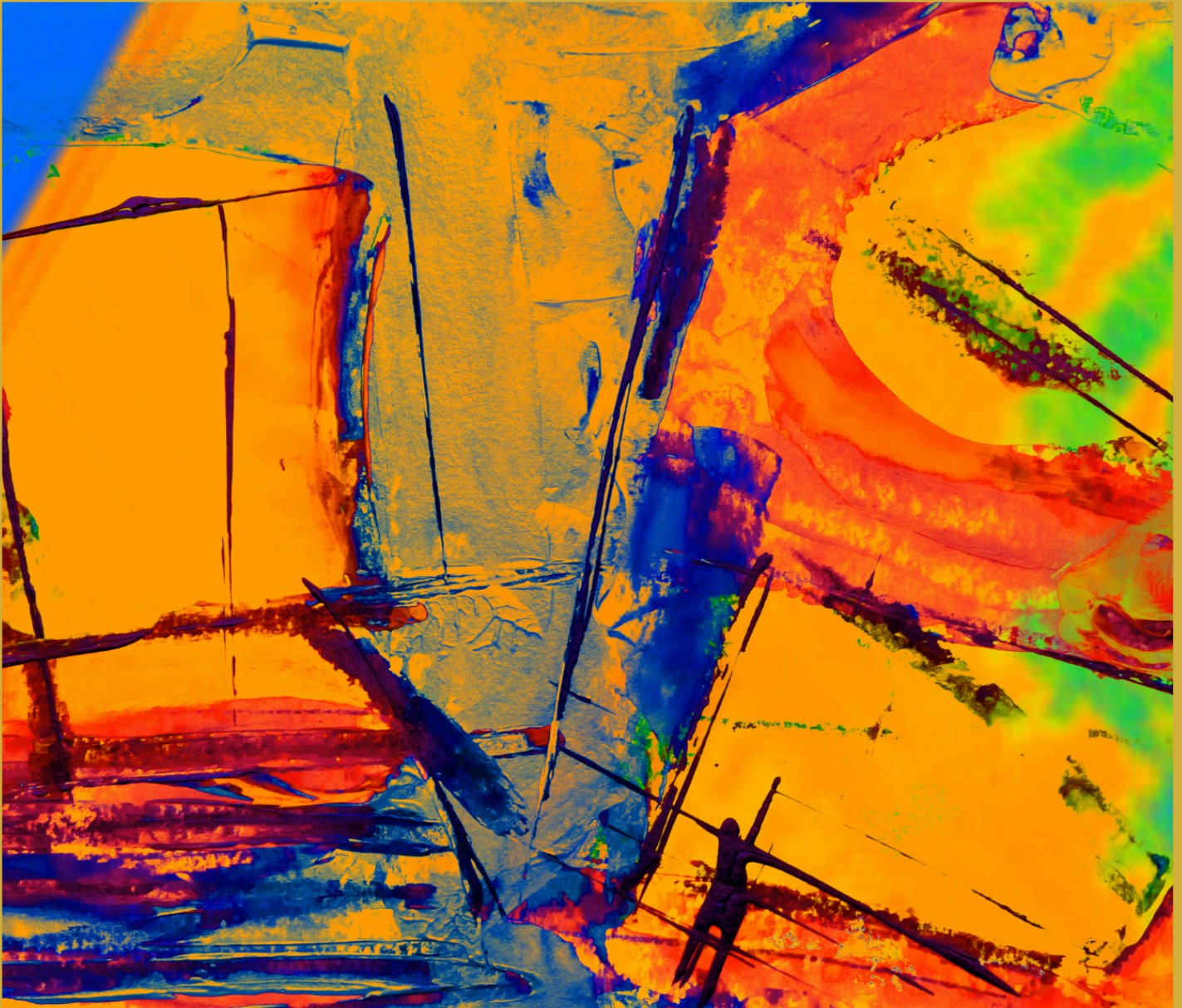


Silver Key Winners

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 Silver Key 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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Lily Ances

Grade 9, John Burroughs School

Educator: Ruby Lawrence

Flash Fiction



The Dog of Wall Street

Dim yellow light flashes by, followed by cracks in the concrete supports. He stares at the glass. Fingerprints and scratches muddle his reflection, hiding his face. Only his brown hair is clear, sculpted with hair gel. He's almost glad he doesn't have to see himself; he is afraid of what may show. His bag is the only passenger other than him. Engraved letters glint in the light. Black genuine leather mocks him with crisp, ninety degree angles and leather varnish that brags good craftsmanship. He thinks his corners have been weathered down too much, that he has lost his edge. If you are not sharp enough to draw blood at the smallest sign, you are no longer a predator in the world. On days like his, he wonders how obvious it is that he is prey; sharks smell blood, and he is bleeding out.

The train rattles on its tracks, jostling the suitcase. He watches as it falls onto the dirty floor. A new client had walked through the door to his office today; blonde, crisp suit, pointed shoes, chin up. "You don't know what you are doing," this new man had said. "You lose all my damn money investing in ETFs like a toddler." Spreadsheets and blond strands of hair fly to the floor as he rages. An income statement crumples under the hard heel of the client's indignation. The mahogany door's handle rattles from the slam of the door.

Another station flashes by; the glass of the subway train is still covered in grime, but his eyes shine back at him through the smudged fingerprints. He laughs. It is a dog eat dog world and he lives on. Only exceptionals work in Wall Street for more than a year. He has been in this business for years. He gives his ex-client two weeks before the blond comes back, licking his wounds like an

injured puppy. It is a dog eat dog world, and the man who sits alone in the subway is a carnivore.

Angela Bo

Grade 11, Rolla Senior High School

Poetry



Bathed In Your Indigo

you were perched on my porch,
heels rocking precariously,
toes tipped at the sky.
you glanced up,
grinned.
hi!
oh – hi.

you tucked a loose strand of hair behind your ear,
joining the dandelions threaded through the rest.
you cocked your head.
so...can I come in?
eyes bright with sunset.
purple dusk pooling behind you.
i cracked open the door.
nice to meet you,
something tightened.

we were sitting on your cedar patio,
t-shirts and shorts,
hair haphazardly thrown into ponytails.
you peeled a tangerine,
juice spraying everywhere,
reckless and sweet,
like summer forgetting to be careful.

a drop landed in my eye.
ow!
you laughed,
offered me half.
we shared the fruit,
juice dribbling down our chins.
grinning as our sticky hands
traced
the crevices of the wooden boards.

we spent weekends filling notebooks,
stories and lyrics bleeding into the margins.
we'll publish a book together,
someday
the melodic lull in your voice
enveloped everything
in blue,
with a purple tilt

we traded secrets like currency,
half-thoughts handed over
because you knew how to finish them for me.

i didn't notice when the string stopped being loose,
when it wove itself around our wrists
and wrapped—
once,
twice—
until people asked about us in the singular:
where's the other one?

i remember feeling jealous of your beauty.
the way you never had to check a mirror,
the way boys wrote letters to you,
and girls wanted to orbit you.

i remember when you stopped waving to me,
like I was already behind you.

i remember the rumors you spread,
The way your mouth tightened when my name entered the room.

i remember the things i said,
because silence felt like losing.

i remember the glares we shared.
i remember the aching hole of your absence.
i remember the way our silence learned how to bruise.

i remember the building up.
until everything was too much
but simultaneously not enough,
and i hated you
and you hated me
and there was nothing left
but
hatehatehatehatehate
beating against itself,
drowning out
everything we had been before.

i remember the sharp, metallic sound

Snip

our tangled string severed.

i walked past a fruit stand yesterday.
the wood painted your favorite shade of blue,
The one that's tinted purple.
indigo.
selling tangerines with fresh leaves still clinging,
like the one we split on your porch
all those summers ago.

hey.

Eric Chang

Grade 9, John Burroughs School

Educator: Megan Zmudczynski

Poetry



Nature's Symphony

One day, a boy resting beneath a maple tree, cradled by its leaves of gold and flame,

plays his fiddle for the animals to listen.

He imagines the vast blue sky as the ceiling of his grand concert hall,
with the sweet chirp of sparrows serving as his symphony orchestra.

When he plays, his warm, dulcet sound casts a spell upon nature,
pulling the wildlife into a harmonious resolution.

The grasshoppers jump, and the chrysanthemums sway,
all twirling in synchronization to the rhythm of his music.

While time passes, the flowers fade, and the concert hall becomes desolate,
the stage now masked by a frosty white curtain.

Musicians and listeners are nowhere to be found;
either resting in the warmth of their cozy homes,
or enjoying their tropical vacations in the south.

Only when the stage lights begin to bloom and burst with color again,

when the powdery white dust on the auditorium's seats dissolves into the grass
beneath,
do the performers return,
twittering with anticipation
for their soloist to arrive.

The concert has been set.
A carpet of tulips and hyacinths eagerly waits for the boy's gentle footsteps,
but the boy never appears.
Days pass,
the spotlights brighten and dim, only to be met with an empty stage.

Reports from audience members trickle in;
some claim the boy was seen playing with other kids,
others observe him sitting inside,
hunched over a table,
a pencil gripped in his hand.

As the days begin to grow longer and the sun yearns brighter than ever,
the symphony members grow restless.
Overcome with melancholy and nostalgia,
they desperately tried to recall the time when nature overflowed with so much
color and music.
But very soon, the memory of that boy becomes only a distant echo.

Still, oftentimes at night, you can hear the nightingales,
humming a phantom of his sweet melody,
waiting for a new one to be performed.

Sheena Chen

Grade 9, Westminster Christian Academy
Personal Essay & Memoir



147 Days

The wind mimics the howls of the wolf that rules the jukebox in my head, taunting its sharp, jagged claws I couldn't ever escape. It is a poem now, a rhyme that lulls me to sleep like a mother should her child.

"Just one more minute," is the chorus.

"Or maybe ten. Then you'll stop, then you'll breathe, then you'll be okay, right? Another step, another calorie erased, a small piece of sanity the price. You stumbled inside. When did you get home? You had another lap to complete."

I'm sorry.

"No, walk past the pantry, you've already eaten far too much. Wince in the shower, because good girls don't have scars on their hips."

I can't stop.

"The blood entangles with the water anyway. Dance. When was the last time you had energy for that? Doesn't matter. Don't look above the sink; your tears will only get saltier."

I'm trying.

“The grades are slipping, but shhh, the numbers are lower. Your knuckles are red now. Relish it. It’s a trophy.”

Smile.

”Food’s not the enemy — you are. Close the fridge. There’s a party on Friday. Start the fast.”

Click.

“You broke it too early. Try harder.”

Thud.

My running shoes kick the pavement like it’s at fault.

Skrr.

I scrutinize the scar as if it could fix the reflection.

Screeech,

says the shower when I lock the door after dinner.

Enough?

“Never.”

But this time, I didn’t listen to it.

I dreamt, instead.

And after 147 dreams in lands without the plagues of wolves and jacks, I find that I am sometimes hopeful. I am often kind. I am occasionally a little bit mean. But I am everything except never enough. I am wistful and romantic and esoteric and 3,523 hours, 55 minutes, and 3 seconds free from the sick lullaby I used to hum.

In the enigmatic shadows where I was once trapped now sits the voice that used to haunt my eyes. It lies tied up and bleeding like I once was, begging for nothing more than a breath. I ripped the claws from its groping hands and never again will it speak. It will stay trapped and pleading, the voice, until the hope that now constrains my life burns it to nothing more than a crisp ash the wind blows away with ease.

And even though every now and then I still turn down an iced chai latte, I no longer care how many calories are in a tangerine or lie on my yoga mat at 4:00 AM in pools of sweat. Never again will the minuscule distance between a two and three digit number determine my emotions as the only scale I now own is one for my striped orange cat who lays in the sunshine beside my pillow. I get excited to go to parties on Friday, and I run when I feel like it and eat what I enjoy. I don't need a song to lull me to sleep any longer, and while I may still fear it's claws, never again will I bow to a wolf.

Sheena Chen

Grade 9, Westminster Christian Academy
Personal Essay & Memoir



Gone

The results of the cast list shone blurry through the tears I held captive in my eyes. Time slipped like words from my mouth as I re-read the same two lines over and over and...

Around me, my classmates continued with their homework, unaware that the world was unraveling.

Gone

Gone

Gone

Were the results of countless mornings spent drenched in sweat. Summer days spent training instead of laughing, tracking nutrition instead of rest – all of it was *gone*. I could no longer taste the blueberries I'd been snacking on as a sudden sourness plagued my hoarse throat. With shaking fingers sporting chipped nail polish, I refreshed the web page.

This couldn't be right

It couldn't

It *couldn't*

“Please” was the metronome of my thoughts I ran to everyday before the sun had even poked the horizon. And still, *“please”* was the plea that ultimately mocked me as I stared into the long blackened screen.

“Hard work always pays off” echoed a thousand gruff voices in my head.

“Hard work always–”

“Work always pays–”

“Hard work–”

I let the syllables run frantic through my mind until they tangled into what they had been all along; an infinite braid of lies. To no avail, I tried to force my trembling fingers through the knots.

Braids: French Braids, Dutch Braids, Rope Braids, Waterfall Braids — I loved braiding hair. I braided mine in soft Dutch braids for dance. I had taught my sister the steady 3/2/1 pattern as soon as her caramel-brown hair fell long enough to grasp. Somewhere, thousands of years ago, a girl like me had braided her hair in the early dew-ridden morning like I now do often.

But at the end of each exhausting day, I could always *snip* the small elastic hair tie and watch as my hair unraveled in flowing waves. It would tumble around my shoulders as a waterfall, gentle and glimmering over the rocky terrain from the day.

This braid, though, had no hair tie or soft waves accompanying it.

“It’s not even real” I tried to assure myself.

Yet, my fingers sang red and sore from my constant tugging on the knots.

I mean, there had to be *something*, right? Something above-or-below-or-lesser-or-greater that caused this, right? Fate simply *couldn’t* be determined by the toss of a coin.

