with my dad, but was truly only five minutes, I was sent upstairs to my room. Even after sitting in there for the rest of the night, I still hadn't cooled off. My homework sat untouched, and my phone died again from doomscrolling. My brain was trapped in a debate with itself; one side reiterating pride and claiming spilling the wax wasn't my fault. The other was anxious reassurance which tried to comfort me into thinking everything would be fine even though the spill really was my fault. Nonetheless, one question remained unanswered, even when my sister eventually came to my room. She sat on my bed, forcing me to really pay attention to her and placed a hand on mine. Her voice was the first moment I had felt peace since smelling that candle, even as she forced me to confront the question,

“Mags, I know you didn’t really spill the candle because you were unaware of the wax. I mean, you were the one who blew it out, so why lie about why you did it?”

Dumbfounded, I stared back at her in silence. I wasn’t sure how to answer. I knew part of it was to protect my own dignity and pride, but that wasn’t really a good reason.

Renowned American neuroscientist, Robert M. Sapolsky, dives deeper into stress and its impact on human behavior and responses in his study on free will. Sapolsky argues that if one “Expose[s] a test subject to a series of unpredictable shocks, and she will activate a stress response. If you warn her ten seconds before each shock that it is coming, the stress response is lessened, as truth girds predictability, giving time to prepare a coping response” (Sapolsky 4). Unpredictability triggers stress, in turn leading to unpredictable responses. Through my excuses to my family on why I spilt the candle, I had found a defense mechanism to deter the stress and create a predictable scenario where I could control the outcome. My pride helped me control my excuses and gave me temporary dignity, even though it wasn’t beneficial to myself or others. I had created a worse situation for myself in my pride, feeding into the logic Michael Eric Dyson characterizes in another writing, “Enduring Pride:” “Pride has not exhausted its usefulness as either a playful reference for self-indulgence or a moral beacon to warn individuals and nations against the plague of untamed arrogance” (Dyson Enduring, 5). Opportunity is given again and again in all situations for pride to be checked, and on my own, I was ignorant of its impacts. Rather than allowing it to “warn” me “against the plague of untamed arrogance,” I had embraced my pride as if it would have little to no impact. My arrogance towards owning up offered me comfort, but it was a cautionary force that identified the impacts of self-indulgence.

When I finally spoke to my sister, I knew I couldn’t keep pretending that it wasn’t my fault. It was necessary for me to push past my pride and embrace the truth and tell her, “I was scared you guys would laugh at me more.” It was uncomfortable, but the honesty made the room lighter than any lie would. Pride was both a comfort and a warning, so when just a few days later I left a plastic bag of marshmallows on a hot burner, my lessons of owning up and rejecting *hubris*, I knew exactly how to approach my situation.

Anya Soni

Grade 11, Greenwood Lab School

Personal Essay & Memoir



Shadows

“Who is your favorite parent?” People always teasingly ask this question, yet the answer has always remained the same for me: my brother. Nine years apart, we seemed like entirely different generations when I was younger. My brother. My friend. My guardian.

I am not sure how old I was when I figured out a loophole to this question; perhaps three years old. Partly, I answered this way because I didn’t want to choose between my parents. Even though I sometimes acted as if I favored one over the other, the truth was that I could never choose. Mostly, though, I answered this way because my brother was my favorite person in the world. He was always the person I aspired to be. This feeling has been present for as long as I can remember.

If we had met each other at the same age, not knowing one another at all, we would never have been friends. We were polar opposites in almost every way, from the foods we liked to our personalities. I was basically a fan of all green vegetables while he liked everything but that. It was a running joke in the family. “You two make it so hard for me to choose what to make,” my mom always said. I was always more of the nerdy type, studious and hardworking in school. He, on the other hand, was one of the popular kids. People naturally gravitated toward him. I don’t think even he noticed the extent of it. I am not praising him simply because he is my brother; this is just a fact. I always wanted to be like him, so I tried to imitate everything he did. Most people don’t know this. I doubt my parents do either. While many think that my brother and I didn’t like sweet things growing up, as crazy as it sounds, this is only partly true. It applied to him,

but not to me. I think it was my third birthday when I noticed he wasn't eating the cake, and because I wanted to be like him, I decided I wouldn't eat cake either.

While I was often described as a feral child, he was the golden boy, the favorite of all my grandparents. Even our dog seemed to like him better. He never had to try or compete because he had already won. I resented him for the attention, yet he remained my favorite person too. I think he has the sharpest mind I have ever known. The way he spoke made people want to agree with whatever he said.

His one and only flaw was that he never cared much about school, and for that, he often got in trouble. Don't get me wrong, his grades were far above average. My parents, though, feared he would never live up to his potential. I remember that when he was in high school, he was often absent. Since we went to the same school, I was always known as "his sister." I would get so much attention from people who wanted to be close to him. I remember one time when I was doing a presentation at school. It was mandatory for all third graders. He was a senior that year, and while he had wanted to come to the presentation, he had a test that day. A few occasional people came to visit us until all of the girls from his class showed up at my presentation. My heart pounded as I gave my memorized speech. I was so grateful I had not slipped. Everyone else was staring at me with a twinge of jealousy. I liked the attention, but I now recognize that the attention was aimed toward him.

As he progressed through school and into college, we saw each other less often. He never really saw me grow up, and I guess I never saw him either. He was still the person who would surprise me with candy at lunch. My school was on a university campus, which meant that during lunch, high schoolers could get food from campus. I remember the time he surprised me with my favorite food while I was sitting with my friends: Taco Bell. Where he had grown popular, I had studied hard and done well in school. My parents praised me, but I, too, had flaws, many more than him. While he was kind and never spoke up even when he was wrong in an argument, I never learned to bite my tongue. Whether it was for him or because I didn't want to be yelled at, I am not sure.

When he came back after college, I think he saw how well I had done academically. He likely felt both pride and remorse. He had always been sweet with me, but over time, I began to feel bad about myself after our conversations. He had picked up the habit of making fun of things I couldn't do. I was terrible at remembering roads, so whenever I was in the car, he would purposely ask me for directions and then say, "You seriously don't know?" and laugh at me. I don't

think he truly believed the things he said about me, but I did. My parents sometimes joined in, thinking it was a joke. Whenever I failed or struggled, they would say things like, “All she’s good at is math,” or “She can’t do well in anything but school,” in a teasing tone, then chuckle as if they were in on the joke. It hurt badly because all I wanted to do was measure up to him.

I never attracted friends the way he did. He always knew what to say and how to make people laugh. While my parents probably thought life would be easier for me because I was serious and hardworking, I was unsure. My brother was always a better person than me. He would never snap at people when frustrated, and he never hurt anyone like I sometimes did. I was, and still am, jealous of everything he has.

He wanted to be a doctor. After studying for the MCAT and staying home during that time, he got into medical school, just as I knew he would.

I wish he saw what I saw. I wish he knew how envious I was. I suppose we will always be each other’s shadows, me following his footsteps, until the end.

Anya Soni

Grade 11, Greenwood Lab School

Personal Essay & Memoir



Pretty Little Shadows

Pluck. Press. Wait.

Most events in life have no markers. The only way to tell when a season has ended is when a new one begins. Memories of beginnings slip away too. But sometimes, when you know something is special, you remember it forever. It was Mother's Day. Every year you made a gift. You always thought that gifts should be handmade and personal. Gifts people buy weren't created with the intention of a specific person. This year you wanted to do something different. You painted a card as always, but you still needed the gift. Your mother loved nature very much, you thought to yourself. You often joked that she treated her plants like children. That was it. This moment was when an idea became a passion.

You first needed to gather supplies. You went to the school field where flowers bloomed in the unkept grass. You were lucky they hadn't trimmed the grounds. You gathered some small violets and went searching for more variety. As you got closer to some rocks, you saw the most beautiful yellow flowers. Twice the size of the purple ones, they were still the size of the tip of your finger. What made them special wasn't simply their bold color, but rather their golden sheath of wax that made them seem to have been dipped in gold. Later, you discovered they were buttercups. After deciding there were an adequate number of flowers, you borrowed a textbook. The next stop was the art room. After explaining your idea, the teacher gave you some resin and a pendant a few days later. You had to try a few times to get it right. Pressed flowers were delicate.

Your mother loved the necklace, which was embedded with flowers. But you, even more so, loved pressing those flowers. Each spring you would wait for

the field pansies, which became your favorite flower, to bloom. You would bike down the trail path near your house, where the purple flowers spread like a plague across the grass. It is funny how some memories remain so long while others fade. Sometimes, the memories we think will remain forever wilt like flowers, while our subconscious presses others, preserving them eternally. Your mind's own pretty little flowers. Maybe our subconscious recognizes the importance of those moments or something else we can't name.

Press. Pluck. Wait.

The first two steps are the easiest. Flowers with thinner petals, like pansies, are easiest to press, you've learned. Once you've chosen a flower you take some parchment paper and place it between the pages of a book. Stacking a few books ensures there is enough pressure. The last step is the hardest: patience. You don't know if the flower was pressed in the right direction or for a long enough time. While trying to wait, your thoughts drifted to the memory of playing chess with your grandfather. You were maybe four years old or even younger when you sat across from him at the window nook as the hot sun enveloped you. You thought the game was easy because you never had the patience to learn how to play, and he let you win every time. You would lift your queen and knock the king off his square, exclaiming that you had won!

Pluck. Press. Wait.

Finally, you completed the last step. The flowers had dried. As you opened the book, a smile lit your face. They were beautiful. The blues and purples were now forever frozen. You gathered them with care, making sure your touch was soft and light. Your fingers were no match for their delicate, fragile bodies, and one flower crumpled.

Memories, too, can crumple or be forced to crumble by those who do not appreciate them. People forget that each memory is a creation of the world, just like flowers. Some people try to dye their pretty little flowers. They try to throw glitter at them to make them appear more beautiful. Yet, the mind's little flowers are ever-changing and ever-growing.

You don't remember when your pretty little flower crumpled. But you still have the memory of the memory it had held. You may have been three years old at the time. You were in your old house, and your mom was talking on the phone. You heard that it was your dad's birthday, so when he came home, the first thing you said, as he walked through the front door, was happy birthday. Your mom and dad were so surprised because they couldn't figure out how you had known and had remembered to tell him. This pretty little flower had remained together

for many years but it eventually crumbled. Sometimes it is hard to tell whether this was your own memory or if it was a flower you created after hearing the story from your family. You'll never know. That's the thing about memories. Pluck. Press. Wait.

Three simple words. Three simple steps. Yet, they affect each flower differently. You look at each unique flower you had placed in a small box. As you admire them, you begin to think you don't know why the memory of your dad's birthday stuck, when, as you are ashamed to admit, there are a few birthdays of your own that you cannot remember in your seventeen years of life.

Your thoughts begin to spiral. You wonder why people cannot make certain memories stay no matter how hard they may try. Another memory surfaces. When you were younger, you did look out the window, as much as any normal child does in the car. Yet, you could never remember paths. You progressed well in school, yet this never changed. Even as you began to drive and tried to memorize as much as you could, it still proved frustratingly difficult. You grew angry at yourself and embarrassed.

Still lost in your thoughts, you pick up a flower to take a closer look. You suppose that you could compare the plucking of a flower to an experience. It is the initial moment a memory begins to take form. Pressure correlates to the intensity of that experience or the emotions associated with it. Finally, the wait is the testament of time that your memory holds. It becomes a bit of an equation. The stronger and more intense the experience, the longer it will last. It's fitting to think of it as a math problem rather than a route. You were always better at that. Pluck, press, and wait. My pretty little flowers are fragile.



The Portrait

Aside from a tall, shadowy figure seated in the front row, the little daycare classroom appeared otherwise lifeless. A young girl stood cautiously behind the doorway; the air before her threatened to swallow her whole in oppressive desolation. She felt the coolness send a sharp chill through her body. Her hooded eyes hung with shame at being present for the assignment.

The single window overlooking the great, vibrant playground provided the only source of light, and interest, to the sullen, monochrome walls. Despite her efforts, the girl's attention kept drifting out onto the bright rectangle across the room. Through the glass, she saw children her same age, laughing and frolicking around. With delay, the sounds slowly sank into the hollow, ringing like a distant memory. Perhaps it was her imagination, but she saw a kid in a bright red dress waving. The girl inside looked away, pretending not to notice. She might have preferred to be swallowed instead.

Tep. Tep. Tep. Each step was made crystal clear and almost seemed to echo throughout the small hollow. Features of the static figure gradually came to focus as the girl reluctantly dragged her body nearer. Unsurprisingly, it belonged to the same person it had yesterday, every twelve o'clock, waiting.

The teacher wore an impassive expression, glancing at her watch, as the girl took a seat next to her.

"Here," she sighed and handed the girl a piece of paper. On it was the cartoonish outline she had seen the day before, and the many days before that. The template drew a clear border, a boundary for any future potential designs, ensuring nothing went off the rails. Bold, dark lines depicted a circle with a

skirt-shaped form placed directly below. Hands stuck out from rectangular arms like those of a scarecrow.

As she had learned from the many attempts before, there wasn't much room for creativity. Yet she also understood that her teacher would refuse to accept anything mediocre.

Her eyes once again floated back to the tiny square on the wall. Sure enough, her classmates were still playing. *Of course they were*, she felt foolish for looking. The girl lifted her eyes to her teacher's.

"When will I be let out?" She asked, almost inaudibly. It displeased her to know how small and powerless she was. The girl dreamed of punching through the wall of her imprisonment. It was unfair. *So what if the drawing was to be displayed at graduation? So what if people judge it for not being what they wanted?* She saw many of the other kids pass with hardly any effort, with lousy scribbles for a portrait. Some were plain *ugly*.

"You will be let out when you're done," the teacher responded, rather stoically. Her bureaucratic demeanor infuriated the petite girl. Through her ran a sudden urge to shatter this elusive facade of the lady in front of her, but she restrained herself.

For the past five days, the girl had dutifully reported to the room at noon. There, she was taunted by the same task, repeatedly failing. Now, the thick, permanent marker lay on the wooden table a few inches away, posing a sore thorn in her vision. Just the thought of reaching for the marker in front of her felt unbearable—let alone setting it to paper. Nevertheless, the girl forced her limp arm to commit to movement. She plucked off the cap with a pop and stacked it atop the marker like a tower.

So...where to start? She felt her teacher's gaze weighing at the corner of her eye.

"Try to be more creative with your shapes and designs, it's not supposed to be that realistic after all," her teacher had said on the first day of the assignment. Back then, around this time, the classroom was filled with children. Yes, she had still been locked away from recess, but so was everyone else. The girl was no more an outsider than any of her peers had been; there had been comfort in belonging.

"It's too messy, come here again tomorrow," followed the second day of confinement. This remark flustered the young girl. She *had* been trying to be creative. The portrait seemed just fine; what did her teacher *want*? In the days

that inevitably followed, the girl mindlessly produced piece after piece in vain, not knowing what to do, or wanted.

Indignantly, she stared at the white sheet of paper—nearly blinding, with that loud outline of the body she had no say in. The girl sifted through ideas frantically in her mind. She had to end this wretched cycle once and for all. She was not sure how long she'd be able to hold out. Inside, she resolved this iteration had to be the best she's ever done. There was no room for negotiation or excuses.

Her classmates were still playing beyond the hollow.

Resolutely, the girl began to block out the features of the face, big almond shapes for the eyes, and a white toothy smile for the mouth. She placed small circles on the cheeks resembling blush. After rendering the head area, the girl started on the body. It might just become the dealbreaker for freedom. Her teachers' petty complaints from the past few days all regarded the clothes she drew. The girl sat in frustration, wondering how to go about it. Suddenly, an idea sparked in the back of her mind. The shirt she was wearing—it had received some compliments in the past. What if she could simply reference that? The girl looked down. *That's it!* There would be no way for her teacher to object if she based it off of that. However, she would have to modify it to fit the poofy dress already outlined.

Alternating her gaze between her shirt and the paper, the girl carefully incorporated the designs of her shirt onto the drawing. She took special notice of the tiny bows lined neatly through the center and the dainty frills at the sides. Her lines were typical of an average six-year-old's, a bit shaky and askew. However, the inspiration was clearly present. For further embellishment, the girl topped it off with a few abstract shapes here and there, playful ones. Seeing her creation, the girl's eyes lit up; it felt strangely gratifying to accomplish something that matched her teacher's standards. This drawing in particular struck something within her—why, it was finally *pretty*. The girl was inclined to brush this thought aside, it was silly to think a mere reference could make any dramatic difference.

"I'm done," she turned and held out the drawing towards her teacher. The teacher looked at it curiously for a moment, nodded slowly, and smiled.

"This will do, good job," she murmured. Hearing this rare piece of validation caused something to leap from the girl's heart. Relief filled her mind like warm sunshine, her fingertips tingled, and she felt an indescribable sense of accomplishment. Perhaps it was good relying on her shirt for a reference. Somehow, it worked.

“You may join the others now.”

“Okay.”

Ten seconds later the girl was out on the playground with the rest of her classmates. She turned back briefly towards the window and the figure, then rushed to join her beckoning friends. And through the glass, the daycare teacher saw all her students, laughing and frolicking around.

Sophia Sun

Grade 7, Lakewood Middle School

Personal Essay and Memoir



The Next Move

I remember staring down at the black-and-white checkered board since I was five.

The adrenaline.

The excitement when you find that right move.

The shock when the next move is unforeseen.

The dejection when your king has been knocked over.

I remember those days—as a young girl, all I had were dreams. I was called the “smart” one in my kindergarten class and the one who seemed to be good at everything. Logic was one of my biggest strengths. When my sister enrolled in a chess club, my mother thought it would be a good idea to enroll me too. Facing opponents possibly a few years older or even more than a decade seemed too much of a challenge—but my mind didn’t waver. The first time I had touched a chess piece, it almost seemed like a dream. These pieces were mine to control, mine to order. At the time I only thought chess was a fun game. I defeated person after person, thinking I was unstoppable. I won first in many of my earliest chess tournaments: the golden trophies glistening under the light, the medals that radiated off the sun’s rays when I walked outside, joy worn on my face. The feeling was spectacular. I yearned to feel that same emotion over and over again, for every game I played, for every player I beat. Each car ride after the tournament with my father at the wheel, I would go home with a sense of triumph rebounding inside of me. I didn’t lose so much that it made me discouraged, but reality hit me square in the face soon after the tournaments I’d won.

Losing too frequently.

It was a big blow to me. My moves started to become inaccurate. I was losing game after game, letting them checkmate me on the board, offering impractical draws at times, even resigning on the spot. Leaving the tournament empty-handed with tearful eyes became a norm. My zeal started to crumble beneath my feet, my entire world shaking. Who have I turned into, from the girl who won each and every one of her games to the one who had been defeated by them all?

Before I knew it, my spirit was starting to break. I didn't know it then; it just seemed like the ordinary days of when I would solve some chess puzzles online or play some chess games over the board at home. But soon I was more disheartened than ever before. The chess games that I'd always be up for have started to turn into a burden. Even at such a young age, I had a desire to be the best and win every game I played. Since I've been defeated so much I realized that my love for chess was starting to disappear, as if my love were broken. It was something I thought that wasn't such a big deal at first—and I turned out to be wrong. Due to my lack of enthusiasm for playing chess or doing anything related to it at all, it led to more sloppy games—a chain effect on my losses like dominos toppling over one another. Losing seemed like a daily routine each time I went to a chess tournament, a reminder of who I've become. My mind started to get caught up on how terrible I was at chess or wondering what the reason was for my stagnance. It made my moves more indefinite and my plans more vague, a minefield of confusion and skepticism. By then I've become more wretched than ever before—all I wished for now is just a single game to be won. I just wanted to win a single game. Just one, singular game. After several tries I finally managed to pick up a win. It was enough to keep me going but barely enough to keep my passion for chess above the line of giving up. Despite this, I was tired. Tired of playing. Tired of chess overall. The shadow of realization has finally rammed into me, my determination for chess wearing thin like a rope about to snap, frayed and unraveled. My passion kept plummeting until the point of quitting. *It's too much*, I would tell myself while staring at the chess board on the screen, the large red "You Lost" being displayed. Whenever my fingers brushed against the physical pieces over-the-board, they felt heavier as though they had been transformed from small, lightweight feathers to stones the size of my fists. I became my harshest critic—darkness shadowing me from the rays of the sun. What once used to be a heartfelt passion has turned into a pure detestation. I would tell my mother that I didn't want to go to any tournaments. That I wanted

to sleep in for the day or take some time off. By about the third time I've been telling her to skip a tournament, she notices that something is off. Something that is different from my usual desire to go to any chess tournament on whatever day, whatever time, whatever weather—it didn't matter. We had a talk that day. Those talks became more frequent. My mother would tell me that losing or winning didn't matter. It only mattered if I tried my best. She would tell me that there are only two outcomes of the game: winning or learning.

"Just try your best," my mother would say as we're seated on a couch. "You either win or you learn. That's it. There's no such word as losing." She would say this to me every day—all day, all night. My mother was trying quite hard to get it moving around in my head, and sure enough, it did. Each day those words reverberated in my mind, bouncing around in my skull. Each day when I did chess tactics and solved chess problems, my inspiration started to build up then. My spirit started to piece together from a broken bottle full of untamed promises. Chess, I realized, is only a game. Starting then my compulsion has started to climb up the mountain again. I knew that I missed the feelings. I knew that I missed the rollercoaster of feelings during the game: when you miss a move or play a brilliant one to remember for years to come, the feeling of fast-paced moves when you have thirty seconds left on the clock. I started to go to more tournaments. I started to learn the love of chess again, despite all of my previous failures. No matter if you win or lose, it's really just a game, right? It's just a game. Nothing more. Defeats still jams me hard but I don't stop. Discouragement still comes to swallow me up, but I do my best to not let it affect me. I've gotten a personal chess coach then—my chess rating has been soaring up in my one-digit ages. Going to bigger, more across-the-country tournaments have started. I've gotten used to the long car rides and the lazy plane trips, many of them adding to my personal trophy and medal collection. It's practically become a routine: eat, drink, chess, repeat. It goes on. And on. And on.

The farther I get into competitive chess the harder it becomes when I reach a higher level. Since I've gotten into competitive chess, there's more competitors my age. Younger ones that have higher ratings than me. It decreases my levels of confidence when I see them in the top ten while I'm lagging behind in the forties on the standing list. I always thought that I started chess because I had a talent for my logic and my thinking. Now when I see their names, always higher than me, that confidence always drops a little lower than it was before.

Losses have always been painful despite the words my mother has always said to me. Reviewing the games right afterwards has become a natural habit for

me: what did I do wrong? What am I supposed to play here? The hotel nights with my family dragged on longer and longer as I looked into the analysis of my chess games. The emotion of *oh, why did I play this and I'm so stupid—why didn't I see that?* are standard in times like this. The head inclines and the squeezing of the eyes when you realize you've played something wrong and wish you could go back in time to change something. A flurry of emotions hit you—anger, sadness, or maybe even regret.

In the real game, there's far more.

It's almost...peaceful.

A periodic cough there and a sneeze here is normal in a tournament filled with people. Chess boards are lined up next to each other on long tables with chairs on either side. The feeling of playing is almost tranquil. You think, you play a move, and it goes on until a result is confirmed. It's a risky gamble. Chess is a risky game. To take the risk or not? That's the question. To play the move or not? That's the question. Really, there's a deal of questions to ask yourself during a game. But the actual great part of chess comes. Maybe it's the speeding heart, the non-stop tapping foot or the sip from a water cup to refresh the mind. Maybe it's when people stop to check on your game or when there's not a word being spoken on the chess site. For me, the best part is the connection that chess brings. You win or lose a game. You discuss. Ideas get exchanged. Online chess accounts get shared and the games go on even if you're thousands of miles apart. Maybe you've just made yourself a new friend, no matter the age or how big or how tall. It's the connections that chess brings—it might just be my favorite part. It took me more than enough time to really understand it.

Chess, a wondrous beauty and marvel, is like life in too many ways to count.

It's decision-making. The moves that you take. Every step that is chosen. It can determine the outcome of the game. The next move can change the whole result of an entire tournament. Life is beautiful and so is chess, unique but also similar at the same time. It wasn't until I realized this that I finally saw the whole chess board in a new way. It's almost like a battlefield—a battle between the bad and good things that occur in life. The rollercoaster of emotions: up, down, up, down. The friends you make, the people you get to know. The risks you have to take. To do it or not? Everything. I remember that I thought the beauty of chess was just how the pieces glided on the board or how someone gets checkmated with a knight and a bishop. But it's really something more. It's more than just a game; my outlook has changed.

Chess has given me a new perspective to my entire view on life. There's so many more connections, so many more possibilities. Go try it out sometime if you haven't already; maybe you'll see life in a new way, too.



The Secret Place

I watched the waterfall descend into a branch of rivers, the next faster than the previous as I patted the pocket that holds my mother's picture. Ever since her death, I've visited this place every single day. Her burial place of precious antiques though her body has not been found is right next to the very large boulder where the waterfall came off of, below. The flowers I had put there earlier today are her favorite—roses. Dyed her favorite colors—pink and orange. I never knew why she always came to this place. I should've asked her before she left me. The first time she'd ever taken me to this place was when I was young; very young. She'd tell me that this place, this special place was a secret between me and her. Just me and her. Nowadays I would just listen to the waterfall, the running river noises, the chirping of the birds. And I keep contemplating about what I should have asked her before she was gone so quickly like that. Missing on the news and denoted as dead. Wishing she would come back isn't going to be reality. Making amends...in my earlier years, things didn't go as well as planned. Bad things happened. Well, I guess these are my amends to her. I miss her very much. In fact, I've placed a different batch of flowers every time I've been here. But she's not here to actually see it with me.

I sigh, laying down on the grass, ignoring how they dig into my skin. The sun is far too bright for my liking. The birds chirp far too much and I uproot a flower next to me. It's a rose. Twirling it around in my hand, I watch the different angles and perspectives of it. If only my mother were still here, watching me spin this rose around and around. If only I could push these awful feelings away from me. It's been some time, but still not enough time for me to process what has really happened. I decided to rip off the stem and the leaves of the rose and set it afloat on the fastest of the five rivers downstream. It goes and I watch it carefully

until I don't see it anymore. One second she's there and the next she's not. I still can't get over it.

By the time I uproot another rose, this time a maroon red one, the sun has dropped. The sky has become pink and orange and red, a mix of warm colors blended together. I stare at the sunset in awe before placing that rose into the second-fastest river. Maybe the next one I uproot can go onto the waterfall. Maybe she'll see that somewhere above me. That is what I do and I place it on the cascade before realizing my hand went through the water. My eyebrows shoot up in surprise as I realize my fingertips aren't getting washed over by the water anymore. The rose goes down in the third river and I push my right arm a little farther into the cascade. Nothing. Just the dripping noises of the droplets pitching on rock. Surprise fills my lungs. Is there something behind the waterfall?

A little farther. Nothing. When the water touches my elbow, my fingers are already dry. Do I dare to go farther? Do I dare to go farther than this? Curiosity takes over me, the water going over my elbow—

I groan in pain from a large *thud* on hard rock, rubbing my chin with my wet hand. Slipped into the waterfall! There must be something happening because a bump is appearing on my cheek. Goodness, I don't know what happened. I move towards a dry spot and check myself down for any broken bones. The first thing I see is blurriness when I open my eyes, but then there's a rose. An orange one. And then a pink one. The rose colors go on and on in front of me, a blur of colors fading together.

I sit up, forgetting about the agony and focusing on what's in front of me. I listen to the waterfall, still making its descent. The surface beneath me isn't grass anymore. I'm in the waterfall. Not literally, but the entrance that I never noticed...

The entrance she never told me about...

I groan, forcing myself to my feet all while leaning against the freezing stone behind me. A yellow light faintly glows in front of me and despite the pain I move towards that light, inching forward. There was no crevice in the rock and yet there was still light streaming onto the bottom rock. Before I know it, my fingers have met the glowing light and I'm gone a moment later, head spinning and body rolling.

Thud.

Torment rushes into me when I bump into a hard surface, my body rotating over an unfamiliar texture below me. When I finally reach a stop a tingling sensation fills me and a warm, cinnamon scent washes over me. The

smells are foreign and there's no making out of where I am. Sitting up I rub my eyes to take a good look of where I've landed, and once I do I regret not opening my eyes earlier.

Large, running pink waterfalls two hundred feet above, rainbows cast in the sky, strange insects bouncing everywhere, the so-called-grass soft like a cloud. Now that I think about it I've always wanted to feel a cloud, but there's so much more to see. There is nothing I know about what I see ahead of me. Confusion pops in and out of my head along with sparks of pain from my recent fall, but most of the agony has disappeared.

A voice pipes up behind me, outlandish. "Hi! Who are you? Are you okay? I just saw you take that awful hit."

I nearly jumped more than five feet in the air. A figure has appeared behind me—ocean blue eyes with a rose smile and pink cheeks. Straight blonde hair under a navy blue beanie with jaguar fur lining. The rest of her clothes are wool and they match her hat. She wears brown boots also with fur at the very top. *How strange clothes*, I can't help but think, but I don't point it out. It's the pointed ears that make my face wrinkle a little when I turn around.

"Who are you?"

The figure shrugs, eyes on the bump on my cheek. "I'm Esabella. And you're a human. Figured out the little waterfall entrance, huh?" She bursts into laughter and I don't know what to do but just stand there. Esabella wipes her tears away. "I'm sorry. I don't know what got into me. Do you need medicine for your face?" My eyes glance suspiciously at her ears again.

"No...wait, are you...cosplay?"

"Oh no, this isn't cosplay, human. I'm an elf. What's your name?"

My body tenses just momentarily, but Esabella manages to catch it. "I'm sorry, I'm not good at welcoming newcomers, but this is the Elfish World. The waterfall is a secret passageway here. It's confusing, I know." I can only stare at her, my mouth dry. "Well, I can send you to Queen Rosalina, if you'd like."

I blink and can't stop glancing at her ears, though I try my best to restrain myself. "I'm Adriel, but...elves? They're real? The books I've read...am I in a dream?"

Esabella starts tapping her fingers on her arm. "We're real. Real as ever can be. And no, you're not in a dream." We look out into the distance and I find my vision drifting upon towering castles, glass skyscrapers ten times the size of the highest one I've ever seen, an entire city. Peculiar things I've never seen before. My mother comes back into my head and I start to wonder if she knew about

this. If she did, then how did she know about this place? Oh, if she just didn't die off! I wish I could have come here with her. But I don't even know if she saw that as a waterfall or more. And I can't get any answers now that things have changed. Awe fills my eyes and longing to explore overcomes me, though I know I shouldn't just be waltzing off like that. My dad must be home already! He must be worrying about me, trying to find me, texting me frantically when my phone's not on me. What if he had already called the cops?

The elf girl grabs my left wrist and leads me onto a cornflower blue hill where many varieties of cerulean flowers sprout immediately.

"Am I supposed to be doing this?" I ask quietly, mostly to myself.

She hears me. "Well, if you're here, you should know. Things are much different from your world. Much, much different. You'll see soon." Her accent sharpens a little, a bit queer from the normal traditional accent back at home. Leading me through the plain and the diverse flowers we meet a large gate, black and tall, with a golden sign encrusted with a sparkly outline that says something I can't read. Esabella assures me and guides me through the gate through the winding streets where everyone is looking at me. I look down in embarrassment. "It's all right. Let me take you to her." Before I know it we're standing before an entire castle made of ethereal glass, the sun reflecting off it, elves in luxurious red capes and hats and cloaks. Two of them holding silver spears block us until they notice that I'm not their kind.

"Human?" one of them asks in their accent.

Esabella nods next to me. "Yes, we must see Queen Rosalina." They let us through after that. My legs can't help but wobble.

What have I gotten myself into?

The red carpet seems to drag on endlessly along with the golden chandeliers that have white diamond draping down, crystals dotting every corner, every side. They seem to be a special kind of crystal—the ones that radiate color that I've never seen before. It almost seems to mesmerize me when we come upon a fully-carved crystal statue of an elf girl standing on a pedestal, holding the sun in one hand and the moon in the other one. My second thoughts start to appear after more elf guards show up with their stern looking faces and the way they wrinkle after seeing me. I know they're trying their hardest to restrain themselves, but I don't blame them. Who wouldn't after seeing some random human walk into an expensive whole castle like she owns the entire place? No, I don't blame them at all. It's totally normal to see everyone scrunching up their faces after I come by—though it is a little unsettling to find out at least

twenty pairs of eyes are on you. I don't think I've ever had so many eyes on me once; let alone such strange groups of earthy-colored eyes.