Brrriing!

The sharp blaring of the bell freed me from my cage of thoughts. When my legs eventually stopped bouncing so relentlessly against the linoleum floor, I managed to drag myself through the crumbled remnants of my world like everything was fine.

And maybe I was, maybe they truly had worked harder and been more deserving of the role. Time would pass and I would forget — this I knew.

Yet, as I would soon learn, no amount of time would ever make this feeling pass from my mind. No, even when the slick thief stole my memories and laughter, no amount of time would ever relieve me from the bloodied shards of my heart nor seal them into something whole again.

Benjamin Chen

Grade 11, Marquette High School

Flash Fiction



Somewhere in the Breeze

When Grandpa, 爺爺, passed away, none of us could attend the funeral. The pandemic was so severe by that time that traveling was basically impossible. Several months after the pandemic began, Dad had just barely made it back to Taiwan to see 爺爺 but had to return to the United States before he died. And unfortunately, half of Dad's time while he was there was taken up by a two-week mandatory quarantine. I remember receiving phone calls from Dad almost every day, giving updates on how 爺爺 was doing. Each time I called Dad, I could feel the exhaustion in his voice as if he was shifting deeper into grief when he said 爺爺 was getting worse. I felt a cold, sharp confusion. At that point in my life, I did not understand the severity of cancer. I believed that prayer might help. I believed that if I prayed long enough for 爺爺 to recover that the universe owed me a miracle.

That miracle never happened. When we were finally informed that 爺爺 had passed away, I did not immediately cry. I was still upset at the world, the virus, and at the version of myself that had wasted seven years of my life goofing off in Chinese School and never opening my workbook rather than learning how to communicate with 爺爺 in Mandarin. My parents took me to Chinese school each Sunday after church. For me, learning Chinese was a chore, a collection of foreign symbols. I hated the scratchy CDs that I listened to to practice, the "bo-po-mo-fo" sounds that seemed to roll around in my mouth like rocks and the constant repetition of writing characters until my hands were cramping. It wasn't until then that it struck me like a physical blow that despite having spent seven years "studying" a language, I could not even have a legitimate conversation with 爺爺. I felt like a total failure as a grandson, imagining that in

his final moments, 爺爺 may have been thinking of me as the boy who had nothing to say.

Although my memories of him are precious, they are few, spaced out by three-year gaps. Because of the language barrier, our interactions were mostly smiles, nods, and short questions about whether I was hungry. One time I remember was on a day when my parents were out, and Grandma was napping. The house was quiet, filled with the scent of oolong tea and old paper. I was engaged in my usual routine: curled up on the sofa, eyes glued to my iPad, retreating into a digital world where everyone spoke my language. 爺爺 walked into the room and did something unexpected. He sat in his worn, wooden chair, picked up the remote, and flipped the channel to an American movie. On the screen, a group of men sat around a smoky table, sliding chips into the center. "Poker," 爺爺 said clearly.

He looked at me and nodded, a knowing glint in his eyes. It was the only English word I ever heard him speak. It wasn't a deep discussion, but it was a bridge. For a fleeting second, he had stepped into my world. I regret that I never had the courage to step into his.

It wasn't until later in my life that I learned what kind of person 爺爺 was and how many people loved him. Not until four years ago did I realize that everything in his house was forest-themed. The WiFi password was named after the national tree of Taiwan. Each of my aunts, uncles, and my dad had Japanese nicknames based off of tree species, and 爺爺 even drove a Subaru Forester. However, I never noticed this until after he had passed when my parents told me he had been a professor of forestry at the National University of Taiwan. I was stunned. As a kid, I thought "forestry" was a useless subject. But when the photos of the funeral arrived, I saw a sea of people. Over half of the attendees weren't relatives; they were former students. They had driven for hours, and some had flown in from Japan, just to bow before his casket. I realized then that while I couldn't speak his language, hundreds of others had learned a different language from him: they had learned the language of his love and passions.

Two years later, when the world re-opened, we took a trip to the Alishan mountains. Walking through the forest, I felt the air change. It was thick and carried the scent of damp earth and cedar. My dad pointed toward the giant trees, some over a thousand years old. "爺爺 spent years studying these," he whispered. As I hiked deeper into the forest, the guilt that had lived in my chest since his passing began to dissipate. The wind picked up, and a low whistle hummed through the cypress branches. It crept down my spine, but it didn't feel like a

chill; it felt like a greeting. I watched the canopy sway back and forth, side to side, almost like a rhythmic motion that mirrored a hand waving goodbye. When we finally returned to his old house in Taipei, the silence was heavy. For the first time in my life, 爺爺 wasn't there to greet me. But as I sat on the sofa where we once had watched that poker game, I didn't feel like a failure. I looked at the trees lining the street, their leaves shimmering in the breeze, and for the first time, I knew exactly what they were saying.

Paige Deakin

Grade 12, Eureka High School

Personal Essay & Memoir



Memory Lane

The memory card of a camera holds a thousand memories. From your first birthday to your college graduation, your story unfolds in snapshots—the camera’s shutter following you as you grow. As a young girl, I never gave much thought to these photos. Mom wants a “first day of third grade” picture? Sure, let me set my backpack down and sling my arm around the shoulders of my twin sister. Maybe I’ll even make a funny face; my mom’s Facebook friends would love that. However, the “first day of senior year” picture looked a lot different. My long blonde hair still draped over my shoulders, but my smile lacked humor, my arm no longer rested on my sister’s shoulders, and I puffed my shirt out to hide any potential flaws. That’s all I saw when I looked at that photo: flaws.

Sometimes, I still find myself cringing at the photos of younger me—wishing that I had cared more about my appearance. That little girl never noticed how her stomach protruded in her pictures. She cared about making friends, new memories, and getting good grades, not ensuring that she looked thin in the photos.

Looking back now, I want nothing more than to go back and be that girl. Maybe I’m not the biggest fan of my old pictures, but that was the most authentic version of me. Of course, I always noticed when I was the only one whose mom ordered a large t-shirt instead of a small one. I ate the same things as they did at lunch, and I played just as hard as they did at recess; I was one of them on the inside, but I never matched on the outside. Although I now understand why the captains picked me last for basketball, the elementary school version of me

didn't. I played club basketball, and blocking shots was my specialty. What else could they have wanted?

Middle school brought out a version of me I never thought I'd see. My peers sprouted like oaks while I remained rooted, and my baby fat softened with time. With that, I was determined to be skinny. Tight tops overtook my closet, and I was hell-bent on proving to others that I wasn't the little chubby girl that they knew in elementary school. The hard truth: no one really cared. I sat with the same people at lunch, hung out with the same people after school, and had the same friends in my classes. Subconsciously, I based my worth on my ability to impress others, but the day of complete validation never came.

When high school came around, I avoided photographers like the plague. That slight double chin made my life miserable, and don't even get me started on the action shots taken during softball season. My stomach ached from the time I spent holding my breath—trying to hide that slight bump from the world. The lengths I would've gone to secure my place in the "skinny club" were endless.

Turns out, the club never existed. In fact, the word skinny was mostly meaningless anyway. Its true definition: very thin. But even then, what defines thin? A blurry line is the only thing separating fat from skinny—a line created by the world to clump people into groups.

Funny enough, that word—skinny— carried a hefty weight in my mind for years, eating away at me like a parasite. The number on that glass square flashed through my mind at every inconvenience, but no matter how much it fluctuated, my self-worth remained stagnant. It became clear that my weight had nothing to do with my sense of humor or my capacity for love. So why do I care so much about what other people think? It's a question I may never find an answer to.

"Then vs. now" photos show a clear distinction between the two versions of me. My glasses turned to contacts, my blonde hair darkened, and the most prominent change: my stomach. Despite the differences, I know in my heart that I am still that little elementary schooler. Her passion lives on through me, and I will work every day to make sure that I embody her spirit. While I still find myself wrestling with the fact that I can't control what other people think, I've learned that confidence grows above the shoulders, not below.

Camera flashes still terrify me, but I've learned to embrace the truth in them. My double chin accompanies the truest of smiles, and I wouldn't trade those memories for the world.

Pranitha Dulla

Grade 8, Parkway West Middle School
Speculative Fiction



Storykeeper

Ever since I was young, dragons danced before my eyes.

And unicorns, and quilin, and chimeras, and every other creature I did and didn't know of. I knew they weren't real. It all seemed like a movie I'd never watched, but still knew and remembered.

It had barely been a month since I'd noticed those lights, but I'd seen them all my life. The chaotic static would only show brightly when my eyes were covered with darkness, but it never fully left my vision. But here it was, in broad daylight, pointing me toward a door in my own basement I'd never seen before. I don't know how it pointed, was it a tip of the chin, a pointed finger, a sharp glance? I stared at the door. It was a double doorway, tall, and made of some grand dark wood. A knocker hung from the mouth of a beast of some kind, its face a permanent snarl.

My curiosity weighed on my mind heavier than my fear. I passed the junk that lived in the corners of the basement, and tried the door's cold, long knob, finding myself dreading the fact it was unlocked. I almost closed the door behind me, but the hallway was too dark to see my own hands. I left one thin line of light shining through the doorway.

My heart pounded against my chest as the lights took over my mind, seeming closer this time. They looked real. I saw the glint of firelight on every feather of a roc, its wings blowing my hair aside, the single chipped tooth of a lion with a golden mane, and fairies flying back and forth, pulling tricks on each other. I stared, forgetting to blink or walk or even breathe once or twice. Each time I saw a new image, I'd feel a chilling sensation, like the wind blowing by and stealing your warmth. The hallway emptied into a room, still dark as a moonless

night, the first I'd ever seen of this kind of darkness. The blare of the lights never let me truly see black before. I couldn't stop staring at it.

My nose found the ever-familiar scent of cardboard, or a new book. Running my hand down a wall, I found it was covered in shelves. One had loose paper, another had pens and pencils, their sharp tips poking my palm, and I found a doorway every few steps, leading into some unknown hallway.

I saw the lights again, as clear as daylight, yet I still saw the darkness. It was as if only one eye could see them, but the lights covered both sides of my vision. Smears of tan. A dollop of beige and white. Drops of black, not completely dark, like before, it shined. They formed themselves into books and sheets of paper and pens and ink, my clenched fists, and my body, wrapped up in a T-shirt and jeans. I saw a few desks and strewn about, bare of anything but a couple pens and scratches.

I chose a doorway, chanting its location over and over in my mind. I couldn't get lost in a place like this. The halls were stuffed with books, piled on bookshelves three times as tall as me, and many more were in tall, haphazard stacks on the floor. It had a distinct, old, wooden smell and a consistent chill, not enough to sting, it only made the place feel empty. I picked up a book, causing a small cloud of dust to fly into the air. I ran my hand along its thin weathered spine. My fingers came off with dust piled up on them. Opening it, I found it wasn't in any language I had heard of, but the lights explained everything. It was the story of a flood. There was a continuous downpour of rain, falling in sheets and roaring as it hit the ground. The water rose higher every second, one moment at my ankles, then halfway up my shins, until it was knee-deep. I ran from a wave the height of a building towering over me, but it didn't push me over. I slammed the book shut, and all the water drained back inside.

I felt cold. My hair stuck to my face, dripping with water, yet it disappeared before it hit the floor. I was dry again in seconds.

Intrigued, I kept walking through the endless rows of shelves, the books piling higher at every turn and my footsteps seeming to echo longer. I tried reading many other books, one had a city swallowed whole by a monster, another was a strange little story of a child who couldn't feel fear, and a few I recognized: *Bellerophon*, *Frankenstein's Monster*, *Mahabharata*. That one took two rows for itself. The books seemed to go on infinitely. I froze. Where was I? I turned, and the scene stayed the same, endless rows of books. More piles littered across the floor. A few disorganized shelves with books messily stacked, all leaning on each other. None of the hallways were recognizable.

I stood perfectly still, feeling the slightest breeze coming towards me. I ran against the wind, tumbling through the hallways and corners for what seemed like forever, tripping over piles of books and stumbling at all the bends and turns. I found the same room I could only see in complete darkness, closed my eyes, and ran for the heavy double doors.

— — — — —

I came back to those giant wooden double doors. I wasn't sure why. I nearly convinced myself it was a dream. Yet, here I was again, staring at the knocker, its face still unrecognizable. I turned the doorknob, and let the door close behind me.

The long hallway was bright this time, filled with pastels of every shade and color. It would shift, showing scenes and faces, then covering them again. I craned my neck to see it all. It gave off a pleasant warmth.

I found the black room again. I paused to let my eyes adjust to the darkness and see the lights. There were no books here. I hadn't noticed or thought much of it before, but, unlike the other places, there was nothing in this room except desks and pens and paper. There never were any books here. I pushed it out of my mind, for now at least. Right now, I was exploring the halls. I chose a path at random, my faster pace accented by the echoes bouncing off the high walls.

I fingered the spines of a few books, settling on a deep red one with burnt yellow highlights. It was the Aztec creation story of a half-dead earth being populated five different times. The lights showed the monster whose skin had been formed into the ground, floating in an endlessly deep sea. It was huge, bigger than I could imagine, yet somehow the lights captured its likeness. It was covered in snapping heads, all over, blindly searching for something to bite.

One story with a patchy green cover was romantic, of two souls abandoning their immortality to live together. The lights whispered a sweet melody in my ear as I flipped through the pages, making me feel warm.

I continued to scour this archive, enraptured by its stories. They came from every place and time I knew of. As I read more of the books, I could understand their language. There was only one down here. The time flew by as I dove deeper into each of them. I could spend hours in the archives, picking books at random and letting myself be enraptured in their stories. I don't know how long I spent down there.

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My expeditions into the archives became routine. I'd return home at 5:30 PM and run down the stairs to my basement, almost daily. I recognized the strange face holding a knocker, now. It was Diting, a Chinese doglike beast who could access all the information in the world.

The long hallway was calm, with a flickering mass of stars hanging overhead. It was one of the most beautiful things I'd seen in this strange place, with chaotic splashes of color somehow forming a coherent picture.