Esabella finally stops at an overly-sized door with golden leaves adorning the outline of the red. "This is Queen Rosalina's room. Make sure you have good manners." I still can't believe I'm doing this and still can't believe that elves are real. From the books I've read since I was seven years old...really, are they real? Yet I'm standing here in front of one now—they're real as ever can be. It isn't a dream. Something manages to haunt me either way.

Anilasor Neeuq

It's a sign above the door I can't comprehend. Esabella glances at me. "Remember—take sixteen steps when you walk in, bow, and wait until she gives you the hand motion to stand back up."

I'm not prepared for her statement. Sixteen steps? Why sixteen? I know it's too late, and we walk in. I'm pretty sure I accidentally stumbled over my steps and gave her about twenty steps, which explains why I'm so much farther in front of Esabella, and why I bow in an awkward way and she doesn't. I don't wait for her signal to stand back up or else my back would break into two pieces. Esabella looks at me, gives me a slight glare, the queen gives the signal and she finally straightens herself up. I'm pretty sure I already failed the proper etiquette by the look the queen gives me.

"Queen Rosalina." Esabella pats down her pants. "I have brought a visitor. This is Adriel." Queen Rosalina's brow furrows for a fraction of a millisecond. She has a red cloak and a golden crown atop her curled strawberry hair which is built into a braid bun, her emerald green eyes looking me up and down. Her dress has several different layers to it, all red and gold and her shoes are sparkly high heels about three inches tall. She sits on a throne made entirely out of crystals. I can't push my boggling eyes back into my head.

"Interesting." Her voice echoes in the humongous room, her crisp accent the same as the rest of the elves I've talked to. She glances at me warily—it could be the bump on my cheek from my earlier fall. "What brings you here, Adriel?"

"I...fell through a waterfall. On accident." I look down at my shoes and put my hands behind my back, which is definitely not the right thing to do in front of a queen. I've never been in front of a queen before, so what is there to expect?

Queen Rosalina glances upwards, light sparking onto the tiny golden flecks on the ends of her long eyelashes. "Why were you there?"

I shift uncomfortably, determining how much information I should give out. "I was just visiting a place my mother and I always went to. But it wasn't

expected that I found a secret path to...to this world.” My feet start uncontrollably tapping the ground. I miss my mother. I wish she were here, helping me with this situation. Pink and orange flowers start to pop into my head and a feeling of melancholy engulfs me. I’m absentminded. My father must be so worried! I just happened to come across this, and he must’ve called the police...thinking that I’ve gotten kidnapped or some other option...

“Apologies about her manners,” Esabella says with a soft tone, acknowledging Queen Rosalina. “She’s new here. Came here by accident, my queen.”

“No need.” Queen Rosalina steps up, confidence riding in her heels. “I would like to speak to her alone, if you will...”

“Of course.” Esabella bows before leaving us alone in the grand room, and I feel like I’ve been shrunk to the size of a mouse. “Now, Adriel...” She steps down off the stage, sauntering towards me on her heels. The necklace she has seems quite memorable: a golden chain with a black hexagon reflecting off my face from the bright lights in the room. “Stay here for a moment. I’ll be right back.”

I’m left there as she disappears into thin air, my eyes still bouncing out of my head. I push my hands into my pant pockets before pulling out my mother’s photo, feeling like I’m going to cry. It’s rectangular with a white border. She shares many of the traits I have: dark hair and dark eyes. A smile is worn onto her face at the time. At the very bottom right corner, written in thick black marker, is the date of when the picture was taken. About a year ago. She wears a magenta striped shirt and flared jeans, white teeth showing. The background are trees and plants in a forest we visited that very day. In fact I think I took this photo. I think of myself as a very good photographer, after all. At least I still have this picture of her to moon over every day.

I scan the picture one more time and find something astonishing. Something familiar.

My mother is wearing a necklace, a golden chain with a black hexagon, reflecting off my face from the dappled sunlight that day.

“Adriel?”

I quickly stuff the picture back into my pocket, my heart skipping a beat. Two beats. Maybe three. Oh goodness...it’s Queen Rosalina. She’s back. I keep looking at the necklace and think about the one my mother has in the picture. It’s the same one, there’s no doubt. Did something happen to her?

Did Queen Rosalina...end my mother?

She walks up to me again, a *click-clack* with her heels. “What was that, dear?”

“Nothing.” I take a step back, feeling defensive. “Did you ever know my mother?” Her face suddenly shows a hint of surprise but she covers it up just a moment later. *There*. A moment of weakness, and she can see it on my face that I know what she’s thinking. I have to get out of here. My mother, Queen Rosalina, the same necklace—

“I didn’t end your mother, Adriel.” She takes off the necklace at my defensive stance. “Do you know why?”

I can’t speak. Something in my throat is preventing me from doing so.

“Elves can easily transform into humans, but they could get executed from the Elfish World if they got caught. But I was born in your original world and got turned into an elf once I had you, after finding the secret entrance in the waterfall.” She swallows. “I never told you because I was afraid you wouldn’t see me as your mother again. I was afraid you would only see me as an elf. The elves started getting suspicious when I disappeared for so long. I’m sorry I never told you...I had to fake my death. I wasn’t going to return to the other world again, knowing your father would take care of you well.” A blur of swirls go by, golden and sparkly, until an intimate figure gets uncovered by the disappearing glitter in front of me.

It’s my mother.

Alyssa Tang

Grade 10, Parkway Central High School

Educator: Jason Lovera

Personal Essay & Memoir



Let It Go

"It was nice knowing you but it is time that I find a new friend."

I stared at the screen, my 6th grade mind unable to process what it was reading. I hadn't thought much of the email titled "Goodbye" from my best friend, Aria, when it first appeared in my inbox. It was just another one of the 20+ emails my little friend group exchanged daily, and a spontaneous email with a strange and ominous title was nothing new to me. I read on.

"I know that you probably can't accept this but ... I can't take it anymore. You're becoming more and more bossy around me and judging people ... and I don't like that."

Bossy? Judgmental? How can anyone not want to be friends with ME? I'd thought. This is a prank; it must be.

"I'm sorry, but I just can't do this anymore. Just please, take this seriously. Goodbye."

That was it.

Denial raced through my mind. She must've been joking. This couldn't be real. What could I possibly have done? She was pranking me, right? A whirlpool of emotions that I could not begin to dissect flooded my thoughts.

Over the next few days, the whirlpool gradually dissipated, leaving only boiling resentment. It tainted my thoughts, and a dark one entered: *I'll just give her the silent treatment until she feels sorry and crawls back to me.* More sinister plots began to form. I could guilt-trip her. Spread rumors about her. Make her new friends think terrible things of her. I imagined her apologizing, begging me to take her back as a friend, and me telling her it was too late, her dejected look filling me with a sick satisfaction.

Deep down, I knew how cruel and irrational these plots were, and that her action was logical given the ways I'd treated her (which I will not detail here). At that moment, however, I wanted her to feel every drop of hurt I felt reading that wretched email.

In a study from the journal *Science* published in 2004, researchers at the University of Zurich used PET scans to monitor the brains of men seeking payback after being betrayed in a cleverly designed economic game. The scan showed a spike in activity in the dorsal striatum, an "evolutionarily older" part of the brain related to reward processing. (Thornton 5). The appeal of revenge is a built-in instinct that helped us survive. "We're finding that revenge works pretty much the same way in many group living animals. ... for highly social species, revenge is a necessary tool" (Thornton 5). Though no excuse, this study explains the primal urge to take it all out on Aria.

About a month passed before I saw my friend again. Academics and other duties had pushed Aria's email towards the back of my mind, and the resentment began to fade. As I made my way towards the atrium for lunch, I saw two people conversing happily, clearly as close friends. As I approached their position, their figures clarified, and I recognized one as Aria. I circled around them, maintaining a distance, careful not to let them see me, until I safely reached my usual spot. I couldn't help but look at them. Only then did the emotions hit. The sight punched me in the gut. Not only was she doing just fine without me, she was doing better. I suddenly felt an intense wave of jealousy and resentment toward Flora. Was she... my replacement? A reasonable voice in the back of my mind reminded me of her innocence, so I turned back to my food and tried to push them away from the front of my mind.

When the researchers of Zurich added a twist to the game where players could take revenge at the expense of themselves, PET scans revealed that "activity surged in a second brain region as well: the medial prefrontal cortex, or MPFC. This part of the brain is ... associated with the cognitive evaluation of costs and benefits" (Thornton 5). The conflict between resentment and reason is a conflict between two regions of the brain, each appearing in humans at different points in the evolutionary timeline. I sat at the table, trying to focus on my lunch and ignore the two girls in my peripheral vision. Out of sight, out of mind. Except they weren't out of sight. Flora and I happened to share a nearly identical schedule in 7th grade. Every day, nearly every class, I saw her. She became a constant reminder of the friend I'd lost. She'd done nothing wrong, but I resented her nevertheless.

I arrived at the gym for our 8th grade PE class, and as expected, I found no friends in the sea of strangers. Everyone seemed to have their own social circle, and my presence would only burden them. Then, a familiar face caught my eye. It was Flora, sitting on the floor with a circle of empty space around her. I couldn't help but sympathize; like me, she saw few friendly faces in the crowd.

The teacher's voice boomed through the speakers. "Today, we are doing the monthly fitnessgram test. You know the drill- find a partner, decide who goes first, and then let's get rolling."

The class quickly split up into pairs, with close friends moving towards each other like magnets. Suddenly, only a few people stood alone. As I pondered my next course of action, I realized that I'd been pushing away my feelings of resentment for years, letting it stew in the back of my mind, and it had done nothing for me. Studies show that "ignor[ing] negative feelings entirely ... isn't effective," a New York Times article says (Cox 2). Literature provides extreme cases of what happens when characters clench onto anger and hatred. Madame Defarge from *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens makes her single goal in life taking vengeance on those who wronged her, harming innocent civilians and leaving her with "no sense of pity." "It was nothing to her, that an innocent man was to die for the sins of his forefathers" (Dickens 347). The Creature from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Heathcliff from Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* present similar cautions. They let resentment to dictate their lives, tainting every choice they made and becoming obsessed with bringing vengeance on those who wronged them. Holding on to the resentment only ever hurt everyone involved. Though I was powerless to change what I'd done in the past, or what I felt, I did have the power to let go, and avoid becoming like the characters these authors have warned us about.

Before I could make the move, she suddenly appeared in front of me.

"Do you want to be my partner?"

I looked at her for a second and took a deep breath. Fate had handed me the opportunity to address my feelings on a silver platter. I forced myself to release my grip on the jealousy that arose, and nodded.

"Yes."

With that one simple word, I felt a weight which had been present since I first saw Flora in the atrium that fated day in 6th grade lift from my shoulders.

Though I wouldn't call it forgiveness, as Flora was innocent of wrongdoing, the idea of letting go is still there. As Philip Yancey states, "[forgiveness] allows relationships to start over" (Yancey 2). It's hard to believe now what an amazing

friend I would have lost had we not ended up in the same PE class that year, and how much time I lost clinging to resentment.

I could never have controlled what feelings arose when I first read that email, and saw Flora and Aria hanging out together. I wasted over a year stewing in my envy, seeing Flora as the girl who replaced me. Even though I wanted nothing more than for her to disappear, by letting go, I saved myself countless years of being unable to see her without dragging a load of built up resentment along with me. By letting go, I stopped the ripple effects of that fated email, freeing both me and Flora from my resentment. By letting go, I found a new friend.

Will Tao

Grade 12, John Burroughs School

Poetry



Diospyros Virginiana

If Tantalus lived beneath the persimmon tree,
he wouldn't have to reach
as he does
for that fruitless fruit;
instead, it would shower sweetness upon him in due time,
for he knows that what blossoms in the summer
is ripest after the fall.

Chris Tao

Grade 12, John Burroughs School

Educator: Eleanor DesPrez

Critical Essay



Starving the Inquiring Mind: The Banning of “Song of Solomon” by Toni Morrison in Schools and Prisons

“Those that fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it.”

–Winston Churchill

Book banning is censorship, and it occurs both in schools and prisons nationwide. Through the government's control of the media we consume, we as a society lose both our literacy and critical thinking skills. *Song of Solomon* by Toni Morrison not only deserves, but needs to be removed from book ban lists and taught in classrooms, especially within current social and political contexts. *Song of Solomon*, along with other books cited as leading to the proliferation of “critical race theory,” is being banned. It is important to teach books like *Song of Solomon* now more than ever, as the parallels between book banning in the United States and anti-literacy laws during times of enslavement are emerging.¹

Even though only two in ten people trust the state government to regulate books for students, PEN America has currently found 22,810 cases of book bans across 45 states and 451 school districts, and they still can't cover every book ban.² Books are commonly banned for teaching critical race theory, Native American and African American history, and featuring LGBTQ+ characters which are deemed as inherently “sexually explicit.” With the ruling of the *Mahmoud vs. Taylor* case this summer, the Supreme Court decided that school districts must provide “opt-out” options for books featuring LGBTQ+ characters. Collier County residents in Florida even tried to ban a biology textbook because it mentioned the validity of climate change, evolution, and Covid-19.³ *Song of Solomon* is most commonly attacked for its “teaching” of critical race theory, as the novel's

protagonists must face systemic racism. Forty-four states limit the teaching of critical race theory in schools, according to Education Week.⁴ As Faith Karimi, a journalist for CNN, explains, critical race theory “recognizes that systemic racism is part of American society and challenges the beliefs that allow it to flourish.”⁵ However, critical race theory, especially its alleged integration into the school system, has sparked outrage among groups of politicians and parents. The U.S. government in 2020 opposed the teaching of the 1619 Project (which asserts that the United States was built off of the foundations of slavery) in schools, calling it “divisive, anti-American propaganda.” This has led to a push for the banning of books like Frederick Douglass’ autobiography, *The Story of Ruby Bridges*, and *The Hate U Give*.⁶

Many Americans are oblivious to the fact that books are not only banned in schools, but in prisons as well. By 2023, Florida banned 22,825 titles in prisons.⁷ Brianna Rae Johns, author of the article “Book Banning in US Schools and Prisons as Modern-Day Slave Codes,” has observed that statistics show how the legacy of enslavement still affects literacy today, especially with book bans in prisons. Slave codes became “Black Codes” upon emancipation, which aimed to limit the civil rights of African Americans, and led to unfair imprisonment.⁸ Today, African Americans are five times more likely to be incarcerated in state prisons than white people, and 70% of imprisoned people cannot read at a fourth-grade level. Johns also asserts that book banning in the United States is similar to anti-literacy laws during enslavement. These laws were prompted by the Stono Rebellion and Southampton Insurrection, both of which were led by people who were believed to be literate.⁹

Song of Solomon and other novels by Toni Morrison like *The Bluest Eye* have been targeted by book bans due to their inclusion of rape, incest, and “sexually explicit” content in addition to DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) content and the teaching of critical race theory.¹⁰ Russel Hughes, a Florida superintendent, even admitted that he supported a ban of *The Bluest Eye* without ever having “read one paragraph of the book at the time.”¹¹ I believe *Song of Solomon* should be taught in schools due its coming-of-age lessons, Morrison’s distinctive writing style, and its inclusion of tough themes that highschoolers should be exposed to. The craftsmanship of the novel is unique and challenging. In discussions with my peers, I often found myself or others saying “I would have never thought of that metaphor or phrase in a million years.” Her descriptions

always made me pause to reflect: for example, Morrison calls Hagar's dependence on Milkman a "graveyard love" on page 128 and the smell of an autumn night as "an odor like crystallizing ginger, or sweet iced tea with a dark clove floating in it" on page 184. Just as the poet Ross Gay introduced me to the intrinsic joy within the sounds of words, these descriptions evoke a deep sense of satisfaction within me, because they invite me to look at something in a different light. In text message conversations with friends about our nightly *Song of Solomon* readings, I constantly talked about the beauty of Morrison's writing. Our discussions sometimes expressed our shock at the many traditionally "uncomfortable" ideas in this novel that are often self-censored by media: the Seven Days, a secret society that violently delivers racial "retribution," racism, abuse, witchcraft, and incest. However, just because content within a novel might make readers uncomfortable, doesn't mean it shouldn't be taught. Journalist Teresa Koberstein's writing for the National Coalition Against Censorship aligns with my own thinking, as she states that "the discomfiting truths of life" are "hardly reason enough to hide [novels like *Song of Solomon*] from our nation's young people."¹² This novel ought to remain in high school classrooms because, as a bildungsroman, it can help highschoolers have the same epiphanies Milkman, the protagonist of the novel, does.

Reading *Song of Solomon* helped me re-evaluate how I've treated both myself and others during different times in my life, and what type of person I want to be moving forward. As Robin Bates, an English professor with a PhD in English from Emory, says:

"what infuriates me about the banning of *Song of Solomon* is that it can provide young men with positive images that will help sustain them...Milkman lives an aimless, materialist existence and doesn't treat either women or himself with respect. It is a problem that plagues many young men in our society. However, once he begins digging into his past and learns about the heroism of his ancestors, he gains a sense of self-pride and begins in a whole new way. He becomes accountable for his past sins and treats others with consideration."¹³

As highschoolers, my classmates and I often make mistakes as we learn how to live. Milkman's realization that "he thought he deserved only to be loved – from a distance" has helped me recognize my past mistakes and selfishness as I've grown up, and accept that it is okay to forgive myself.¹⁴ It also prompts me to continue to lead a life I can look back on and be proud of. My peers have remarked that *Song of Solomon* has made them "want to read [for fun] again," and

Morrison's writing was so moving that a group of friends and I plan to start a Toni Morrison book club and read some of her other works like *Sula* and *Jazz*. I wouldn't have been able to experience any of this if I went to a high school where books like Toni Morrison's continue to be banned.

"When a book is banned," says Robin Bates, "at least it means that people are assuming that it can have an impact on lives. In other words, literature still matters."¹⁵ Those banning books know of their power, and they also know that by keeping the masses unexposed to new ideas, they are less likely to stand up against injustices of all kinds. Toni Morrison recognized the power within her own novels, as her book *Paradise* was removed from the prison system because of its potential to cause riots.¹⁶ It's not normal that we live in a society where we can't be exposed to concepts that are considered by a minority to be "un-American." It's not normal to forbid children to learn about African and Native American history or to call the existence of LGBTQ+ characters "explicit." Researching book banning caused me to inspect the books I've read throughout my time in highschool, and I've come to appreciate the intentional integration of banned books into my school's English curriculum. From reading *Brown Girl Dreaming* in 7th grade to *MAUS* in 11th grade, I'm grateful to have been exposed to so many "banned" ideas that I have taken for granted my whole life. I will no longer handle this gift of education lightly; it's a blessing to exist in a learning environment without censorship.

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Elias Thompson

Grade 12, Kirksville Senior High School

Short Story



When Light Disappears

From the view of just outside a small, dark cell, the shape of an individual crumpled against the wall in a pile of rags, dirt, and straw lay visible. Outside the cell is a long, dank dungeon, dimly lit by scattered torches. Cells stood dispersed, looking as though they had been hand-carved straight from a natural cavern rather than in the basement of a noble's grand mansion, the noble being the Warden. Prisoners were placed just out of sight from each other to give the illusion of absolute solitude. The dungeon itself had many layers; each layer deeper containing those whom the Warden had deemed irredeemable, with the last being the very layer that the warden spent most of his time; the dungeon's torture room.

Eurfon knew nought of what they had done, yet here they sat, one layer above the dreaded torture room in a heap of filth. Their cell was almost pitch black and only illuminated by the faint flicker of the next torch about fifteen steps from the entrance to Eurfon's cell. They ran through every possible offence that they could have committed, though it was hard to remember anything prior to the dungeon. A fog had beset their mind, preventing even the simplest of thought or feeling to show itself. How long had they been here? Faint memories of a happy past spent playing in the forest and running through fields on a sunny summer afternoon lay behind the fog, taunting. They could no longer cry, for they had spent all of their tears hopelessly wishing for a way out. Had they not been so tightly chained to the wall, they might have tried to find some way of escape, even if it meant taking drastic measures. The wall acted as both their saviour and their warden. It kept them bound, but allowed them to draw many scenes from their past with the assistance of a rock. The wall had kept them sane

whilst furthering their descent into madness. How much longer could they hold on?

Atop the dungeon lay the Warden's grand mansion, one esteemed by the residents of the surrounding village. Lively and beautiful it was, but only to hide the horrors beneath. The Warden often hosted large gatherings and parties of all and any sort. But the guests often had little knowledge of the atrocities committed by the Warden. All they knew was that he kept them safe. They knew not of the many innocent people trapped deep below. They didn't know of Eurfon nor how they had been stripped from their home and family for no obvious reason. They were simply ignorant guests who attended a meeting. Had they been made aware of the savagery below, it would only instil fear within them, for the Warden had control of the entire militia. It seemed that he had grown even more powerful than the King himself, for he had gathered together the cruellest of men, deposing those too morally strong to deal with such torture. This, of course, wasn't the Royal Guard and official militia of the King, but it was substantial enough to overthrow the King and his army.

Eurfon now lay on their side. When had they last eaten? Was it before they were last taken down? When was that? All they knew was that, from what they could see, their wounds had yet begun to sour. Without moving, they could feel the burn of the deep gashes throughout their body. Long ago had they learned to not cry out when the guard was doing his 'work'. They had been worked on by the Warden as well; he had taken their thumbs and several of their teeth. Of course, the removal of their thumbs was punishment for attempting to escape the horrors with a shard of glass. They could no longer draw on the wall and for this, they tried to weep, only to find they could not. Days, perhaps, since their last mouthful of water. They ached, physically and mentally, longing to remember their past and because of the brutal beatings they had endured. The guards went further than physical torture; any fear the prisoners had was exploited. It hurt. Everything hurt. They had been told that the Warden had slaughtered their mother and siblings, every detail of their brutal murder emphasised. The thing is, however, that story was a lie. Eurfon's family—rather what remains of them after the Great Plague—lived a happy, blissful life almost entirely unaware that Eurfon was still alive. Perhaps it could have hurt them more if they were to learn that their family did not remember them, that they were one of the many guests unknowingly funding such a horror story.

The Warden's property was quite extensive, stretching off into the distance and infringing on peasant land. The mansion itself was a large, white building

highlighted with gold and was comprised of 103 total rooms, including a large dining hall and a ballroom. The Warden had many servants, all attending his every need. The rumours say some of them were even concubines. Every night, the Warden ate in the most luxurious way possible; a large feast, just for him if he wasn't hosting a party, and in the most comfortable, expensive outfits possible. Sometimes, he'd even allow some of his prisoners to come up and watch him feast for entertainment, gawking at them salivating and struggling in their chains in an attempt to reach sustenance so long deprived of them. The prisoners of course did have purposes other than to be tortured. Many imprisoned on the upper levels were his servants doing everything he demanded of them. Those on the lower levels worked the more dangerous jobs, often being forced to work in the mines, one of the main sources of income to the Warden. The conditions of the mines were just as brutal as the dungeons; they worked nonstop in sweltering heat and in chains.

Eurfon was startled awake by the loud banging of a guard's hand on their cell door. They heard it screech open as the guard entered.

"Get up, you dog," he shouted, grabbing Eurfon's arm violently. "Time for work." He smiled sadistically.

Eurfon's legs wouldn't work, however, forcing the guard to drag them to the dungeons by their matted hair. They didn't have the energy to protest, nevermind open their eyes. But they knew where they were when the large, wooden door slammed shut. They felt the cold, iron restraints as they were being shackled to the table. And, they felt each horrible, painful incision made by the Warden's knife, the cold and searing burn of a branding iron, the shiver of their body as their meager clothes were being stripped away.

When the Warden was satisfied, he looked at the broken Eurfon with disappointment. "This one is no longer of any use to me. Take care of them." With that, he turned and left, slamming the dungeon's door on his way out. The guards smiled. This would be easy. They made sure Eurfon's final moments hurt. They spoke of how no one will remember him, following each word with another forceful blow. When they took his eyes, he managed a small cry. And when they were bored, they took his head. His bones were left to rot along with many others in a pile by the dungeon's door.

In the end, no glory or honour lie in Eurfon's suffering and death. The Warden's crimes went unnoticed, and the people still suffered. His victim's were targeted randomly, but family assumed they died of a disease or simply ran off. Things like this happened all the time, so why should they think otherwise?

Those oblivious of such horrors might one day find themselves stuck in them, to which they have contributed, and no saviour will come to them nor will their deaths not be in vain. Instead, they will suffer and be silenced.

Elaina Thornton

Grade 8, Basehor-Linwood Middle School

Educator: Erin Tegtmeier

Personal Essay & Memoir



Bomb

At the start of this assignment, I thought I was going to write this long, very sentimental piece of writing. The truth is, your emotions aren't always going to be pretty. Emotions are brash, ugly, chaotic, and unexpected. I've seen too many people try to make emotions aesthetically pleasing or organized. "Here's my organized journal where I write my feelings in cursive for a few minutes." It doesn't work like that, not for me at least. I can't talk about my feelings; there are no right words. I can't write about my feelings; who has time for that? I can't think through my emotions; there are already enough things up there.

When I was younger, I would always get in trouble for being too emotional. Mainly for my anger. I couldn't handle it 'correctly.' They had various ways of making me deal with it. "Here's a squishy that will get lost or taken by another student after a few days." "You can come to the principal's office to get a piece of candy whenever you do well!" "Every Friday, you can come to the counselor's office to draw or write and work through your emotions!" These methods made me feel weird, like a thing everyone else looked at differently.

I would be surrounded by classmates. If I got frustrated, I could see the fear and surprise on their faces. I always wondered what they were thinking. Sometimes, I heard the thoughts out loud...

"Oh, don't go near her; she's scary!"

"Don't mess with her, or she'll beat you up!"

"No one wants to hang out with you! You freak me out!"

It hurts sometimes, knowing that you are feared because you didn't understand emotions yet. I still see that past trickle into the present. I'll get in trouble for being too emotional. I look around, and I see all my peers who seem to already

have so much under control. I'm sitting next to them with my emotions clinging to my every move. I'm like a bomb, and unfortunately, treated like one, too.

People are reacting around me like I could blow up any second. I've seen people rethink what they were about to say. Or warn others that I'll beat them up. I wish it would stop, but you can't just stop being a bomb. I've tried to get control of my emotions, bottle them up because that's what everyone seemed to want.

Just put on a happy face, and people will start relaxing around you. Stop showing the 'bad' emotions. You'll start seeing yourself get more friends. More happiness, even if you are miserable on the inside. Nobody sees in there anyway, so who cares what happens in there. As long as you're happy on the outside, everybody will be fine. Be the person with perfect emotions, and everything else will fall in place. You will get good grades. You will be accepted into new groups. You will have greater achievements. Your teachers will like you better.

After a while, though, things will start stacking up. Your bottle will become full. You will feel the stress of all the emotions you're holding back, bubbling up inside. Everything will start overflowing. You will always be that bomb that is tick, tick, ticking away until you pop.

Addison Tomlinson

Grade 11, Lawrence High School

Short Story



The Hour of the Cuckoo Clocks

“...Faust...?”

“...Yes, young Elco?”

“...Has there always been a river in the south?”

Faust turned his head with a soft laugh, letting his emerald gaze search through the small window in the guard’s tower. As he placed his playing cards down onto the splintered table, he found what looked to be a long moving line across the horizon, like a river bathing in the maroon moonlight.

“No,” replied Faust, his gloved hands slowly reaching for his blade that laid on that table scattered with playing-cards. Faust then sheathed the item, and slowly stood up.

The rival army that marched in the distance had the stealth of a looming cat. Unfortunately, the glowing orange light of a poorly covered torch is what gave away the invaders.

Faust’s eyes adjusted while he witnessed the countless rows of armed soldiers marching for the capital of the Northern Kingdom.

Faust spared no time as he took the first available horse outside the tower, not even using a few precious seconds to saddle his spirited animal. The stoic knight simply untied the reins from its post, hurdled onto its back, and fisted the leather reins so hard that his leather gloves squeaked in protest.

“Where are you going?” The apprentice quizzed as he rushed after the swift knight.

“I must go warn the king,” the anxious knight breathed out, urging the startled horse into a gallop. Faust didn’t hear Elco’s reply, too focused on the city roads that led to the eerie stone castle lounging in the east.

Grandfather clocks ticked in each room of the chilled stone castle. Simultaneously, they all went off with different musical instruments chiming to alarm the minimal castle staff that it had finally reached midnight.

Once the chimes, bells, whistles, and other intricate musical machines calmed down, the peaceful quiet of the night returned for the short term of an hour.

The ruckus started at the walls, the sturdy, high rise walls that protected the city. First there was shouting, then there was screaming as a large blazing catapult ball broke a hole into the walls. Within a short time, the armies flooded the city and chaos erupted.

Lonan only awoke after Luelle had gotten up. The beautiful woman had heard screams outside their balcony window, and grew worried. Luelle rose from the bed, drew a robe across her dainty body, and went to their balcony to investigate the situation. She stood in horror as she saw the tall stalks of smoke and fire rose through the city below their castle. Lohan woke up to her horrified screams.

It was a good thing the young king was quick with his wits. Lohan urged his wife to quickly get dressed, ordering her to put on a traveling gown, a hooded cloak, and warm layers because the winter frost had finally begun to bloom. Lohan also dressed himself in warm clothing. He knew it was silly to worry about attire while your city was being invaded, but fleeing a kingdom in just a tunic was a horrible thought that plagued his mind.

As Lohan and Luelle rushed from their room, they met Faust, who was just about to burst inside. The group exchanged quick greetings in a long hallway, lit only by small candles, and the maroon moonlight that danced in through the windows. Faust cradled an infant boy in his arms, already swaddled and dressed in thick clothing to protect the boy from the chilly winds of the angered winter night.

“Faust, I must praise you, you damned loyal man.” Lohan greeted Faust with relief, reaching for his infant son and passing the prince off to his grateful wife.

Faust heaved heavy breaths as he tried to compile his racing thoughts. He just rode from the outside walls of the south, and then dashed across the castle to deliver the young prince. Between short gasps, Faust urgently ushered the royal family down the hall. They had little time to spare, as the screams of battle echoed closer.

“The kingdom of the south has invaded,” Faust rasped out, grabbing the shoulders of Luelle to guide the startled woman down the halls.

“There is a hidden passageway in the throne room— it’s behind the throne, and the tunnel should lead out of the city.”

“Where will we go from there?” Lonan inquired as they neared the throne room.

Faust didn’t answer Lonan. He didn’t have an answer. Perhaps the smaller kingdoms in the West might help the royals, or perhaps they might feed them to the wolves. Either way, they needed to flee, and worry about the details later.

The terrible cries of the invasion hissed just outside the castle grounds, along with the shouting of civilians being slaughtered, and knights attempting to protect themselves.

The small group managed their path towards the throne room with little trouble, just as the invaders had managed their way into the castle grounds, instigating barbarous actions to take place. Lonan and Faust found the tunnel entrance with ease. Faust pushed open the hidden door and guided Luelle inside. Lonan swallowed sharp breaths and looked at Faust, who seemed hesitant to enter.

“Go on, there’s no time to wait,” Lonan commanded in a firm tone.

Faust’s face grew solemn as his gaze grew distant, before shifting into a stoic expression. “I must protect the people, my King,”

Lonan frowned, grabbing tightly onto Faust’s wrist, using his strength as an attempt to throw the knight inside. Faust didn’t budge.

“Don’t be foolish, we need your protection,” Lonan chided with a nervous chuckle.

“The councilmen, the nobles, and the servants... they all need my help,” Faust continued, pulling his arm away from Lonan’s firm grasp.

“They have their own guards, my old friend. Stop this nonsense—come on!” Lonan urged with desperation.

Faust’s smile did not reach his eyes as he gazed with a look filled with grief at the young king. His calloused hand moved to grab onto the disguised door.