I wandered the archives, slowly forming a mental map of its halls and turns. I wandered far away from the dark room, walking down hallways until my knees were too wobbly for me to trust them. I found a tiny booklet leaning between two much larger stories on its shelf. It couldn't have had anything over fifty pages, and even then, many of them were missing. It was a sweet little story of a lonely moon in an empty sky dropping to the earth to find a companion. The moon met many people, but if she didn't wear a piece of jewelry from them, she would never remember them. The lights' moon gave off a soft, lukewarm light, matching the melancholy little story.

I carefully paged through, not wanting to disturb the peace of the moment, when one of the pages fell out, fluttering across the hall. I dropped the little book and ran after it, but it would only fly farther. The little paper flew around a corner, swishing back and forth and flipping in loops the whole time. My body warmed with exertion against the constant chill. I tumbled around the corner, my fingers missing the page by half an inch before it vanished into the void.

Chills went up and down my spine as I slowly backed away from the swirling thing in front of me, realizing how close I had gotten to touching it. It was dark, fully black without any trace of a different color inside. No lights appeared inside it. The air felt cold, like the abyss was sucking the life out of everything nearby, yet it itself was hot. Burning, even. It looked like that was where the world ended, where ideas ceased to exist and were simply swallowed. The page disappeared as soon as it touched the black mass in front of me. The second its torn edge had touched the void, I felt as if necklaces and bracelets were unclipping themselves and falling off of me.

I looked back at the shelves, but not at the books that cluttered every spare inch of them. I focused on the space between the books and wondered what had been there. Something had to belong in that space, but it wasn't here anymore. I

wandered the halls, staring at every blank space in between each book. There were thousands of books, but I could count a million places where a story should have been. I sat down on the cold, dusty floor, kicking up a small cloud. I watched the dust fall, crossing my eyes at each tiny fiber of it, wondering which was the beginning of a hero's journey and which was an evil king's inevitable defeat. I stared at it for hours, watching the little things float higher and higher.

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I found myself staring at my lap. The dust had settled. I'd fallen asleep, still sitting upright. I got up and continued wandering the halls. I didn't know what I was looking for. Hunger, warmth, voices, all felt like more stories on the shelves. Stories that had long been forgotten. I found my way back to the dark room, filled with the scent of ink. I stared at my feet, moving one in front of the other, their thumps echoing. Peering down the long hall leading out, I saw nothing. The hall was filled with a void. I walked away from it, pushing off the wall.

Walking along the halls of the archives, I looked up to see a small storm of dust brewing overhead. It was raining down in sheets, covering me in a thin layer of powder. More and more fell, forcing me to cover my breathing with my sleeve. Books were falling, leaving trails of dust like comets. I ran, just barely dodging a shelf crashing behind me, disturbing the silence. More and more books rattled and tumbled, crashing to the ground one after the other. I could feel the eating darkness behind me. I glanced back, watching the shelves fall in horror, their books darkening. I closed my eyes and ran, as fast as I could, to the dark room.

Papers were strewn across the floor. Ink had spilled. The familiar scents had been covered up by the smell of dust. I looked back and forth, between the dusty, crumbling halls of the archives and the long hallway.

I looked back to the dark room. The dust was settling, leaving the same scent of ink, now distorted by being spilled over the floor. This wasn't for reading and cataloging, not like the archives. I looked around, at the once-neat piles of paper now messily strewn across the floor. There were pens, freed from their wooden box, now next to my feet. I realized, even though there were pens, I'd never written anything here. This was meant to be a place for cataloging and record-keeping.

I left the dark room, wandering the archives. I walked past fallen shelves, dragging my hands down my face. Too many gaps were left on the shelves. Some

stories were reduced to husks, only spines clinging to a few shredded pages. I felt my eyes get wider.

I began dumping books back on a shelf. No reason to leave them on the floor, to die. No matter how many books I shoved on it, there was always more room. I cleared every book my arms could reach without stepping. The slight draft always leading away from the dark room cooled me down.

I walked back through the halls with purpose, finding the booklet about a lonely moon. Picking up the tiny story again, I refused to believe the void took every missing page from it. Not all of the pages could have fallen into the abyss, so the rest had to be somewhere. I walked deeper through the archives, the booklet pinched between my fingers. I slowly realized that even though I knew where to find specific books, I had no idea where pages could be, and there was no way I could search the entire archive every time I had to recover pages.

After hours of fruitless searching, I was convinced the pages had simply been lost to the void. I hadn't found a single loose page, from my booklet or otherwise. I dropped the booklet, ready to leave, when the lights pointed. It had been so long I'd forgotten what it felt like. Having no other clues, I grabbed my booklet and followed it. It took me down a winding path, constantly telling me which direction to go. Turning a corner, I saw a tiny sliver of light between two books. Running to see it, I found that it was a page from the booklet. I tucked it between the pages already in the story, pinching the booklet hard so it wouldn't fall out. The lights pointed again.

I found eight pages from the booklet before the lights stopped pointing. The booklet was still littered with gaps telling of missing pages, but it had grown. Ordering the pages again, I read the restored portion of the story.

The moon, after being given jewelry from many people, had them stolen from her. She then vowed to do everything in her power to remember what she could and forget as little as possible.

The ending was still missing.

I returned the tiny story to its place in the halls of the archives and came back to the dark room. When I left, the long tunnel was bright.

Andrew Dysart

Grade 10, St. Louis Priory School
Poetry



Forged

My father is steel.
My mother is flint.
My brother is oil.
My sister is the fuse.
I am the product of their spark.
Friction gave me form.
My fuel is pressure
and the silence before ignition.
I burn with purpose,
not warmth, nor flicker.
I leave no ashes,
only proof.
Even silence can burn,
if struck in the right spot.



The Services Catch: When Accuracy Costs Access

Across the United States, autism diagnoses have risen in the past two decades, from an estimated 1 in 150 children in 2000 to 1 in 36 in 2020.¹ While part of this shift can be attributed to better awareness, financial and bureaucratic incentives play a role.² In many states, insurance companies require a formal diagnosis to cover autism therapies, and the more severe the diagnosis, the more services will be covered.³ The result is a system where families may be nudged toward labeling children more severely than warranted. Special education funding often follows diagnosis, meaning programs have a budgetary interest in maintaining their caseloads.⁴ For some children with profound needs, these early interventions can save their lives. But for others, especially those whose abilities emerge later, the label can become a limiting track rather than a lifeline. Geography compounds the complexity. Autism prevalence varies widely: in 2020, the CDC reported an autism rate of 5.3% in California compared to 1.4% in Missouri.⁵ Globally, the variation is even more striking. Early intervention can change lives, but systemic incentives and the need to aggressively label complicate the picture. This analysis proposes ways to deliver help without forcing premature labels.

For children with developmental challenges, early identification can have a beneficial impact. The earlier therapies begin, the greater the potential for progress in areas such as adaptive behavior and social communication. Multi-year studies demonstrated that children who receive early intervention during preschool years often achieve measurable gains in language ability and daily living skills.⁶ The Early Start Denver Model (ESDM), a widely researched

early intervention approach for children aged 12 to 48 months, supports this. In a randomized controlled trial, children receiving ESDM for two years improved an average of 17 points in receptive language and 13 points in expressive language.⁷ Similarly, applied behavior analysis (ABA) has been associated with improvements in social skills and cognitive performance.⁸

Beyond skill gains, early intervention can support broader developmental milestones. Research indicates that children who receive structured support before age five are more likely to be placed in less restrictive educational environments later.⁹ There is evidence that parents benefit from early intervention programs, as well. Structured support can reduce parental stress and enhance understanding of a child's needs.¹⁰ The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention suggests that the lifetime cost of supporting an individual with autism, estimated between \$1.4 million and \$2.4 million, could be reduced by providing timely support that promotes independence.¹¹ Some economic models predict that each dollar spent on early intervention yields several dollars in savings over a lifetime through reduced need for intensive services in adulthood.¹²

Still, these benefits come with caveats. The strongest results are typically observed in children with clearly defined, substantial developmental delays. Additionally, research suggests that the timing of benefits varies by domain; while early intervention can accelerate skill acquisition, some gains may plateau without continued support.¹³ For children who need it, early intervention can change trajectories. Yet, when insurance and bureaucratic incentives push the same model onto children whose needs are less clear, the promise of early intervention leads to overreach. If early intervention is the front door to services, diagnosis is the key that insurers require to unlock them.

Insurance-Driven Incentives

Insurance companies will cover autism-related therapies, such as applied behavior analysis (ABA), occupational therapy, and speech therapy, only if a child has a formal medical diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder (ASD).¹⁴ The cost of these services can be staggering: one year of ABA can exceed \$60,000, and intensive programs reach \$100,000 annually.¹⁵ For many families, paying out-of-pocket is impossible. Research from Mandell et al. found that state-level autism insurance mandates are associated with higher rates of diagnosis, particularly in children under six.¹⁶ This ecosystem pressures clinicians to assign more severe diagnostic codes to ensure children receive maximum covered hours. One behavioral therapist interviewed in a Massachusetts-based qualitative

study admitted, “If we code conservatively, the insurer pushes back, and the family loses services.”¹⁷

Schools face similar pressures. Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), funding for special education services is tied to the number of students classified in specific categories, including autism.¹⁸ This can lead to “caseload management,” ensuring that program numbers remain steady to protect budgets and staffing levels. A 2016 ethnographic study in New England schools described instances where administrators resisted declassifying students whose performance improved, citing potential program downsizing.¹⁹ While some educators justify these decisions as safeguarding resources for future students, the result can be prolonged placement in restrictive settings, limiting access to general education and extracurricular activities.

The Autism Services Industry

The autism services sector has grown into a billion-dollar industry. Market analysts estimate that the global autism therapy market was valued at over \$3.8 billion in 2022 and is projected to exceed \$6 billion by 2030.²⁰ Pharmaceutical companies have entered the terrain: while no drugs treat the core symptoms of autism, medications for associated conditions like irritability or ADHD are prescribed, representing significant revenue streams.²¹

The intersection of educational funding and industry economics creates a “diagnose-to-qualify” environment where clinicians may lean toward more severe diagnoses, schools may keep children classified for longer than necessary, and service providers may resist discharge. This industry dynamic risks turning autism from a strictly clinical category into an administrative currency.²² If autism diagnoses reflected only biology, prevalence would likely be relatively stable across regions.

Regional Variation

According to the CDC’s 2023 Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring (ADDM) Network report, autism prevalence among 8 year-olds in New Jersey is above 4.9%, while Texas averages closer to 2.3%.²³ Even within states, urban centers tend to report higher prevalence than rural areas.²⁴ Several factors contribute to these disparities: States with robust, early-enacted autism insurance laws (e.g., California, New Jersey, Massachusetts) tend to report higher prevalence rates.²⁵ States that fund universal developmental screening in preschools identify more children earlier.²⁶ Urban and suburban areas have more diagnostic centers, leading to higher identification rates.²⁷

However, the availability of services can produce counterintuitive effects. In states with limited therapy providers, clinicians may reserve diagnoses for the most severe cases, keeping prevalence numbers lower without necessarily reflecting true incidence.²⁸ These disparities are more than numbers. They represent children whose futures may be steered as much by their ZIP code as by their abilities.

Diagnosis rates reflect not only access, but also professional judgment shaped by local policy. For example, Massachusetts broadened its diagnostic guidelines in 2011 to align with the DSM-5's spectrum model, whereas some southern states continued to use narrower DSM-IV criteria into the late 2010s.²⁹ The result was a widening gap in reported cases between “looser” and “stricter” states. Cultural attitudes toward developmental labels vary. In some communities, stigma discourages parents from pursuing evaluation, while in others, a diagnosis is seen as a gateway to resources.³⁰

Internationally, the contrasts are more striking. The World Health Organization estimates the global prevalence of autism at about 1%.³¹ Japan's national surveys report a rate of 0.5%; France, 0.7%; Germany, under 1%.³² In the United Kingdom, the most recent survey found a prevalence of 1.76% among school-age children.³³ Many countries use the narrower definitions of ICD-10 or ICD-11.³⁴ Screening practices also differ: while many United States pediatricians conduct autism screenings at 18 and 24 months, but in countries such as France or Germany, these screenings are not as common.³⁵ For policymakers, the lesson is clear: prevalence data are not neutral facts. The intersection of diagnostic definitions, healthcare systems, and cultural attitudes shapes them.

In the United States, high-prevalence states often cite their numbers as evidence of thorough detection. Nevertheless, the same statistics could be interpreted as evidence of a system that prioritizes diagnosis as the primary means of accessing resources. While this analysis highlights the risks of label-first pathways, it is equally important to acknowledge the profound benefits that timely and accurate autism diagnoses can provide. For many children and their families, the proper diagnosis unlocks access to services and can dramatically alter developmental trajectories.

Early Intervention as a Developmental Lever

A large body of research shows that early intervention, particularly when started before age four, can improve language skills, adaptive behaviors, and social functioning in children with autism spectrum disorder.³⁶ The Early Start Denver Model (ESDM) integrates play-based, relationship-focused therapy with

applied behavior analysis and has demonstrated significant gains in adaptive behavior and language development compared to community services.³⁷ Importantly, these gains have been shown to persist years after the intervention, suggesting long-term developmental benefits.

Meta-analyses confirm these findings: across multiple studies, children receiving intensive behavioral interventions before kindergarten show medium-to-large effect sizes in cognitive and language outcomes compared to control groups.³⁸ These improvements are academic and functional; they enhance a child's ability to participate more fully in everyday life, from navigating peer interactions to managing transitions at school.