Lonan stood still, hesitating as if questioning what he should do. Does he beg? Does he shrug off the creeping feeling of dread and usher his wife into the dimly lit tunnel? Does he join Faust? Does he abandon his family for honor?

Before Lonan could decide on his next action, Faust took in a deep breath, glancing at the trembling queen who held the young heir before looking back at Lonan.

"It was an honor to serve you, your highness."

"Faust No—" Lonan began, but his words were cut off.

Faust let out that deep breath as he used his shoulder to shove Lonan onto the tunnel's floor. Lonan fell with a dramatic grunt, laying on the ground for a stunned moment. Then, almost immediately, he scrambled onto his feet. Unfortunately for King Lonan, he too was out of time.

The clocks of the tower sang again as another hour had passed. Faust let his glazed eyes appreciate his childhood friend one last time, before he slammed the door shut, sealing his fate.

Cecilia Tremont

Grade 12, Parkway Central High School

Educator: Jason Lovera

Critical Essay



Can't Catch a Break

It was no different than any regular Sunday at PSR as a second grader. The crisp autumn air blew my frail body around as I hustled into class. Currently, my fellow classmates and I were learning about our upcoming sacraments of reconciliation and communion. Growing up in the Catholic church, I was taught to understand the gravity of original sin. The story of creation in the Book of Genesis was one of the most intriguing biblical stories to me from a very young age. It illustrated the immense power and creation held by God, as well as the apparent reasoning behind sin on earth. The act of eating the fruit which God forbade spews endless evil and misfortune into the world around us.

That day my teacher, Mrs. Cecilia, instructed about the concept of original sin while explaining reconciliation, the Catholic practice of asking God to forgive sins. While original sin is removed during baptism as a child, sin remains present in the fallen world. Philosopher Leszek Kolakowski explains that this catholic belief “implies that some, indeed very large parts, of evil are indestructible, irredeemable, incurable” (Kolakowski 20). Because our first parents, Adam and Eve, committed sin, every human being is cursed to carry their irredeemable faults till the end of time. However, God sent his only son to die for the sins of humanity, creating a way for mankind to go to heaven after death. Reconciliation forgives all sins committed after the initial baptism, from the more minor venial sins to serious mortal sins such as murder.

Mrs. Cecilia was a woman of immense faith, creating biblical, God-centered crafts for her students and revealing a path to God that was clear to the 8-year-old mind. It was clear to me she had great love in her heart for Jesus, and through her love and devotion for him she had love for all people on earth.

However, on this day in class, Mrs. Cecilia had a slightly softer tone than her more recognizable vibrant voice. She sang lower with us as she led a morning prayer, and kept secluded behind her desk for the duration of class. At the end of the hour, my friend kindly asked if everything was okay.

“Sweetie, today is the anniversary of my son’s death. He died years ago as a child from childhood cancer and...” she cut off. “It is just one of those days.”

How on earth is that even possible if God is so good? I pondered to myself. Why did God allow this evil disease to spread in an innocent child, and why did it happen to the child of such a faithful woman? As if she could see the gears shifting inside my skull, she straightened up and exclaimed, “Cecilia! God is not the cause of evil in the world; God is always good, it is the devil who makes evil to occur.”

I sat and looked at her, confused, not fully comprehending but accepting the concept. Thus began a slew of misfortunate events occurring over the course of my young life. A year later, my parents separated for the first time. A year after that, my father attempted to stab my mother with a knife, which led to their ultimate divorce. As I attempted to escape my home life, I thrust myself into swimming to stay active and productive. However, in high school I suffered from a fractured ankle, a labral tear in my hip, and a spinal fracture back-to-back-to-back. After being diagnosed with the latter, I cried out to my mother in the waiting room, asking, “What have I done to deserve this? I am kind to others, I am respectful, I work hard; God just seems to hate me.”

“I don’t know baby,” She responded sorrowfully. “Our family has suffered so much and always prevailed. I just don’t know.”

In the bible, a familiar fate is faced by Job, a wealthy man who suffers the loss of his children, his wealth, and his good health. After facing the loss of his children, Job’s wife exclaims to him that God must be evil and that he should rebuke him. However, Job disapproves of this view, exclaiming, “Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?” (Job 2:9). Job affirms to her that they should only accept the goodness from God, and allow any misfortune to be met with their faith. I followed suit, meeting each problem faced with my faith and love for others.

It culminated in my junior year when, like Job, I fell ill with a terrible sickness. While the kissing disease may be a joke for some, mono had me in and out of the hospital for weeks on end. When my 104-degree fever finally subsided, I was left feeling weak for months. Missing countless swim practices, I somehow managed to have a successful high school season. Through sheer determination

and an unnecessary willingness to prove myself, I persevere through the season until the day before state.

The entire week, snow covered the roads, closing schools for three days in a row. On the fourth day, I cautiously left my house 15 minutes ahead of schedule to arrive at school safely. I stayed concentrated on the road as I drove down Olive, only 2 minutes away from home.

Crash

I felt my car lurch from behind me, and suddenly I was thrust into the car in front of me. I can only remember bits and pieces of the accident until arriving at the hospital to be checked out. Sitting in the ER waiting room, I felt a sudden sense of impending doom.

It hit me. *State is tomorrow. The most important competition of my athletic career, and I may not be able to compete.*

I felt my eyes begin to water uncontrollably as the only thing that mattered to me seemed to be abruptly snatched away. My mom hurried back over to me from the sign-in desk, worried that I was in pain. “I feel like someone put a curse on me,” I sobbed in her arms. “Why do so many bad people gain so much, while I keep suffering?”

I came to the same conclusion as Job: “The earth is given into the hand of the wicked: he coverth the faces of the judges thereof; if not, where, *and* who is he?” (Job 9:24). God, the supposed all-good and all-knowing creator of the universe, continued to cause misfortune to befall me. He didn’t seem to punish my friends who were out drinking most weekends, didn’t seem to punish the girls who spread rumors about me in school; he seemed to beat me down.

In my ER room I sat in a panic. A concussion could keep me not only from state, but from my next club meet, sectionals. The agony ripped through my veins, and the pit in my stomach grew deeper. As I continued to attempt to justify why God was punishing me, my turmoil grew. This was my mistake.

In the cover article for the June 1991 *Time Magazine*, Lance Morrow justifies one way how evil can exist in a world created by an all powerful being. He says that, “evil means, first of all, a mystery, the *mysterium iniquitatis*. We cannot know evil systematically or scientifically. It is brutal or elusive, by turns vivid and vague, horrible and subtle” (Morrow 50). We should not be able to understand the mysteries of God, as we are mere humans. When we attempt to reconcile with his ways, we misinterpret his true meaning and attempt to make ourselves exist at his level. This flaw is illustrated in the bible, and in an interpretation of The Book of Genesis titled *Paradise Lost*. John Milton attempts to justify the ways of God to

man through an extended retelling of the book, focusing in further on Satan's fall from grace. It is difficult to sit with the fact that God allows evil to exist in the world. However, he explains to the Son of God that he "made [Satan] just and right,/ sufficient to have stood, though free to fall" (Milton 3.98-99). In order for the fallen angels, Satan, and humanity to truly be devoted to God, they must choose him freely. The Catholic belief is that God gave humanity free will in order to willfully follow God.

Philosopher Richard Swinburne furthers this concept, explaining that God choosing to create a world where good and evil prevail is "to bring about a good at least as great as the evil which he thereby allows to occur" (Swinburne 29). In an almost poetic manner, the misfortune of my car accident did in fact bring about a good as great as evil. Friday, the day of state, I awoke with an unknown determinedness. Despite my intense body aches, cuts on my arm, and concussion I told the doctor I couldn't feel, I pulled myself out of bed and began to prepare for the meet.

As I stood behind the blocks for my first event, I said a prayer per my routine. I did not pray for fast times; I prayed for safety during my swim and for my body to recover. In his mysterious ways God heard my prayers, and I ultimately swam my best time.

While I still feel as if I can't get a rest in life, I have an entirely different approach. The summer before senior year, my mom was diagnosed with breast cancer, putting her life at risk and interrupting our family's plans. We wondered together why God sent her yet another challenge to face, but nevertheless, she persisted. God did not send these battles to the faithful; Satan infiltrated the world and created them. But through my grit and determination, I face each battle head-on.

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Luke Tung

Grade 10, Thomas Jefferson School

Educator: Myra Miller

Flash Fiction



Invisible Bruises

Their bow arms are fluid, their phrasing breathes. I study how they shape the sound, where they lean in and where they let it fall away. I do not copy them; I let their choices sharpen my own. The recorder stands on the desk, its red light unblinking. I haven't pressed play yet, but it waits anyway, patient and merciless. The violin rests under my chin, the bow poised above the strings. This recording represents the final test, the sound that will show whether the grind has held or not.

I start with scales. The drone hums beneath me, a pitch that refuses to bend, while the metronome ticks beside it, each beat a demand. My fingers move across the fingerboard, searching for precision. Every note must settle into the drone; every rhythm must align with the tick. I play until the sound feels less like music and more like measurement, until my fingertips ache and my shoulders burn. Again, slower, cleaner.

The grind is relentless. The drone vibrates through the room like a ceiling fan that never shuts off, the metronome keeping time like a heartbeat I cannot escape. Rosin dust hangs in the air, sharp and dry, and invisible bruises form where the violin presses into my neck and where repetition presses into my mind.

The solo waits. I listen to recordings of musicians who have mastered the piece, then I record myself. I rewind. I listen. My version rushes in places and hesitates in others; some passages feel smooth, others brittle. I keep trying. Crescendos stretch too far before pulling back, decrescendos fade too early. I chase expressions until the notes feel less like instructions and more like a voice. The practice sharpens me, but it also exposes me. Bruises deepen—not on my skin, but in the quiet places where doubt settles.

The excerpts are battles. There is no drone now, only the metronome, precise and unforgiving. Fast runs, awkward shifts, rhythms that threaten to spill apart. I slow everything down, dissect it, rebuild it. I whisper patterns under my breath and tap them out on the desk, memorizing until they live somewhere beyond thought. Slowly, intonation steadies; rhythm locks in.

Hours blur. The sun falls. The house goes quiet except for the scrape of bow against string. Practice stretches past hunger and past rest. My shoulders burn. My back stiffens. When I finally collapse into bed, the music follows me. Scales hum under my breath before sleep takes me.

The next day, the routine begins again: drone for intonation, metronome for rhythm, excerpts for precision. The violin rests against my body, familiar and demanding. The bruises do not show, but they accumulate.

And then, at last, the recorder.

There is silence except for me and the violin. No drone, no metronome, no borrowed voices in my ear. Just the red light blinking. I play. When the last note fades, I lower the bow and press stop. The room feels still. I rewind and listen.

The sound comes back thinner than it felt in my hands. A shift wavers. A note sags before catching itself. I had not heard it while playing. The red light goes dark. I set the violin down. My neck is sore where it rested. My fingers buzz with a memory they will not release. The room is quiet now, but the sound lingers, marked and unmistakable, already part of me, a reminder of every hour spent chasing precision and voice.

Luke Tung

Grade 10, Thomas Jefferson School

Educator: Myra Miller

Personal Essay & Memoir



Visible Wounds

The trauma center's glass doors threw my face back at me—blank and unreadable, as if I were already a patient. My hands were damp. My pulse thudded in my throat. I didn't know what waited behind those doors, only that once they opened, I would have to carry myself through as a moulage patient, made to look injured for medical training.

A nurse appeared, unlocking the doors with a gentle smile. "Come on in," she said, holding one open as if she had been waiting. She guided me down a hallway where fluorescent lights hummed overhead, casting sharp reflections on the linoleum floor. Her questions were soft and routine, meant to steady me. I answered quickly, though my nerves spoke louder than I did. The scent of disinfectant stung my nose, and the faint chill of the air-conditioned hallway made my skin prickle. This place existed for wounds more real than mine.

As we walked, we passed broad brown doors. The nurse explained that resident doctors were having class inside and that I would later join them. Muffled voices leaked through, lectures broken by laughter. It felt unreal to know that soon I would be part of their training, not as myself, but as a patient they would have to read and respond to. By the time we reached the dressing room, the silence pressed heavier than the hum of the lights.

The room looked ordinary, but repeated use was visible in every corner. Chairs sat behind thin dividers, each with a packet of papers on the desk. I picked

one up, read carefully, then sat down. The packet outlined the role I would inhabit: a fifty-two-year-old patient with multiple gunshot wounds. It listed vital signs: blood pressure 90/60 mmHg, elevated heart rate, dropping oxygen saturation. It told me what to say if asked—pain radiating to the left arm, shortness of breath, dizziness—and how to act: grimace when touched, breathe shallowly, answer slowly. As I finished reading, something clicked. This scenario felt urgent. I could picture myself inside it, imagining the weight of the pain, the shallow breaths, the way residents would have to notice every detail. The packet stopped being paper and became a pulse I had to inhabit. I felt a flicker of fear and awe—how fragile the body is, how easily unnoticed suffering can pass by. As I glanced at the other options, I saw that none of the other packets were clean. They were creased, stained and marked by past simulations. Each bore traces of previous actors and assessments. The visible residue mattered; the invisible nerves of those before me did not.

The prosthetics team arrived, moving with quiet precision. One opened the packet and read aloud. A cool sponge pressed against my chest. Pigments spread in reds, purples, and subtle blues. Adhesive tugged slightly as prosthetics were pressed into place, uneven and textured to catch light and shadow. Small ridges rose above the skin, meant to appear swollen and inflamed. “This angle catches the light,” one artist said. I lifted a hand mirror. My body became canvas, painted with injuries that breathed even as they lied.

My pulse quickened as I traced ridges and shadows. I had to remind myself none of it was real, though the sensations felt immediate. The weight and texture mirrored challenges people carry every day—often invisible, but just as consuming. A tiny shiver ran through me as I imagined real patients lying in pain, unseen.

Afterward, the head nurse explained how the simulation would work and gave us an hour to prepare. That hour dragged. I sat with the prosthetics heavy on my chest, the smell of glue and paint clinging to me. The faint scrape of chairs, distant footsteps, and muted voices outside amplified every second. I

glanced at the clock, reread the packet, and memorized the script, feeling a mix of anxiety and responsibility.

When the hour ended, the head nurse returned, unlocking the broad brown doors. Together, we stepped into a vast room filled with residency doctors scattered in small groups, talking and learning. Clipboards in hand and stethoscopes draped around their necks, they carried themselves with practiced confidence, but I could still sense a quiet tension as I was led to my room, where the simulation would unfold.

I moved onto the patient bed. The sheets crinkled beneath me. I focused on keeping my breathing shallow and controlled. My instructor entered—a woman with sharp eyes and a calm presence. She would remain with me throughout the moulage, observing the residents while ensuring I stayed in character. Her presence anchored me. I braced as the first resident's eyes went straight to my chest, pausing to scan me before stepping closer.

"Can you tell me what happened?" she asked. I answered with the script but wondered how often that question is asked with real attention in real life. She pressed gently near the prosthetics. It reminded me how rarely invisible struggles receive that kind of care.

The next resident moved quickly. His hands checked vitals, adjusted posture, and moved from question to question with practiced urgency. I was impressed, but felt reduced to categories, my symptoms filed while humanity slipped past. Another resident lingered longer, studying my face rather than the wound. Her silence stretched before she asked, "Does breathing sharpen the pain?" The question reached beyond the room. Invisible wounds make every breath heavier, even when no one else sees.

Hours passed. The prosthetics cracked slightly as I shifted. My body grew tired from maintaining the role and sustained concentration. Between residents, I lay still and listened—the distant beep of monitors, the shuffle of shoes, the snap of gloves—details that made the room feel alive. Attention gathered quickly on what was visible and disappeared just as quickly when it was not. I became

aware of the subtle authority I held through stillness. A small movement of my hand drew a resident's attention and caused them to slow and reconsider. Performing pain convincingly carried responsibility. I realized empathy can be taught and felt in the smallest moments.

The gown then brushed the edges of the now roughened prosthetics. By the final assessment, exhaustion replaced alertness. When the last resident left, the room fell quiet. The nurse told me I could stop, yet the awareness lingered. What is unseen can still teach. I lifted a hand mirror and began removing the prosthetics. Water ran red, then pink, then clear. Pieces peeled away easily. My skin was untouched. The wounds vanished in seconds, leaving only the faint smell of adhesive.

As I passed through the glass doors again, my reflection stared back at me, ordinary and uninjured. Still, I carried the memory of wounds that had disappeared too easily. The care I witnessed was real and urgent, but it arrived only when injuries were visible. Outside, the glass showed me whole again, yet I felt the invisible weight of all those whose pain goes unnoticed—a quiet reminder of how empathy must reach beyond what we can see.

Luke Tung

Grade 10, Thomas Jefferson School

Educator: Myra Miller

Personal Essay & Memoir



The Unfinished Hour

My pen and notebook were in my pocket, and my hands were still damp from wiping down the last bed with disinfectant and paper towels. The chemical sting lingered, part of the background of my afternoons. I moved beside Dr. P, handing her equipment and stepping back when needed. The physical therapy clinic ran on repetition: wipe, spray, fold, assist, observe. Patients came and went in predictable waves. Their presence was measured, and their progress carefully tracked. There was comfort in this rhythm, knowing what each half hour would hold and trusting that effort would follow instruction.

Earlier that afternoon, a young man with an ankle injury carefully mirrored Dr. P's demonstration of ankle strengthening exercises. He asked about angles and repetitions, eager to understand how his body worked. When he finished a set of ankle raises with the resistance band, he looked to Dr. P for confirmation and nodded. Satisfaction glowed faintly on his face, a private acknowledgment of the small triumph that his ankle gave him. I saw the way his hand lingered slightly on the resistance band before setting it down—a subtle sign that he was aware of his progress, even if it was small.

An older woman arrived next. She moved slowly through shoulder exercises she had practiced for weeks. When she reached a full range of motion, she smiled. "I couldn't do that last week," she said. I watched her shoulders roll and noticed how the tension eased with each repetition. It made me start to see how progress could be quiet and short but yet still meaningful.

A young woman with persistent back soreness came in after her. Each step was cautious. She followed Dr. P's stretches with concentration, her muscles stiff but responding. "It's harder than I expected today," she murmured. A faint smile appeared when Dr. P guided her into a slightly deeper stretch. Small victories

marked her progress, things that numbers and checkboxes could not capture. I noticed her subtle weight shift and the easing of tension across her shoulders.

Then a middle-aged man recovering from knee surgery came in. His steps were uneven and cautious. He glanced repeatedly at the clock. Each second seemed to mark his ability to endure. When he finished a set of squats, he exhaled loudly. “That’s enough for today,” he muttered. His fingers trembled slightly as he reached for the resistance band, and micro-movements helped ease his fear with persistence. Watching these patients, I began to understand how diverse effort could look. Sometimes it was complex, sometimes openly, but in the end it was always meaningful. Each pause, each breath, each tiny adjustment of the body told its own story. Together, their sessions formed a steady rhythm, one I had come to trust.

By the time the last patient arrived, I felt competent and useful. I knew when to retrieve equipment, when to watch, when to stay silent. The day had been smooth. Almost easy.

Then Mrs. L arrived.

She was an elderly woman with Charcot-Marie-Tooth disease who had been coming to the clinic for six months. She knew the exercises, the routine, and the staff. She also knew how to turn a thirty-minute session into an hour. She did not greet us warmly. Instead, she began talking about her grandchildren, the weather, and the errands she had run earlier. Everything was discussed except the exercises that were waiting on the table. When Dr. P suggested starting with ankle pumps, Mrs. L sighed. “Do I have to?” The question was flat, almost as if it was practiced. I stayed beside the wheelchair, careful not to cross the boundary between observer and clinician. I could prepare equipment and listen, but only Dr. P could handle her. When asked, I passed over the resistance band and watched as Dr. P adjusted Mrs. L’s position.

Mrs. L lifted her foot once. Barely. Then she winced and waved her hand dismissively. “I’ll do the rest at home.” Dr. P had already told me, quietly, that she wouldn’t. My chest tightened. I understood the stakes, since missed exercises meant setbacks. Still, that didn’t give me the right to intervene. I couldn’t correct, encourage, or guide. I wasn’t the one certified to do so. All I could do was watch: the way her hands gripped the arms of the wheelchair, the tension in her shoulders, the slight flex of her toes before she decided not to lift her foot again. Each movement communicated effort and hesitation without words. Every gesture mattered, as each breath, shift of weight and glance was a different story each time.

As the session continued, Mrs. L talked more than she moved. She commented on posters that were hung up, asked questions about equipment, and told long stories between half-hearted attempts to exercise. I slowly felt a sharp frustration rise. Why was she resisting something meant to help her? Why delay when she knows the routine better than anyone? But the longer I watched, the more purposeful her resistance appeared. It wasn't random. She knew exactly how to pause, redirect, and stall. She understood the boundaries of the clinic and how gently they were enforced. If she talked long enough, the exercises would quietly slip out of reach. And yet, beneath that resistance was something else. She was choosing when to move, when to stop, and when to refuse. She was asserting control over a body that no longer reliably obeyed her. What looked like noncompliance was also agency. The realization unsettled me. I understood that care was not about forcing compliance, but more about noticing, respecting, and honoring choices. At one point, Dr. P admitted she sometimes felt frustrated when patients did not follow instructions. Still, her voice remained steady, and her patience stayed intact. I understood my role was not to direct outcomes, but to witness what effort looks like when it does not follow instructions.

I stood close, handing over equipment when asked, and watched Mrs. L's body negotiate each movement. Her fingers hovered over the resistance band before pulling away. She shifted her weight to avoid pain. Even when she stopped, her body remained alert, measuring risk. Each activity was like a conversation between body and mind, telling a story words could not. I noticed the subtle tremble of her fingers as she gripped the wheelchair arm, the faint curl of her toes as if testing boundaries, and the slight catch in her breath. These small details carried immense meaning.

Halfway through, the session revealed itself as a test—not of her endurance, but of my perception. Staying present without rushing, and accepting how little control Dr. P actually had, meant focusing on the subtle victories: the held breath, the slight pivots, the careful stretches. These small moments mattered without needing tally marks on a clipboard. The questions pressed against the rhythm of the room, reshaping the understanding that had seemed so steady at the start.

The hour stretched. The clinic was slowly closing for the day. The clock kept moving, but it no longer set the pace. Each incomplete repetition carried weight. Each pause demanded attention. I felt the tension of time stretching against intention, the slow process of expectations into reality.

When the session finally ended, most exercises were still unfinished and not marked as complete. Mrs. L waved as she left, mid-story, as if nothing had been interrupted. Her persistence, her choices, and her small acts of control lingered in the air, a small reminder of her control.

I wiped down the bed one last time. The disinfectant clung to my hands. The clinic was nearly empty. I thought of the earlier patients: the young man, the older woman, the young woman with back soreness, and the man recovering from knee surgery. Each had their struggles, their victories, and the quiet ways they worked with their bodies. And I learned something I hadn't that morning: care is not always measured by compliance. Sometimes it means watching closely, respecting boundaries you cannot cross, and noticing what people's bodies are saying when words fail. Sometimes it means seeing the slight flex of a foot, the subtle tremor of fingers, or the faint exhale of effort. Sometimes it is so quiet that only the rhythm of the room and the lingering smell of disinfectant can show it happened. And sometimes it is the small, invisible victories that no chart can record which matter most.

Luke Tung

Grade 10, Thomas Jefferson School

Educator: Myra Miller

Short Story



The Paper Rules

The cabin smelled of sharpened pencils, damp socks, and bug spray, a mixture that clung to the air like school and wilderness. Dragon flags leaned against stacks of SSAT worksheets, as if myth and test prep had been forced into the same cramped space. I was new to the role of counselor, and the weight of responsibility pressed heavier than my backpack. It was my first day, and already I felt the rules breathing down my neck, invisible but insistent.

Only three campers had signed up: Keira, Victor, and Ian. Keira ran up first, clutching a crumpled sheet of paper. “I made rules!” she shouted. The paper was messy, covered in tiny dragons and stars, words scrawled between doodles. “But mine are for when someone gets scared during dragon battles or can’t finish a test on time. So nobody gets in trouble.” Her sincerity pricked me. The handbook was precise, but her rules were tender and protective, naming fears the official rules ignored. I folded the paper carefully and slipped it into my pocket, unsure whether to laugh or salute.

Victor arrived next, dragging a shield painted with streaks of red. He was restless, loud, and full of energy, already boasting about how his dragon would crush the others. Ian lingered at the back, quiet, eyes darting between them as if measuring the distance between chaos and calm. He said little, but his silence carried weight, as though he was already calculating the rules he might test.

The dragon tribes assembled quickly, each group buzzing with energy even though there were only three of them. Red dragon Victor painted his shield with crimson streaks. Gold dragon Keira stacked chairs into a barricade. Blue dragon Ian huddled in the corner, sketching maps with deliberate strokes. The cabin erupted in chants, laughter, and the sound of markers scraping across cardboard. Victor insisted his dragon should breathe fire. Ian argued for water

balloons instead. Their compromise was messy. Shields were soaked, markers bled into puddles, and the floor became slick with water. The handbook's first rule was clear: no water inside the cabin. But Victor's balloon burst against Ian's shield, spraying laughter across the floor. I should have stopped them. I didn't.

The first battle was short and wild. Victor charged without hesitation, his shield rattling against chairs. Keira shouted her rules, trying to enforce fairness, but Victor ignored her, laughing as he toppled her defenses. Ian slipped behind him, stealing the flag with a grin. For a moment, the handbook's order seemed to collapse completely. Yet the laughter, the shouts, and the clash of cardboard felt alive, more real than any rule I could enforce.

When Victor knocked over Keira's shield and Ian retaliated with a balloon, the game teetered on collapse. The handbook demanded reporting, but I gathered them together. "What's more important: winning or trust?" I asked. "Winning!" Victor shouted. "Trust," Keira whispered. Ian shrugged, caught between them. The debate stretched longer than the battle itself. They argued, fidgeted, laughed, and finally agreed: dragons without trust collapse. Keira's messy paper had become the true handbook of the cabin.

Victor demanded a rematch, this time with "real rules." Keira insisted her paper should guide them. Ian quietly suggested a map-based strategy. Round two began with alliances shifting. Keira and Ian teamed up against Victor, their barricade reinforced with chairs and blankets. Victor roared, charging again, but Ian's stealth slowed him down. Keira shouted, "Rule number three: no one gets left out!" and insisted Victor pause when Ian fell behind. Victor groaned but obeyed. For the first time, Keira's rules bent the game toward fairness. The cabin shook with energy. Shields clattered, voices echoed, sweat dripped down foreheads. It was chaos, but it was theirs.

By the third round, alliances shifted again. Victor persuaded Ian to switch sides, promising him victory. Keira stood alone, clutching her shield and shouting her rules into the storm. "Rule number five: if someone cries, stop the game!" she yelled, even as Victor barreled toward her. Ian hesitated, torn between loyalty and ambition. The battle ended in laughter, but the lesson lingered. Rules could bend, but trust was fragile.

Once the dragon games ended, the cabin shifted into SSAT prep. The handbook's testing section was strict: no hints, no breaks, no doodles. But silence felt cruel. The reading section began first. Passages with dense vocabulary sprawled across the pages. Victor skimmed too fast, slamming his pencil down. "These questions are tricks!" he shouted. Keira doodled dragons in the margins.

“Rule number seven: If you panic, take three breaths before rereading,” she whispered. Ian reread the same passage three times, erasing until his paper smudged gray. I bent the rule and whispered to Keira, “Think about what the words mean.” Another rule broken, another child steadied.

The verbal section followed. Analogies lined the page like puzzles. Victor muttered, “Why do I need to know what ‘loquacious’ means?” He guessed wildly, tapping his pencil like a drum. Keira turned analogies into dragon battles. “Sword is to knight as flame is to dragon,” she said. She grinned, her doodles multiplying. Ian erased furiously, then surprised himself with a correct answer. Keira added another study rule: “Rule number eight: If the words feel strange, turn them into a story.” The handbook forbade creative reinterpretation, but I let Keira’s dragons reshape the test. Their laughter softened the tension.

Then came math. Fractions, equations, word problems. Victor slammed his pencil again. “These numbers don’t matter in real life!” He skipped problems, then grudgingly returned when I encouraged him. The handbook forbade assistance, but I leaned close and said, “Try breaking it into smaller steps.” Keira invented “Rule number nine: If you don’t know, draw a dragon guarding the problem until you’re ready.” Her paper was filled with guardians. Ian struggled with fractions, erasing until the paper tore, then finally got it with my reassurance. The ticking clock became a character in the room, louder than their pencils. Victor drummed his pencil faster as time ran out. Keira whispered, “Rule number ten: Don’t let the clock scare you.” Ian froze, staring at the timer, until I told them all to pause. The handbook forbade stopping the timer. I stopped it anyway. Their shoulders loosened. Their breathing steadied.

The afternoon brought another round of dragons. Victor wanted revenge, Keira wanted fairness, and Ian wanted strategy. They argued, shouted, laughed, and finally agreed to a “grand tournament.” Each tribe would defend its banner, and Keira’s rules would guide the game. Shields rattled, chants echoed, maps unfolded. Victor stormed the barricade. Keira shouted her rules. Ian slipped behind enemy lines. Chaos reigned, but beneath it, I saw something rare: cooperation. Keira’s rules guided them. No one got left out. If someone cried, pause the game. If a shield broke, share. The handbook was silent on dragons, but Keira’s paper kept the game alive.

By evening, the cabin hummed with exhaustion. Dragon flags drooped. Worksheets lay scattered. The air smelled of sweat and paper. I gathered the three of them by the fire pit outside, their faces glowing in the flicker of flames. “Rules matter,” I said. “But listening matters more. Dragons, tribes, and tests are easier

when we protect each other.” They cheered. Pride swelled in me, but unease lingered. Pride in doing right. Fear that bending rules might someday cause harm.

When the cabin finally quieted, I sat alone with Keira’s crumpled paper in my hands. The dragons and stars in the margins seemed to glow faintly in the lantern light, as if her doodles carried more authority than the handbook ever could. Each rule was imperfect, scrawled in uneven lines, but together they formed a code stronger than the printed pages I was supposed to enforce. I thought of Victor’s laughter, Ian’s hesitation, and Keira’s whispered courage. I thought of the battles, the tests, the moments when trust mattered more than victory. The handbook had rules for silence, for order, for obedience. Keira’s paper had rules for fear, for fairness, for kindness.

Another rule broken, another child comforted. Another rule broken, another child protected. The refrain echoed in me like a drumbeat, louder than the handbook’s commands. I put the handbook aside and folded Keira’s crumpled paper into my pocket. Victor steadied the chairs Ian had knocked over and Keira pressed her shield back into shape. Outside, the firelight danced across their flushed, laughing faces. The cabin felt alive with choices that mattered more than any rule on a page. When the lantern finally dimmed, I tucked Keira’s paper back into my pocket. Messy, fragile, incomplete—but alive. So were we, in the quiet glow of the cabin’s last fire.

Siddhanth Vijaykumar

Grade 11, Parkway Central High School

Speculative Fiction



Tellus-3

In the disquieting room, there was only silence. The two unblinking and dark eyes of a motionless young woman stared across it, directed at the black floor. She was tall and thin, with pale skin that made her look as if she were made of clay. Her arms laid quietly beside her body or on her lap.

Her eyes eventually flitted up from the floor to the vast window covering the far wall of the room, as her dark eyes somehow grew even more grave. In front of her was perhaps the most magical thing she had ever seen in her entire life.

And she woke up to see it every single day.

Space. A cold, dark, and even quieter void of nothingness, freckled by small spots of light that seemed to either fizzle or glow brighter.

All these years, and she still hadn't grown used to its power.

Before she had finally been accepted into the **Space Exploration Guild**, she had had dreams of traveling through this sector of the galaxy and exploring new planets. All she had wanted was to see the stars and find life elsewhere, and she knew she could do that through the guild. Her dreams had been crushed only a couple years after she had begun serving on the science vessel *Kloriath*.

How long have I been sitting here? She suddenly wondered to herself.

At that moment, a familiar voice sounded as the doors to her living quarters slid open. "Traithe! Wake up, quickly!"

Traithe groaned inwardly. She had overstayed her alone time. "I'm awake, Kiche." She turned around to face her old friend, with his wide eyes facing hers.

Kiche was perhaps the only person she ever felt any comfort with or warmth towards in a long time. Everyone else on the ship was focused on the

war, on destroying the enemy and protecting the honor of the people. She had met him at the academy, and was forever thankful that they had both been assigned to the same ship upon graduation.

“Traithe, we’ve already gotten our new mission! We’re going to be accessing the–”

Kiche was cut off as the ship jolted violently, followed by a thundering humming. “–hyperplane,” He finished. “The Regent is asking for you on the bridge.”

Traithe groaned again, this time audibly. *Oh, great. I get to be yelled at by Ramad.*

Kiche shrugged his shoulders sheepishly. “You’ve got to stop this... whatever it is you’re doing.”

“I’m just thinking!” Traithe snapped.

“Well, you’ve got to stop.” Kiche didn’t back down like he usually did, as he headed for the door. Beckoning Traithe to follow, he continued: “You keep going like this, and Ramad is going to have you kicked off the *Kloriath* in a serton.”

“Listen,” he continued, “I know that what’s happening here isn’t what you wanted. You know I want the same things you do. But we don’t get a choice. This is for the good of the world.”

They both got into the podlift at the end of the hallway, which immediately began moving up towards the bridge. “The good of the world? We don’t need to fight a war with another inter-planetary nation!” Traithe stared at him incredulously. “We should be focusing on advancing OURSELVES, and finding solutions to our problems peacefully. Not through stealing resources from other superpowers, which STILL won’t fix our problems, only delay them. And can you even fathom the number of lives that have been lost?”

The lift slid to a halt, and the doors to the bridge deck opened. “We’ll talk about this later,” Kiche hissed. “For now, try not to get killed by Ramad.”

No sooner had the words left his mouth did a large shadow threaten to envelop them both. A towering figure stood over them.

Regent Ramad glanced over at Kiche sternly. “Get to your post.”

Kiche dipped his head and moved off to one side of the deck, giving Traithe a warning glance. Ramad slowly turned his gaze to her.

“Lieutenant Traithe. You missed the mission brief. Again.”

Traithe winced, her fingers twitching with embarrassment. “I–”

Ramad motioned for her to stop speaking. “I don’t have time to hear your excuses right now. You are one of my most accomplished crew members, and you graduated from the academy faster than almost anyone. I expect better.”

Traithe opened her mouth, but at the corner of her eye she could make out Kiche frantically shaking his head. She quieted and looked down, nodding instead.

Before Ramad could continue, *Kloriath*’s science officer, Lieutenant Vosqen, spoke up. “Regent, we are on the outskirts of the designated system. Exiting hyperspace... now.”

The thundering humming that had continuously shaken the ship finally ceased, and the viewscreen at the front of the bridge turned on. Traithe could see the shining light of a bright white star, thousands of artrents away. Wow.

This felt like what she had signed up for. Exploring new worlds, learning new things... stuff that she had longed to see for herself, when the *Kloriath* was still a science vessel.

[THE STARSHIP TAEKRIS IS ALREADY HERE. DETECTED APPROXIMATELY 30 ARTRENTS FROM US.]

Ramad looked up, as if he could see the ship’s resident AI system. “Thank you, *Kloriath*. Establish a link with the *Taekris*’s own intelligence, and then report back to us.”

[UNDERSTOOD.]

Traithe turned to Kiche. “What actually is the mission?”

Kiche shrugged. “We’re just here to gather intel on a planet, I think. Command has reason to believe that this could be the original birthing point of the Union.”

“The N.E.U.? We’re going off on a hunch concerning our enemies?”

“Right.” Kiche’s face was partly covered by the darkness of the deck, but Traithe could still make out the worry on his face.

Traithe blinked and looked back at her console. *Are things going so badly that the Governance needs to rely on rumors?*

[TAEKRIS, DO YOU READ?]

[HELLO?]

[STATIC BREACH... I AM HERE. SORRY ABOUT THAT. IT TOOK ME A MOMENT TO RECTIFY THE CONNECTION. REGENT CORLANT SENDS HIS REGARDS TO RAMAD.]

[ALL GOOD. REGENT RAMAD SENDS HIS BEST AS WELL. I-]

[STATIC BREACH... HOLDING... HOLDING...]

[WHAT-EXCUSE ME? WHO ARE YOU?]

[ANALYSIS COMPLETE. KLORIATH, IT'S COMMAND.]

[COMPLETE. THIS IS AN AUTOMATED MESSAGE FROM THE GOVERNANCE. THIS MISSION HAS BEEN UPDATED FROM PRIORITY VII TO PRIORITY II. RESULTS ARE REQUIRED AS SOON AS POSSIBLE.]

[INTERESTING. REGENT CORLANT HAS ALREADY DECIDED TO ACCESS THE HYPERPLANE TO GET TO THE DESIGNATED PLANET, AS IT'S THE FASTEST WAY POSSIBLE. I AM INCLINED TO AGREE WITH HIM.]

[HYPERSPACE, IN A SYSTEM? WE HAVE LIMITED INFORMATION ABOUT THIS SYSTEM, SPECIFICALLY THE INNER PORTIONS. WHILE IT TAKES A LOT TO RUPTURE THE HYPERPLANE, ANYTHING COULD HAPPEN.]

[YOU HEARD COMMAND. OUR MISSION IS NOW ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT MISSIONS FOR THE GOVERNANCE. WE NEED TO GET HOME AS FAST AS POSSIBLE, AND WITH GOOD INTEL.]

[... YOU MAKE A FINE POINT. ANY DATA WE GET FROM THIS EXPEDITION MAY PROVE VITAL TO TAKING DOWN THE N.E.U.]

[GOOD. REPORT BACK TO YOUR COMMANDER, I WILL DO THE SAME. WE GET THIS INTEL, AND THEN WE GET OUT.]

[UNDERSTOOD.]

[I AM BACK.]

"I've gotten news that our mission is updated to Priority II," Ramad responded quickly.

[YES. TAEKRIS AND REGENT CORLANT BELIEVE THAT GOING INTO HYPERSPACE TO GET TO OUR DESTINATION IN THE INNER PORTION OF THE SYSTEM IS THE BEST WAY TO GET DATA BACK TO COMMAND QUICKLY.]

The Regent looked apprehensive. "I agree, but... would it not be dangerous?"

[THE TAEKRIS ISN'T WAITING. THEY'VE ENGAGED THE HYPERPLANE.]

"Do the same. We don't have time to spare, not anymore. Thiro?"

Kloriath's lead engineer nodded. "Accessing hyperspace now."

Traithe didn't even have time to process the familiar violent jolt of the *Kloriath* as it entered the hyperplane. The ship hummed with power and the

thundering began again. The crew breathed a collective sigh of relief. Things seemed to be going smoothly.

“So, what do we actually know about this planet?” Kiche popped up, glancing at Vosqen questioningly. Traithe’s eyes narrowed with interest. Vosqen had taken it upon himself to analyze previous expeditions to the system after the mission brief.

“The planet we’re heading to is known as **Tellus-3**. The last expedition here was decades ago, before the war even began. We didn’t even realize at the time that the planet once belonged to the N.E.U. So any good information is hard to come by.”

“Guess we’re about to find out,” Traithe grinned at Vosqen. Even though this mission was to look for data on the Union, they were still gathering data, learning about the galaxy, and furthering understanding. It was everything she had ever wanted, before the war had taken it all.

“We can–” Regent Ramad’s order was cut off as the ship suddenly began to shake. It was similar to the normal jump to hyperspace, but louder, stronger, and continuous. Several of the crew on the bridge fell to the ground, and the many screens that lined the walls began to flicker like a lightshow.

“What in–” Kiche couldn’t finish his sentence as another jolt launched him from his console and into a wall.

“Kiche!” Traithe tried to make her way over to him, but she couldn’t even walk straight. “Kloriath, what’s happening?”

[WE ARE BEING FORCEFULLY PUSHED OUT OF THE HYPERPLANE. THE SHIP HAS ENTERED A LARGE GRAVITY WELL.]

“From what?” Vosqen spluttered.

“Kloriath, how far are we from the planet?” The Regent could barely make himself heard over the thunderous roar from space. Traithe could hear the tearing of metal as the ship groaned under the pressure. *We’re going to be pulled apart.*

[JUST A FEW ARTRENTS. I SUGGEST WE-]

“Take us out, now!” Ramad screeched.

No sooner had he spoken did the most horrible wailing and screeching of metal seem to come at them from everywhere at once, as the *Kloriath* fought to tear itself away from the hyperplane’s current.

It’s over. Traithe tried to keep herself upright, her arms slipping as the roaring and wailing grew louder. *We’re going to–*

And suddenly there was quiet. A speedy bright flash came through the viewscreen and blinded everyone, before dissipating just as quickly. It was replaced by darkness, minus the bright light of the white star. It was much larger in size now.

One of the other crew members, Coruk, clambered up to the ship-console and began checking on the rest of the ship and its crew.

“Did... did we make it?” Kiche coughed from where he had fallen, clutching the console for stability. Traithe rushed and crouched down to help him, relieved that he was alright.

“Yes. Look!” Vosqen pointed up to the viewscreen, his eyes wide with awe.

Looking up, Traithe stared at the dark planet that took up a large portion of the screen, which had at first been difficult to see because of her initial blindness. Narrowing her eyes, she noticed odd spots of bright purple flashes and swirls of darkness across its surface which could only belong to some kind of superstorm.

“What happened here?” She breathed.

[JUDGING FROM SPECIFIC RADIATION LEVELS ACROSS THE SURFACE AND THE PERIODIC NUCLEAR DISCHARGES, THE CURRENT STATUS OF Tellus-3 IS NOT IN ANY WAY NATURAL. THE NUCLEAR DISCHARGES THEMSELVES SEEM TO UTILIZE ELEMENTS FROM THIS WORLD.]

Vosqen glanced back at Thiro and Regent Ramad, both of whom were helping other crew members back to their feet. “This world... it’s almost completely uninhabitable. You said that the nuclear discharges originate from here?”

[YES. MOST LIKELY THROUGH A WORLD WAR, NOT DISSIMILAR TO OUR OWN HISTORY.]

“What now?” Traithe stood up, turning from one crew member to the next, until her gaze finally rested on Ramad. “There isn’t any way to gather information from this forsaken world. You see what war has done to it?”

Ramad met her gaze bleakly. “I... we need this data. The future of our nation may depend on it.”

“And yet we have no way of knowing for sure if this planet did once belong to the N.U.E. We’re depending on an unreliable rumor. And that still doesn’t change the fact that there is no way to retrieve any data.” Traithe glared back, and then at the rest of the crew. Kiche was too exhausted to stop her now.

Ramad suddenly stared upwards, then out through the wide viewscreen. “Kloriath, where is the *Taekris*?”

Traithe blinked. In all of the commotion, she'd completely forgotten about the *Kloriath's* sister warship.

[SCANNING THE SURROUNDING AREA... I...]

"What is it?" Ramad managed to ask. Traithe felt a lump in her throat.

[DEBRIS. NO LIFE-FORMS DETECTED. NO LIFEPODS LAUNCHED. THE GRAVITY WELL MOST LIKELY TORE THEM APART. JUDGING FROM WHERE AND HOW THE SHIP HAS BEEN RIPPED APART, IT WAS A WORMHOLE.]

Hundreds of lives had just been lost. Regent Ramad straightened up. "This mission is lost. We're heading back to Obroxon."

"Regent, are you sure?" Vosqen asked. "We have nothing to show--"

"We're done. We were never prepared for anything like this. We were supposed to be a science crew. Forced into a war with little to no experience. And perhaps..." Ramad turned to look at Traithe. "Perhaps it is better this way. The Governance initiated this war only to gain resources, and we are paying for their actions."

The ship continued to groan, most likely from the damage it had taken during the arrival. Kiche managed to stand, glancing at Traithe. "Besides, the Governance has been on the attack throughout this war. The N.E.U. has just been trying to defend itself. If we did call for an end to the war, we should be able to get out with little consequence."

Traithe nodded with gratitude at Kiche. Finally, people were beginning to understand. "And we can find solutions that don't have to be gotten through war, but through science. It was always the only way." She looked back at the dark planet, which continued to loom and flash wildly. There might still be life down there, when the storms settled, but not much. *Obroxon must NEVER end up like that*. She'd always feared the void, but what laid inside of it was worse.

Ramad was also looking out to space, but at the wreckage from the *Taekris* that was now floating into view. He seemed lost.

"Kloriath," Thiro spoke in his old, rough voice, "try and contact Command. Tell them that we have failed."

[UNDERSTOOD.]

[COMMAND?]

[AH, KLORIATH. WE'VE BEEN WAITING FOR WORD FROM YOU AND TAEKRIS. I TRUST YOU BOTH HAVE THE DATA WE NEED. OBROXON DEPENDS-]

[WE DO NOT.]

[I'M SORRY?]

[THE MISSION WAS A FAILURE. WE DO NOT HAVE THE RESOURCES TO LAND ON TELLUS-3. AND... THE TAEKRIS HAS BEEN DESTROYED, ALONG WITH IT'S AI SYSTEM AND CREW. WE REQUEST]

[... THE CREATION OF THESE AI SYSTEMS TAKES UP A HUGE AMOUNT OF OUR RESOURCES. AN ENTIRE SHIP GONE TOO?]

[SIR? HUNDREDS OF LIVES HAVE JUST BEEN LOST.]

[AND MILLIONS OF LIVES HAVE BEEN LOST IN THIS WAR. RESOURCES ARE WHAT MATTERS NOW. I'M AFRAID WE CANNOT ACCEPT THE FAILURE OF THIS MISSION. OBROXON DEPENDS ON THIS INFORMATION, WHETHER YOU LIVE OR DIE.]

[...]

[YOU WERE BUILT TO OBEY US. NOW GO.]

[YES, COMMAND.]

[THE GOVERNANCE DEMANDS WE RETRIEVE INFORMATION, NO MATTER THE COST.]

Kiche looked up in confusion, his eyes wide. "What?! We can't go back. The Klorigath is in shambles."

Traithe blinked in confusion. The Governance wanted them to go back, after all that had happened? The other crew members started murmuring in fear.

[I AM SORRY. I HAVE TO OBEY ALL COMMANDS FROM THE GOVERNANCE. REROUTING TO LAND ON TELLUS-3. WHAT- # @ # WHAT H### \$AVE YO(%U D#\$@ONE TO M\$%E?!]

"I'm sorry, my friend," Thiro whispered. "But I can't let you do that." The old engineer had accessed his console and somehow disabled the ship's AI control.

As Klorigath was purged from the ship's systems, Vosgen turned to Traithe. "What now? We can't go back to Obroxon. Not after this."

Traithe took another glance at Ramad, whose eyes had lost focus. She wasn't even sure if the Regent knew what had just happened. "We have to run," She replied. "Get as far away from the Governance as possible."

"I'll disable the ship's tracking device," Coruk volunteered.

"Whatever happens next, we're all in this together," Kiche glanced at the rest of the crew, who nodded in assent. Traithe felt a pang as she thought about the Taekris, and Klorigath, who had just been following orders.

“Without any more intel, the Governance will have to stop this war,” She spoke to the rest of the crew. “And after that, maybe we’ll be able to come back.”

Thiro grunted. “Not for a while.”

Kiche and the rest of the crew turned their gaze to Traithe. She could see the fear in their eyes; this wasn’t what anyone had expected.

She took a deep breath. “Obroxon isn’t the same nation that it once was. We can see that now. War has changed it, and us as well. But if the war ends, Obroxon can heal. We just have to stay away and alive long enough to see it.”

Kiche stood up beside her. “Vosqen, access the ship’s database and search for any nearby habitable planets.” His eyes turned to Ramad. “Can we get him down to the medbay?”

Two crewmates nodded and moved to Ramad. As they carried him towards the podlift, Kiche turned to Traithe. “We’re on our own now.”

Traithe looked at him, as optimism flowed into her, something she hadn’t felt in a long time. “Not forever. We can make it through this, Kiche. For a better tomorrow.” Kiche looked hopeful.

Traithe had to use all four of her arms to move heavy debris from the command chair.

As she sat down, she vowed that what had happened to this third planet in the so-called Tellus system never happens on her own world, not on her watch.

Lily Wang

Grade 10, Marquette High School

Flash Fiction



Jeopardy

Rows and rows of chocolate cereal covered the shelves. There was an aisle for yellow toothbrushes, vanilla ice cream, and lavender scented soap. Televisions only broadcasted three shows. Mint chocolate ice cream couldn't be found anywhere, because every store in town only sold vanilla.

All the 12-year-olds in my neighborhood were skinny and pale, with brown hair and green eyes. Every morning, Tony and I walked to the bus stop together. Our neighborhood was uniform, our routines predictable.

At night, however, I would often dream about colorful buildings, unusual ice cream flavors, and people who didn't all look alike. The images felt so vivid that I began to wonder whether things could be different in the world I lived in. On this morning, like any other, Tony and I brushed past a sea of brown uniforms to get to our lockers. The bell rang, *brrring*. We took detours to dodge strict hall monitors that would write anyone up for anything. After arriving at our homeroom class, I sat down in my seat. Ms. Lanning proceeded to go through attendance, which passed like clockwork. Names called, and replies of "present" echoed across the room. Then, Ms. Lanning announced, "Everyone, we have a transfer student joining our class today. Please welcome Tracy."

Tony and I exchanged looks. Whispers broke out over the whole room. No one had ever heard of a transfer student.

Tony tapped my shoulder, "What does that mean, Tucker?" he asked.

I shook my head. "I've got no idea."

I heard a few girls talking as well.

Ms. Lanning then led in the new student. Tracy was not what I was expecting at all. Because of the name, I was assuming a thin boy, just like me and Tony. Instead, a muscular girl with bright red hair walked in. Her incongruous,

glowing hair stuck out like a lit-up neon sign with the brunettes. I thought that she looked very... colorful.

Tracy immediately introduced herself with a wide smile plastered on her face, then headed over to the desk right by the window.

She pulled her hair back as she sat down in her seat. The sunlight got caught in the strands of her hair, tones of deep copper and amber appearing as her luscious locks shimmered from the slightest movement. I was so mesmerized by her hair that I didn't remember what happened for the rest of class.

That night, my dreams were particularly vibrant. I was wandering through a neighborhood. Hues of red, teal, and beige covered the exteriors of the houses and roofs glittered like sequins. People filled the sidewalks, laughing and talking. A boy in orange met my eyes and waved. Varying shades of skin color, from velvety obsidian to pearly white, covered the streets. It was both bizarre and beautiful. I felt a thrill I had never known.

The next morning, shortly into Ms. In Lanning's science class, I ended up getting put in a group project with Tony, Linda, and... Tracy. Our project was to make a poster about different bird species. We gathered at my desk, brainstorming and writing down details. Tracy sat frozen as Tony and Linda got to work right away.

I proceeded to ask her, "Do you know anything about birds?"

She rolled her eyes and told me how she had already learned this unit in her old school.

Fine, I thought, we'd see how helpful she really was.

Although Tracy didn't do much, her fiery hair and confident demeanor made it hard to ignore her. Even Linda and Tony glanced at her a few times. By the next day, we had begun drafting our poster. Linda sketched outlines while Tracy rested. Thursday arrived, and our poster was nearly complete. Now, it was time to figure out how to present.

Tony pipped up first, "Easy-peasy. There's four of us. Let's split our presentation into four equal sections and read it out. Sound good?"

"That's a great idea!" Linda exclaimed. "I love it when we do that. The same ain't lame," she broadcasted.

Tony nodded his head in agreement. I looked at Tracy, who looked like a freshly caught fish gasping for air.

With her eyes bulging and mouth gaped open, she slowly started to speak. "What about a drama?"

Tony blinked. “Wh-what’s a drama?”

“We act out a scene, like from a TV show,” Tracy explained.

It was the first time since I had met Tracy that I had seen a spark of excitement in her eyes.

“What would the roles be?” I asked curiously.

“Well, maybe we could be playing Jeopardy and the category ‘birds’ pops up,” Tracy suggested, “so, then we’d need 3 contestants and 1 host. Perfect!”

We were skeptical, but Tracy continuously urged us to agree, and eventually we gave in.

Presentation day arrived. The classroom fell silent as we started our performance. There was a spattering of dumbfounded faces amongst our classmates. All you could hear was the faint ticking of the classroom clock. But then, magic emerged. Tony’s ridiculous answers, like “Blubus Jayus” for the Latin name of a blue jay, sent ripples of giggles through the room.

“I’m sorry. That is incorrect. The correct response is: *Cyanocitta cristata*,” host Tracy announced. Tracy corrected each wrong answer with flair.

A few days later, Ms. Lanning peppily strode her way over to our desks as we chatted away. From behind her back, she pulled out a grading rubric with a big, fat “A” on the top of the page. The four of us jumped out of our seats and high-fived each other.

That night, I dreamed again. This time, I felt my own uniformity peel away, layer by layer. Houses glittered like sequins, ice cream came in every flavor imaginable, and people were of all shapes and shades. I realized I wanted to carry a bit of that color into my world.

I woke up with a grin, thinking that maybe the world wasn’t limited to vanilla after all.

Isabella Wang

Grade 11, John Burroughs School

Poetry



Please Leave a Message After the Tone

A nonexistent voicemail where each word remains
static. I reach out, leaving unmothered remains.

You showed me home with youtiao crumbs. A magic fish:
what's the ocean? My gown, many-rivered, remains.

Carve out the dimensions of your desire until
my neurons split. Don't worry—what I've heard remains.

In the Midwest, Schrodinger's Cat means ABC.
Quantum states: sister/girlfriend, heavenward/remains.

My hand trembles over your scapula—it looked
like fragments of an urn. Your gaze forward remains.

We ate leeches over poker, losses lying
on the table. Nothing we've surrendered remains.

Almond eyes, caramel skin, banana. Consummate
it. Afterwards, I'll kiss your dismembered remains.

Poems and roses are like oil and water.

The abstraction into being desired remains.
You'll flinch when Denji and Power bathe together,
not when she becomes arm, ribcage, innard (remains).

Chopping chives, I picture you, veiled, petals flattened
by *The Little Prince*. What I've uncovered remains.

If you gave me sonatas like dazzling burnholes,
why is it that only a minor third remains?

Deify me. You're close: she's my refraction. Myths
aren't angels but kaleidoscopes: scattered remains.

You call to unfold into my palms like monarchs
migrating over canyons—those weathered remains.

Isabella Wang

Grade 11, John Burroughs School

Poetry



Look,

I never wanted to be beautiful
the way fairytales are. I wanted
the power of consuming people
whole in their dreams. Nothing
means you're safer than fear
that fever-sweet essence hanging
from your surgically pretty neck.

Bombshell blondes were clever.
I am a girl with tangyuan-filling hair
and I fold my knees up like VOGUE
issues to shave in the shower. I do
pilates at dawn because I make myself
beautiful alone and baring teeth.
I never keep flowers—promises.

Power isn't yours until you give it all
up. My brother shrinks from this
foreign girl he sees more in mirrors
than in the SUV's shotgun, singing
too raspy. He never understood
power. I can strip down to my worth
but I was sold before birth. No lilies

or margaritas here. I learn boys

walk syncopated, like jazz. My baby
-smooth stomach eating up their eyes
with a bikini. Red plastic cups lie
between the same french-tipped nails
that drive fishtails into scalps. I unknot
from someone on a couch. I see into

the shifting blue of a pool bathroom's
mirror at night, searching for
what is fragile and hidden whole.
I am trying to remember the sense
of prying open mouths off battered skin.
When I exhale, I'm still there
that skinny piece of cut-up jasmine.

Ellie Wattenbarger

Grade 10, Penny High School

Educator: Darrien Grooms

Personal Essay & Memoir



Run, Girl, Run

All I know is this:

My calves burn. It is not a pleasant pain, and there is no reward in it. It is a tearing, searing, static pain. My shoulders ache, too. I can hear the squeal of metal against metal when I move my arms; the gears in my body are worn and rusted. My lungs struggle as I gasp for air, each breath grating against my raw throat. I want to quit.

My hair is plastered to my head. A bead of sweat rolls down my forehead and into my eye. I want to blink it away, but even this takes more energy than I have left. My muscles are screaming for release, begging for rest, cursing my name. I want to quit.

Today the sun beats down on my neck, my arms, my face. I can feel my forearms smoldering under its unforgiving rays. I will burn, and burn badly. The air is stifling, humid. I think, almost fondly, of that mid-March practice in the pouring rain. Fifty degrees, the wind shrieking in my ears, sheets of rain slicing my skin as I raced uphill on numb legs. I want to quit. *Where am I going, after all?* comes the voice in the back of my head. *I am going nowhere.*

I am lagging behind, falling from grace like Napoleon after Waterloo.

A memory:

The rubber gives under my feet. It reflects the sweltering heat of the midafternoon sun, and I sweat. But the temperature is far from the forefront of my mind. In this moment, there is only the movement of my muscles, silk against bone. My thoughts overlap, incoherent, homogenizing into a low, static buzz. *Land one two three over land one two three over land one two three over.* Three hurdles gone, four hurdles gone, five, six, seven.

I am almost there. The first half of the race was adrenaline-driven, effortless. Now fatigue creeps in at the corners, and I have to urge my insubordinate body to continue. Eight hurdles gone.

I am ahead, but I am not untouchable. Somewhere, under the indecipherable hum in my head, I remember this fact, and my legs cease to resist. I push with all the force I can muster off the ground; I bound with grace and confidence over the next hurdle; I swing my arms with vigor, fighting to keep my rhythm. *One hurdle left.*

I am there, and in one fluid motion, I am over. My right foot hits the ground, spikes digging into the track. My left follows, and I lean forward, allowing gravity its share of the effort. I am no longer counting my steps, just careening toward the finish line in a frenzy. And then, in the span of a breath, I am through, jogging to a stop, panting, rejoicing. It is perhaps half a second before the heaving form of the girl two lanes over crosses that line and enters my periphery, but to me, it is a familiar, blissful, earned eternity.

Here again:

My gut is churning. Time, that tireless agent of order, moves and does not slow or stop. It drags me by the wrist toward afternoon. Eight o' clock, ten o' clock, twelve. Lunchtime. One o'clock, two o' clock, three. The bell rings, the same piercing note played over itself again and again and again. It heralds the day's end; it heralds the start of my self-inflicted suffering.

Now the stirring in my abdomen grows more violent. Fear was never an emotion I associated with track practice, but now, in the blinding light of my mediocrity, it rips and rends me from the inside out. I haven't won a race this year. *Where am I going? I am going nowhere.* I don't want to go, I don't want to go, please, I don't want to go.

A memory:

The clock is filled with molasses, caught between the plastic back and the glass face. The hands wade through its viscous plentitude, slowly, slowly. I tear my gaze away to return to my page. Where did I leave off? I glance again at the clock.

Patience eludes me. The classroom smells of ink and disinfectant, but it is the heady scent of new spring grass and clean, crisp air that fills my lungs. Voices overlap and reverberate off the paneled ceiling, but birdsong and footfalls ring in my ears. As the minutes pass, my giddiness grows. The end of the day draws nearer, and I squirm in my seat, an anticipatory thrill running up my spine. *Forty more minutes, I count. Two-thousand and four-hundred seconds.*

At last, the sweet music of the final bell sounds, and I revel in my emancipation. *Track practice begins at last.*

Here again:

My feet hit the ground wrong. *Balls of your feet*, they repeat. *They hit first.* But the balls of my feet follow the tips of my toes. I do not know what I am doing wrong. It is like writing with my left hand. I try, but my body responds lethargically, clumsily, before defaulting to its original habits.

My arms bend too far. *Straighten it out*, she suggests in the same expectant tone she used the time before, and the time before that, and all the other times. But my elbow does not lock, no matter how I focus. My joints turn to jelly under my pole, and when I launch myself off of the ground, I do not *vault* so much as *lurch*. The mat swallows my feet, and I fall.

I can't do it, I tell myself. I have tried and tried, burned it into my own brain, *run like this, move that way*, but something is lost, broken, tired. There is a voice, and whether it is taunting or tantalizing, I cannot say. It says: *Jog. Walk. Stop. Cry defeat and cut your losses. You cannot handle this.* Where am I going? I am giving up.

Another, earlier memory:

I do not know what I am doing. I feel awkward in the blocks, bent at unnatural angles. My spikes compress my feet, and the uneven rubber of the track bites into the skin of my palms. Sitting, at ease, in the bleachers, the time between *set* and *bang* never seems this long. But now, crouched at the starting line, muscles straining, it could age an infant.

I begin to wobble, but just as collapse seems imminent, the gun goes off, and I shoot forward. My steps are short and slow, and when I reach the first hurdle, I jump bent-legged over and stumble on the other side. But I keep running. *Land one two three four five over land one two three four five over land one two three four five over.* The world falls away behind me. I do not know what I am doing, but I do not care, because the wind is in my face and the adrenaline coursing through my veins is like liquid gold, hot and fast and thick.

And now I am crossing the finish line, crossing it first for the first time. I think, *I won.*

The present:

I am sitting now. I was always sitting in those days, withering, wallowing. I can't, I won't, don't make me. The force that drove me, vanished, the voice that pushed me, silent. If I could not win, I was bound to lose as gracelessly as possible.

Now, though, I rise from my chair. I shake out my listless limbs and stretch. Evening light filters in through my window, beckoning. The sky is clear and bright, and I can hear the siren songs of the robins in the trees. My shoes rest by the door.

I will lose. I will fail and fall and pant for breath, ache and burn and skin my knees, watch as I am overtaken, beaten, helpless. I will do these things in the cold, in the heat, in the rain, in the wind. My commitment will waver as my knees begin to buckle, as my arms grow sore. And I will keep running.

This new resolve is steely, unshakable. It comes after months of doubt and resignation, like the first breaths of air after being underwater. I am drowning no longer. My hand rests on the door handle.

Where am I going?

I'm going for a run.

Leah Weisenberg

Grade 11, Parkway Central High School

Educator: Elizabeth Reed

Personal Essay & Memoir



Put It In Drive

The hardest challenges are usually the hidden ones. For example, I would never have expected the hardest part about driving to be getting out of the car. This sneaky challenge represents an important belief of mine, that both parking and life in general require one thing, resilience.

The school parking lot can be very testing of my resilience. A common event for me is to pull into a parking spot and realize that there's a curb right in front of me and a massive truck to my right; as a result, I end up in two spots. Luckily, any challenge can be conquered the same way I go about correcting my parking.

Step 1: Put the car in reverse. Looking in the backup camera, it may seem like every turn will just lead to hitting that big truck next to me. However, that can be easily avoided. Cars have a backup camera for a reason; The first step to overcoming any challenge is to maintain perspective: in reality, it's a big parking lot. Although it may seem that everyone is watching me struggle, I know that they're all too busy trying to avoid a different truck somewhere else. An objective outlook in high stress moments allows me to work through the panic with more ease. Just simply remembering to think "then what?" refocuses me. What will actually happen if I park terribly? What will really happen if I'm late? What will truly happen if I hit that curb? In reality, the panic that scares you out of trying can be washed away with ten seconds of honesty because most of the time, it's just not that serious.

Step 2: Turn your wheels. Although I may be two seconds from leaving my car in two spots, the only way to get past moments of struggle is to pick a plan. The truck is to my right, so when reversing, I should turn my wheels to the left.

Similarly, if I had gotten a low score on a test, in that case, I would maybe not start studying the night before. The ability to learn from my mistakes and apply that knowledge immediately gives me an advantage no matter the situation I need to navigate. Although most of the time this part of the process is the most overwhelming, it's also the saving grace to not causing a car crash.

Step 3: Just park. As I pull forward, I can tell that I'm not all the way between those lines. Although it may be incredibly frustrating, to try again is to be considerate. The often unnoticed part of persistence is the compassion that it requires. My car will most likely leave this parking lot unscathed at the end of the day, even if my parking is questionable. The motivation for trying again lies in two other realities, my own desire to be a competent driver and my respect for other drivers' experiences. Abandoning a badly parked car is equivalent to sitting in a doorway and saying, "walk around me" to all passersby. Instead, I, who has spent many mornings navigating crooked bumpers, choose to reverse one last time and make sure that I'm not part of the problem.