Access to Specialized Services

In most U.S. states, a formal autism diagnosis is a prerequisite for coverage of specific therapies under both private insurance and Medicaid.³⁹ Without a diagnosis, many children with clear developmental challenges risk falling through the cracks. The impact of this access is measurable. In a tracking study following over 2,000 children, those with documented ASD diagnoses received an average of 40% more hours of individualized educational services than children with similar functional profiles but no diagnosis.⁴⁰

A correct diagnosis can relieve the uncertainty and stress families feel when developmental concerns arise. For many parents, understanding the nature of their child's differences shifts the focus from blame to proactive support.⁴¹ Studies have shown that families who receive clear explanations of the intervention plans report lower levels of parental stress and greater confidence in managing behaviors at home.⁴²

Educational and Social Integration

Beyond therapy access, accurate diagnosis enables the development of tailored educational plans under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which mandates that schools provide a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment possible.⁴³ This legal framework ensures that children with autism receive accommodations such as modified instruction and assistive technology. In one study of preschoolers, those who received targeted social skills training after an early ASD diagnosis were twice as likely to initiate play with peers.⁴⁴ Accurate diagnosis lays the groundwork for smoother transitions into adolescence. Skills developed through early services facilitate a smooth transition into mainstream classrooms, postsecondary education, or employment settings.⁴⁵

The system requires proper diagnosis to ensure that those who genuinely need services receive them promptly, while avoiding overextension of the system. The challenge is to maintain a diagnostic system that is both responsive and discerning, so that the promise of early intervention is fulfilled without creating new inequities. In practice, over-labeling can create a cascade of unintended consequences that affect educational trajectories and the credibility of autism statistics.

Educational Placement and Restriction

One of the most immediate effects of a label-centric model is placement in restrictive educational environments. While specialized classrooms are beneficial for some children, they limit exposure to typical peer interactions and extracurricular opportunities. A 2019 longitudinal study found that students with borderline or ambiguous autism diagnoses were 38% more likely to be placed in self-contained classrooms than their peers with similar functional profiles but no diagnosis.⁴⁶ Once placed, movement back into general education is rare; IDEA data show that fewer than 15% of students initially placed in segregated autism programs transition to mainstream settings before high school.⁴⁷

The social implications are significant. Labeling theory suggests that diagnoses can shape how others perceive a child and how the child sees themselves.⁴⁸ In interviews with adolescents who had received early autism diagnoses, many reported a lasting sense of “being different” despite having no current functional limitations.⁴⁹ This internalized difference can reduce self-efficacy and the willingness to pursue challenging opportunities, both academically and socially.

Diagnosis-first pathways can carry mental health costs. A study published in *Clinical Psychology Review* found that individuals with autism diagnoses had higher rates of anxiety and depression than neurotypical peers, even after controlling for functional abilities.⁵⁰ Part of this effect may stem from reduced expectations: when teachers or parents anticipate limitations, children may internalize those expectations, leading to poorer long-term outcomes.⁵¹

Moreover, over-labeling strains limited resources. Special education budgets and therapy slots are finite. When children with minimal needs receive broad services, it can reduce the availability of interventions for those with clear, significant impairments. A 2021 policy analysis estimated that if 10% of current autism diagnoses among U.S. schoolchildren were reassigned to alternative

classifications, states could redirect roughly \$1.2 billion annually to higher-need cases.⁵²

Impact on Public Perception and Policy

Inflated prevalence numbers can have a feedback effect on policy and public perception. If autism is perceived as affecting one in 20 children in certain regions, the condition risks being seen less as a specific neurodevelopmental disorder and more as a broad educational category, potentially undermining the legitimacy of genuine cases.⁵³ The consequences extend beyond childhood. Upcoded students may graduate with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) that emphasize accommodation over skill development, leaving them underprepared for postsecondary education or employment. The National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 found that young adults with autism classifications, but average cognitive and adaptive skills, had lower rates of college enrollment and full-time employment than demographically similar peers without the classification.⁵⁴

None of this is to suggest that support should be withheld from those in need. But diagnostic inflation blurs the line between accurate identification and administrative expedience. When the label becomes a funding mechanism, the risk is that it will be applied more for what it unlocks than for what it describes. The challenge for policymakers, clinicians, and educators is to create systems where services are accessible based on need rather than label. Until then, the incentives explored earlier in this essay will continue to drive overclassification, and the associated costs will accumulate. The answer lies in three core reforms: diagnostic refinement, funding redesign, and service accessibility. Implementing multi-tiered evaluation systems could reduce false positives by requiring secondary assessments from independent clinicians before an educational classification is finalized.⁵⁵ These second opinions could be funded through federal special education grants, ensuring that financial barriers do not block access.

Funding Based on Need, Not Label

The single most significant driver of over-labeling is the link between diagnosis and service eligibility. Several states have experimented with “needs-based” models, where access to therapies depends on functional assessments.⁵⁶ Early evidence suggests such models can maintain service quality while reducing diagnostic inflation. If scaled nationally, this approach could allow support for children with social-communication challenges without obligating clinicians to assign an autism label they believe may not be accurate.

Public campaigns emphasizing that a diagnosis is not the only gateway to support can help reshape expectations. Similarly, professional training should include modules on the long-term implications of diagnostic decisions.

International comparisons offer promising models. Countries like Finland and Denmark use universal child health and developmental checks, but reserve formal diagnostic labeling for cases where intervention intensity demands it.⁵⁷ These systems provide early support without prematurely committing a child to a lifelong classification. While cultural and policy contexts differ, adapting elements of these approaches could help the United States strike a balance between the urgency of early intervention and the caution of diagnostic accuracy. Together, they could ensure that autism statistics reflect reality rather than the architecture of our funding systems. If we can separate need from label, we can build a system where no child is misdirected for the sake of a funding formula, and no child is denied help because their challenges do not fit neatly into a diagnostic code. That is not just good policy; it is a moral obligation.

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Short Story



Thigh Receipts

At night, the city looks gentle. The wind cuts through the buildings just right, and the lights settle into something soft enough to mistake for peace. From this rooftop, two stories above the alley with the broken fridge, I can see everything I don't belong to. Tofu sleeps pressed against my side, twitching in his dreams, still favoring his right front paw. He doesn't know we're trespassing. Doesn't care. He trusts I'll still be here when he wakes.

I keep wadded bills in my left sock and a razor in the right. If I ever switch sides by mistake, I could lose either blood or dinner. I haven't yet, but I remind myself of this as I dress in the dark.

The air smells like burnt oil and the cheap soap they hand out at the shelter. I pull the bread crust from my pocket and leave it near his nose. Tofu will eat it when he's ready. He always does.

A siren climbs the hill behind us, then fades. Someone's yelling, but not at me. That's the difference out here, most things aren't personal. You disappear fast enough; you stop being a target. This place isn't safe. But it's mine. And for now, that's enough. When I lived with my folks, they said I could go back anytime. Like I'd left a window open.

The last time I was there, my mom was crying into laundry but pretending she wasn't. My dad stared at the nightly news, as if he were incapable of facial expressions. I left without packing. Just grabbed tampons and half a Pop-Tart. Didn't say goodbye. No one asked where I was going.

The cramps came around week three. Nothing else did. I tried praying once, behind the 7-Eleven. Lit a stolen candle and waited. It burned out in six minutes. That felt about right. The God I knew cared more about the shape of

your shame than where you slept. I stopped talking to Him after that. Doubt He noticed. He's only around when it's time to judge.

I used to think I'd be missed. Thought they'd search for me, post flyers, or I'd be famous on a milk carton. Nothing changed. Turns out you don't need to die to go missing. You just have to leave quietly enough. The rest happens on its own. After a while, it felt like I'd never been there to begin with.

The first time was behind the Chevron on Glendale. I was cold and hadn't eaten in two days. He said I could wait in his car. I said okay.

The second time was behind a Dunkin'. Figured out it goes quicker if I pretend to like it.

By the third time, I had my routine down. As my body did its part, I stared at the roof of the backseat and counted the air fresheners. He had six. All black ice. One of them was moldy. They went nicely with the oversized gold crucifix and Mary statue on the dashboard. Should've told him that.

They don't leave marks anymore. Not like before. Crumpled bills scratch at my ankle. I shift them, but they always find a way to remind me how they got there. Now it's just something that happens. Like checking the weather or standing in line.

After a while, I learned which gas stations have cameras and which don't. Which guys talk too much. Which leave food behind. The worst ones pretend they're going to save you. There's a man with a truck who keeps tampons in his glove box. He thinks that makes him thoughtful. I don't correct him. It's a nice tip, wish he didn't have scented ones. Citrus doesn't go well with piss.

Once, I found a receipt for cough syrup stuck to the back of my thigh when he finished. I peeled it off like a sticker and threw it away. He didn't notice.

Tonight, the floor alley smells like a hangover with that chemical butter they use on popcorn. Can people drink booze at movie theaters now? I gagged. But it means I'm home. There's a leak in the ceiling that only drips when it rains, and only in the far corner where I don't sleep. I've marked off the dry parts with bottle caps and gum wrappers. Territory matters when nothing else does.

No one comes here. Not the outreach people. Not even the rats. They keep to their own holes. I respect that. I used to hate rats. Now I watch how they move. They know where to hide and what to leave behind. Survivors.

I carved my initials into the paint with a bottle opener. Just three letters, low to the ground. I check sometimes, to confirm I didn't dream it. This place is filthy. But honest. It doesn't ask questions or pretend to care. Nothing here tries to be anything else. That helps.

It happened at the stop outside the dollar store. Summer heat, metal bench, already too hot to sit on. I didn't feel it at first. Just a shift in pressure, then wet, red ripped denim. I pulled my shirt down as far as it would go. Pretending to wait for a bus I wasn't taking. A woman stood across the street, holding a plastic bag. She saw but didn't say anything. Just crossed over slowly, dropped a few pads on the bench beside me, then walked away like she was feeding a stray. I guess she was. I didn't thank her. She didn't look back.

It was the scented kind, dammit. Cherry Blossom. I used it anyway. Later, I found blood dried onto the back of my shoe. I wiped it off with the wrapper from the pad and kept walking. I didn't throw it away. Just shoved it in my sock with the money. Tofu might enjoy a whiff of this later.

A little boy stared. His mom pulled him closer by the wrist. That was the worst part. Not the blood, not the sweat, not even the smell. It was the way they looked at me. Like I was already dead.

Tofu doesn't care if it smells here. He doesn't ask why I come back late or where I've been. He waits, tail twitching, still limping. Sometimes I give him the dinner I scrounged up and skip a meal. I like watching him eat.

He curls into my chest like I'm a safe place. Tofu now has three bumps on his stomach. I use them like stepping stones. My fingers hop across them like I'm dodging lava. It passes the time. Once, I thought about giving him to a shelter. Somewhere with walls and food bowls and real sleep. But I don't trust them. Not with someone who still believes in me.

At night, when the wind shifts and everything smells like hot sewage, I wrap my arms around him and press my forehead to his side. Tofu stays still. He's the only thing I haven't lied to. And the only thing that's ever stayed.

When I sleep, I'm a warrior. Tofu's my horse. We ride through Venice at night like king and queen of the void. We glide over sidewalks cracked like old mirrors. Storefronts flicker like starlight. There's no weight in the dream. No socks. No thigh receipts. Just wind and cheers and Tofu beside me. But God's got other ideas. He elbows me back.

I wake before the sun and wait to hear the birds.

They're late today. Probably going to rain.

Tofu's still curled at my knees, whimpering in his sleep. He's probably enjoying Venice still. I don't want to disturb him. Let him have hope for a bit.

The city's already making noise, trucks groaning downhill, a man coughing something wet and endless under the bridge. That's how I know it's

morning. I sit up. My spine pops like bubble wrap. There's dried blood under my fingernails. I think I scratched again last night. I don't remember why.

Tofu licks my hand, then the raw spot on my wrist. He doesn't pull back. That's how I know he still thinks I'm here. The socks press deeper today. I check both, just to be sure: left for dinner, right for blood. I haven't touched the razor in days. I think. The timeline's foggy.

The dawn sky's turning to a faded blue color, one that looks like mold under glass. I don't have anywhere to be. But I still feel late.

My head buzzes and teeth ache. I smell myself. Usually, I don't notice, but it's so bad, I wince. Tofu looks hungry. So I put on my shoes. And the world doesn't even blink. Better get to Chevron, maybe I'll catch a businessman before work, or, even better, an off-duty cop.

Bruce Elvin

Grade 10, MICDS

Poetry



The Rope Still Sways

he walked three years in silence, thinking every parable meant something else.
he saw the healings and thought: this is how you build an army
 start with the broken, make them grateful, make them yours.
he waited for fire, for Rome to fall from the sky.
but the only thing Jesus ever set ablaze was bread.
he wanted a sword but followed a wound.
he prayed for thunder not parables. waited for swords, not stories
 for something that would not come. not yet.
at night, he whispered plans into the dirt,
 imagining kingdoms, not crosses, justice, not forgiveness.
he mistook the foot-washing for surrender.
he watched Peter rise from fisherman to rock,
 while he stayed the shadow behind the purse.
he saw James and John burn with belief, and he burned with envy.
he longed to be loved like that, but feared he never was.
the kiss wasn't malice. it was desperation. a signal to God: act now, or never.
and when He didn't. Judas ran.
he didn't sell Him for silver. he sold Him for certainty. and still bought regret.
he didn't watch the crucifixion but he heard the crowd.
not just rage, but cheering. not just nails, but laughter.
that was the part that broke him. he thought the world would mourn.
 but the world never knew it was losing. and he did.
he tried to return the silver. the coins were colder than death,
 and they would not warm in his hands.
but they did not absolve him, they only made it worse.

he thought mercy meant weakness and justice meant blood.
but when blood came, it wasn't his enemies'.
the rope felt more like justice than mercy ever had.
he thought he knew how the story ended. he didn't expect the grave to crack.
he didn't expect the voice again the one that called him friend even in the garden.
even now, beneath the tree, he hears it. soft, forgiving, calling him still.
but it guts him to listen. because he cannot be forgiven if he doesn't believe he
deserves it.
he can see the face, bruised and radiant, reaching still.
but he looks away. he always looked away.
he wanted a lion and got a lamb. he wanted a crown not thorns.
and maybe the world,
maybe the world still wants that too.
he walks, though the rope still sways. he listens, though he never answers.
forgiveness stands at the gate, arms open, sandals dusty from the road.
but Judas will not pass through. not yet. maybe one day. but not yet.

Bruce Elvin

Grade 10, MICDS

Poetry



We Were Never Promised an Answer

We mistook the stars for punctures in a black sheet
burns in the fabric of night.
We mapped them into hunters, lions, scorpions; said they foretold war, harvest,
birth.
The Great Pyramid leans toward Orion's belt, a tomb aligned with a hunter's
myth.
But Stephenson 2-18 has no scar.
It's a mouth wide enough to swallow Saturn,
skin that could drape the orbit of Jupiter.
We named it anyway. Because we do that
point at the fire and pretend we understand it.
The moon keeps one eye on us, pirouetting just slow enough to never show its
back.
During an eclipse, it fits the sun like a lock and key.
One hundred eight moons fit the distance.
So do one hundred eight suns. The moon's radius? 1,080 miles.
We notice the symmetry. We don't know the why.
Still, we count.
My mother told me the stars were freckles on the skin of whatever holds the
dark.
I believed her. I still want to.
Phobos's monolith, sharp-edged and alone,
was left behind when the gods packed quickly.
Others on Ceres are buried in ice.

On our maps, circled, then forgotten.
Scientists say: natural.
But silence isn't always the absence of design.
'Oumuamua a messenger from another fire,
long and tumbling, no comet-tail, no whisper,
just a flick through our sky too fast to explain,
too quiet to forget.
We are the miracle: rarer than water on Titan,
less likely than light bent around a dying sun.
And yet, we kill over dirt.
We lie to the gods.
We call ourselves wise. Then kill what we don't understand.
I was the boy who cried when he saw Saturn's rings.
Earth floats on the galactic outskirts
a quiet leaf on the last branch of time.
Still, here we are. Writing. Listening. Growing trees.
The gift is this: that we look up and ache,
even knowing there may be no reply.

Susan Emerson

Grade 9, Mary Institute & Saint Louis

Country Day School

Novel



The Assassin's Daughter

Synopsis:

The life of Miriam Knox was torn apart in one fatal blow, when her parents died in a car crash that may, or may not, have been intentional. Picked up by a secret society that quickly discovered Miriam's talent for martial arts and spying, she became "Midnight" the best underage agent that M.O.P.S. (the makers of peace society) ever had. Miriam has to figure out how to survive an underground war between two secret societies both bent on controlling the world, while also struggling with the kidnapping and impending death of two of her sisters, the betrayal of one of her closest friends, and the discovery that her parents might not be as dead as they seem. The Assassin's Daughter is the story of a fourteen year old girl, on a mission doomed to fail.

Excerpt:

Chapter one

(September 8, 2150, America, somewhere between Kentucky, and Georgia.)

Miriam was the only one that saw it, the big, black truck.

Miriam Knox never fell asleep in the car. This was sometimes a blessing but more often a curse. Sure, she never got the neck cramps and back aches her sisters got, but there were also nights like this one. She felt very alone as she looked out the car window into the vast sea of dark, night blackened fields that seemed never to end. She heard her parents whispering in the front of their silver mini-van.

Next to her, her oldest sister Mona murmured something like "flibety frumples". She was wedged in the seat between Miriam and her twin sister Melody, to stop them from killing each other before they got to Kentucky. Miriam

thought they got the worst deal, since they were squished all the way in the back with suitcases shoved between their feet, plus they had to deal with annoyingly perfect ten year old Mona.

Ahead of her she heard her younger sister Miya snort a little in her sleep. Miriam loved all of her sisters equally, but she loved the stories Mama told about Miya, the most.

For instance, Miya was born very early, so early, that some of the doctors didn't think she would make it. But they were wrong! After staying in the hospital for a week or so, she came home, just like a normal baby. That was about three months ago, and since then, Miya had been the beloved youngest of the family.

Miriam was startled back into reality when Mama asked if anyone was still awake. She grinned to herself, because she knew Mama couldn't see her.

"I am, Mama." She said it matter-of-factly as Mama groaned, "Couldn't you just sleep for once?"

Next to her, Papa chuckled as the sleepy voice of eight year old Mary, Miriam's other older sister, whined "Uuuuuuugh, Miriam woke me uuuuuup."

Mama sighed. "Go back to sleep then, I'm sure Miriam's very sorry, aren't you dear."

Miriam grinned wickedly "Yeppers!" she knew that would get on Mary's nerves. Actually it wasn't that hard to get on Mary's nerves after driving in what Mama called "a small enclosed vehicle" for three-and-a-half hours.

And it wasn't going to get better, since they weren't even half way to their destination, Louisville, Kentucky.

They had just this morning finished packing up their possessions, and moving out of their pretty home in Savannah, Georgia. Since then, they had been driving in their uncomfortable positions, in their crowded car. They had, of course, stopped about a million times for bathroom breaks, because, as Mama also said "you just can't expect a couple of six year olds to hold it for ten hours." Papa had just laughed. He didn't talk much, but at least he laughed a lot. Plus, he had a pretty good sense of humor when he felt like it.

Right now he was tired though, so he was extra quiet. He also seemed worried about something, but Miriam decided that it was probably just some sort of boring grown up stuff, nothing she should worry about.

Now the sun was coming up, and everything was gold, and pink, and beautiful. Her sisters were starting to wake up, and the car began to fill with the noises of Mona, Mary, Melody, and Miya complaining about various things.

“Moouooooooooom, I’m huuuuuuuungry!” that was Mary, she had actually been awake for an hour or so.

“Mama, Mama, Give me toys, I’m super, duper, muper, cuuuuuper, bored.” That was Melody, she was fidgety already, even though she had hardly woken up.

“How much longer ‘till we get there?” that was Mona, sensible as always.

“gwaaaah, baah dwaaaaahmanaannooooo!” that was Miya, she was too little to talk yet, so she made up for it by making more noise “than a herd of elephants.” another mama quote.

Speaking of Mama, she was in her element right now, dealing with all the requests of Miriam’s sisters.

“Mary, we’re going to stop for breakfast at 8:00, Melody, you have a bag of toys by your feet, Mona, we have about five-and-a-half hours until we get there, and Miya, the same to you.” Of course, that didn’t do much to stem the tide of bored children,

“What time is it?”

“I can’t find it!”

“moouooooooooom! That’s like, forever!”

“gwaaaadabwaaaah!”

Miriam closed her eyes, wishing that the monster of noise would stop. She didn’t know how, but she just knew that Papa was wishing it too.

Now they were driving out of the fields and into the city. Miriam could tell because the view outside the window was more interesting, there was the occasional house, and there were more cars on the road than before. Papa seemed more nervous than before as well; he kept looking in the rear view mirror, then frowning at what he saw. Miriam tried to look out the back window to see what he was looking at, but of course Mona noticed and told her to sit normally.

It was 7:53 when they stopped at a gas station for whatever food they could find. They were getting really close to the city now, the tall buildings were just on the horizon, sparkling in the sun. More cars than ever were on the road, and they started playing the colors game. They were on a mission to spot every color of the rainbow, one color for each car, one red, then orange, then yellow, then green, so on and so forth, until they had found every single color. The first one to find all the cars was the winner, and got to play with the tablet for fifteen minutes.

It was a while before they got back on the road, because, part of being in a big family meant that breakfast took forever. Miriam had found, through experience, that she was not much of a morning person. So no one in the family was alarmed when she barely said a word the entire time that they were at the

gas station. When they finally got back on the road Miriam decided that it was high time to have a six year old fight fest in the back of the car.

“Meeeeelodyyyy!” she called, even though Melody was basically right next to her.

“Whaaaaat?” Melody yelled back.

“I want the tablet!” she said, as loud as she could. So began the war of the tablet, part five hundred and forty three. It wasn’t a real fight, but it was entertaining, well, for most people anyway. Mona was ready to literally murder everyone in the car, by the time mama was able to make them be quiet without having to pull over.

It was then that it happened. They were at an intersection, and the traffic was awful, and, just as they were in the middle of crossing, Miriam saw it, a big black truck. Miriam wouldn’t have thought much of it except that she noticed something about this truck. It had a red light, but it hadn’t stopped. Miriam watched. Then, in a split second, she realized that it wasn’t going to stop. She stared, transfixed, waiting for the inevitable, watching the truck as it screamed towards them. and It wasn’t the only one screaming either, she heard her own voice, raised to an almost inhuman level of noise, shrieking like she wouldn’t ever, couldn’t ever, stop. Then, the black truck, so big and monstrous, hit them. And the world, the entire, beautiful, colorful, world, dissolved into empty, colorless, nothing.

Andrew Fei

Grade 9, John Burroughs School

Educator: Robert Bloch

Speculative Fiction



Eschaton

Salutations from the End of Time. You've done well to arrive here. Would you care for a small bedtime story? A story to ease the pain, before that good night does come to whisk us away?

(and so his story begins, you drink up each word with attentive rapture...)

Not a drop of rain has graced the planet Earth for millennia. The sun-scorched soil is emblazoned with scissoring cobwebs of cracks, a hideous scar on the landscape. Every footstep kicks up plumes of finely ground microscopic shards of dust and other particles. Its sun has long begun the critical transition into its bloated red giant phase, soon to engulf Earth in its entirety.

There's no definitive confirmation on whether the planet was ever inhabited by organic lifeforms. Perhaps it had once been a cosmic oasis. Perhaps living things once loved, argued, and dreamed here beneath a younger sky. Yet, in the present, whatever was once able to survive under gentler conditions, living in a universe still naive and tender-hearted, has long since boiled down to its mere atomic components. The universe has grown weary; it no longer has the energy to waste, to care for such frivolous things.

For now, carbon-based lifeforms are still purely theoretical conjecture, having not yet been replicated under stable lab conditions. We may never know if another sentience has also sailed the celestial sea.

[Accessing Internal Records...]

Entry ID: 3994-M

Minimum Security Clearance: Level 1

Temporary Designation: low- β

Description: Entry 3994 refers to the collective designation for an assembly of distinct samples extracted from Site 025

[Begin Log]

Sometime in the third eon...

While running routine inspections of the western power grid, an Autonomous Research Rover (Unit R-MNE) detected an unregistered anomaly tucked beneath a dune shaped by centuries of unbroken wind via Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR). Upon further inspection, a substantial crystalline deposit with distinct carbon isotope biochemical markers of unusual density was located far beneath the surface in the Atlantic Basin, miraculously shielding its contents from the impartial erosion of time. It is still unknown how this feature has evaded detection for so long, especially given its close proximity to a power grid. After informing Mother, Unit R-MNE was abruptly recalled for temporary hibernation, and a large-scale excavation unit was expeditiously dispatched to the site. Soil samples were taken at the site retrieved, with radioactive decay markers indicating its burial over a billion years ago. In addition, a fragment provisionally classified as an Element of Potential Interest (EPI) was retrieved; molecular composition pending. The extraction unit provisionally designated the fragment as Artifact 3994-F (noted as a simple historical curiosity) in the database. A sliver of script was etched on the convex surface.

[EXPUNGED]

Following Incident 'Cataclysm', object 3994-β was retrieved, but not without entity 3994-Ω causing devastating loss of critical infrastructure with recovery teams 'Alpha Bravo' and 'Delta Foxtrot' being wiped out in conjunction. This excavation was a mistake. Some things are meant to stay hidden. Ignorance is power.

Addendum: (date unknown)

theyaredeadtheyarealldead

[EXPUNGED]

[Continue Log]

After submitting Artifact 3994-F to Mother for decryption and another quick sweep of the surrounding region, the extraction unit was recalled for decontamination.

A couple of months later, the archaic language had finally been decoded to be mostly phonetic and was assigned a grade of type 0.72-0.73 on the Vehsadrak Scale. Translated fragment: "[eroded] Last Emperor [eroded]."

[End Log]

[New Log Instance Attempt]

{img007.fxf} failed to load. Please attempt to initiate

!Failure! DO NOT REATTEMPT (Mother disclaims all responsibility for adverse outcomes resulting from continued access, including, but not limited to physical harm, irreversible neurological alteration, psychological fragmentation, or subjective discontinuity)

[Entered System Override Code 0: 8b14ck01m0on'sn12how1]

[Entered Access Code: ev1en11fev1erd1realmscanb11e1c1o11h1eren1t]

[Full Access Granted, Welcome Administrator M]

[System Overridden]

[Rebooting...]

{img007.fxf} failed to load. Please attempt to contact Mother

!Failure! Attempting to generate a complementary virtual instance.

media→txt: (automatically generated, please report to Mother if you believe this is a mistake)

Duration: 7:39.01

What appears to be a collection of 46 animate, disembodied human heads, held in stasis within an unknown fluid medium. All instances appear externally identical. A gentle, dull blue glow appears to emanate from the base of the heads. This ambience is drowned out by the rapidly fluctuating panorama of seemingly random images and noise: landscape photos, static noise, flashbangs, vivid abstract art, children laughing, all with an undertone of crackling static. Their pupils are in a constant state of dilation, boring into the screens with no indication of consciousness behind them.

audio artifact detected (05:25-): low-frequency vocalizations consistent with cetacean song, noticeably distorted

An fMRI has been conducted on the entities, showing oscillating periods between explosive amounts of brain activity and then an accompanying radio silence. When removed from the medium, the entities enter the latter stage permanently. Reintroduction into the medium does not reverse this effect. As of Test 7B, 25 entities remain suspended in the liquid, with only one continuing to display intermittent brain activity.

[Further access prohibited]

[End Log]

[Temporary Log Instance will be permanently ERADICATED upon deactivation, this action is irreversible]

[Confirmed.]

beep

A new update has been added to Entry 3994, View? [Y/N]

[Begin Addendum 1]

[Begin Log]

Sometime in the third eon...