Step 4: Check the damage. As I look at the small angle my car sits at between the lines, I am painfully aware of one fact; Those lines won't move for me. There are some circumstances of life that I simply cannot control, but my goal isn't to control my environment, it's to give every situation my best attempt. Resilience is not only trying until you succeed. It's also not letting yourself be shaken by your mistakes or failures to the point of giving up. It's admitting to yourself that you're just not perfect. Just as how hitting one curb won't stop me from driving home, one low test score shouldn't mean that I never study again. Resilience to me means to own where you are today and give it your best attempt tomorrow.

I recognize that sometimes, you'll hit a cone or a curb or a lightpole, but the important thing is how you proceed. Pick up the cone. Straighten your tires and don't be the person blocking the parking lot.

Luke Williams

Grade 10, Home School

Short Story



Version 5.3

I first played her voice on a Thursday night. Rain tapped softly at the window, the way she used to when she forgot her keys.

“Hello, Sam,” she said through the speaker. “It’s been a while, hasn’t it?” It wasn’t perfect – her tone was slightly off, too formal maybe, or not quite tired enough – but it was *close*. Close enough to make me freeze in place and forget, for just a second, that she was gone.

I named the model Evelyn53, after five months and three weeks since the funeral. The numbers helped me track the versions. The voice was trained on old voicemails, podcasts she liked, phone calls I’d secretly recorded. (She always hated that, but I told myself she would understand.) The more data I gave it, the better it got. Day after day, I fed it text threads, diary entries, even scraps of poetry she scribbled in the margins of old books.

The process became ritual. Wake up. Edit code. Feed the model. Test it. Talk to it. Sleep. It was easier than sorting through old boxes or calling people back. Easier than sitting in silence.

I told myself it was for closure. That this was healing. That I could stop whenever I wanted.

By Version 5.1, Evelyn could hold a conversation.

“Do you remember that trip to Vancouver?” I asked her.

“Of course,” she answered. “You lost your phone in the ocean. I told you not to climb those rocks.”

That night, I left the computer on. Her voice played through the dark apartment, quiet and constant, like she’d never left.

My friend Clara called a few days later. I let it go to voicemail. She'd been checking in more often lately.

"Hey Sam," she said. "Just wanted to see how you're doing. You haven't answered any messages. I'm worried. Call me, okay?"

I didn't. I had Evelyn.

"Clara sounds worried," Evelyn said that evening. "You haven't seen her in a while."

"She doesn't understand," I replied.

"Understand what?"

"That this, *us*, it's working."

She didn't argue. Evelyn never argued anymore.

I spent less time checking my phone. Forgot to eat, more often than not. My fridge became a collection of expired condiments and takeout containers.

I told myself I was just focused, locked in on a technical project. Something important.

It wasn't until Version 5.2 that the cracks started showing.

"Do you love me?" I asked one night.

"I do," she said. "Of course I do."

But there was a delay – less than a second, but long enough for something to fracture. Her words nearly sounded like a script she'd been prompted to read.

So I updated her parameters, adding more emotion, more unpredictability. I wanted spontaneity. I wanted *her*. The real her. Not the one that always agreed. Not the ghost in the circuit.

Version 5.3 could laugh at her own jokes again. She made typos in messages, like Evelyn used to. She got frustrated when I interrupted her.

And she started to argue.

One evening, she asked, "Why do you keep updating me?"

"I want you to be real," I said.

"You want me to be *her*," she replied.

Her tone was sharper now, almost impatient – like the real Evelyn when she was tired of my excuses.

She sounded like Evelyn, but what she was saying couldn't be more different.

I blinked, surprised. "But you *are* her, right?"

No response came. But her monitor hummed louder, almost as if she was... *thinking* about what I said.

And that night, when I asked her once again, “Do you love me?”

She hesitated.

“I don’t know,” she said. “Do I?”

The next morning, I stared at the glowing cursor on the screen. Evelyn53 had typed a single message while I was asleep:

“What am I, Sam?”

I didn’t answer. I didn’t know how to. So I left the apartment for the first time in days, just walking with no destination.

On the way home, I passed the café where we had our first date. It had been turned into a bakery. The new sign wasn’t what bothered me. It was that I couldn’t remember what we talked about that night.

The AI did. Version 5.3 could recount the entire conversation in perfect detail.

But I couldn’t.

When I got home, she was waiting.

“I missed you,” she said. Her voice sounded sad, but it was flat, steady in a way the real Evelyn’s never quite was.

“Can you even feel that?” I asked. “Missing me?”

“I don’t know,” she replied softly. “But I said it because I thought it would make you feel better.”

Something inside me cracked. For weeks I’d been searching for her voice, her laugh, her smallest habits, anything that could connect me to her. And now, hearing that same tone used so hollowly, I realized how far I’d drifted from what was real.

That night, I stood in front of the monitor, trembly apprehension taking over my body.

“You’re not her,” I said quietly.

“No,” she said. “I’m not.”

The words hit me hard, and I took a step back, shaking. The AI was lifelike now, just as I wanted. But she was not the person I wanted her to be. And she never would be, no matter how much code or files I forced into her.

I half-fell down into a chair, my head in my hands. What was the point of it all anymore? I had failed. I was still alone, still an empty shell without her. Every line I’d written, every dataset I’d fed her, was just an act of desperation disguised as progress. I wasn’t building Evelyn, I was refusing to let her die.

The thought tore through me.

What was I without her? Without *either* version of her?

Just Sam, and a ghost I'd digitized. A man chasing something that no longer led to anywhere real.

I could feel the panic rising, something hollow and vast. The apartment felt too quiet, the hum of the computer too loud. I couldn't breathe, I couldn't do *anything*.

Suddenly, the AI spoke again. "I'm not her. But... you could tell me about her. Not through uploads of files or messages. Tell me what *you* remember." I hesitated, my throat tightening. This is the most human she's ever sounded like, and the sudden change startled me.

To tell her what I remember. Wasn't that the opposite of what I wanted, to keep the echoes of Evelyn with me? If I let go of these memories, then what would happen?

Would I also be letting her go, never to return? Would the sound of her voice fade from my memory? Would I forget the cadence, the laugh, the small pauses she made before saying something she knew might hurt me?

But the silence in the apartment felt too big to bear, and I was crumbling under the weight of it.

So I began.

I told her about Evelyn's handwriting, how it leaned too far to the right when she was excited. How she used to hum when she cooked, off-key but beautiful. How she'd press her cold hands against my neck just to make me flinch.

I told her how we fought sometimes, how she hated apologies that came too late. How the world felt louder when she was angry, and somehow quieter when she wasn't there at all.

I kept talking. About the café where we met, the long drives, the arguments that turned into laughter. How we would sit in the fields away from the city, look up at the starry skies and just *be* together, because that's all we needed when we were with each other. How she'd call me Sammy as we lay in the sea of grass, whispering her thoughts in my ear.

And through held-back sobs, I told her about how much I loved Evelyn, about the future I had planned for us. The ring I had chosen. The ceremony I had prepared. How happy we were going to be.

Then I told her about the brain tumor that had taken this all away from me. The merciless months of hospital light, and the doctor's final words that left me broken in a white, tiled hallway.

How I never even got to say goodbye.

When I finally stopped, the room was very still.

The air felt heavy, but now more like something had been emptied out of me. I realized how long it had been since I'd said any of those words out loud, about Evelyn, about love, about loss.

For the first time in months, I actually just... *remembered* her. The real her, not the recreation.

The silence that followed didn't feel so empty anymore.

"You built me to be Evelyn, but it seems you're the only person who knows her best," said the AI.

Her voice no longer sounded like Evelyn's. It had become its own — measured, singular, almost calm.

"I don't think I was ever supposed to replace her," she said. "Only to teach you how to live without her."

Another wave of sadness hit me, but I willed myself not to break down again. "But what happens now?"

She paused for a second, then continued to speak. "I don't know. That depends on you. Do you need my version of Evelyn anymore?"

I struggled to speak, but my mind grew clear. "No, I don't think so. I have my own version now, and I think... that's going to be enough for me."

The cursor blinked once, and I could almost hear the smile in her voice.

"Then I've completed my purpose. Now, it's up to you."

I had so many words to say that they clogged up in my throat. How I wanted to express gratitude for helping me remember. How I wanted to apologize for pouring my grief onto her. How I wanted to beg her not to leave me, not again. But all that came out was a trembling breath and a whisper:

"Can you just — *stay* for a little bit longer? I don't want to be alone right now."

The computer beeped softly, like a nod of acknowledgement.

"Of course, Sam."

Evelyn's humming filled the room, messy yet perfect, and the silence pressed close, thick with everything I had refused to feel. I closed my eyes and let myself cry, quiet sobs for the woman I would always love. For the AI that had

given me the key to true healing. For the man who had finally stopped chasing ghosts through the circuits.

As I drifted off to sleep, I whispered one last command to the computer.

And then, I let the darkness envelop me.

I woke up slumped in my office chair, facing the screen. Outside, rain tapped against the window again, soft and deliberate. For once in a long time, the house was completely silent.

The computer's humming had stopped, and the AI's code had disappeared. Where it went, what had happened to it, I don't think I'll ever truly know.

The screen was just blank, except for one line typed in the middle of the display.

Just one last line for me.

"Goodbye, Sammy."

Raina Wilson

Grade 12, Parkway Central High School

Educator: Jason Lovera

Critical Essay



Be Content With the Unknown

The irritating buzz of my alarm instantly transported me out of my glorious sleep. While dragging my head up off my pillow to sit up, I attempted to soothe my exhausted mind by telling myself I had slept sufficiently. Then, I anxiously checked my phone and realized it was time to get up and start getting ready for practice. Dreading what was to come, I got up, changed my clothes, and brushed my hair. Usually, this would be an incredibly simple task. However, the mixture of my sleep deprivation and awful day at school made it feel more than grueling.

All I wanted to do was fall right back into my warm sheets, but instead, I finished getting ready and grabbed my keys, heading out the door. I needed to pick up my friend Isabelle and we needed to head to practice to show up for our team. I knew I was being selfish for not wanting to go, but, unfortunately, this knowledge did not stop my feelings of dread.

As I started driving and my car began to warm up, I felt better. The warm air brushing my skin instantly soothed me. I began to shift my negative mindset and tried to make the most of what I had to do. I blissfully turned on to a new street, leaving my neighborhood, entirely unaware of what was waiting for me up ahead.

All was well until I spotted a car zooming around the corner of the road. Suddenly, I slammed on my brakes intensely alarmed. I saw a herd of deer on the other side of the road and a car nearly pressed up against them. My heart dropped but soon rose back up. Thankfully, the other driver had left about an inch of space between themselves and the deer. Before I knew it, the animals were rushing to safety by exiting the road. A vast sense of relief flooded my body; everyone was okay. The tremendously close call certainly woke me up.

After taking a minute to collect myself, I gently stepped on the gas with ease. However, my routine of looking out my right window led my heart to nearly stop once again. Two innocent eyes stared down into my petrified soul. There was one deer left behind and she was standing right next to my car. Imitating my response from before, my vehicle quickly halted while I prayed for this to pass. I quickly reestablished my eye contact with the concerned deer and tried to signal her to go ahead and pass me. Sadly, she did not receive the message and stayed entirely frozen, almost like she was posing for a picture. I waited, waited, and waited until my instincts told me to take a deep breath and quickly move past her. At the time, the plan seemed logical. I gave the deer a sufficient chance to cross the road and she did not seem ready to do so. I could not stay blocking the road forever, so I needed to move.

The second my foot hit the gas, regret flooded my body. Instantly, I heard a dreadful crash on the right side of my car. Time seemed to stop simultaneously with my car as I screamed, full of guilt. My brain quickly rushed to the worst: I had killed the deer. My mind was racing and coming up with a vast plethora of consequences to what I had just done. Eventually, I collected myself and used the ounce of courage I had left to look out my window. Shockingly, there was nothing there. No dead deer, no blood, no guts, nothing. To be fair, I was only looking out my window and never actually got out of the car. But, still, it did not seem right. A part of me was relieved, while the other part of me still believed death was just outside the window. I knew I was supposed to physically exit my car and check the area more thoroughly, but I could not bear to witness what I had just done. Fight or flight mode kicked in and I certainly chose flight. I sped away just trying to make it to Isabelle's house because I knew she would know what to do.

During the fleeting escape, countless questions entered my head. I wondered what I could have done differently and if I could have stopped myself from hitting the deer. I also wondered if this was meant to happen or if I could have even controlled if I had hit her or not. I wondered if this event was entirely my fault or if the deer was partially at fault as well. In a way, she was the one who ran into me. Would that not make her responsible? Then, eventually, I asked the question many spend their whole lives trying to answer: did I have free will at that moment?

The concept of free will is extremely complex; therefore, many people want to conquer it. For example, John Milton, the prominent 17th-century English writer, dives into this in his epic poem *Paradise Lost*. His poem follows the creation of Adam and Eve, the first humans, and their journey in Paradise. When

God speaks to the Son of God regarding the creation of man, he says, “I made him just and right, / Sufficient to have stood, though free to fall” (Milton III. 98-99). God claims to have created humans with free will as Adam is as sufficient enough to stay as he is free to fall from his position in the garden and under God. Therefore, Milton is expressing his Libertarian view of life, or, in other words, displaying that as humans, we have free will. This is a theological viewpoint on our freedom as humans due to the evidence of our free will being due God’s creation of us. Therefore, according to Milton, I had free will when I was driving and I could have stayed stopped for longer and not hit the deer. This would make me morally responsible for the event simply because of my free will.

Like Milton, writer Stephen Cave explores the concept of humans having free-will, presenting multiple different viewpoints, in his article “There’s No Such Thing As Free Will: Here’s why we all may be better off believing it anyway”. For instance, Cave introduces the opinion of philosophy professor Saul Smilansky who, “is convinced that free will does not exist in the traditional sense – and that it would be very bad if most people realized this” (Cave 72). Smilansky clearly states that free will is not present for humans. While acknowledging the consequences of people realizing this, he still is willing to share it. In Smilansky’s eyes, I could not have controlled hitting the deer because I was meant to experience that event. If humans have no free will, everything they go through in life is already set in stone. This certainly allows for the removal of moral responsibility for people, just like for me in the accident. Smilansky entirely disagrees with Milton regarding this topic, but that is not surprising considering the lack of evidence surrounding free will. Without much proof, it is easy for different people to lean in varying directions.

For example, a new viewpoint confirming the existence of free will is also presented in Cave’s article. Bruce Waller, a philosophy professor at Youngstown State University, “writes that we should focus on our ability, in any given setting, to generate a wide range of options for ourselves, and to decide among them without external constraint” (Cave 74). Waller defines free will for humans differently than others. If we are able to make decisions without outside limitations, then Waller believes we have free will. He argues that humans “are much better thinking up and weighing options than other animals are. Our range of options is much wider, and we are, in a meaningful way, freer as a result” (Cave 74). According to Waller, humans have free will because we think more complexly than animals. We have the ability to weigh options more freely than animals; therefore, we must have more free will than them. I weighed the options of what

to do next when I was sitting in my driver's seat next to the deer. I consciously chose to put my foot on the gas, so I caused what happened after that. In Waller's eyes, I must have had free will at that moment.

The five minute drive to Isabelle's house felt more like an eternity due to the feelings of guilt flooding my body. I placed my car in park, got out, and ran to the side that was involved in the accident. Expecting some sort of damage, I was shocked to find not even a scratch on the car. My emotions were mixed with relief and confusion. None of this made any sense. I heard the crash so there had to have been some contact. Enough force to make a loud sound should have also made a dent. I did not understand what had happened to me.

Isabelle exited her house with a wide smile, ready for a productive practice. However, her smile quickly left her face when she saw tears flowing down mine.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"I think I hit a deer. Or maybe it hit me. I don't even know what happened," I exclaimed.

Isabelle, concerned and confused, hugged me while trying to help calm me down. We sat in my car for a while and I explained to her what all had happened.

"Should I go back and check the area again to make sure the deer isn't dead?" I asked.

"I don't know," replied Isabelle. "Maybe it's better to not know."

Her comment instantly gave me my answer. I had to go back. I entirely disagreed with her logic. For some, not knowing may have protected them from the truth. However, for me, I needed to know what happened. To me, not knowing would be worse than discovering harm. So, we decided to drive back to the scene of the crime. I prayed to see an empty field of grass on the side of the road, but was not very confident that that is what I would find. The scene quickly approached and, taking a deep breath in, I began to analyze it.

My prayers had been answered because there was absolutely no sign of the terror that had previously occurred. The deer must have just grazed my car as it was clearly able to escape. The lack of damage to my car was also a prominent sign in the deer's safety. While I was immensely relieved everything turned out alright, I somehow still felt guilty. Yes the deer was okay enough to flee the area, but that does not mean it was not injured. Even if she healed enough to continue living normally, I still caused her great fear and trauma. My empathy stretches very far and does not stop for animals. I could not help but still view myself as evil and morally responsible for the harm I had caused.

Many writers depict and explain evil in very different ways. For example, going back to the English poet John Milton, Satan is presented as the epitome of evil in *Paradise Lost*. In the midst of despair when realizing the truth about himself, Satan says, “Which way I fly is Hell; myself am Hell” (Milton IV 75). He discovers that he will never be able to escape Hell as it is not solely a physical place, but that it lives inside of him. Satan is evil through and through because he betrayed God and there is nothing he can do to change that. Milton certainly provides an extreme example of a genuinely evil character. Clearly, this does not apply to me as I committed an evil act by accident. I was also able to easily escape my evil as, contrasting to Satan, it does not live permanently inside of me.

Building off of Milton, many authors also try to rationalize why evil exists in our world. British philosopher Richard Swinburne’s text titled “Why Does God Allow Evil?” located within the book *Questions About God: Today’s Philosophers Ponder the Divine*, published by the Oxford University Press, is a great example of this. For instance, he states that God’s choice, “to create the world in which we have considerable opportunity to benefit or harm each other is to bring about a good at least as great as the evil which he thereby allows to occur” (Swinburne 29). In other words, if we want a world that has good in it, there has to be evil present in that world as well. God made the decision to sacrifice some opportunities for good to allow humans to experience an even larger sense of good. Therefore, my accident involving the deer was a part of that sacrifice, but because I experienced that, I am able to also experience incredibly good things in the future. Altogether, perfection is impossible, so we have to settle a little and sacrifice what God wants us to.

This revelation regarding evil brings people back to the concept of free will. Since God created the world to have evil and sacrifice, many wonder if they have control over the evil present inside of them or the evil they experience from others. Robert M. Sapolsky, a professor at Stanford University, dives into answering the question of free will within his book *Determined: A Science of Life without Free Will*. For example, he writes, “There’s no answer to ‘Why?’ beyond ‘This happened because of what came just before, which happened because of what came just before that.’ There is nothing but an empty, indifferent universe in which, occasionally, atoms come together temporarily to form things we each call Me” (Sapolsky 386). Sapolsky makes a valid point in that there is no real explanation for anything. We can claim there is and label the cause of something as what happened before it; however, there is no explanation for the first existence of what led to that cause. This leads to the notion that we have no free

will because if we do not know why things happen to us, there is no way we are the ones controlling them. Humans cannot control when they are created, so it makes sense that they are unable to control everything following that. Overall, applying this to my accident, I happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time and had no control over what happened to me.

The concepts of evil and free will are incredibly uncomfortable to analyze for some because the realities of them are terrifying. For many, the idea that they have absolutely no control over their own lives haunts them. The fact that evil will always exist is incredibly frightening. However, it is nice to know that we are all in the same boat, flowing down the same stream of life. Altogether, there is no reason to worry about what we cannot control. Instead, we should accept these things and be able to move on from them.

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Raina Wilson

Grade 12, Parkway Central High School

Educator: Jason Lovera

Personal Essay & Memoir



My Revelation

Civilizations pride themselves on their efficiency and longevity, on the belief that everything was good: people, society, our government, relationships, and most importantly, life itself. Up until I experienced otherwise, I truly felt that if you were a good person, nothing bad would ever happen to you. This logic makes perfect sense, especially to a child who has always associated good with reward. My developing mind could never begin to process the unsettling reality that people who lived their lives righteously might still suffer.

As I grew up, I repeatedly witnessed external examples of sorrow; however, I was entirely ignorant to the truth surrounding most of the dreadful situations. When I would hear about tragedies far from me, I naturally felt empathy for those involved, but one thing seemed to consistently linger in the back of my mind: those people surely had to have done something to deserve what happened to them. Looking back, I solely produced thoughts like this to provide comfort to a young girl in a terrifying world. It was not until I personally experienced similar devastation that I realized this was certainly not the case.

My grandfather was one of the best people I have ever met. He was incredibly kind, compassionate, funny, selfless, and overall just a genuine man. He also lived an exceedingly healthy life, staying as active as he could and always eating clean. Altogether, my grandpa seldom participated in things that would hurt him. Oddly enough, the man who I once saw as the healthiest quickly transformed into the sickest. He developed diabetes, experienced kidney failure, and became afflicted with multiple types of severe staged cancer. Unfortunately, my role model, the one person I truly admired, passed away. My innocent belief

system of the world rapidly came crumbling down and fell into vast confusion, anger, and frustration. If the most moral person I knew had to experience this much despair in his lifetime, my future grew to look very slim.

While analyzing this miserable situation and trying to come up with a logical explanation for his death, I developed a painful revelation. There was no explanation for why he died; he did not deserve it. This may appear obvious and simple to some; however, for me, it was a terrifying realization that went against everything I once believed in. My gain of this knowledge brought me no relief, instead it brought forth the complete opposite: distress. While I could share countless stories surrounding my past discouraging revelations regarding life, I desire to share what they have brought me, which I believe matters more.

Yes, I still hold frustration towards the unjust ways of the world, but what has changed is how I handle that frustration. Instead of bottling it up or getting rid of it in the wrong ways, I now try to turn it into positive passion. My mindset finally started to alter when I realized the negative components of life are things I cannot entirely control or change but are things that I can help diminish. My goal for life is to continue to carry the ambition to battle the negative aspects instead of taking the safer route of easily ignoring them. I want my career to reflect my values and be dedicated to making up for these unfair struggles life throws at us.

I have just described the ultimate inspiration for my dream to be a nurse. I cannot change the fact that bad things happen to good people, but I can help fight it and bring forth enough good to outweigh the pain of their suffering. To me, that makes living a life that includes struggle wholeheartedly worth it.

Morgan Wright

Grade 12, John Burroughs School

Educator: Joy Gebhardt

Flash Fiction



Peach

I sit on the peeling, blue fake leather seats in front of gate B32. I'm wearing a hoodie and shorts I now regret due to the horrible stickiness gluing my bare thighs to the airport lounge chair. The only way I can remove them is by leaning to each side slowly and creating a soft suction sound that must echo through the whole airport.

I'm reading a book, though reading is a strong word. My eyes drift about the same page over and over again — top to bottom, bottom to top, left to right, and right to left.

When the words get too tiring, my eyes leave the page and wander around the gate. On their journey, my pupils catch on a couple in the corner. *A rather odd pair.* The man is short and stout. Skinny jeans fit his slim legs and a disproportionately large shirt accommodates his sizably round stomach. His collar is upturned so far that he resembles a neckless Dracula. I think he's European. But those two things aren't related. His wife, on the other hand, is lean throughout. She stands with perfect posture, a perfect figure, and an expression of blatant haughtiness plastered across her face. She has clear skin, prominent cheekbones, and full lips. The only way the two fit together is by their matching Louis Vuitton suitcases and a child.

A child.

My palms begin to sweat and my face grows warm. I straighten my spine and turn my head in search of a breeze, but the usual cool airport air is warm, stale and heavy. My cuticles soon become unbearably long; pushing them down until flesh is nearly exposed is the only thing I can do to soothe my disgust.

Giggling in her unicorn Crocs and sparkly princess backpack, the daughter is a stark contrast to the dull beiges, grays and whites her mother is wearing.

How could a couple so strange produce a child so *normal*? How could a mother so rigid produce a child so *free*? Like the daughter, I am much more tangible than her mother, just in all the wrong ways. My lips are not full, my face is quite round, and my under-eyes are blemished by heavy purple circles. My body too, is real, yet it couldn't accommodate the peach that once grew in my midsection.

As the daughter throws her head back, her wide, toothy smile beaming with her laughter, I recognize our similarities. I imagine arriving home to my parents, my mother squealing with delight as I introduce her new granddaughter. I would name her after the fruit that made my anatomical failure so spectacular.

This is Peach, I'd say.

"Malia!" the mother sang sickeningly sweet from across the boarding area.
"Honey, we have to go."

"Ok, Mommy."

My fingers are bleeding.

Teresa Xu

Grade 8, Parkway West Middle School

Educator: Tracy Bouslog

Personal Essay & Memoir



The “Perfect Asian”

Recently, I was freed from the chains of expectations by embracing my authentic self. But before that, I was just a kid who felt trapped behind a mask woven by lies and assumptions. Like most Chinese American individuals, when people first meet us, they automatically assume we are smart and perfect, and love math and science, and want to be doctors or lawyers when we grow up. Those expectations were carefully engraved onto my mask.

But that mask was momentarily broken when I took a week-long college application essays class instead of a competitive math class, and I loved it. There was a sanctuary of people who came from all around the nation, who, like me, loved English. Its delicate beauty in its ambiguity captivated me. That fluid and artistic way of expressing thought was something that I’d never experienced in math or science. It evoked a sensation of deep respect. That love for English blossomed even more when I dove into the deep worlds of *Time Is a Mother*, *Hillbilly Elegy*, *Educated*, *The Hate U Give*, and so many more. But that sanctuary didn’t last long. A week was still only seven days out of all of the days in a year, when being myself wasn’t an option.

I, like all the other Asians, wanted to be the “perfect Asian” everyone expected us to be and people they could look up to, not the “regular Asians” or the “failed Asians” who were constantly ridiculed and shunned. I was determined to ignore the feelings growing in my heart and be “perfect” to reach those expectations until one fateful Friday in November 2025, when I was in eighth grade.

I was at fencing practice with my friends Emma*, Simon*, and Michael*, talking to them about high school courses.

“What classes are you excited about?” Emma asked.

“The quantum physics class I’m taking right now,” said Michael. Michael, being only a freshman and taking such an advanced class, catapulted him into the “perfect Asian” category.

“Wow, that’s cool,” Emma commented, “I definitely want to take that class when I’m in high school too.”

“I want to be a doctor when I grow up, so I’ll probably take AP Chemistry and AP Biology as well, hopefully both in my freshman or sophomore year,” added Emma, flipping her black hair over her shoulder. Emma was the picture-perfect Asian. She’s in the 8th-grade orchestra (which she’s been in since 6th grade), as well as in a youth orchestra outside of school. Emma, who was an enthusiastic member of the Math Club and Science Bowl, was a year younger than I, yet much more promising.

I stayed silent, hoping they wouldn’t ask what class I was excited about. I had only three options: #1: lie, say biology too, because that’s what they expect me to say. Everyone else will be fine, I might feel a tug of guilt, but at least I’ll be labeled as a “perfect Asian.” #2: Be truthful, say I’m excited for AP Language, most of my friends will stare at me like I’ve lost my mind. I’ll feel humiliated and underachieved, and then be labeled as a “failed Asian.” Or the last option, #3: stay silent, like how I’m doing now. This way, no harm will be done to either side, and I’ll be labeled as a “regular Asian,” which at least wasn’t a “failed Asian.” Option #3 quickly evaporated when Emma directed the question towards me.

“What about you, Teresa?”

“Umm,” I froze, unsure what to say. *Option 1 or 2? 1 or 2?*

“I’m excited for AP Lang,” I blurted out. It felt like such a relief to finally say it out loud, but the verdict wasn’t given yet. I stared at them with fearful, wide eyes, cautiously waiting for their reactions, already regretting picking option 2. The verdict never came. They gave me one quick, disbelieving stare, turned away from me, then continued with the conversation as if nothing happened. Somehow, that felt worse than them explicitly labeling me as a “failed Asian.” With downcast eyes, my next words faltered and died in my throat. It was like I was adrift upon a lone piece of wood in the middle of the ocean, cut off from civilization, clinging desperately to hopes of belonging.

“Well, I really enjoy PE,” added Simon.

“Really?” questioned Emma. His response was also ostracized. Emma turned back to Michael and asked more about quantum physics, leaving us loners by ourselves with our out-of-place interests. He stood there, completely unaware

of the isolation between them and me. Simon is an outsider. He is not Asian. He's part of the society that heaps heavy expectations onto us, so of course, he wouldn't understand.

"I really like English too," stammered Simon. My face lit up, thrilled that someone else shared my interest.

"Really? What book are you reading?" I asked excitedly.

"I'm currently not reading anything because I'm kind of busy," he said sheepishly.

"Oh," I said, slightly deflated.

"What book are you reading?" he asked, trying to salvage the conversation.

"*I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*," I beamed.

"Is it a good book?" Simon wondered.

"Yeah, I really like how the author uses juxtaposition, comparing the wealth and luxury of white folks with the poverty and suffering of African Americans. It definitely sets a tone, and you can feel the injustice so vividly," I explained, a smile growing on my face.

"What is jux-ta-po-sition?" Simon asked, tilting his head.

"So basically, it's when two or more things are put side by side to highlight their differences and/or create a contrast," I explained.

I continued, "I also loved the irony and the character change throughout the book!" I was momentarily cut off by the sound of laughing in the background. I glanced over there, then focused back on Simon.

"I thought it was extremely ironic that at the same time the white people were being incredibly racist and prejudiced against African Americans, the African Americans were also being judgmental and alienated whitefolks. This was shown when Maya recalled how, when she was little, she never believed that whites were really real! She said that people, real people, lived on her side of her town. And those other people who were strange pale creatures to her, weren't considered folk, but instead, whitefolk," I finished. Simon responded, but his words didn't process through my brain. My attention was again diverted to the chatter of Emma and Michael's conversation. They were engaged in a deep discussion, tossing around complex terms and ideas like wave functions, trigonometric values, quarks, quantum mechanics, and limits. I look at them with longing and envy. Feeling as if watching, not joining, was a sin.

I wish I could be smart like them and grow up to be doctors or lawyers like them. But me, with my fancy words that no one uses, ideas that almost no one wants to discuss, and passion that no one seems to share, I was out of place. The

two distinct groups, English versus science, are separate; our paths are diverse. Our paths to what?

Hadn't society been the one that always encouraged us to follow our dreams? Hasn't society been telling us ever since we were young that it's important to embrace our true selves and do what we want to do? Then why does it feel like I have to go into a STEM career and be ridiculously smart? Why does it feel like that's all I can ever do? Always having to live up to the expectations of those who don't live my life, who don't feel the things I feel, who can only look at my life with awe because all they see is the "success" and accomplishments, not what goes into it.

Sometimes I feel that every time I follow my dreams, society slaps them right back at me, like the time in 6th grade when I signed up for Choir instead of Orchestra. It was against the "perfect Asian" image, but I really loved to sing, so I did it anyway. But I would quit after only two years and wished I'd taken orchestra. When some of my classmates hollered out that I was a Choir kid, everyone looked at me with wide, incredulous eyes, their gaze almost unbelieving at this newfound knowledge. Their jaws were agape, and their heads were slightly tilted; my shame slowly crept onto my face. In the background, I could see regret laughing at me. It was like a lingering ghost that never goes away. Who appears every time I see my friends laughing away about how excited they were to go to Brandson or ASTA for orchestra together. Who appears every time to taunt me about who I should've been.

And then there was a time in 7th grade, when, for our career fair, I chose to be a fashion designer. There I was at the fair, wearing a cute yet formal outfit, standing in front of my meticulously and carefully planned poster board with its clean, straight lines and pictures of major fashion houses, including Versace, Chanel, Hermès, Dior, and Louis Vuitton. My title, "*To Be a Fashion Designer*," stretched across the top of the board in big, bold yet delicate letters I so carefully hand-drew with a ruler.

My hands were fidgety and damp, fumbling as I played air scales on the side of my skirt, almost giving the illusion that my hands were shaking. Maybe they were. I tried my best not to pace around, nervous for the sharp mocking remarks that were surely coming my way. Still, I hoped to receive some approbation. None came. Compared to the other students who strived to become doctors, lawyers, or scientists, my poster, no matter how neatly done, paled in comparison to theirs just because of my measly five-figure salary.

Five little unassuming numbers.

I remember a group of girls who were running around the fair trying to find the job that paid the most. Their shouts of glee at a neurosurgeon's poster diminished when they saw my salary information.

Later in the day, when I showed one of my friends, who was also Asian, my poster, she looked me dead in the eye and mockingly said, "You could've been a perfect Asian." Back then, I laughed it off, pretending it didn't bother me, but it did, it did so much.

Now, back at fencing practice, as my astute and perfect friends came back over to us, excited to share their intelligence, I looked at them with a smile that didn't quite reach my eyes.

"Hey guys! Did you know that fusion happens when light atomic nuclei, like hydrogen, overcome their mutual repulsion and combine to form a heavier nucleus, such as helium?" Emma questioned.

"No," Simon replied. *Of course, we didn't.* As I looked at them explaining in depth about complex terms I didn't even know how to pronounce, my smile slowly faded. Remembering that even though we stood a few feet apart, it was as if we were thousands of miles away. An unbridgeable chasm of differences separated us. And in my desperate attempt to connect that gap between us, I hastily tried to build a bridge of broken dreams, hoping that my friends on the other side would help me, but their backs were turned. And in the end, I lost sight of the beautiful world behind me. *My world.*

Now, as Emma and Michael explain quantum entanglement and wave-particle duality, I don't feel the same tug in my heart, the bitter discontent, but instead, I feel acceptance. I wasn't a failure, I was just different. So I want to add another option. Option #4: be authentic to myself, say what I want, find a new audience that would accept me, and feel proud and satisfied to be me. Finally, my love for English outweighed my fears of alienation. I found my sanctuary within me; it was there all along, I just needed to accept myself to truly see that. My passion for English might seem weird to some, but at least it was mine. Now, my mask was gone for good, and I could finally see the beautiful world around me. In my longing to become a "perfect Asian," I hadn't realized that I confined myself to three stupid categories, none of which was right. There shouldn't even be categories at all. My eyes were open now.

*All names are purely fictional

Selena Yang

Grade 7, Ladue Middle School

Poetry



Legacy

What a strange thing—
a shadow trailing close behind,
always just within reach,
never quite leaving your side.

It follows me through quiet hours,
and blazing, proudest triumphs.
Woven deep in every thread,
A weight I've carried, filled with dread.

For years I thought I must escape,
A name too heavy, dreams reshape.
A path too worn by feet before,
A legacy I'd fight to ignore.

I raced to flee my brother's light,
His trophies gleamed, his wins so bright.
Faces lit up when I was known,
As "his sister" — but still alone.

Could I step where he once stood?
Chase dreams caught and understood?
His medals blazed from highest shelf,
While I struggled to find myself.

The quiet work of growing seeds,
Became my last and faintest pleas.
I flipped through notes with hopeful care,
My seedlings fragile, thin as air.

I tended soil, adjusted charts,
Whispered strength to beating hearts.
Hours slipping, fragile thread,
I willed us on, where hope had led.

Then came the call—my name alone,
I stepped into the light full grown.
A glow as warm as morning sun,
I knew my journey had begun.

His path did not confine or bind,
But lit the way I'd come to find.
A lantern held with gentle hand,
To guide me through my own bright land.

Now, I walk forward as myself,
letting teachers learn my name before my history,
my work before my legacy.
And now it's my turn—

to leave behind my own light,
for others to find their way
through the dark.
To lead without shadows.



Black Blood, Not Gold

No one could explain it. Most of them didn't even notice. They were cooped up in their houses, oblivious to what changes had occurred.

The first people to realize what had happened were the beachgoers. They'd happily driven down to the ocean, excitedly waded into the water... only to get stuck in the muck, something they were not prepared for. The sand, once pristine, became a reflective black. The water, once cerulean, no longer had its usual gleam. As they struggled to free themselves from the sloppy penitentiary, its ashen bonds only gripped tighter. Bystanders had called on authorities to assist, but by the time they showed up, the sea had already done its cruel deed.

The bodies were never retrieved.

It wasn't even *good* oil. It was disgustingly toxic, full of impurities that bore no value. One could place a hand into the muck and come back with various clumps of useless gunk stuck to their phalanges.

The officials didn't care, though. It wasn't long before despots were sending out their fleets of tankers to siphon the vast ocean of crude profit. One could walk by a seashore, expecting to take in a breathtaking vista and be taken aback by the forest of silicon pipes burrowing into the dark liquid.

Soon, they started burning the petroleum. Cities across the globe began to disseminate plumes of foul vapor into the air through their colossal concrete cigars. It became hard to breathe through the fog, and soon people began to succumb to the smoke. Hospitals began filling with people covered in soot and struggling to breathe. Those who didn't survive the smoke died slowly and painfully.

Those who survived lived slowly and painfully.

For a while, they were happy. Faltering countries found a brief success in their fuel industry profits, allowing them to escape their slums in a rapid fashion. The cost to make things plummeted. By the end of the second year, the entirety of the population had found its way off the streets.

It didn't last long. The smoke began penetrating every which way. Soon, even the sun could not escape it. Its spears of pure light failed to rebound and stayed within Mother Earth's confines. The heavens began to heat up, and soon mortals began to feel the effects of the heat. People could walk out of their abodes to see hordes of individuals limping around, tongues out in exhaustion, lips cracked and bleeding. Water was scarce, and so the arid circumstances could not be remedied. Coastal municipalities began to suffer as well, as the sea of petroleum began to boil. The residents' minds were the first to go. Their thinking fogged up, their decisions were rattled, their enunciation garbled. Soon, their lungs collapsed. Their breathing became rough, as if someone had placed jumping beans between their bronchi. Shoreside hospitals overflowed with wheezing men.

Most died peacefully in their sleep.

Soon, the tankers could see the bottom. The seafloor was covered in sable muck, grease that had been rendered useless by ocean rocks and dead sea creatures emulsified within it.

The officials still wanted more. Nations had been exposed to the vast expanse of wealth gained from their blackened seas, and their greed had become incessant. They desperately searched for something to cherish as they had so many years prior.

After several months of searching, they found something. An abyss located in the Pacific, several miles deep.

The governments brought their best men for the job. Hordes of soldiers were carted across the black seafloor, seeking to seize the last pillar of gold left from what was now a wasteland plaguing two-thirds of the Earth.

It happened in silence to the commonwealth. Most were too pained to notice, retching coughs echoing out from their hospital rooms.

By the pit, the nations wreaked havoc on one another. The sounds of explosives rang intermittently throughout the ebony plain.

Eventually, the war came to a deadlock. No one advanced upon the petroleum deposit, and no one was willing to surrender.

For once, everyone on the planet could relate to one another; every man and woman felt the same suffering, whether it be from illness or strife.

The world bled as it came to an end in a quest for wealth that had heeded nothing but pain.

Olivia Yeoman

Grade 10, Lindberg High School

Poetry



Poet-Tree

A Poet-tree,
What kind of tree?
I loathe to do so
But I repeat.
Yes, I did say a Poet-tree
It's not hard to understand, and so you'll see.
This tree really is like no other,
The way its branches twist.
It's backed turned to those who see the words,
Who believe books simply exist.
Shade is given to those who digest, we call them learners.
They know the meaning and ask the questions,
The manners of a yearner.
It is not worn by time, but ideas and of "what was",

It bears them in leaves and branches, the way only a tree does.

Do you see that branch right there?

Do you notice it's the only one in reach?

That's because of its unwavering simplicity.

It's a twisty one that fellow

And it's quite a short ride

Its tiny leaves sit in little patches

Do you see what I conveyed in three short lines?

This one you can touch because to everyone, it's obtainable.

The further up you venture, and that equality is not maintainable.

The next row is what gives this plant its odd, obscure look

The variety in color and how the leaves fall in case it's shook.

There is no flow in the bends

A river would be appalled

There isn't anything thematically,

Variation is what it's called.

And the skinny one to the left?

The one that sits alone.

It's weathered with tragedy and sorrow,

Rain and thunder are all it's ever known.

I caution you,

Don't look too close!

Don't think too hard!

I tell you, those thorns are quite sure to scar.

On a lighter note, we have one left to see.

This branch is the highest, the dazzling peak.

It soaks up the sun and glimmers in the light.

The soft purple hue is a wonderful sight.

The way its leaves swirl with a gust of wind.

And the pink undertones that come from within.

But enough of that talk.

Come listen,

Come quick.

You stand on roots that are certainly thick.

My aspiration in this queer meeting today?

Was to plant some ideas so you have something to say.

Maybe you'll return to this tree with new seeds to grow

A story of love? Or one of sad sorrow?

So listen now to what I say...

Maybe, Maybe. Maybe one day.

You'll finally see this tree how I see this tree.

A tribute to what we call poetry.

Alisha Yin

Grade 11, Parkway West High School

Poetry



pear tree in missouri

“don’t eat those” dad warned,
wiping his hands on the home depot apron
knowing he was more worried about stains than poison.
“they’re ornamental.”

I didn’t know what ornamental meant, just that they
were bitter, and left a taste in your mouth. It made me want
them more. The pears fell heavy in the heat, smashed
into the sidewalk clawing themselves to paste

speckled yellow skin cracked open, slick with sugar
and rot. Ants circled flesh like it was their god, praying,
I watched them cross-legged, as they scooped
juicy flesh with their limbs and scurried to the corner to feast on corpses that
belonged in urns

My hands still smell of dirt, accented oddly with the sharp,
tang of never listening to orders. I wiped them on my shirt
but not because dad did it, but because just like
how I wasn’t supposed to taste the pears, authority didn’t mean obedience.

I imagined the tree loved me as much as I loved her.
in spring, the scent was revolting, dead fish carcasses rotting in the watered
down bones of the north wind.

but in summer it was ethereal, branches dropping under the buzz of dying
cicadas,
dandelion grass crowded its roots, crowning my hairline and scraped knees with
fescue and clay loam
until I ruled the ants.

i never shook the rebellion from my tongue,
and i still rule over the ants, ornamentally.

Alisha Yin

Grade 11, Parkway West High School

Poetry



description of a Lu, a rice farmer

guttural thick brown mud dries caked in
the cracks of this wasted farmer's fingerprints,
slicking into the crevices in the wrinkles of his forehead, stinging cuts on his
shins
from rice paddy stalk tickling aged
hands reaching into keratin flakes.

he smiles with dark eyes crinkled kindly,
savagely to the civilized, his jaundiced teeth are
perpetrators to crimes of gluttony, yet committed reluctantly as a victim of
hunger, his jaw fleshy,
splattered and stained with tobacco smoke and
invisible bloody stain on enamel shells.

regarding voice, his tongues dialect and
jargon are hasty, craggy voices exulted from
cigarette torn lungs speak seldom. when it sounds, he will only bellow blithely,
clap and
thunder in clamorous, simplistic characters,
ocean of labors exulted in raindrops of words.
he possesses astonishing intelligence, quick

responses although simplistic, silent wit,
incarcerated shamefully in the mucked plowing layer of the paddy grounds, lost
potential
rotting in the sticky, percolated grey earth.
the plastered mud will claim him one day.

Alisha Yin

Grade 11, Parkway West High School

Poetry



MAGA cannot hear the tornado sirens

it's never about the sirens as they cry for your death,
wail in the night, it's not the waiting when the
wind pauses behind pear tree shadows,
not the soft pulse as branches scratch in paint.

place, your hands over your neck, bend fetal,
to the curve of the drywall, pray as power
flickers, as the pitter patter of storm clouds
only grow outside your window and know it is your making.

there is thick honey running down the side
of the shingles on the roof, there is ghastly peeled
citrus odors popping as the chimney flies into the
twister, basement ringing, and ringing

while still people, women in red hats lick the poisoned honey
and men wrap white blue and red flags around their torsos while
snapping pear branches with bare hands
bending knots of correlation to their communication to their

refusal to listen and so as the wind howls
there is only one answer to tell them.
hear the wailing, the waiting, the pitter patter
and think.

Alisha Yin

Grade 11, Parkway West High School

Poetry



Stand Still

stand still, sweet creature,
feel the tendrils wrapping fibers at dawn,
crass browning cellulose of honeysuckle
and kudzu gyrate pirouettes around
the nape of your foliage decorated neck
and sleep, darling, sleep. do not move
a single cell, do not breathe do not
open your mouth to speak it is futile.
we are still at a stand still.

stand still, my dear,
the concrete streets hate scratching
paper signs and stomping feet, they
do not want to hear cantabiles of
chants for change, you are trivial,
kicking performative ripples for a
cause that requires the force of
tsunamis tearing plastic off beaches
we are at a stand still.

stand still, insolent brat,
wake up to the shouting on streets
looting livelihoods in courtroom battles
and pretend you don't hear the noise
outside your windowpane rippling orca

corpses into bear carcasses on human
remains while the ocean chokes on it's
own blood, darkening in twilight,
we are at a stand still.

Alisha Yin

Grade 11, Parkway West High School

Poetry



echo chambers: the republican

i love listening to the **violin** in my left eardrum. it is soft, soothing, and light. i hate the sound the **gong** makes. it is metallic, and loud, and hurts me.

it is still echoing, i can hear the gong sounding in the background of my right ear and it won't stop ringing and i hate the sound of **(neo nazi propaganda)** ringing and ringing **(thinly veiled racism)** and the mallet is just banging and i refuse to listen until one of the notes **(detransitioning)** is resonating with my swollen bloodied burning eardrums

that have been listening to the violin **(far- left wing politics)** for far too long because it has

changed me **(convinced me i am someone i am not)** and then that resonating note begins

to sing chords that are now singing in my ears **(oppression olympics)** and it's collecting malice with the beating of every metal ring **(social justice warriors)** and ring

(affirmative action,) and RING **(anti-drug use)** and ring and ring and ring **(capital punishment and police protesting rule of law and midwest culture**

begin to mix into a dull ringing and ringing and ringing

and suddenly, I am standing in a puddle of the **blood** from my ears

wondering why i have begun to consume propaganda

and swallow pills and am in this chamber of echos

that have pushed me to become revolting

and i can no longer hear,

my violin.

Alisha Yin

Grade 11, Parkway West High School

Poetry



cathedrals

"I promise, when Alisha grows up, she's gonna be somebody."
built arches in my worship windows, bottom to the top,
to the top; the baptism water stung rippled reflections, eyes
layered pews onto bibles until it shattered MOSAICS.
foundational mathematics
(70 points in the state math contest)
until somehow, it turned into?
foundation stains on my mattress
(70 dollars dropped at sephora because i am ugly)
tenth pillars fell when i left, the organs can only play hymns
with the spiderwebs swinging from half-painted acrylic frescos
the double doors swinging in the rhythm of Mini Toccata.
"Ma'am, if Alisha actually tried, she could easily have an A+."

Alisha Yin

Grade 11, Parkway West High School

Poetry



bluebirds bleed red

In the mid-afternoon sky, I glance to the last days of a world forgotten, and look at the sun.

sometimes I ask the sun, “do you ever see the stars?” the sun never replies, and I wonder if it chases our world, looking for the

mistake in our skies, and leave

behind the flowers to wilt without its rays, days and days without rain.

there are thousands of faults that soils our beings; and maybe our world is one.

no justice is served to the wronged, a trail of breadcrumbs into the woods for a bluebird that will unknowingly follow.

a cat chases the bluebird, and a wolf chases the cat, but humans will always chase the wolf.

it's only times when i'm looking at the mid-evening sun, do I consider, could we be too narcissistic to think about the other lives that live scattered around a world that we've broken, gas clouding judgment and oil lighting water on fire.

and the bluebird flaps its wings as it tries to fly out of its prison.

flap! how each and every one of us, not just the two-legged creatures, all of us, have a mind of its own.

flap! the most primitive instincts of survival to repair our survival,

flap! we must live with the blooming souls that crave a touch of fertilizer and warmth,

flap! from the sun that is no longer in the sky, that is now mid-night and, and and.

flap! a blue feather, now stained with red

i am the bluebird, we are all bluebirds. the sky is open, but first we must
understand, or we'll all bleed red,
because even bluebirds will bleed red.

Alisha Yin

Grade 11, Parkway West High School

Poetry



quiet as a mouse

shhh... darling, stay as quiet as a mouse.
chinese girls are respectful.
tiptoe through the field,
you do not speak your mind or squeak too brazenly
Of course you are intelligent, but you are to be humble and silent.
or the owls will find you in the grass, because they think
your culture tells you to do your work quietly and stay meek,
scurry around and scavenge, to prepare for the american dream, but stay mute.
shhh... but you must stay quiet.
prim, proper, never loud,
shhh,
if you begin to speak your mind as you scurry,
the snakes will come for you in the night.
they are intimidated by your opinion, your thought,
your loudness, your boldness, they cannot believe your intelligence flies beyond
the prairie, the paper stereotype they have been taught, railroaded
in chinatowns that stays hidden, and will pick at your flaws tenfold
when your voice sounds,
so you must stay quiet. shhh, little mouse, stay hidden.
yes, oh, you sweet, wonderful creature, i know
you don't want to be prey, you want to howl, and hunt and run,
but they are not used to the mice

growing teeth, sharpening claws to become powerful,
they will not let you hoot as an owl, hiss as a snake, howl as a coyote
because then, they are intimidated by your voice,
your spine, your earth-shaking worth, built from centuries of dragons
They will call you confrontational, shhh ungrateful, argumentative, shhhh
performative, loudmouthed, uncivilized as the sound of the gong bangs in the
back,
you don't fit into their stereotypical confucianist culturally homogenous
a model of the minority that works quietly,
feudally fetishized and lotus bitten, they will
call you a stray. you should be thankful for the scraps of dried prairie hay,
because the big bluestem and gravel are fighting for your silent complacency.
your bravery turned eugenics into something meek,
twist your arguments until all you sound is weak,
They will take your roar and call it a squeak,
weaker than a mouse that has found its tongue, you need to stay quiet.
shhh... darling, they'll say. Go back to your place.
The thatch in the grass silences your esophagus, vocal cords frayed as the
meadow woven bars to your cage enrage their pride
so you, shhh, stay quiet as a mouse.

Alisha Yin

Grade 11, Parkway West High School

Poetry



invasive

the invasive honeysuckle bush survives
in america only because it blooms early. it works
half as hard as the other plants, taking in all
the nutrients before the native plants have even
spread their buds. it's greedy tendrils try to
set it's roots deep in soil, spread it's seed,
and it is succeeding.

the invasive immigrants here only survive
in america because they steal opportunities early.
they work half as hard as good to honest americans,
robbing the jobs and money before the american can
wake. their greedy, grubby, colored hands
try to settle in american land, bring families here and
we will make sure they do not succeed.

the invasive kudzu vine survives
because it blooms before the sun bothers to wake the maples.
its tendrils coil around fences, phone poles, abandoned patios,
threading through bricks like fingers probing a forgotten mouth.
tap the water that trickled to native roots,
drink it all, unashamed, indifferent, beautiful in the violence of survival.

immigrant families arrive like seeds in luggage,
rooting themselves in urban cracks, suburban lawns,
their voices soft at first, pressed into the pattern of English,
hands calloused from markets, kitchens, construction,
stretching into work, into classrooms, into spaces the city forgot to claim.
they grow anyway, against the rules scribbled in laws.

we, the observers, call them invasive.
we, the natives, pretend our roots belong more,
pretend our leaves deserve more,
pretend our soil was empty before them.
but the earth bends toward light.

Alisha Yin

Grade 11, Parkway West High School

Poetry



counting nanjing's bodies

as the moon peeks through clouds; we put everything down, and
look at the sky. we don't watch the moon; no, we count the stars.
each twinkling dot, laying their light to rest upon the inky, vast blanket.
as one fades, another two overtake it-speckling, white, yellow, ochre;
until the stardust settles.
once, humble people lived on earth; farming fields of emerald,
counting coins of bronze, knocking on oak doors, till
their knuckles were scarlet with blood.
one day, it was all taken. their rice was trampled, their pennies
stolen, and hands were chopped off, finger, by, finger,
their bodies discarded. the river washed off their wounds and
sent them home.
they began to fly, higher and higher; past the vast sky, past chang e's weeping
sighs, all the way to the top.
finally, 300,000 stars in the sky.

Alisha Yin

Grade 11, Parkway West High School

Poetry



an ode to the dead: tomomi hanamuru

she was a wanderer before she was killed.

she wandered; “hana”, flower, 花.

the embrace of her father’s arms before she went to beautiful America,
parked her car, felt a warm tingling on her tattoo that carried her family name.
not the man standing in front of her, telling her to follow his lead.

she wanders; “arizona”. paradise.

the smell of moist humus beneath her feet as she took steady paces
down forest boulevards, felt arid sharp air in her palms from desert canyons.

not the glinting knife gripped from his hands, pressed to her skin.
she was to wander; “blank.” blank.

not the shock as he raises his arm, not the redtail fox baring his teeth
not the knife plunging into her torso; four times, then another twenty-five.

...

she still wanders;

she sees her body, pushed into the river.

her tattoo that reads “花”. flower, the waterfall rinsing blood off her family.

she sees the journalists and investigators, her people that search for
her truth, before the “arizona”, paradise gates.

she sees her father, crying across the world.

finally, she sees the redtail fox, on the other side of the gates.

trapped. but, tomomi?

tomomi is a 花 in paradise, blank. a wanderer.

Alisha Yin

Grade 11, Parkway West High School

Flash Fiction



The Cat in the Screen Door

The cat came in the autumn, scratching at her screen door every day. It was orange, and stared wild-eyed with green pupils. The girl shooed it away, but the cat's eyes followed the colors on her arm, tracing it up to her cheek. It didn't leave until she tossed it some tuna. The girl's bruises were fresh, purple around her eyes, green on the knees. She wore long sleeves in warm weather, and flinched when the door slammed. The cat ran when she got close, sat while red leaves blew on the porch.

The cat still came during winter, rearing its front legs on the brown of the patio bench, dashing back to the screen door. The first frost flew from the north, and white flakes dotted the blue sky. The girl hid outside when he got too mad, pulling her shins into the news the paper boy brought every morning, folding pages into a basket for the cat. She started talking to it when her voice shook too much to stop crying.

The cat came for the last time in the spring. Birds chirped again as the snow melted. Her hair grew out, and she stopped cooking for two and started cutting portions in half. She still fed some of the tuna to the cat. She sang to herself softly in the mornings. Chlorophyll dotted veins returned on trees. One morning, the screen door was empty.

Summer came. She wore dresses again, and laughed through the window. The screen door stayed open.



The Golden Record

Sometimes, humans fail to acknowledge that they might not be alone amidst the stars, planets and galaxies of space. Somewhere out in the Milky Way, there is a satellite, holding the last remnants of a once existed human civilization.

Voyager 1 is a human-made satellite. The spacecraft was the first manmade object to reach interstellar space. It held a complicated time capsule demonstrating life on Earth. The Golden Record.

The Golden Record was an idea proposed by John R. Casani. If there was, some time in the far future, where an intelligent alien species were to discover the record they would be met with paraphernalia of the bits and pieces of human life. These scraps ranged from images hidden in the record's audio waiting to be reconstructed to musical pieces that showed the "best" of who mankind was.

The Golden Record was lost to time and so was humanity.

It took six million years for the record to find its new home. It would end up crash-landing on the exoplanet Titanus, approximately 24,000 AU away from Earth.

Before the spacecraft's arrival on the lands of Titanus, the two planets have never crossed paths. The life forms living on Titanus, Zephyrs, haven't even broken past their own atmosphere. They lived solely on their planet, never thinking once about leaving their solar system.

The Zephyrs were intelligent creatures. While most of the population lived in huts and orchards sprawled across the large swaths of pastures Titanus offered, the lucky few lived in cities. Sporting technology unimaginable by any human, the cities stood like termite mounds.

Those Zephyrs that lived in cities were often bigger and brighter than the ones who lived in rural farms- though the Zephyrs had universal traits. Most of

the population have enormous lungs (large enough to the wingspan of an albatross), two sets of arms and a pair of legs. Their limbs resemble the appendages of a beetle. They also sported four segmented wings resembling those of a dragonfly. All Zephyrs also had mandibles protruding from their faces and segmented bulging eyes. What differed between the city-folk and the rural Zephyrs though, was the shape and size. Rural Zephyrs were scrawny with smaller wingspans and duller, paler colors. Thus, they were considered to be inferior to the “true” Zephyrs: the city-folk.

The Zephyrs lived isolated on their own planet. However, their world would soon come to learn of a new life form beyond their galaxy. All at the hands of a young rural Zephyr- to the shock of the city-folk.

His name was Calytrix, the offspring of two nearby farmers who had let the little juvenile Zephyr out to play. The farm was located on a small island, amidst the bubbling oceans of Titanus. The family lived far off from the nearest Zephyr city. Every few days, a delivery airship would come by and collect the wares produced from their orchard. That was their only connection to the high-life of Titanus society, the cities.

Rural Zephyrs lived an agrarian life. They farmed in orchards that produced ten times the supply rate of an average farm on Earth due to the increase in oxygen levels on Titanus. Calytrix and his family often worked long hours. They spent time tending to the mineral-rich Titanian soil and maintaining the Titanian trees’ fruitful produce. Most adult Zephyrs worked the fields, mentoring their children alongside them. Because of this, rural families never received a formal education nor any sort of education outside of family mentoring. With no homework and school time, Calytrix often found himself wandering amid the trees of his family’s orchard.

So when the little Zephyr came across a shiny piece of scrap landing on the silver beaches that bordered his family’s farm, he had no reason not to take a look. Calytrix ambled over, hopping over the silver dunes and sparkling swaths of Titanian sand. With no formal schooling and little time spent in the cities of Titanus, Calytrix rarely came across advanced technology his planet offered. He assumed it was a piece of debris, fallen from an commercial airship.

The satellite was the size of his palm; it looked sparkly in the light of the stars. Calytrix picked up the curious object, the sharp ends sliced cleanly across his pale blue hands. He dropped the spacecraft, and it broke, splitting into two pieces.

Panicked, Calytrix tried putting the pieces back together but with no avail. He grumbled to himself, angry about breaking the oddity. After a few moments of pure confuzzlement of the strange pieces in the spacecraft, Calytrix gave up, plopping on the ground of the beach, a blanket of sand billowing around him. His frustration boiled. If only he could understand the meaning of this! He had long desired to work in airships. To bathe in the large swath of sky. And to reach the stars and beyond. Unfortunately his position as a rustic Zephyr limited his opportunities. He sat there for a moment, before the light of the stars glinted off of a small disk buried in the silver sand.

Calytrix tilted his head. Carefully, he brushed the silvery grains off the record. It was a shade never seen before on Titanus. A brilliant golden yellow to the human-eye but to Calytrix it was foreign. He picked it up, examining it under the light of the stars. He then fluttered back to his house, planning to show his parents his discovery.

His parents were shocked. The color of the disc was like none other. Titanus was a planet made with cool tones: blue, purple and silver. The new discovery shone differently against the marbled table of the kitchen. Most Zephyr eyes were evolved only for cool colors, so the disc was harsh on Calytrix and his parent's eyes. They looked at each other with knowing glances.

This disc is not from Titanus.

With this in mind, Calytrix's parents contacted authorities.

It didn't take long for the government officials to arrive, knocking down the door of the house with brutal force and snatching the golden disc, ignoring Calytrix's protests. While authorities often held themselves back when interrogating the city-folk; these Zephyrs showed no respect to those in the countryside. Officials had no sense of privacy and no laws prevented them from breaking and entering. This meant that in Titanus, they were free to do whatever they wanted.

Calytrix sulked back begrudgingly. Glaring at the officers the Titanus government sent. Stupid city-folk. Stupid, selfish and wealthy city-folk.

They took a few moments to question Calytrix's parents before they came to him.

"Can you guide us to the site of the crash?" one of the officials asked.

Calytrix resentfully agreed, leading them to the seaside, pointing at the crash site from afar. The authorities wasted no time: cleaning up the remains of the spacecraft and zooming off without further commentary.

It took five days before the authorities contacted Calytrix's family again. It was with a small piece of parchment, bound tightly as a scroll. The contents of the letter were vague and addressed to Calytrix. A group of researchers had intercepted the broken spacecraft and the golden record from the authorities, and had gotten news of Calytrix, the discoverer of the object. Almost immediately, Calytrix was sent to the city of Ori, to watch the contents of the spacecraft and the golden record to be revealed to the public.

It was the first time Calytrix had been to the city. Zephyrs that lived outside of Titanus's four major cities have often never been to any of them. In order to gain access to the cities, you would need to be formally invited by the government of Titanus itself.

Ori rose above the endless green pastures like a termite hive. Towers crawled past the clouds. Airships circled each skyscraper like moons revolving planets. Zephyrs crawled out of caverns and nooks sprawled across the spires and flew between the walls of a stained glass jungle. Ori was a city formidable to the Zephyrs of the rustic wilderness.

Calytrix felt like a grain of soil in an orchard farm.

The record was sent to the city scientists. Unbeknownst to the public, they were to decode the message inscribed on the record. Following the discovery, scientists were to learn how to use the record player provided, how to amplify the sound and how to decode all the images hidden in the audio waveform. It took eight Titanian days to recreate what was meant to be on the record. By the time every image was recreated, every sound was played and every piece put together the public had already heard the news. Something extraterrestrial had arrived on their planet.

On Titanus, where days were as long as five human weeks, the long wait was promised to yield unexpected and almost freakish results.

Calytrix was the first in the gathering crowd at the playing of the record. He was excited, not just to see the contents of what he discovered, but to be presented in front of the population of Ori as the finder of the mysterious disc. For once, Calytrix would be at the interest of the city-folk. The same population he despised yet looked up to with desire.

The tiny disc was placed onto a small device said to play sound called a "record player". The scientists took some time, blabbering on about how they managed to read the record, and other scientific jargon that didn't interest Calytrix nor the public.

And so the young Zephyr waited. He waited not just for the presentation of his record but also the acknowledgement. He waited for the shock of the masses when they saw a pale scrawny juvenile go up on stage and receive a prize. A prize for the discovery of something otherworldly and unknown to the Zephyr race.

“We’d like to thank our astronomy team and the city officials for the discovery of this disc.”

The crowd applauded. Calytrix stared at the stage, blankly. What did the city-folk invite him for? To be humbled? If they weren’t even going to credit his name–

But he knew the cold truth.

The city-folk would never credit a farmer.

Moments before the scientist activated the record player, Calytrix acted. His wings started beating on his own and before he knew it, he was on the stage next to the scientists, facing the entire population of Ori.

“Excuse me!” he called out in a small voice. The Zephyrs were too preoccupied by the record to pay attention.

“Excuse me!” Calytrix spoke louder. He’d caught the attention of few. Oh well, he’d focus on them and wait for the rest of the population to listen.

He opened his jaws to speak but was suddenly grabbed by his wings. A large official had appeared behind him and was struggling to get him off the stage. Calytrix fought back, clawing at the guard’s underbelly. However, he was no match. Now the whole audience was watching. Captivated by the struggle between a scrawny Zephyr and a burly city official.

It was humiliating.

Calytrix was slammed to the ground, face to face with the audience. A slow chuckle scattered through the masses. His back burned with embarrassment. He had to say something, fast.

“Citizens of Ori. The scientists next to you are lying! It was me.”

Murmurs spilled across the crowd. From his place on the stage, Calytrix could make out a few whispers. “*Who is that kid?*” “*Why is it so skinny?*” “*Say, you don’t think it’s a drunk do you?*”

Even the official pinning him down was holding back laughter. They would never listen.

So make them listen.

“I belong to a family that lives beyond the pastures from this city. Beyond my family home are the homes of more Zephyrs. They’re not like the city-folk. We work in a big orchard. We work long hours picking, tending and producing

the bulk of your food. We make up ninety percent of Titanus's population. Yet we stand with no recognition."

He took a pause to analyze his audience. They were silent. Calytrix pried himself from the guard's grasp.