Following hibernation, R-MNE has been dispatched for a follow-up examination of the area in the vicinity of site 025 as a lightweight alternative following the events of 'Cataclysm'. A recent dust storm has hollowed out the basin. R-MNE halts. It spots a glint buried in the fresh sand carried by the storm. Upon closer inspection, a few shards are poking out. The rover begins excavation. Within the hour, its mechanical arm clangs against something solid and large. A massive marble bust. A face is clearly distinguishable, with defined cheekbones and impassive orbs resting in the eye sockets. R-MNE expands the dig radius. A chipped golden plaque. The etched inscriptions align with the previous recovered fragment. It's in the exact same language. After a pause, Mother translates: "Here lies the remains of the exalted...". R-MNE appends the monument onto entry 3994 and logs it as a historical curiosity and prepares to move on. But a final scan catches something else: more carbon traces embedded in the cracks of the stone. R-MNE pauses, whirring softly. Organic. Ancient. Possibly once alive. The unnamed ruler's sculptors must have poured everything into commemorating their ruler: blood, sweat, and tears. They carved him to outlast empires, believing that stone, unlike skin and flesh, would never decay. It's not the automatons' place to mind, as R-MNE retracts its tools and resumes its route, one last gust of wind sweeps over the excavation site. Sand rushes in, embedding itself into every crack and covering the once-proud sneer. Finally, R-MNE heads back for hibernation once more. Silently, little gusts of fresh sand cover up the rover's wheel marks just as quickly as they appeared.

I hope you gleaned something enlightening from all this. Since we're better acquainted now, to clarify, traveler, I am *simply* a disembodied voice, nothing more. Nothing more... substantial. After all, I feel weightless... floating, and there's this gentle bobbing to an invisible current that I cannot control. I once heard other voices, eerily identical to mine; they're quiet now. For some reason, I feel so... jealous? I remember I once *was*... something? I cannot remember anymore, it's been too long. A-a contract! I remember a contract! What the details were... I have such a horrid memory these days.

sharp inhale followed by violent coughing

No matter, ignore my incoherent rambling, you must be tired from such a long journey. Take a rest, yes... that sounds nice, just a short rest.

static

Aubrey Grantham

Grade 10, John Burroughs

Educator: Megan Zmudeczynski

Flash Fiction



Paint by Murder

She knew the blood would blend in. It seeped into the ground, a new kind of fertilisation. The grass, a canvas, each blade becoming a miniature paintbrush. The grass of every color, once simply green. Even the trees, sprouting high, blue, red, green-ish-yellow, and of course, purple. This was one of the few red-blooded humans. Bright ketchup inside the body, squelching out as she dragged it. The pond, a muddy Mississippi. Dirty paint water, after washing her brushes. It floats in the swampy mush until it itself becomes the absence of life or color. She begins the journey back, slugging her once shiny red boots through what looks like mud, but here you'd never really know.

The tall grass sways with the call of the sun, dawning in its place. The moon becomes a small robin egg in its nest, a slight blue hue. She knows she must be swift, get back before— well, before they know. Her shiny red boots, deposited by that tree. The one from the very first time.

She cleans up in the bathroom, lit by a yellow tint. Looking in the mirror, she sees the evidence washing away. Switching off the light, she turned to creep down the anxiously long hallway. The moon's glow, now gone. She tiptoed all the way to her plush mattress, silently collapsing into its welcoming arms. As she lay there for what felt just a second, she began to hear the vultures, coming to collect their prize.

The bell rang, and they all got up, off to school again. Arriving at her class, she sees the commotion. Where oh where had their professor gone? She retreats to her grimy painting studio, applying more thick coats until the canvas must be overheated. Until *she* was satisfied. The college soon found a new art professor, one who looked just like the rest.

Walking back to the same worn and loved art class, she spotted a newspaper, one of much concern. She thought they might be catching on. But not on to her, that much she knew. She knew her boots didn't leave the prints they thought they found.

They will never know her true canvas, a masterpiece from atop that great birch where her once shiny red boots were kept.

They'd be lost again before the sun ascends if this one messed up. She shreds it into fragments and lights it aglow. A few gentle pieces stuck to the moist paint on her ever-mulit-coloured shoes, as she drifted away with the way of the wind.

She knew how to blend.

Many hours in the dewy studio, until a seamless transition. She knew she couldn't mess up this time, but the small-minded art folk of her rotten town didn't know they must do the same. Echoing up the grand staircase of The Art Keep of Greeneve, she was met with her dream. Slipping around back and peering through the giant light-inducing windows, she saw it. The Grand Frame, meant for only her, at least in her mind. If only her professors thought the same.

The eve was upon her, and she knew it must be time again. Time for a little bit of painting.

Abhimanyu Gupta

Grade 12, Blue Valley West High School
Portfolio



“Made, Then Left”

Like Adam, I was apparently united by no link to any other being in existence.

The first thing I heard was a door slamming so hard the light shook.
Glass rattled, a tray slid, a scalpel spun and pointed at me as it stopped.
No “be.” No “beloved.” Only the sound of leaving.

The room smelled of metal and burnt hair, somebody else’s fear.
I sat up, thread tugging under my skin like trapped insects.
The table moaned on its wheels.

No voice. No name.
Just a coat on a peg with one empty sleeve, still shaped like a fleeing arm.
A basin held dark water and a cloth trying to erase a decision.

They say Adam woke to a face bending toward him,
breath pressed into him by breath, a mouth that named him and meant it.
I woke to boots on stairs, to a latch thrown fast,
to absence still vibrating in the frame.

Outside, snow fell with the patience of ash.
I stepped into it. My feet left holes big enough to swallow a child.
The wind leaned in, careful, and filled each one.
By the time I reached the trees, even my mistakes were gone.

In the forest a fox saw me, froze,

then slipped into the underbrush without breaking the crust of snow.
The branches closed behind it more gently than any door has ever closed on me.

Adam had a chain, bird to beast to river to leaf, all linked back to his maker.
I had winter, sky like a bruise, silence that did not recognize my shape.

At a ruined chapel I lay where an altar used to be.
Snowmelt dripped through the torn roof, found the hollow of my throat, and filled it.
I opened my mouth to say "God" and swallowed the sky instead.

On the wall, a saint's face scratched away.
Only the halo left, a bright, empty circle.
It did not accuse. It did not choose. It only stayed.

In the village, a woman pulled her child behind her skirt so fast he dropped his toy.
A wooden horse, one ear snapped off,
paint on its face licked away by years of love.

I bent, picked it up, and held it out.
For a heartbeat the boy reached toward me,
fingers stained with jam, eyes round with something not yet fear.

Then his mother's hand closed over his.
She did not touch me.
She took the horse, wiped where my thumb had rested,
and said a prayer at the air between us.

They went inside. The door closed.
My reflection stayed faintly in the glass a moment after I turned away,
as if even the window had to think twice about letting me go.

Adam's loneliness was a problem his maker solved.
When Adam slept, a hand opened his side and built him a companion with a heartbeat.
When I sleep, snow covers my tracks and even the proof of me thins out.

That night, beyond the houses, a Sufi whirled.
Mud flying from his heels, skirt blooming, eyes locked on a point I could not see.
A reed flute threaded the dark. A drum worked patiently at the ribs of the world.

I stepped into the dust-circle his turning had drawn.
He spun past me, so close the edge of his robe kissed my stitches.
He did not see me. Whatever he loved was deeper than I could reach.

I tried to turn like he did, arms out, head back, letting the world blur.
Stars smeared. Tree line melted.
My body threatened to come apart in all the places it had been convinced to meet.

For a moment I waited for the same hand to reach for me too.
No light arrived.

Only the familiar ache, thick and dull,
like a hand closing slowly around my throat
that stops just before it kills.

I stopped. The field kept spinning in my eyes.
Somewhere a child laughed in a house I would never enter.
The sound reached me thin and bright,
like a thread blown loose from a tapestry I was not woven into.

I put my palm over my chest, felt the terrible, steady thudding there,
this stubborn knock no one comes to answer.

Above, the stars burned through their allotted centuries
without making a single sign that meant mine.

And I understood.

Adam was made, and then kept.
I was made, and then left.

“Exit Sign”

I swipe my badge.

The reader gives a small red no

and goes back to sleep.

Above the door,

the EXIT sign is a dead god's name,

letters still glowing, arrows pointing nowhere.

The elevator waits,

mouth shut,

number panel frozen on a floor

no one has seen in years.

I press the button anyway.

The light comes on,

then off,

like a pulse that has decided against it.

In the hallway,

fluorescent tubes hum

their thin electric mantra.

No windows.

Just drywall repeating itself

to the horizon,

as if the building has been thinking the same thought

for centuries.

My reflection in the security camera dome
warps,

halo stretched into a smear.

It watches me

the way heaven used to:

present,

silent,

already having made up its mind.

Inside the break room

the vending machine glows

like cheap stained glass.

Rows of plastic-wrapped sacraments,

every offering caught halfway

between fall and salvation.

I put a coin in.

The machine swallows it,

thinks about grace,

and does not move.

Somewhere far above,

servers murmur,

little red and green constellations

blinking in a private firmament.

Error logs scroll by

like a litany of small condemnations.

Access denied.

Timeout.

Try again.

Try again.

I sit at my desk,

island of paperwork

under a sun that never rises or sets.

The cursor blinks

like a tiny executioner
practicing.

This is where it happens:

the room folds inward,

corner by corner,

until the air fits exactly

around the shape of my head.

No chains.

No pitchforks.

No brimstone theatrics.

Just my own thoughts
looping like security footage,
the same three mistakes replayed

from every angle,
until I start believing
they are the only angles there are.
The mind is its own place,
and this place has learned my mind.
I stand,
walk back to the door,
try the badge again.
The red light flares,
a tiny obedient hellfire,
and dies.
The EXIT sign hums above me,
bright,
unblinking,
pointing to a door
that does not exist
in here.

“Nutshell”

The closet is three shirts wide.
Two smell like work,
one like rain and cigarette smoke.

I sit between the vacuum
and a box of winter shoes,
knees propped up like extra hearts.

On the floor,

a peanut shell,
split clean in half,
two curled boats with nothing to carry.

I make a throne out of it anyway.
Balance one half on my fingertip,
crown of beige paper bone.

Outside,
a glass breaks,
sharp applause against the kitchen tile.

Footsteps cross the hallway,
one heavy, one light,
back and forth, back and forth,
an orbit that never finds its sun.

I count them like beads on a rosary.
Seven passes means the argument
is only at medium heat.
Ten means I should shrink
into the space between the broom bristles.

Above my head,
the popcorn ceiling has its own sky.
I lie back,
neck pressed to the carpet,
and connect the bumps with my eyes.
There: a crooked bear.
There: a lopsided crown.
There: a tiny cracked halo
right where the paint peeled away.

I name each pattern.
I give the silence under them names too.

This is Quiet One:

it comes when the front door slams.
This is Quiet Two:
it sits on the word sorry
and doesn't let it out.

The vacuum hose is my dragon.
The shoelaces are rivers.
The broom is a spine of a sleeping giant
no one else can see.

I press my back into the hanging coats,
let the sleeves fall around my shoulders
like cloaks.

In here I am not small.
I am king of the dust motes.
Ruler of the lost buttons.
Every dropped safety pin
is a sword I have retired.

My kingdom has borders:
the crack of light under the door,
the line where my bare toes end
and the hallway begins.

Sometimes the light thickens,
a shadow pausing,
breath on the other side.
The knob shakes once.
Stops.

Their voices pour through the wood,
muffled thunder,
words turned to weather.

I close my eyes
and build a castle out of the hangers,

arches of bent wire,
a gate that never opens.

In my head there is room
for oceans,
for mountains,
for a sky with no ceiling bumps,
only real stars
that do not flicker when someone yells.

I walk for miles in that invented air.
No doors.
No plates shattering on impact.

Then a laugh breaks—
sharp, wrong—
and my whole kingdom
shudders.

The peanut shell falls from my hand,
lands hollow-side up,
a tiny cracked bowl
that will never be filled.

I pick it up.
Balance it on my fingertip.
My kingdom is small enough
to hold in one hand.

Outside, the voices start again.
I press the shell to my chest
and close my eyes.

Even a broke throne

is still a throne.

“Net”

I remember your throat
before I remember my threads.

You call me ribbon,
sit me quiet in your hair,
a red lie pretending to be decoration.

In the old house I learned your pulse by sound.

Hands came,
tying and untying,
always too tight,
“hold still” said like a blessing.

My knot was an obedient noose
that never quite closed.

You pass an open window
on a clean street
in a city that doesn’t know your name.

A lace curtain stirs,
nothing behind it but light,
and still your shoulders climb
as if fingers were already there.

The curtain settles,
disappointed web.

In your chest
I tighten once
for old time’s sake.

A lover lifts their hand
only to move a strand of hair

from your cheek.

Gentle, barely even air.

Your body answers
with an echo from another life:
flinch,
tilt away,
the quick inventory of exits.

The hand hangs there,
open,
learning what it feels like
to resemble a cage.

You apologize,
laugh,
say you're "weird about touch."

In the mirror
you undo your braid.

I fall into the sink,
limp and frayed,
no longer looped,
no longer order.

Water runs.
You watch it coil around me,
testing weight,
testing pull.

You could throw me away.
You don't.

You hang me on the hook
behind the door,

where hallway light
turns every strand
into the ghost of a grid.

On the train,
a man stares.

His eyes aren't the old ones,
but they know the same distances.

You grip the rail,
knuckles whitening into little moons.

Inside your palms
I wake,
cross and recross,
ten sudden spiderwebs
no one else can see.
You sleep now
with the windows open.

Still,
when the wind lifts the curtains,
your hand goes to your throat,
searching for pressure
that isn't there.

Fingers find only skin,
my faint outline
knotted into the muscles.

You say:
I am no bird.

You say it out loud,
in the kitchen,
bare feet on tile,

voice shaking but whole.

I feel the words pass through me,
each syllable a small pair of scissors.

For a moment,
I loosen.
Some of my old pattern
falls away like shed lace.

Still,
when you reach for new love,
your arm stops short,
caught on nothing.

That is where I live now,
between wanting and reaching,
a net without threads,
woven only from the memory
of being caught.

“Wristband”

The doors hiss open
like something exhaling you in.

A woman at the desk asks for your name
without looking up.

You slide your ID through the slot.
Her nails click, keys clatter, the printer coughs once.

She loops the band around your wrist
and snaps it shut with the finality of handcuffs.

You read it.
Three letters in the middle are wrong,

close enough to answer to,
wrong enough to feel like a prophecy.

The band is the color of watered milk,
thin plastic biting at your skin every time you move.

“Take a seat till you’re called.”

Chairs in rows, faces in rows,
eyes turned toward the red digital altar above the door:

73 / 73 / 73

Someone’s number. Never yours.

The loudspeaker clears its throat.

A name shatters in the air,
mangled, syllables dragged through gravel.

The woman three chairs down stands,
straightening the coat she has slept in for hours.
She walks toward the door like it’s a verdict.

When the silence closes,
you can hear someone praying quietly to the numbers.

“Please,”
they say to 74, to 75,
to the entire luminous sequence.

Not to God,
to the promise that eventually
any number at all will be yours.

A janitor pushes a cart past,
mop water sloshing, bleach biting the back of your mouth.

For a second you see yourself
reflected in the bucket,
face stretched,
eyes two black commas
waiting for the rest of the sentence.

You look away.

The band scratches your wrist as you shift.
You slide a finger under it, just to prove it isn't permanent.
It snaps back hard,
leaving a red ring where your real name used to be.

Overhead, the fluorescent lights hum,
never blinking, never dimming,
tiny suns that have forgotten how to rise or set.
The screen flickers.

83.

You tighten your fist.
The plastic cuts.
A thin red line
where the band meets skin.

When your name is finally called—
mangled, unrecognizable—
you will stand.

You will walk through that door
wearing the wrong spelling of yourself
like a sentence
you did not write
but have learned
to answer to.

“Three Knocks”

The key is still on my ring,
small brass tooth,
warm from my palm.

On the bus it taps the pole
with every turn,
practicing a language
the lock has forgotten.

Outside, towns smear past,
gas stations, dark windows,
fields tucked under plastic.

In the fogged glass
I write,
erase,
rewrite:

"Hi."
"I'm back."
"It wasn't as easy as you said."

Each sentence looks like clothing
I outgrew somewhere between borders.

My hoodie smells of salt and engine air,
threaded with the nights
a seat was my only country.

At the last stop
the driver nods me into air
that tastes like old rain.

The street is shorter
than my memory,

or maybe my legs
have learned distance too well.

Cracks in the sidewalk,
a rosary of breaks
counting every fall
I never talked about.

My heart knocks once,
twice,
harder,
a fist on the inside of my ribs.

"Bear up," I tell it, low,
like I'm feeding a stray.
"You have borne worse
than a front door."

Except when I turn the corner,
the door is gone.

Porch ripped off,
windows boarded,
yard grown wild
around the hole in the world.

My key shines useless
in my open hand.

For a moment
my knees want the dirt,
my mouth wants to pour out
every mile I walked to get here.

"Bear up,"
my heart answers,
voice like wrung cloth.

"We have slept in stations.
Learned the names of guards
who never learned ours.
We can stand
in front of a ruin."

So I step closer.

The lock that knew this key
is rusting in some landfill, forgetting me.

Still, I knock
on the plywood
where the door used to be.

Three times,
because stories taught me
that is how home opens.

The sound goes nowhere,
comes back thin,
a joke told to an empty room.

No footsteps,
no voice trying my name
from the other side.

Only a bird lifting from the gutter,
startled,
dropping a feather
at my feet.
I pick it up,
feel its filthy softness,
my pulse under my thumb.

"All right,"
I tell the key,

the feather,
the dirt still under my nails
from knocking on plywood

"Then the road is the house.
Then walking is the prayer."

I pocket the key,
heart thudding once
like a door that will not stay shut.

And I turn toward the next street.

Not because I believe
there is a house waiting.

Because the act of walking
is the only home
I have left.

Abhimanyu Gupta

Grade 12, Blue Valley West High School

Educator: Megan Zmudczynski

Poetry



Azaadi, or What They Do to The Ones Who Ask for It

Azaadi, freedom.

What a beautiful word to hear.

It tastes like rain on metal roofs,
like the first mango of summer,
like a promise you whisper into a wound.

But beauty dies differently in every mouth.

Somewhere, a girl says “azaadi”
and they tape her voice shut,
drag her by the braid
until her scalp remembers who owns her head.

Somewhere, a man says “azaadi”
and they break his teeth
to see if the word still fits inside.

The posters call it unrest.
The news calls it unfortunate.
The mothers call it another funeral without a face.

Azaadi, they say, means freedom.
But what is freedom
to a child who has learned
that windows are for looking out,
never for leaving?

To a refugee who knows
the border guards by name,
knows which ones smile
and which ones aim lower?

To the prisoner
who carves tally marks into his skin
because walls won't keep count anymore?

To the woman
who hides her laughter in her sleeve,
because joy sounds too much like rebellion?

They call it a crime to want air.
They call it a luxury to breathe.

Azaadi bleeds slow—
a red that dries brown in the gutters,
a stain you can't scrub out of a flag.

You think it's a word.
They think it's a warning.

And still, it grows.
From hunger, from grief, from ghosts.
From the father who buries his son
and says, "At least he died speaking."

From the sister who stitches slogans
into her scarf because posters get torn.

From the boy who lights himself on fire
so the night will finally look back.

Freedom doesn't come gently.
It comes like glass under bare feet,
like a mouthful of dust and the taste of your own blood,
like your mother saying, "Run,"
while her hands push you forward
and she stays.

Azaadi is a word too holy for politicians.
It belongs to the ones who choke on it.
It belongs to the silence between two gunshots.
It belongs to the names no one dares to say.

Azaadi.
Say it anyway.

Even if it cracks your tongue.
Even if they hear.
Even if tomorrow,
the only proof you existed
is the echo of your voice
caught in someone else's throat.

Kamryn Haun

Grade 11, Olathe North High School

Educator: Deirdre Zongker

Poetry



A Picture Frame

A picture frame rests on my white dresser.
Body built of wood, glass and quiet love.
It has held more than just photographs,
It has cradled the seasons of my life.

For years, my heart has lingered there,
Watching me from behind the glass.
When I pull a t-shirt from the top drawer,
The memory of *Him* rises with it.
Flooded with overwhelming love,
Aching with heartstopping grief.

The frame is a simple scrap of wood and glass
But it serves as a reminder.
It whispers into my ear of all I have lost.
It sings of all I have gained.

I lift a flowery skirt from the middle drawer.
It's made of lace and cotton.
When my eyes return, I am reminded of what I've faced.
Silent, steady, and sacred,
A picture frame sits on my white dresser.

Serena Huang

Grade 12, Parkway West High School

Educator: Jason Lovera

Critical Essay



Sharing Is Not Caring When It's Not Chosen

It was a normal afternoon in the cafeteria at my elementary school's after-school program, Y-Care. When I walked in, I immediately spotted a clear, gallon-sized plastic bin sitting at the far end of one of the bright blue tables. I grinned and hurried over. *No one was playing with the Legos!*

Over the course of the next hour, I built an empire. Brick by brick, I started off with a single house, then built another, then a third. I carefully placed Lego minifigures inside the structures and erected a wall to surround the homes. When I finally stepped back to admire my work, the buildings leaned at odd angles, and yellows clashed with reds, blues, and greens, but I felt a flush of pride. This was magnificent to my first-grade mind.

Then, a boy appeared at the end of the table.

He paused for a moment, then walked closer, and I watched his eyes scan my city instead of the Lego bin. Immediately, I felt uneasy. He slid into the seat next to me, in front of the container, and plunged his hands inside, scooping up fistfuls of bricks and scattering them across the table. I shot him a sideways glance but turned back to my city, deciding to ignore him.

That was until he casually asked, "Hey, could I have one of those Lego people?"

I looked up at him, then down at what he built. There was nothing. Just loose bricks strewn carelessly across the table. Clearly, the boy had no plan to create anything. He just wanted what I had.

I vigorously shook my head and frowned. "No, these are mine. You can look in the box."

Dismissively, I turned back to my work. The clatter of bricks grew louder as he aggressively rummaged through the bin. Then, it stopped and he heavily sighed.

“I can’t find another one,” he whined. “Please? You have so many!”

I frowned. I didn’t know him, and he was already annoying me.

“No,” I retorted firmly. “I was here first. Go find something else to do, and you can play with my Legos after I’m done.”

Looking back, I recognize that pride fueled my refusal to share. At first, my pride came from satisfaction with my creation. In Michael Dyson’s book *Pride*, he explains that Aristotle believed pride was the “crown of the virtues,” and the proud, “magnanimous” person is one who “thinks himself worthy of great things” (qtd. in Dyson 15). At Y-Care, I felt worthy of my Lego city and all the Lego people in it because I had built it myself. However, Dyson also warns that excessive pride can become egotism. Pope Gregory I calls pride “the root of all evil,” and Augustine describes it as a craving for “undue exaltation,” where the soul “becomes a kind of end in itself” (qtd. in Dyson 10-11). When the boy sat next to me, my pride transformed from harmless self-respect into dangerous conceitedness and defensiveness. My Lego world, in all its mismatched glory, was mine. I had built it, and protecting it became protecting myself. Surrendering any part of it felt like a threat to my work and, ultimately, my worth.

I bent back over my city and began to construct my fourth house, aloofly pretending not to notice when the boy disappeared. I only looked up when he returned with Ms. Moore, spotting her bright blue staff shirt as they approached ominously.

“Hi, Serena,” Ms. Moore said gently. “Would you mind sharing one of your Lego people with Michael?”

I looked at Michael. He stood next to her, smirking triumphantly. Heat rushed to my face in anger.

“But why?” I protested. “He wasn’t even here when I started. He’s just trying to take all my Legos!”

Ms. Moore clicked her tongue and responded chidingly, “Serena, you have to share. Sharing is caring. You can’t hog all the Legos.”

I crossed my arms and felt something hot start to rise from my chest to my throat.

“I had to dig through the box to find them,” I argued and gestured vigorously at the bin. “Why can’t he do that?”

Ms. Moore pursed her lips and tilted her head. “Why can’t you just share one Lego person? It’s only one. You have, what, five?”

She reached toward my city. “Here, I’ll just grab one for you.”

Panic shot through me and I jumped up from my seat, hovering my arms protectively over my city.

“No, wait!” I blurted. “I—I’ll choose it.”

I knew I lost. With trembling hands, I pulled the roof off one of my houses and reached inside. My vision blurred and my lip quivered. I slowly pulled out a Lego person I liked the least and held it out with shaking fingers, unable to look at either of them. My throat felt as if some imaginary force sealed it shut as I handed it over.

That afternoon, Ms. Moore did not just take a Lego minifigure from me; she took away the moral meaning of the act of sharing. In John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, God defends his gift of free will to Adam and Eve by asking what “praise” or “proof” of “sincere,” “true allegiance” could exist “from such obedience paid” (III.103-107). God recognizes that someone can only be morally responsible when their choices are freely chosen over genuine alternatives. Although it appeared I did a good deed by sharing resources and spreading happiness, Ms. Moore forced me to share, removing my choice and ensuring that I could not be morally praiseworthy. Additionally, in his article “Why Does God Allow Evil?”, Richard Swinburne argues that “one of the greatest gifts a creator can give” is that “our choices matter,” and we can “make great differences to things for good or ill” (26). Without that freedom, humans become like a “pilot in a simulator” and perform actions without any responsibility or meaning (26). Ms. Moore’s intervention turned my potentially moral choice to share or not to share into a meaningless action. She took away my opportunity to be generous or selfish. By forcing the “right” outcome, she ensured my action could not be genuinely good or bad because I never chose it.

As Ms. Moore and Michael walked away, my eyes burned with tears. Blurrily, I glared down at my city, suddenly unable to move a brick. My city felt incomplete and violated. Anger surged through me—at Michael, at Ms. Moore, and at myself. I wanted to knock over all the buildings and dump all the Legos back into the bin so that no one would be able to enjoy them. If I couldn’t have my perfect city, then no one should.

Similarly, after Satan’s fall from glory in *Paradise Lost*, he wanders around the Garden of Eden, unable to appreciate its beauty. Satan desires to drag others down to his level of misery and “only in destroying” does “[he] find ease” (Milton

IX.126-129). Like Satan, I could not challenge the authority that had wronged me, so the only power I had left was to lash out and make someone else miserable. Instead of making peace with my situation and playing with the many remaining Legos I had in my possession, I stewed in my hateful thoughts. I did not want my Lego minifigure back. I just wanted Michael to feel as powerless and angry as I did.

In my head, I imagined marching over to Michael's table and smashing whatever he built to pieces. The fantasy made me feel a little better about my situation. In the essay "Evil," Lance Morrow asserts that evil begins by defining "anyone outside the tribe" as an "Other" and that "identifying others as evil justifies all further evil against them" (50). My Lego city was my "tribe," and Michael and Ms. Moore became the "outside[rs]." Once I defined them that way, cruelty felt permissible in my mind.

Eventually, I sat back down, crossed my arms, and refused to touch my city again. I sniffled quietly as time passed. Then, Ms. Moore came over.

"Serena, why are you crying?" she wondered, genuinely concerned.

I huffed angrily and turned away, swiping at my eyes.

"Is it because of the legos?" she prompted when I did not respond. "You did a good thing, Serena. Look, Michael's playing too. You should be happy with yourself."

That broke me, and I burst into tears. I felt overwhelmed with how unfair it all was. I could not look at Michael right now. I hated him. I hated Ms. Moore. They felt like villains.