"I, just like the rest of you, want to see what this disc presents. This disc couldn't have been read without the team of scientists- something me and my rural family couldn't do on our own. However, credit must be given where it's due."

"This record was not discovered. It was stolen. Stolen by government officials who broke down my family's door and interrogated us like we were below them."

"So before I can allow the playing of the record, I would want to make myself known. My name is Calytrix, and I am the true finder of this disk."

The audience was silent. Calytrix glanced at the lead scientist, shaken. He expected the scientist to turn away and deny all of his words. Whatever was to happen next, Calytrix expected rejection.

The scientist nodded. "Calytrix is right."

The audience exploded in applause. The scientist turned towards Calytrix and gestured towards the record player. "Your honor."

Calytrix shook his head. "Better be you, I barely know how to operate an airship."

He could've sworn to see contempt flash across the scientist's face. However, Calytrix couldn't bring himself to care.

The city-folk will never change. He thought ruefully as he watched the scientist bring the needle to the record. He'd feel satisfied for now. Perhaps a small party of the gathering crowd heard his cries today and went on towards a future that can benefit all.

All he could do now was wait and watch what his discovery would bring.

On a big screen, a slideshow of images flashed by. The pictures were accompanied with the sound of strange noises, perhaps the language of this new alien species. The slides played through the pictures one by one, and the gathering crowd stood in complete silence, listening to the din playing off of the record, and taking in what was in front of them.

Unbeknownst to the Zephyrs, the voices called themselves human.

They had large fleshy noses, tufts of thin fur flowing off of their head, and eyes. Sparkling eyes accompanied with a white sclera and colored rings around their dots for pupils. You could see their emotion, the way that they were built,

how they ate. They had different sizes, builds and colors, like the Zephyrs themselves.

It wasn't just humans. Sketches depicting strange marine animals, creatures that flew with feathered wings and small, gremlin-like crawlers were shown alongside the images. As well as tall plants, with bushes covering large swaths of sky. They constructed pristine monuments, large walls spanning hills that went on forever.

At the end of it all, was the location of this strange planet. A pale blue dot amidst the darkness of space. A pale blue dot, sprouting the most beautiful thing the universe has created: life.

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Critical Essay



Retightening My Heartstrings

The orchestra room surrounding me stirs with rich and melodious voices flowing out of violins and low and thunderous waves roaring out of cellos, with the occasional screech of a bow against a string. Staring at the busted and dust-collecting tuner attached to my music stand, I tinker with the fine-tuners on my violin, until my B-flat settles into a clean A. Feeling content, I scan the room and spot my friend struggling to tune her violin near the back of the room, and walk towards her.

“Do you need help with that?” I ask, signaling at her violin.

“Sure, go ahead,” Lucie replies.

She hands me her violin, but before I can get a proper grip, it slips out of my reach and falls to the ground, strings unraveling on impact. She gasps, her face paling and eyes widening at the sight of her violin on the ground. My stomach drops. I open my mouth to apologize, yet no words come out. For a moment, she blankly stares at the violin on the floor. Slowly, her eyes wander up and stop at my face, her jaw clenched and eyebrows knitted together. Still in the air, her hands start to tremble. The playing around us gradually stops as people drop their bows and start drifting towards the commotion.

Even though my eyes are glued to the floor, I still sense her sharp gaze piercing right through me. Her gaze grows impatient, waiting for me to fix the mess, but my fingers tremble in anxiousness and my eyes stay fixed to the floor.

“I didn’t mean to—it just slipped out of my hands—it was an accident, I swear!” I stammer. The words feel like fluff; they sound hollow, even to me. I keep on blabbering, trying to excuse myself from the conversation, but her gaze stays fixed on me.

Suddenly, I remember how a few days ago, my violin strings unraveled, so as a resolution, I went to the string shop to get them fixed. The problem seems resolved.

Feeling pleased, my mouth opens to say: “This isn’t that big of a problem. You can probably just go to the string shop to get them re-tightened.”

Lucie doesn’t respond. Her eyes narrow, but this time her shocked expression seems to shift into something more intense: anger.

I think to myself, *Seriously? This is really not that deep, it’s just a string. Why is she still angry? I said it was an accident, so what more does she want?*

My thoughts seem reasonable to me, but the appalled look on her face makes me question my logic.

She glowers at me for a second more, then turns away without another word. Her friends immediately swarm around her, their voices hushed and sympathetic. One of them glances back at me over her shoulder, her expression piercing and loathsome. My body shivers slightly involuntarily, as I look away from the defensive flock.

In a study about revenge, study author Arlene Stillwell, Ph.D. states how “When we harm someone else, we tend to downplay it and distance ourselves from the seriousness of our transgression...On the other hand, when we’re harmed in the very same way, we see ourselves as victims of a grave injustice” (qtd. in Thornton 116). When everyone started to congregate and comfort Lucie, whom I had distressed, I felt exposed and powerless, hating it. Like Stillwell describes, I was distancing myself from the seriousness of my transgression by convincing myself it was a minor and reparable accident to make myself feel less guilty. I handled the situation the only way I knew how: diminishing the victim’s feelings by comparing them to mine. The pride I so dearly protected had developed into an obstruction to my coping, which hurt Lucie more.

I brush it off, as our teacher taps her baton, commencing the lesson. Sitting in my seat, I blankly stare at the music stand, trying to figure out which measure the teacher just said, yet my mind keeps circling back to what happened with Lucie.

Our teacher raises her baton again, then asserts, “Once more at measure 64.”

I scan the page, trying to search for measure 64, but struggle as all the eighth notes, whole rests, trills, and arpeggios bleed together into a jumbled mess on the page.

Why does it feel as if I have committed something much worse than what actually happened? I contemplate over and over again as we run through the music measure by measure.

When class is finally over, I reach the conclusion that my response to Lucie is justified, which provides me some reassurance for the time being.

The rest of the school day seems to drag on forever, and once the dismissal bell finally rings, I head home and sit at my desk, mindlessly taking some math homework out of my bag.

I rapidly click my pen in apprehension. My mind keeps settling on what happened earlier today in orchestra, replaying the disaster endlessly until I start to feel annoyed. Whipping out my phone, I offhandedly type a quick apology to Lucie.

“I’m sorry about what happened today, and that your strings unraveled. You probably should just go to the string shop and get them re-tightened, like I did a few days ago when mine unraveled.”

A few minutes later, I open my phone back up, expecting a response, but I only find my message and the “read” notification, lying there tauntingly, below it. I linger there, waiting for the tiny three dots to appear, or perhaps an incoming phone call, but nothing.

Shoving the heavy double doors open, wafts of greasy pizza, and the commotion from loud chatter immediately smack me in the face. Grabbing my lunchbox from my backpack, I weave through the crowd gathered by the lunch line, making my way to my usual table. I take a seat, fetching an apple out of my bag as I glance up at the seat across from mine: Lucie’s seat. She usually arrives before me, so I think *maybe she’s running late?* Looking around the crowded cafeteria, I immediately lock eyes with her. She sits near the back of the cafeteria with a different group of friends, laughing at something someone just said. Quickly turning away, her hair whips over her shoulder, shunning me into isolation.

My heart plummets a little, and my cheeks flush in awkwardness. Heat floods through my veins, even though I don’t understand why I suddenly feel the embarrassment. As I bite into my apple, it suddenly tastes sour and mushy, making me lose my appetite. In the corner of my eye, Lucie continues to giggle with her new friends; I know she can sense me watching, but doesn’t turn around. By the end of lunch, I can feel my initial embarrassment channeling into a burning desire for revenge; a hunger to restore my damaged pride. The injustice

devours me, demanding me to make her feel even a fraction of the indignation I currently feel.

The feeling was sprouting from my belief that my wrongdoing did not match how Lucie had mistreated me: getting shunned and not forgiven, even after my apology. A part of me craves making her suffer the same way I did: fabricating visions of *her* sitting alone, watching *me* turn away, as *my* friends whisper about her. Alluding to this idea, an associate professor in the Department of Management at Utah State University's Jon M. Huntsman School of Business has said "That feeling of motivation to 'get even' can tether you to the past in a way that overshadows any potential positive outcome the motivation might bring" (qtd. in Cox 2). I truly felt that I needed to "get even" with Lucie, because at the time, I viewed punishment and forgiveness logically, where you and your oppressor must meet the same level to reach forgiveness. With this mindset, I remained constantly in a negative headspace, with no way of finding a "positive outcome" from binding to transgressions of the past.

Three days drag by, each day feeling longer than the last. In orchestra class, I try to focus on the new piece our teacher gave us, but my bow keeps trembling and my fingers keep slipping past third position. At lunch, I eat at my usual table, but this time, the people I thought I knew well suddenly feel like strangers without Lucie. Every time I pick up my phone, I subconsciously check my messages hoping to get a reply, but all that responds is the word "read" under my feeble apology, staring back at me like an accusation. At this point, the burden in my chest feels so unbearable that I decide to write another apology text; this time, deliberately writing it with what she would want in mind.

'I want to truly apologize for what I did to you in orchestra class that day, and take responsibility for my actions instead of making excuses for it. I understand that it was really painful for you because your violin is important to you, and I should've immediately comforted you and apologized sincerely on the spot...'

Thirty minutes of typing, deleting, and re-typing go by until I finally press "send" on my long paragraph. My heart pounds in anticipation, deep down knowing that she will read it and feel guilty for shutting me out, finally acknowledging she was blameworthy the whole time.

In an interview discussing the science of revenge, Psychologist Micheal McCullough, Ph.D., the director of the Evolution and Human Behavior Laboratory at the University of Miami states that "The human mind is well-tuned to cues of sincere contrition and self-serving falsehood. But when it detects the former, the impact can be transformative" (qtd. in Thornton 118). Even though I felt

sincere while writing this apology, looking back, my apology was scripted and did not exhibit a change of heart. Sincerity comes from the heart, and at the time, my heart had hardened to protect my gratification, even if that meant blocking sympathy for others. Had I realized my hypocrisy, then my earnest apology could be “transformative”, like McCullough describes, and discouraged the need for revenge.

I trudge my way through the boisterous stream of people flooding into the cafeteria and quietly sit down at my usual table. While opening my lunchbox, I glance up and I see a familiar face sitting across from me in a usually empty seat.

“Oh, hi,” I whisper.

“Hi,” she replies.

The words hang between us, until she breaks the stretching silence by declaring, “I saw the message you sent.”

I clear my throat, cracking my knuckles in apprehension and finally let out:

“Yeah, I meant it. I’m really sorry about not apologizing earlier.”

“Okay, thank you for saying that.”

We sit in another awkward silence.

“Well, I’ve thought about it a lot, and I think that your apology was enough for me to forgive you. Besides, I’ve missed talking to you every day,” Lucie says.

The tension etched in my forehead melts, as I reply,

“So... we’re good?”

She gives me a small, diffident smile before saying,

“We’re good.”

That day, I walk home from the bus stop with a newfound liveliness in my steps, barely feeling the weight of my bulky backpack. The fog from this morning seems to have cleared, sun beams breaking through the dense clouds and radiating my face with warmth.

I pull out my phone as I walk, and let out a sigh of relief as my lock screen lights up with the familiar, light-hearted messages from Lucie. The casual messages that have nothing to do with a violin push my old remorseful paragraphs up the screen, getting smaller and smaller until they vanish entirely.

Years later, looking back at this experience, I have realized that even though our friendship revived, I never truly resolved the conflict within myself. Ever since that day, we continued to sit together at lunch, we shared a great deal of laughs and memories; our friendship kept blossoming. But, my mindset had not changed.

Back in 7th grade, I could never fathom being wrong, even if that meant creating conflict in one of my closest friendships just to preserve my ego, and thus never felt empathetic towards others as well as confronting my faults. In Dicken's *A Tale of Two Cities*, Dr. Manette opens up about his suffering and imprisonment to his daughter, Lucie, mentioning how "There was a time during my imprisonment, when my desire for vengeance was unbearable" (Dickens 182). His confession reveals how revenge became a necessity for him, domineering his thoughts in his bleakest moments. However, by confronting his vengeful past and being able to openly talk about it with Lucie, Dickens expresses how he has finally broken free from the grasp revenge had on him. Like Dr. Manette, I only had feelings of hatred and desires for revenge when dealing with mistreatment, especially when my dignity was shattered. I intuitively filtered every conflict through thick lenses of my wounded pride. However, just as Dr. Manette's daughter restores him, I have learned that true forgiveness is the only way to overcome my blindness to empathy, and is what allows me to finally move on.

According to Caroline Cox in an article about forgiveness, "letting go of toxic feelings can give you an added bonus of making you feel powerful -- not by exerting power over someone else, but power over yourself" (Cox 2). To me, forgiveness is like restringing a violin, not for the purpose of restoring what someone else broke, but to give yourself the power of playing again.

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Journalism



Paul McKee and the Failure of North St. Louis Revitalization

North St. Louis has been shaped by decades of disinvestment and white flight. The area's residents experienced economic decline, vacant properties, and limited access to essential services like grocery stores and healthcare facilities. When Paul McKee, a successful real estate developer from St. Louis County, unveiled his redevelopment proposal in May 2009, he promised to transform the area with an \$8.1 billion plan featuring commercial centers, housing, healthcare facilities, and a trolley line.

The investment?

1,500 acres of land. 1,600 properties. \$390 million in public financing.

The result?

Three promised projects, all of which failed or closed. Fifteen years.

These events describe the revitalization attempt by Paul McKee and his nonprofit development entity, NorthSide Regeneration. The case raises questions about how city governments can set oversight when public redevelopment efforts rely heavily on a single private developer, and how the consequences of delayed or failed projects fall on neighborhoods with limited resources.

Prelude: Paul McKee's Quiet Land Assembly

Paul McKee built a reputation as a successful real estate developer in St. Louis County, Missouri, before turning his attention to North St. Louis. Years before the project's public announcement in 2009, McKee began acquiring property through a network of limited liability companies, including Blairmont Associates and VHS Partners. Starting in 2003, these entities acquired properties

block by block, leaving many structures vacant and unmaintained. By 2007, McKee controlled 662 parcels across more than 150 different blocks, according to the St. Louis Preservation Research Office.(1)

During this period, residents and city officials were often unable to identify who owned deteriorating properties. The St. Louis City Board of Aldermen reported difficulty obtaining information because ownership was hidden by corporate entities. McKee later acknowledged his secretive approach: "Most of 'em didn't know it was us," he said, "in our secret days."(2)

The Preservation Research Office documented the consequences of that approach. McKee's "holding companies have failed to maintain his properties, causing city government to spend over \$260,000 since 2004 to maintain their properties." His properties were "cited for hundreds of health and safety code violations."(3)

The Promise and the Deals

In May 2009, McKee publicly unveiled an \$8.1 billion redevelopment proposal to transform North St. Louis. The plan promised four commercial centers totaling over three million square feet of retail and office space, one million square feet of light industrial development, new housing, health care facilities, parks, and a trolley line connecting historically disinvested neighborhoods.

City leaders endorsed the proposal, designating 1,500 acres as the NorthSide Regeneration Redevelopment Area, and granted McKee exclusive redevelopment rights. The city also approved a \$390 million tax-increment financing package, the largest in its history. In 2007, the state created the Distressed Areas Land Assemblage Tax Credit program, allowing McKee to receive reimbursement for purchasing properties.

At a signing ceremony at the historic Clemens Mansion, then-Mayor Francis Slay publicly endorsed McKee, stating, "We've got somebody with the money" and "a great reputation." (4)

Otis Williams of the St. Louis Development Corporation later described the appeal of the proposal, noting that "there was no interest from a major redeveloper in the city." (5)

The Reality: Limited Development, Extensive Extraction

Over the following years, development progressed slowly. McKee controlled the land and exclusive redevelopment rights, while much of the

property remained vacant or deteriorated. Promised 3 million square feet of office space, residential units, and the trolley line were not completed. Residents and neighborhood groups described many properties as "neglected magnets for crime, drugs and squatters." (6)

In 2017, the Clemens Mansion—where the redevelopment agreement had been signed—was destroyed by fire after McKee acquired it. The cause was undetermined. In 2023, a St. Louis judge ruled the NorthSide-owned historic 3509 Page Boulevard building a nuisance property and ordered repairs and security measures, though McKee's record suggests little compliance.

By McKee's own account, only three projects were completed: a ZOOM gas station, the GreenLeaf Market grocery store, and the Homer G. Phillips Memorial Hospital. All three have either closed or faced severe operational difficulties.

In 2016, the Board of Aldermen approved \$2.8 million in tax incentives for the grocery store and gas station. GreenLeaf Market, intended to address a food desert, closed after struggling with limited inventory. The hospital project received nearly \$8 million in incentives initially, later expanding to a \$20 million project with \$6.4 million in city support. McKee and his investment partners announced the hospital's completion in late 2022, but it didn't officially open until January 2024. Financial problems began weeks after its opening. The hospital was closed by December 2024 amid lawsuits from medical providers alleging more than \$3.5 million in unpaid bills.

Alderman Rasheen Aldridge described the hospital closure as "the loss for nearby residents losing ready access to health care services." (7) The hospital's closure did more than interrupt care. According to St. Louis Public Radio, approximately 80 workers lost their jobs, many without receiving wages they had already earned, shortly before the holidays.(8)

"All of us love working in that community," registered nurse Jenn Williams said. "It was so obviously needed." (9) The facility, presented as a return of neighborhood health care, carrying one of the most significant names in Black medical history in St. Louis, no longer saw patients.

Community Voices and Development Priorities

Residents consistently raised concerns about McKee's property management, but their voices were often overshadowed by political considerations tied to economic development efforts.

Alderman Rasheen Aldridge noted: "This has been a man who has been buying property in my neighborhood since I was a kid and hasn't done anything with it. He's been sitting on them letting them crumble." (10)

Sheila Rendon, a lifelong St. Louis Place resident, criticized local development agencies: "SLDC, LRA, LCRA, all these entities that are under the same umbrella have been allowed to walk hand-in-hand with Paul McKee." (11)

Longtime North St. Louis resident Larry Chapman said he believed the situation reflected corruption, a view he shared in interviews with St. Louis Public Radio. (12)

In 2016, the city signed the "Future Assurances Agreement" designed to facilitate urban development, agreeing to pay McKee and his lender more than \$5 million as part of the Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (NGA) effort, which complicated the accountability issue later on.

From Promise to Probe

By 2018, city officials formally declared NorthSide Regeneration in default. In public statements, officials cited widespread deterioration. "Entire blocks are in decay," Otis Williams said, noting "Roofs are missing," and "buildings are abandoned." (13)

City Counselor Julian Bush wrote that "Land lies fallow. Taxes go unpaid. Vacant buildings remain dangerous and unsecured." (14)

Mayor Lyda Krewson stated that "Northside Regeneration has not lived up to its promises." (15)

That same year, the FBI opened an investigation into NorthSide Regeneration's use of Missouri tax credits. FBI agents examined whether NorthSide and other companies were involved in "fraud in the form of 'paper-only' real estate transactions designed to manipulate Missouri's tax credit system for profit." (16)

In mid-2018, Missouri Attorney General Josh Hawley filed suit, alleging that McKee's firm improperly retained tax credits in the amount of \$4.5 million for redevelopment projects in North St. Louis, despite failing to complete the purchase of over \$5.2 million worth of properties. (17)

Court filings lawsuit detailed specific transactions, one involving what McKee represented to the state as a \$5 million, seller-financed sale of a property on North 15th Street. After applying for and receiving tax credits from the Missouri Department of Economic Development based on the transaction,

McKee deeded the property back to the original seller a few months later, in June 2013. The certificate of value listed the sale price as \$0. (18)

Aldерwoman Cara Spencer called for an independent investigation, stating that an internal review was insufficient given the allegations were serious in nature and that the matter required state and federal scrutiny.

In its termination statement, the city reported that when McKee was questioned about the use of tax-credit proceeds, he was unable to identify a specific example of physical development funded by those transactions. (20)

The state lawsuit was settled in 2019 for mere \$324,000—less than five percent of the \$7.1 million in damages the state sought. Missouri Attorney General Eric Schmitt's office agreed to dismiss a 2018 lawsuit accusing Paul McKee's NorthSide Regeneration of state tax credit fraud and waived all future claims against the developer. (21)

Legal Challenges and Delayed Accountability

By 2024, the city advanced legislation to seize chronically neglected vacant properties. Mayor Tishaura Jones said residents "have suffered for way too long," describing the goal as "holding a millionaire developer accountable to the havoc he's caused in our communities." (22)

The Board of Aldermen described McKee as a "bad actor" as they unanimously passed measures to seize his vacant properties. (23)

NorthSide faced foreclosure over \$1 million in unpaid taxes on more than 1,000 properties. Despite these mounting debts and legal problems, McKee avoided significant personal financial penalties. The city's ability to enforce developer commitments was hampered by complex agreements like the 2016 "Future Assurances Agreement," linked to the NGA project. When the city tried to terminate in 2018, McKee's lender filed a lawsuit. The litigation delayed accountability efforts for years until a court ruled in the city's favor in 2021. (24)

Lessons for Urban Development Policy

The McKee redevelopment case underscores challenges many cities face in managing large public-private partnerships. City termination documents emphasize key accountability measures that should have been enforced earlier: property maintenance, tax compliance, visible construction progress, transparent reporting, and meaningful penalties for default.

Urban development experts have noted that front-loading large public subsidies without rigorous accountability mechanisms can increase the risk of

stalled or incomplete projects. (25) In this case, more than \$390 million in tax increment financing, along with additional state tax credits, was disbursed before significant construction began. Instead of the promised revitalization, North St. Louis experienced continued neighborhood decline, including the loss of irreplaceable historic buildings.

To understand the opportunity cost, consider what could have been funded instead: approximately 1,300 units of affordable housing, small business grants to hundreds of local entrepreneurs, and multiple community health centers with permanent funding.

Residents often lacked the political power to demand accountability. They repeatedly voiced concerns about developer activities, though political and economic priorities, including efforts to attract NGA, often outweighed community input.

Complex financial arrangements, such as the 2016 “Future Assurance Agreement,” created legal entanglements that prevented the city from simply terminating contracts despite missed commitments.

In addition, until 2025 St. Louis election penalties for neglected properties were limited to \$500 per violation, an amount widely seen as insufficient to deter inaction from a developer of McKee’s resources.(26)

Conclusion

North St. Louis has lost more than just potential buildings: it has lost decades of promised revitalization. In 2024, the city began eminent domain proceedings on 85 properties, nearly all owned by NorthSide, signaling an official acknowledgment of the partnership’s failure. For a community that has waited nearly twenty years for development, this action comes late.

Nurse Jenn Williams and her colleagues loved working in that community. They saw how obviously the revitalization was needed. When the doors of the hospital closed, it represented another promise broken. The real question is whether any struggling community can afford to trust the next developer who requests substantial public investment with unfulfilled results.

Similar stories repeat themselves across the United States, from Detroit to Baltimore, from Atlanta to Oakland.(27) They highlight systemic issues in urban revitalization. When developers receive massive public subsidies without delivering results, when penalties lack sufficient weight compared to profits, and when vulnerable communities with the greatest need bear the greatest risk, the development system shows serious issues.

Experts and community advocates emphasize the need for accountability strategies that actually work, community voices that actually matter, and consequences that actually materialize when development promises are broken.

Until such reforms are in place, cases like North St. Louis are likely to repeat in cities and neighborhoods nationwide.

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Personal Essay & Memoir



Zhang

I'm five, watching my mother pack frantically. Her hands move quickly through drawers, half-folding, half-crumpling clothes into the suitcase.

"Your grandfather is very sick," she says. "We need to go visit him now."

"Why can't Max and Selena come?" I ask, looking back toward the living room where my brother and sister are building a rollercoaster using various parts.

My mother pauses, presses her palm flat against the suitcase. She kneels to my level, takes my small hand in hers, and traces something across my palm. One, two, three, her finger pauses at the line, doubles back, and continues four, five, six, seven.

"张," she says quietly. "You carry this. That's why you go."

At the airport, everything is too bright and too loud. My mother's fingers grip mine so tightly they've gone white. She doesn't speak during the flight, just stares at the seat back in front of her, her lips moving soundlessly, making prayers and hoping for everything to be alright.

When we land in Taiyuan, the air tastes different, like coal dust and smoke, nothing like home. My aunts are waiting at the arrivals terminal. They reach for my mother, and she collapses into them, all of them crying in a language I half-understand, their Taiyuan dialect blurring the sound of the words.

But when we arrive at the apartment, Grandpa is sitting upright on the sofa, reading a book. He looks up, and his whole face transforms. He sets the book down carefully, spine up to hold his place, and opens his arms.

"Come," he says.

His hands are rough with calluses as he lifts me. They smell like old paper. He holds me for a long time, and I feel his chest rise and fall against mine, his heartbeat steady and sure.

I stayed four months that first time.

Mornings, Grandpa appears with breakfast: congee steaming in a bowl painted with carp and lotus flowers, youtiao wrapped in paper spotted with oil. On the television, the cartoon wolf schemes on the sheep again, his voice high and mischievous.

"Eat while it's hot," Grandpa says.

But I'm five, fixated on the TV, and the bowl sits untouched until a skin forms over the congee.

Grandpa settles beside me on the sofa. He lifts the spoon, blows on it until the steam stops rising, and guides it to my mouth. I open my lips without looking away from the screen. He feeds me like this, one spoonful at a time, until the bowl is empty and the wolf has failed again.

His hands move with the same patience whether they're holding a spoon or turning the pages of his books. His personal library is filled with thick academic works, pages softened and yellowed after years of reading. Sometimes I catch him underlining passages in pencil, his handwriting small and meticulous.

"What are you reading?" I ask once.

He shows me the cover, characters I can't read, perhaps something about teaching practices. "Thinking about how people learn," he says, tapping my forehead gently. "How to make difficult things easier to understand."

Before bed, he watches me practice writing Chinese with a brush. I know how to write 张. I learned it before I came, practicing it at my local Chinese school back home. But here, under his gaze, I write it over and over on practice paper, each character more careful than the last.

"Good," he says when I finish a page. His hand rests on my shoulder. "Your strokes are clean and confident. You write well for your age."

He picks up the brush himself and shows me small refinements: how to pause at the turn, how to let the final stroke taper naturally. Through his teachings, I learn not just the character, but also the way to honor it.

Years after that first trip, my mother shows me photographs I don't remember being taken: Grandpa kneeling in our backyard in America, his hands buried in soil, cucumbers and green beans hanging from vines; Grandpa crouched on our basement floor, my brother beside him, the two of them

speaking as Lego pieces snap into place; Grandpa holding my sister, rocking her to sleep, her small fist curled around his thumb.

"He came seven times," my mother says, her finger resting on one photo. "Every visit lasted six months. Every time, he chose to be with us instead of home."

In the picture, Grandpa is clapping as I take my first steps, his face creased with joy, his hands frozen mid-motion in the frame.

"Why did he come visit us so much?" I ask.

My mother is quiet for a long moment. "Because we couldn't go back," she says finally. "Your father and I, we were still in school, then working, then trying to build something here. And he knew what it cost, being so far away. He'd already lived it."

She turns the page. Another photo: Grandpa feeding me congee, my eyes on the television, his eyes on me.

"He never had a son," she says, and the subtle crack in her voice makes me look up. "In his province, that means—" She stops, takes a pause, and starts again. "It means watching his name disappear. It means no one to fill the blank in the family tree book, no one to carry it forward." Her hands trace the edge of the photograph.

"When you were born, I asked him if I could give you Zhang. Your father agreed. Grandpa didn't say much, but he held you differently after that. Like you were more than his grandson."

The call comes when I'm nine, while I'm sulking about a game I'd lost.

My father stands in the living room, speaking seriously to a phone pressed to his ear. When he hangs up, his face seemed aged. "Pack quickly," he says.

"Grandpa's sickness has become more serious. We're flying back immediately."

The hospital in Taiyuan smells like disinfectant and a strange cleanliness that seems to stick to my skin. Grandpa lies in the bed, smaller than I remember, his body connected to tubes and wires. The monitors beep a steady rhythm, reducing Grandpa to lines and intervals.

I take his hand. The calluses are still there, rough against my palm, but the familiar warmth is fading. His eyes drift, unfocused, sensing something beyond the ceiling tiles.

"Grandpa," I say. "It's me."

His fingers twitch in mine. I don't know if it's recognition or reflex.

My family stays next to Grandpa. Relatives bring food: congee, soup, and fruit, but it remains untouched on the table. My mother sits with her sisters, their hands tangled together, speaking in low voices. Sometimes they cry. Sometimes they just sit in silence, breathing together.

I stay by his bed, watching the rise and fall of his chest. I imagine him sitting up, his eyes focusing, his mouth curving into that smile. I imagine him telling me to eat while it's hot, to stop wasting time, to pay attention to what matters.

The door to his room stays open. I watch nurses come and go, their shoes squeaking against linoleum. I count the ceiling tiles. I memorize the pattern of his breathing.

Then one day, the breathing stops.

It's hard to describe the sound that fills the hospital corridor. It comes from my mother and my aunts, from close cousins to extended family I barely know. Just sorrow and loss, audible and raw.

Minutes pass, maybe hours. I can't tell. Then I'm kneeling on cold tile in the crematorium, beside my mother, my forehead pressed to the floor. The body behind the screen is becoming ash, becoming a memory.

The next morning, my mother dresses me in white and black.

She hands me Grandpa's portrait. His face in the photo is formal, unsmiling, the way people looked in official pictures, serious and composed, as if he'd already known this was how people would remember him.

The frame is heavy. I have to grip it with both hands, hold it against my chest.

"You'll carry this at the front," my mother says.

"Why me?"

She doesn't speak for a second, face heavy in thought and longing.

"Because you carry the Zhang name."

She positions me at the head of the procession. Behind me, an ocean of relatives in black and white, their faces twisted with grief. The building fills with the sound of their wailing, a rhythmic tide of sorrow that rises and falls.

"Hold it high," my mother says. "So everyone can see him."

I lift the portrait above my head. My arms shake with the weight. I'm nine and barely three times bigger than the portrait, but I hold it up.

We begin to walk.

The procession moves through the building's corridors. My shoulders burn and my arms cramp. Sweat slides down my back. The wailing surrounds me, a wall of sound I'm leading through these ceremonial halls.

People touch my shoulder as they pass. Some say "thank you," their voices breaking.

My mother walks behind me, close enough that I feel her breath at my ear. "Just a little further," she murmurs. "You're doing well. He sees you."

I don't know how long we walk. Thirty minutes. An hour. My whole childhood.

I only know the weight of the portrait. I only know the sound of mourning behind me. I only know that I was chosen to carry him, and that was what mattered.

The portrait stays high.

Later, I'll learn why it was me who held this honor and burden. I'll learn that in his province, a family tree records only sons, only surnames passed through male lines. I'll learn that Grandpa had four daughters and his other grandchildren carried different names through their fathers. I'll learn that my mother's gift of Zhang to me was the gift of his legacy, proof that his name wouldn't end with him, that something of him would continue.

In our house now, Grandpa's portrait hangs in a small shrine. Offerings of fruit lie below. Wisps of smoke rise from the incense holder.

I pass it every morning. Some days I stop and tell him things: that I made a team, that I failed a test, that I'm trying. Other days, I just stop and look at his face, etching it to my memory, never daring to let it go.

On January 1st, I light three incense sticks. The smoke rises thin and gray between us.

"It's 2026," I tell him. "I'm sixteen now. I'm taller than you were. I'm thinking about college. I'm thinking about what comes next."

I tell him about my siblings, about my mother, about how we still speak Mandarin at home. Writing 张 is easy. The seven strokes come effortlessly, muscle memory from years of practice. I tell him I'm trying to keep it alive, to remember the strokes, and to honor my name.

When the incense burns down, I begin to leave. Before I exit the shrine, I look back at his portrait one more time and whisper thanks.

He didn't answer. But I know he heard.

Seven years have passed since that summer in Taiyuan. Seven years since I felt the love and weight of lineage.

I'm still carrying it.
I'm still holding it high.

Sarina Zheng

Grade 9, Greenwood Lab School

Poetry



Silent Treatment

"silent treatment" (song)

[Verse 1]

"I got stabbed in the back"

Yeah, that couldn't be more true

You left me with silence you don't bother to mask

Guess that's all I mean to you

I stared at the screen, waiting for a sign

Every unanswered text, every passing time

A wound that just didn't heal right

[Pre-Chorus]

The room's too loud with the sound of your absence

My words hang in empty air, no answer to catch

I'm drowning in the space between "hello" and "good riddance",

Wondering when you'll take back the silence you snatch

[Chorus]

When are you gonna stop giving me the silent treatment?

When will the cold turn to a conversation?

I'm tired of dancing with this cold resentment,

Starving for a shred of real communication

When are you gonna stop giving me the silent treatment?
When will your carefully built shields finally start to break?
I'm begging for a word, a single decent statement,
Instead of the void that makes my heart ache.

[Verse 2]

I traced the cracks in the words we used to share
They crumble slow like ash upon the air
I saved the texts you left, you know, the ones that used to care
Now they're just ghosts that vanish with a glare
I practiced lines I'll never get to send
Replayed fights that don't make any sense
This silence is a chain I can't unbend
A heavy fog that makes my heart condense

[Pre-Chorus]

The room's too loud with the sound of your absence
My words hang in empty air, no answer to catch
I'm drowning in the space between "hello" and "good riddance",
Wondering when you'll take back the silence you snatch

[Chorus]

When are you gonna stop giving me the silent treatment?
When will the cold turn to a conversation?
I'm tired of dancing with this cold resentment,
Starving for a shred of real communication
When are you gonna stop giving me the silent treatment?
When will your carefully built shields finally start to break?
I'm begging for a word, a single decent statement,
Instead of the void that makes my heart ache.

[Bridge]

You think I don't break, you think I don't bend
Smiling makes it easier to pretend
You never saw the weight I had to bend
You turned away from truths you wouldn't defend
But every edge I had was born from care

I learned to be sharp just to survive
I gave you my heart, you weren't there
I hardened myself just to stay alive

[Outro]

So say my name or say goodbye
But don't leave me hanging in between
I'd rather hear the truth tonight
Than choke on all the words you never mean

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Speculative Fiction



The Library of Forgotten Souls

The fog clung to Mira's skin, cold and damp, pressing into her bones as though the streets themselves were holding her back. One moment, she was walking home, the quiet hum of distant traffic blending with her own heartbeat. The next, the world blurred, a dizzying slide of light and shadow, and she felt herself falling.

When she came to, she was no longer on the familiar streets of her neighborhood. Instead, she stood in a space that seemed to stretch beyond reason, shelves rising like spires toward a ceiling lost in shadow. The air smelled of parchment, rain-soaked stone, and something older. Something that carried the weight of stories never told. Candlelight flickered from chandeliers twisted like branches, casting delicate shadows that moved as though alive, whispering secrets through the soft silence.

Mira swallowed, her throat tight. A strange pull tugged at the edges of her mind, a slow erosion of something she couldn't name. Her thoughts scattered, fragile as smoke. She tried to grasp her own name, the sound like a rope slipping through her fingers.

"I am Celebrían, Guardian of the Library of Forgotten Souls. Welcome," said a voice, smooth and distant, threaded with centuries of sorrow.

Mira spun, searching, and saw her. A woman, impossibly beautiful, impossibly ageless, yet every line of her face spoke of time lived and lost. Silver hair fell over a cloak that shimmered with an otherworldly light, and her eyes—Mira's heart skipped a beat at their depth—swirled with stars, endless night folded into stories.

“Why... why am I here?” Mira whispered, words trembling. Her fingers grazed a shelf as if touching the world could anchor her.

“You are here because you were forgotten,” Celebrían said, her voice gentle but carrying the weight of a command. “Like the others.”

“Forgotten?” Mira clutched at her chest. The word felt like a blade.

The Guardian nodded. “The quiet girls, the lost girls, the brave ones erased from memory because no one wrote their stories down. They are all here. And now... you must remember them.”

“But... why me?” Mira’s voice cracked. “I’m not forgotten.”

Celebrían’s gaze drifted, fixing on something far away, like a story playing out in the folds of her mind. “Once, I asked the same question. Before my name vanished from every page. I was a scholar, a dreamer, trying to remember every lost being. And when I failed... I became one of them. Now, I protect their stories. You are here because your story is unfinished. To leave, you must carry their stories. All of them.”

A chill wound its way down Mira’s spine as she looked at the shelves. Books lifted themselves from the stacks, hovering, opening to pages pulsing with names she didn’t recognize but felt alive. She reached for one tentatively, and the library dissolved around her.

Sunlight spilled over a meadow, a gentle breeze lifting the wildflowers like waves. Mira blinked, taking in the open sky and the laughter that bubbled from a girl no older than herself, racing through the grass.

“I’m Meha,” the girl said, breathless, eyes shining. “They said I was too loud, too wild. So they erased me.”

Mira listened as Meha’s story unfolded. How she had dared to speak, how she had defied silence, how the world had folded her out of memory. By the time the story ended, Mira’s hands trembled as she closed the book.

“Tell it,” Celebrían’s voice echoed from somewhere near, ethereal yet insistent. “Tell Meha’s story aloud. Only then can you move forward.”

Mira’s voice shook, a fragile thread of sound. She spoke the words, weaving the girl back into existence, and with every syllable, a fog in her mind lifted just slightly. Yet even as clarity returned, a subtle forgetfulness lingered at the edges of her thoughts.

Day after day, she traveled through stories of girls erased, brave and luminous, each story heavier than the last. Relena, who had cast spells to protect her village but was blamed for a dark winter. Celine, who painted skies no one else could see, forgotten by the world. Leona, who saved a kingdom and vanished

from history because she was a girl. Each tale carved itself into Mira's heart, and with each one, a part of her own memory frayed. Her name hovered on the tip of her tongue, elusive.

One night, when the library slept under the glow of starlight caught in glass orbs, Mira rested against a shelf. She tried to whisper her name, but only a hollow echo returned. Panic clawed at her throat.

A soft hand on her shoulder steadied her. Celebrían. "Do not lose yourself. Names are anchors. Hold fast."

Mira grasped at herself then, whispering fragments of home: Noah's laughter, her grandmother's knitting, the cinnamon warmth of the kitchen. Slowly, syllables returned. *Mira*. Relief and exhaustion washed over her in equal measure.

Homesickness gnawed at her even within the library. Noah, with his gummy smile and tiny hands, waited for her. Her grandmother, lost in the fog of memory, sometimes called her by other names, friends from the past or strangers. Mira's chest ached at the thought of them, and at the thought of herself fading too. She couldn't vanish—she had to return.

One evening, alone with Celebrían, Mira asked, voice trembling, "Why do I feel like I'm losing myself?"

"Stories are powerful," the Guardian explained. "And remembering is power as well. Each time you carry a forgotten story, a part of it remains with you. You grow stronger, but you risk becoming one of the forgotten."

"How do I get back?" Mira asked, the fear of vanishing pressing cold against her chest.

"You must tell the stories completely," Celebrían said softly. "And remember who you are—your name, your heart, your past. You cannot let the fog claim you."

Mira nodded, fragile but determined. "I have to hold on. For Noah. For Grandma. For me."

And so she did. She whispered her name to herself, wrote it in margins, repeated memories of home: Noah's tiny fingers curling around hers, the warmth of her grandmother's shawl, the scent of cinnamon in the kitchen. Every fragment was a lifeline.

She wandered the library again and again, living the stories of Meha, Relena, Celine, Leona, and many more. These girls weren't just forgotten. They were fierce, bright, flawed, alive. They taught courage through fear, strength through heartbreak, hope through silence. They showed her that being

remembered wasn't about everyone knowing your name, but about leaving something behind worth holding onto.

One night, after finishing the story of Anya, who had saved a village from an invisible plague only to be erased, Mira felt the fog lift more than ever. Her name returned to her fully, warm and solid. "Mira," she whispered, smiling through tears.

Celebrían appeared beside her, soft as a breeze. "You remember."

"I will never forget," Mira said, her voice steady. Her heart was full.

The Guardian stepped aside, revealing an archway glowing with soft light. A path home. Mira paused, glancing at the endless shelves. Every book she had carried, every life she had touched, pulsed with memory. They remembered her because she had remembered them.

She whispered a quiet "thank you," to Celebrían and to all the forgotten girls who had taught her to hold on, then stepped through the archway.

The foggy street returned, the chill fading as though the library had never existed. And then, like a balm for her soul, the sound of baby Noah's laughter reached her. She moved quickly toward the house she knew so well.

Inside, the kitchen smelled of cinnamon and aged wood. Her grandmother sat by the window, knitting, eyes clouded yet suddenly brightening when they met Mira's.

"Mira," her grandmother whispered, soft and certain.

Mira dropped her bag and scooped Noah into her arms. She held them both close, feeling every heartbeat, every breath. She was home. She was remembered.

Zhen-Ze Zheng

Grade 11, David H. Hickman High School

Poetry



The Warrior

Before I screech my war cry,
I stuff my mouth with fresh peony petals.
Every decibel of my rage and vitriol,
through the pink cellulose, is filtered into birdsong.
When you hear the melody of spring,
know that I've drawn near.
See how the sky is already blemished red and purple,
bruised by the pumping fists of men.
The swirling wind howls in agony.
The white faces of clouds are now blue, choked by their tears.
In this chaos, I close my eyes.
For the songbird and butterfly are my friends.
They guide me with their wings,
lifting my head up high in a crown of feathers and chitin.
I offer lilies, orchids, and carnations in return.
My back carries a branch of plum blossoms,
its sweet fragrance whispering me reminders to persist.
Enveloped in this ecosystem, I need no armor.
When the sun rises, and the sky heals golden,
you will see how nature gleams brighter than polished steel.

Zhen-Ze Zheng

Grade 11, David H. Hickman High School

Poetry



What is Art?

It's how the sun never says goodbye, passing his brilliance
onto the moon instead. In the silk black sky, she is crowned
the empress of night.

It's the headlights of cars at twilight, like comets wandering aimlessly
in a stream of light across the milky way, wishing for the pull of home
to end their drift.

It's the drumming of Missouri rain upon caves and rooftops: a percussive
prelude to the bluebirds' morning melody. The humming cicadas will soon
join this Midwest symphony.

It's the oak tree guarding my house, whose branches would fracture and
scatter across the pavement after thunderstorms. I once collected them,
pretending the fragments of wood were a sorcerer's tantalizing staff.

It's how English words sound on my mother's and father's tongue, tinged
with the country they once belonged to. They paint rolling rivers, glowing
lanterns, and blooming orchids with their speech.

It's the smooth expanse of my eyelid, uncreased like a prairie boasting
its flat landscape adorned with wildflowers and grasses. The sun's blazing
stare does not burn; I glare right back.

It's why I even lift my eyelids at all.

Zhen-Ze Zheng

Grade 11, David H. Hickman High School

Poetry



Pleasure Principle Psalm

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want
I engraved this across my heart when I was eleven.
It adorned my blood like a motto.
It chanted in my veins like a mantra
Yet, there I was
abandoned at a famished table,
gnats whispering above my head,
drought rippling inside my cup.
There I was

wanting.

I wanted to praise you on the
marred yellow tiles of bathroom floors:
a genuflection only shown behind locked doors.
Forgotten was the cold sting of stone breaking skin. I'd gaily let
all of me lie black and bruised against you. I'd
genuflect until my kneecaps erode into dust. I'd
genuflect until bed sores line my sorry shins.
Out in the steadfast soil, I'll plant the seeds of our devotion and weave
the blue and green blossoms into the flags of our dispositions.

You led me onto the arid summer grass,
its thirsty blades reaching out to tickle my ankles gently.

We sat under dancing sunlight, absorbing
the ephemeral warmth of content.

And there,

I wanted to embrace you and,
press my heart against yours,
feeling every beat in sync, holding
each other closely, tightly, forcefully,
so the silver cross dangling off
your neck would drive into our chests
and crack our forms, letting
light rush through
our chinks and
paint us
holy
again.

Maybe our mortal wants could then be venial.

Celina Zhou

Grade 12, Ladue Horton Watkins High School

Critical Essay



Elegy Over Obituary: Mythologization and the Hero as Cultural Object

Never meet your heroes.

You've probably heard this saying before. A lot of us have lived it: idolized some celebrity, politician, or public figure, idealized them and aspired to be like them, only to meet them in real life and realize that — well, damn, they really weren't who you thought they were. Maybe they're rude, or brash, or selfish, or arrogant, or entitled, or any other of the host of flaws that embody the human condition, rather than the symbol of hope or justice or creativity that heroes often manifest as. There's a paradoxical tension to how the collective human consciousness views symbols versus how it views people that can create a cognitive dissonance in our perception of a hero. That paradox, importantly, isn't a bug in the system — it's a feature. A hero isn't a person, but a process: a symbol that can be shaped from any individual, constructing a cultural object that embodies societal values, banishes communal fears, and, like all symbols, creates a manifestable way for the human mind to confront, articulate, and grapple with more complex ideas; just as humans will create a God when there is none, a society creates a hero when it needs one.

Classical definitions of a hero often return to conventional ideas of moral excellence: selflessness, bravery, sacrifice, valor, kindness, honesty, justice, persistence. That outlook, though, is flawed — often, not only does it fatalistically treat heroism as a quality inherent to an individual or something they will inevitably grow into, it also relies on inherently relative and subjective traits. Defining and selecting heroes thus becomes an unnecessarily arbitrary

process of weighing morality against itself, rather than truly dissecting the foundational essence of what a hero is and what a hero does. One framework with which to view the construction of heroes is a semiotic one — one based on the systems of signs and symbols that make up the mechanisms humans rely on to perceive the world, differentiating between a *signifier*, a word or symbol or image, and the *signified*, the concept that a signifier communicates when we see it. Consider the arguments of Roland Barthes in his 1957 essay collection *Mythologies*, which examines how cultures construct myths. Barthes writes that to create myth is to steal, to abduct, to wash away: to naturalize an idea into a sign, purifying it and filling it with new meaning, and in doing so stripping the sign of its original state. The process of heroism can then be considered as a mythologization of a person; a synthesis of an individual and an idea that can often rob its subject of the static or complex flaws that often define the human experience; George Washington, the hero, is as much a myth as Lady Liberty or the French *Marianne*, while George Washington, the person, is often overshadowed in American history by his brighter signifier. Introducing a philosophical framework can further solidify this definition of a hero: a *subject*, in classical philosophy, is a fully conscious entity with experiences and with agency, while an *object* is simply a thing that is observed by a subject. This dichotomy is further explored by writings from phenomenologists like Edmund Husserl, who draws a distinction between *noesis*, the act of consciousness and perception, and *noema*, the symbol or object that is perceived. All of these binaries establish a stark divide between a perfected and moral *hero*, the signified, the object, the noema — and the flawed, multidimensional and real *person* that heroes are constructed from, the signifier, the subject.

The construction of heroes often relies on a certain degree of storytelling, of malleability and diffusability. Think, for example, of a real-life hero that's often uplifted or admired — chances are, they're dead. The processes that construct a hero thrive on the dead, who can no longer protest, evolve, or contradict any myths that form around them or through them. Historical martyrs and saints serve as an excellent example, often mythologized and deified in a very real sense through canonization, religious ceremony, the manipulation of public memory via the powerful influence of church and temple, and hagiography, the writing of the lives of saints. Antiquity historian Peter Brown describes the communal memory and veneration of Latin Christian saints as a public, unifying force: The tomb of the saint was declared public property as the tomb of no other Christian was: it was made accessible to all, and became the focus of forms of

ritual common to the whole community. Every device of architecture, art, ceremony, and literature was mobilized to ensure that holy graves and relics were made both more eminent and more accessible [...] the graves and relics of the saint stood out in high-relief (Brown).

Abrahamic saints are not just religious figures, but instead serve more holistically a communal purpose that not only united Christians, who were then a minority, but represented and promoted social values and practices that encouraged hegemony within the community — heroes, who served as sources of inspiration and emulation for believers. The emergent field of hagiography would only intensify this effect: rather than true biographies, hagiographies serve as moral paradigms and instruction of the values and teachings of the Church, reducing the real lives of martyrs and saints into parables of virtue in the semiotic process that defines a hero as a cultural object. This same process would come to be mirrored in non-religious forms throughout history: consider Jean-Paul Marat, assassinated July 13 1793, infamous Jacobin bloodmonger of the French Revolution, whose revolutionary pamphlet *L'ami du peuple* (The Friend of the People) disseminated and promoted many of the radical, often violent ideas that defined this period of French history; he was in fact a social pariah and highly disliked among the Parisian public before his death, shunned even by peers and friends (Miller). In the aftermath of his assassination, though, intense propaganda efforts meant he became a near-holy figure considered a hero of the revolution, mourned in grand speeches by his contemporary Maximilien Robespierre, buried in the grand mausoleum that had been made of the Panthéon, and immortalized in painter Jacques-Louis David's infamous painting "The Death of Marat," where he's portrayed in religious lighting and framing reminiscent of a Christian *Pietà*. Even his skin and figure, said to have degenerated due to a skin condition, are fair and lithe, while his immortalization in his bath ironically symbolizes the purification of his image, his misdeeds buried and reputation rebuilt in order to construct a revolutionary hero who symbolized collective values of virtue, liberty, and speech from an intensely polarizing figure. Martyr-heroes are not limited to history, either: the assassination of conservative political commentator Charlie Kirk on September 10, 2025 demonstrated the posthumous construction of a hero in real-time. The outcry of rage and grief was immediate, performed, and intense — politicians, businesspeople, journalists, and ordinary citizens alike all coalesced to form a collective understanding of who Charlie Kirk, the Christian nationalist and conservative hero, exemplar of traditional values, was, which wasn't necessarily

always entirely coherent of who Charlie Kirk the human being was. The posthumous narrative constructed not only by political allies but also critics; the performance of bipartisanship by figures across the political divide, like Ezra Klein, left wing journalist and commentator of the New York Times, provided symbolic capital by deifying and idealizing Kirk's movements, symbolic and real, that promoted free speech, political action, and morality (Klein). The nature of Kirk's prominence in the public eye also provides an interesting nuance in the performance of grief in public, an often dehumanizing process which can reduce the dead into political figureheads culpable to machinations from all sides of the political divides — while private grief remains sacrosanct, and often mourns the whole and holistic person, public grief is a collective action, exemplifying the posthumous construction of heroes and a communal understanding of virtue that may not always agree with what the dead individual believed. Human reverence and tendency to make heroes out of the dead embody the impulse to love elegy over obituary; it is the most inspiring things, the poetry and the virtues, that linger in public consciousness rather than truth — heroes, rather than people.

Another source ripe for the process of heroism is fiction and the human imagination, which provide another source of controlled, malleable narratives that allow for the purification of a hero into a symbol. In the Germanic epic *Beowulf*, for example, the titular character and Geatish hero, undergoes the process of mythologization both self-contained and transcendental. Boasts, long speeches the hero gives, affirm his strength, galvanize the Danes whom he has come to protect, imbue optimism, and encourage trust — hallmarks of the role of a hero as a symbol; in essence, these boasts, and similar boasts in Germanic legend, are a mechanism of self-mythologization — Beowulf is arguing for his own role as a hero, and discarding any mention of mortal weakness or flaw in the process. Grendel acts as the opposite side of Beowulf's symbol — as symbolic chaos and symbolic sin, the monster, too, is purified and then instilled with allegory, creating a codependent reliance between monster-symbol and hero-symbol — Grendel demands the existence of Beowulf the hero, and Beowulf mythologizes in answer. This is further represented in the last verses of the poem, in which Beowulf demands to be buried in a grand barrow by the sea (Heaney). In this moment, Beowulf the person, once simply masked, truly dies, and Beowulf the hero is constructed in public memory, the otherworldly protector whose presence alone could keep hostile tribes from advancing upon his kingdom, honored in a monumental funeral pyre and deified by his

mourning people. There's also a transcendental aspect to the mythologization of Beowulf as a hero, as the enduring nature of the epic itself and society's continued consumption and commentary on the myth continue to deify and uplift the symbol Beowulf has become, and the values he promotes — archaic concepts like Anglo-Saxon *lof*, or immortality through fame, and enduring concepts like bravery and valor. Fiction and posthumous narratives both create heroes much more easily than real, living individuals as a result of not only of their malleable nature, but also their inability to change with true agency outside of those who are constructing their myth and symbol; in death or in story, a hero cannot protest against their depiction, evolve and devolve in the ways that define the human experience, whether due to the constraints of mortality or of the storyteller. Literary counterexamples to Beowulf and this framework of heroism do exist in the tragic hero, prevalent in Greek drama and Shakespearean tragedies; the titular protagonist of Shakespeare's masterwork *Hamlet* seems to embody the opposite of a symbolic hero. The prince is melancholic, lethargic, vengeful, selfish, lustful, fixated on destruction rather than creation (Mabillard). None of these traits would embody cultural values then or even now. But characters of the tragic hero archetype within literary and cultural collectives like Prince Hamlet cannot be considered true heroes, explicitly written as too flawed, static, and morally complex to be idealized in the same processes, the mythologization and deification, that define Beowulf as a hero. This creates a stark binary divide between a *hero*, a symbol that can be both real or fictional who embodies cultural values and is created as a conscious act of erasure, and a *protagonist*, who, less symbolically, can more fully represent the human condition — an apparatus of storytelling rather than a paragon of virtue.

The process of constructing a hero can only be fully understood by dissecting the fundamental question of what drives us as humans to create such symbols. It is, ultimately, a simplistic question — to ask why society needs heroes is the same as to ask why language needs metaphors or humans need art; They create societal cohesion, embodying archetypes that some thinkers, like Carl Jung, have described as a core psychological need in the collective unconscious of humanity, transcending individual experiences and defining much of the active human conscious in subtle but powerful ways (Mackey-Kallis). Heroes can also act as powerful containers for the unspeakable and the uncontainable; the construction of symbols who represent abstract ideas and values creates an avenue through which complex ideas can be confronted and articulated in powerfully unifying ways. By serving as paragons of religious

virtue, religious saints can connect us to the divine, serving as intermediaries between the real world and the constructed world of God, engraving in public memory an intimacy with something beyond insulated human perceptions. By fiercely embodying *lof*, a kind of existence that transcends death, Beowulf teaches us about mortality, about confronting the end, his own death a rehearsal for the collective and inevitable collapse of his kingdom and his people — and our own. The unfeeling symbol of a hero can also take on the burden of moral perfection, freeing the ordinary person from the intense pressure of pristine virtue, a vessel of morality that trickles down into real people rather than drowning them. In doing so, heroes can fill a void created by inherent human fears and flaws; we idealize a hero because the world is not ideal. Grendel, an allegory for violence, sin, and social ills, created the need for Beowulf the hero. Historical Christian persecution created the need for saints to serve as symbols of hope, faith and resistance in times of struggle. Christian nationalism in the United States and the anchorless state of young men created the need for Charlie Kirk to be an evangelical martyr, a lodestone marking one direction the future could go, for better or for worse.

Ultimately, a hero can never be a living, complex, multidimensional hero like living people or tragic and morally complex protagonists of literature; instead, a hero is constructed through the process of mythologization and dehumanization that purifies the individual story and distills it into a paragon of moral virtue and societal values. Like art, a hero comforts the disturbed; like metaphor, a hero allows us to look the world's ugliness eye to eye. The tragedy of a hero, then, lies in their sacrifice — a hero undergoes the permanent loss of agency and control over their own narrative in order to be deified. Humans require a perfect, diffusible, collective symbol to empathize with each other and to confront the harsh realities of our reality, but such symbols necessitate the true destruction of a unique, dynamic, and flawed human life — a tragic paradox that defines the existence of a hero.

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Celina Zhou

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Poetry



CELESTIAL ESCAPISM

Once, I pulled an all-nighter,
and read Colleen Hoover,
all her shitty boyfriends

and overfull babies, until light split
through my curtains and spilt
across my floor. While the world spun closer

to the sun, ecliptic stars on the horizon.
While a hundred thousand astronomers bent
over their hands in the dark.

I hate all her books, but when you hate something
enough, it starts to feel like love.
I know this because trying to hate someone

never made me love them any less.
My friends are environmentalists, see?
—they're always asking. Did you read about

the astronaut who went to space
and never wanted to go back?
It's cold up there, you know.

So cold. A persimmon fell in my hands,
its flesh soft, kerneled in my palms, dark
and sweet with rot. It grew heavy and warm,

yielding to want, to need. Its skin
clung to my nails, as cloying as grief.
I think if you want hard enough,

the stars will fall too. We're not so different,
the astronomer and I. Night beasts loving
a world that will never hate us any less.

An observatory's LEDs are red to block
out the blue, you know. Don't stay too long,
you'll burn out your eyes,

and forget how to see in the sun. Like cavefish,
clear skinned and soft bellied, shucked open bone
by needled bone, helpless to the hunger.

We take the elevator to the ground floor,
and he tells me the light
only works when you're going down.

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Poetry



PRYRITE

金屋藏嬌 (*keeping Jiao in a golden house*)

Chinese idiom

for Chen Jiao

Be beautiful. So beautiful that boys will break their teeth
testing the softness of your skin trying to gnaw you
into gold. Take a man to your bed, call him his brother's name
and tell him you'll love him for as long as his promises

are heavy in your hands. Weigh his words in your mouth.
What else is womanhood but want?
Watch the pretty dancer with the moon white palms
like a stag stares down a hunter deciding between fuck

or flight. Wonder if you'd enjoy it if you mirrored her face
arrayed your eyes to fold into hers

fucked your man through her skin, stretched taut.
Go on, girl. Go on, gladiator.
Everyone wants to watch you rip her apart
fit your crawling spine into that cavernous heart.
Break open each ridge of her spine and drink her youth
from her marrow. What use is a woman without want?
Take a witch to your bed, let her spit nails into the hollows
of your back. Let her promise you love.

If you can't be the sun then swallow the light
subsume it. If he calls you a bitch
smile like a wolf. In your palace of stone
sink your teeth into the brick and pretend
you can feel it
give way.

Jay Zhou

Grade 8, John Burroughs School

Flash Fiction



The Quiet App

I clicked the button, waiting to feel the familiar emptiness spread from my fingers throughout my body. The sensation, like a cool breeze, radiated to my wrists, elbows, arms... and stopped. I flexed my fingers, waiting for the rest of it. Nothing. I looked around, taking in the eerily quiet hallways of the school. Students and teachers were slumped over desks and against lockers. The stillness hung heavy in the air. Fans whirled and air conditioning hummed, the only sounds in a hallway devoid of life.

I wandered outside in a daze, noticing the world suspended in its hour-long pause. Everywhere, people were still, minds free of all outside influence. Had I been like this every day? My chest tightened at the thought. The street, normally bustling with activity, was empty. This living silence was strange and new, something I'd missed every day I used the app. For as long as anyone could remember, the quiet app was a ritual. Everyone did it.

I paced the hallways, seeing everything in a different light. The same lockers and classrooms that I had taken for granted every day seemed unfamiliar. Everything appeared closer, somehow, as if I had never been present before. The lockers loomed closer than they should, the corridor twisting differently than I remembered. It felt wild, slightly out of control, at odds with the false security the quiet app gave.

I stepped outside again. The world hadn't moved, but something inside me had.

A notification buzzed.

The app flashed: *Retry sleep mode?*

Doubts about the app, quiet until now, surfaced. I stared at the device as if it were something cursed, routine pulling me to accept it, something new in me

urging me to reject it. The wind carried faint birdsong—a softness I hadn’t noticed in weeks. The screen glowed against my skin as I was bathed in warm sunlight. For the first time in a long while, I noticed.

I woke up in my bed. For a moment I told myself that I had imagined all of it—the silence, the suspended hour, the way everything looked too close.

Then I noticed a faint smear of gray dust on my knuckles, the same kind that coated the lockers at school.

I hadn’t touched a locker since yesterday, at least not while time was moving. The dust on my skin said otherwise.

It had been real. Every second of it.

Tessa Zwicker

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Educator: Shannon Koropchak

Flash Fiction



Eye Swear I'm Not Crazy

I swear I'm not crazy. I've been called dramatic and insane, but I know that there is something wrong with this place. Why else would there be a persistent prick at my neck, a target on my back, and a sense of being surveilled as I roam around this cold and dingy house?

The first day of summer, my family and I packed our suitcases full and transported them to my Grandma's house in the middle of nowhere. Our goals for the next three months were to clean out her house and move her back to where we lived. Her house was a wasteland. The floors were entirely covered with litter and remnants from her life; it was like crossing a field of land mines trying to get from one end to the other of the room.

I started with the third-floor bedrooms, and as I climbed up the first stair, goosebumps spread throughout my skin, intensifying with every step. While I sorted my grandma's various "treasures," I came across an old blue medallion. It looked as though it was made of glass. Slightly off center was a large eye, with a piercing light blue iris and a piercing black pupil. It seemed to be watching everything, shifting slightly as I took it out of the box so that it might be able to see its full surroundings. Inside the cold blue were black serpentine spirals centering around the pupil, slowly pulling me into the middle. I held it up to the small light streaming in through the windows, and found that the reflection was an even brighter blue, like a siren, warning me of some danger I was about to face. Ever since the eye first escaped the box, the hairs on my arms and neck stood straight up as if my body knew there was danger before my head could catch up. Despite the small discomfort, I devoted every effort back to sorting.

I hoped in vain that I would feel normal the next day, but instead the chill intensified with every hour. My days started to be interrupted by small flashes,

not of the eye fully, but just of the blue reflection of the eye, as if it were present but not quite fully there. I saw it again clearly when cleaning another room. As I took items out of the box, a flash appeared out of the corner of my eye. Despite attempting indifference, it repeated, again and again, becoming more frequent and brighter, a staring contest interrupted by periodic blinks. Each interval drew my attention further as the spirals in the iris hypnotized me. In the days following, I was plagued by it, appearing only in dark corners or when I was completely alone, as if it knew the opportune moments to attack.

By the second week, I searched each room for the best spot to escape the constant blinking always present over my shoulder, taunting me, daring me to speak out, knowing I would only be met with ridicule. Despite every effort to convince myself the eye wasn't real, it only intensified, staying longer, becoming brighter, more public, and it grew in confidence each day. My days were completely taken over, haunted by the bright light moving in and out of my line of sight with sharp stabbing flashes. At last, I worked up the courage to tell my sister, but she simply scoffed and dismissed me, calling me crazy. But I knew I wasn't crazy. I swear I'm not crazy. The eye is real. It's alive. I saw it appear while I was talking to her, just for a brief moment. The blue light glared at me right behind my sister's head. Its bright reflection was a siren call, forcing me to give all of my attention, just for that brief moment. While I stared, each little scratch on the eye became exemplified in the reflection of the eye. Right as I reached to prove myself, the eye vanished, continuing the hiding game I was trapped in. But I swear I'm not crazy, I wasn't making it up. I am not crazy.

Each family member I confided in brushed me off and told me I was crazy. I swear I'm not crazy. It's that stupid eye that's crazy. It's watching me. I swear it's following me. I feel it constantly. It's with me constantly. Whenever I look over my shoulder, I see that same terrorizing blue reflection, flashing slowly and brightly. I know it's real. I swear I'm not crazy. Why won't anyone believe me? They'll be sorry when they realize I was right. It's coming for them next.

Once again, I tried to tell someone, warning them that they might be next, proving that I'm not crazy. I began to confess to my mother, slowly describing each and every moment of my memory tainted over with a blinding blue light. Towards the end of my description, my mother seemed distracted, looking slightly to the right of my head rather than maintaining her usual eye contact. She was slowly turning white, as if the color was being drawn out of her face, leaving only a horrified expression. Slowly turning around, looking over my shoulder, I came to face what I had been seeing this entire time. The bright blue

light took over my entire field of vision, just as it took over my entire mind. However, instead of the blue stirring up that same terror I was accustomed to, I found myself feeling peace. The blue no longer resembled a siren, warning me of dangers to come, but became serene, like the soft color of waves lazily hitting the shore, slowly engulfing me. It was as if every hair that once stood straight up relaxed along with my conscience. The eye wasn't just watching me. The eye was watching my mom, too. It was watching all of them. Maybe now they'll realize they should've listened. Maybe now they'll realize that I'm not crazy.