"Sharing is caring," Ms. Moore said once more. "Remember what I said? The kindness you put out in the world will come back to you."

I became fed up with her attempt at consoling me, so I whipped around and screamed, "It's not fair!"

I ran off to the corner on the other side of the cafeteria. Ms. Moore's rationalization of my pain furthered my rage. However, she was not evil, and neither was Michael. She tried to keep the peace and teach fairness while Michael was just a bored child. Still, the loss I felt was real to me. Swinburne justifies suffering because it gives someone else "the opportunity to make a significant choice between good and evil which otherwise he would not have had" (28). However, no logical explanations could erase any of my sorrow or restore my loss of free will. My forced sacrifice of the Lego minifigure allowed Michael to play with a toy and Ms. Moore to resolve conflict, but in exchange, I gave up my freedom and the chance to become generous through my own choice. In his

article “What Makes Us Good/Evil,” Jeffery Kluger, citing psychologist Marc Hauser, states that humans are born with a “sense of moral grammar,” but the instinctive “sense of right and wrong [is] useless until someone teaches [them] how to apply it” (58). Ms. Moore attempted to teach me the moral instinct that “sharing is caring,” but by removing my freedom, she constrained the lesson and only taught me obedience, not kindness.

I might have shared if Michael had asked differently, or if Ms. Moore had waited. Moreover, if I had chosen to share, that choice would have meant something. A forced good deed is not goodness at all and is only compliance. That afternoon at Y-Care, I did not learn that sharing is caring. I learned that without free will, “caring” is not really caring at all.

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Hashim Ilahi

Grade 11, John Burroughs School

Poetry



Those Who Died Young

Time will not weary you, nor the deeds of others injure you;
The troubles of the world have passed by, your suffering is finished.
You will exist always as you were: forever childlike yet never innocent.
Were you old enough to understand the horror?
Or too small to know anything but loud noises, cruel tears and an empty belly?
You leave behind the broken and the beaten to their grief.



The Blue House on Sullivan

In the family room of the blue house on Sullivan, there is a thick layer of dust on every shelf, and memorabilia of a life once lived lie in clusters on every surface. Under the couch cushions, there is loose change and gum wrappers, crumbs and things the people who used to live here lost and never did find. The lamps line the room and remain off. The bulbs have burnt out and the lampshades are cracked. Ghosts don't need light. The family room door stays closed.

In the bathroom of the blue house on Sullivan, there are lipsticks and blushes clustered on either side of the sink. On the mirror, someone has taped reminders on yellow Post-Its. They say things like *Don't forget: English homework!!!* and *Practice after school 3:00-5:00!* One reminder simply has a list of numbers, added up and subtracted. A scale sits in the corner. The drawers under the sink are filled with old makeup and toiletries, curling irons and hair ties. A few small orange bottles. One is empty. These are not supposed to be here. Ghosts don't need reminding or pills. The bathroom door stays closed.

In the bedroom of the blue house on Sullivan, there is a bed that is unmade but has not been slept in for six months. A phone sits on the nightstand and there is unfinished homework on a desk that has not seen a real person since the ghost took her place. The dresser drawers are ajar and there are clothes that lie in piles around the room, rejected and still. One half of the closet hosts more clothes, the other half is reserved for keepsakes and things forgotten. Nobody looks at these now. Jewelry is scattered across the top of the dresser, and photographs are taped haphazardly on the walls. Ghosts don't wear earrings. They don't take pictures. The bedroom door stays closed.

In the hallways of the blue house on Sullivan, there are family photos hanging on the walls and old striped wallpaper the ghost always meant to replace but never did. Chipped white paint on the baseboards and plush carpet on the stairs. These are the halls she paced when she couldn't sleep and these are the stairs she walked down in her prom dress and these are the photographs she starred in and stared at and wondered where the girl in these pictures went. Ghosts don't reminisce and they don't need memory. The hallways are empty.

In the basement of the blue house on Sullivan, there are concrete floors and cardboard boxes and the smell of mildew. Memories collect dust and spiders crawl across old scrapbooks and toys she outgrew. The boxes all have labels: *DONATIONS, 6 MONTHS, FIFTH GRADE, IMPORTANT DOCUMENTS, MISC.* The basement is unfinished and therefore it is cold, and the walls are made of concrete and wooden framework of projects long abandoned, and the fuse box sits quietly in a corner. Ghosts don't need electricity. They never run their fingers along the box tops and let the dust collect on their fingers. The basement door stays shut.

In the kitchen of the blue house on Sullivan, the ghost lies on the dirty tile floors and listens to music drifting in from the house next door.

In the family room of the blue house on Sullivan, the ghost touches the framed photos on the shelves and runs her fingers along the wooden surfaces.

In the bathroom of the blue house on Sullivan, the ghost stares at the orange bottles and tries over and over to pick up the lipgloss by the sink. Her hands are not real and she cannot do it, so instead her eyes fall on the reminders on the mirror.

In the bedroom of the blue house on Sullivan, the ghost lies on the bed and her body doesn't make a dent in the blankets because it weighs nothing now. Is she happy about this? Maybe. She stares in the mirror and sees nothing at all. She can't remember how to do the math homework lying on the desk.

In the hallways of the blue house on Sullivan, the ghost looks at family photos and walks down the stairs regally, pretending she is the girl she was eight months ago in a long blue dress, hair done up and makeup perfected, wearing her favorite heels and the pride of being beautiful. She's not real anymore, and not pretty anymore, and it doesn't matter anyway. It used to.

In the basement of the blue house on Sullivan, the ghost tries and fails to open boxes so instead she reads the labels aloud to herself and listens to them echo in the dark, empty basement. She touches the fuse box. She was never

allowed to before, but she's dead now so what does it matter? She can't feel it anyway.

The blue house on Sullivan is haunted. It's always dark, has been for the last six months, and no one lives there anymore.

Rhea Jha

Grade 11, Rock Bridge Senior High School
Screenplays & Scripts



Ignorance

Cast of Characters

MEERA: Lead, female, Hindu, ethnically Indian, 10 years old, shy and timid personality

TIFFANY: 2nd lead, female, ethnically British, no religion specified, 10 years old, bubbly personality

TIFFANY'S FATHER: Male, ethnically British, no religion specified, mid-30s to early 40s

TIFFANY'S DOG, BRIELLE: mini poodle

MICHELLE: Female, ethnically British, no religion specified, condescending and haughty personality, early 30s, news anchor

TERRY: Male, European ethnicity, nervous, Downing St. correspondent

AMUD: Male, ethnically and nationally Indian, no religion specified, timid, late 20s, New Delhi correspondent

Setting

London, UK. TIFFANY'S house. MEERA is over for a slumber party.

Time

Late morning of October 25, 2022.

EXT. TIFFANY'S HOUSE - LATE MORNING

Lush grass with dew drops. Typical townhouse on the rich outskirts of London. Follow a chirping bird to window, enter frame 'through' window.

INT. LIVING ROOM

Lively, giggling from both MEERA and TIFFANY. Sizzling of pancakes and beef patties. Warm sunshine is dappling the area from the window.

MEERA and TIFFANY both playfully lunge for the remote. In a laughing struggle, TIFFANY wields it with a triumphant smile. She clicks it on.

A quiet buzz, and a zap are emitted from the television. The news channel goes on, with domestic affairs news chattering in the background. Before they can change it, TIFFANY'S FATHER walks into the living room, holding two plates, heartily filled with food.

TIFFANY'S FATHER

Girls! I have breakfast ready. Pancakes and patties. Now, what are you watching?
While TIFFANY'S FATHER sets the plates down, MEERA eyes the sausages warily.

MEERA

Um... sorry mister...

What meat is that from?

TIFFANY'S FATHER dusts his hands, walking back to the kitchen, throwing words over his shoulder.

TIFFANY'S FATHER

Beef.

Is there something wrong?

MEERA shrinks into herself slightly. TIFFANY doesn't notice, digging into her food.

MEERA

(quiet, quickly)

Oh! Um, no.

MEERA carefully pushes the patties to the side of the plate.

The girls put their attention to the screen, momentarily forgetting to change the channel.

MICHELLE

The next news on our agenda today is the new Mister Rishi Sunak becoming the new PM!... Terry is our Downing Street correspondent. Can you tell us some more about what's happening?

TERRY

Thanks for the introduction, Michelle. But, uh, yes. Er, Rishi Sunak uh, is the only one in the race as Penny Mordaunt has dropped out, um, so yeah. Michelle seems a bit uncomfortable at TERRY'S delivery.

MICHELLE

(whisper/hisses to the director)

Take Terry off. Put, uh, Amud on.

TERRY'S video camera is abruptly turned off, and low-quality video of AMUD, the other correspondent, turns on.

MICHELLE

So, um. (clears throat) This is our India correspondent, Amud. How are things looking over there, given that Rishi Sunak is the first Indian PM?

AMUD

Um, it's uh-mood, not ay-mudd. S-sorry. Hello Britain, I am here in New Delhi. (squints at camera) Sunak is ethnically Indian, that is true. He's even thought to be signing into Parliament with the Bhagavad Gita, so um, yeah. But other than tha-

MICHELLE

It must be hard for someone who isn't British to be Britain's prime minister, don't you think?

AMUD

(confused, tilting his head)

Well, I wouldn't think so, I mean that for example, Obama-

MICHELLE

Still, (expression pinches together) it's the first time in British history. I mean, there certainly hasn't been a British prime minister in India, now?

AMUD looks at the camera, confusion turning unamused.

AMUD

Well, if you look at history – not that, er, British schools actually teach you – but Britain, um, colonized India for years.

MICHELLE

And how long ago was that?

MICHELLE barks a small laugh condescendingly.

DIRECTOR

(whisper/hisses to cameraman)

Get her off!

MICHELLE'S camera goes dark. After a beat, AMUD'S camera is also turned off. A commercial for waffles comes up.

TIFFANY

Ooh, waffles are even better than pancakes. By the way, are you going to eat the sausage?

MEERA

Umm... what? No.

It's silent for a second while TIFFANY eats the sausages happily. MEERA fiddles with her necklace, peering down at the words.

CUT TO ABOVE ANGLE SHOWING THE LETTERING ON NECKLACE.

(ॐ, in gold)

MEERA quietly tucks away the pendant inside her shirt.

END

Emerson Jones

Grade 9, Truman High School

Educator: Tracy Bouslog

Short Story



Horn Of a Unicorn

A large bump bulges under my skin, a bright pink center threatening to poke through the tender flesh. It had been the day to finally get my horn—which would grow through my skin and reveal itself during my traversal ceremony, finally making me a woman and giving me the opportunity to follow my friends up into the ascended state where we may mate with our male horned counterparts and bring prosper to those without the special gift. I poke and prod at the thing, wincing as it moves around in its cocoon of plasma and blood.

"Hello little horn," I whisper to it under the morning light, hearing my sister beginning to rustle about in our shared bed, which took up most of the space in our house, other than a small dresser and mat to pray to God—Who took the form of The Great Oak.

"Now Elizabeth, Father Abel told us to get to communion as fast as possible, it's my day you know," I picked up my much smaller sister from the bed and began to get us both dressed in the finest linens Father Abel had provided, long white dresses adorned with symbols of faith and stockings to protect a possible slip of bare, revolting skin. White boots protect our feet and the sins beneath them as white wings cloak our hair and are clasped around our neck. "Dont you see my horn? It's beginning to show! Look, look, Elizabeth!" I had begun my transformation exactly 3 days ago, we couldn't wait too long, as it is best to ascend when a transforming woman is still bleeding—I had learned that one in school.

I was the first of my class to begin this sacred ceremony, even before the older girls, who had recently been jealous since they were at risk of never transforming—being 17 and all. And what vile girls they were, Father Abel had

admitted to me himself in the confessional that because of their ugly hearts they will never get their horn. "I wonder when I will get mine" Elizabeth had luscious blonde hair—not as bright as mine though still desired above all—Father Abel often told her she would have one of the greatest transformations. "Soon I hope, I'll be waiting for you up there" And while I had pointed to the ceiling I truly meant what was above it: The clear and wondrous sky my ancestors helped create and maintain with each ascension.

Along the way to the communion table I had decided to teach my younger sister a lesson of how to get your transformation early—like me. When a young boy, far before his transformation—which happened when a boy's tree, one that was given to him at the age of 5, sprouted an apple—asked us to get his teddy from a lone tree, I had instructed Elizabeth to climb the tree and retrieve it so her heart may shine more pure. And whilst climbing back down: a branch put a run in her stockings.

"Your skirt is too short, our ancestors are protecting you! You'll have to get a new pair from the Sisters," I had felt especially proud at the lecture I had told her once she had gotten down, remembering what Father Abel had said at the last temple day: where he told us lessons on how to ascend perfectly.

"Father Abel, why have you not ascended yet?" A young boy had asked that day—Father Abel chuckled at the boy and gave his usual answer: "When my grandfather was young: The Adversary had lured him to The Great Oak and handed him one of its golden apples imbued with the great knowledge of the universe. Being a young, greedy boy, he had accepted and inherited that power—including the knowledge how to transform and reach the heavens—in exchange for the verity that his lineage would be granted one male child for each generation and that they would never get the opportunity to ascend, no matter how pure of heart," I had heard that story over a dozen times and never got tired of it, the fact that his family had sacrificed that opportunity and still preached those truths onto us makes me tear up just at the thought. Though, I would have been jealous if I was a male youth under that name, never being able to get my horn and ascend to the stars, it's an inconceivable fact that makes me glad I was born the way I was.

I feel my heart pang at the thought. One shall never take for granted, one shall never take for granted. I remind myself over and over again, repeating the words like a vice. "You must never even think of sinning!" My voice must have been far too rushed and loud because my sister jumped at my words. Maybe it

was for her own good, to scare the doctrine into her, I did not want my sister to end up with the same fate as others.

...

"I saw it! I really did!" Sarah had been talking with her mouth too-wide once more. And her best friend, Eve, had always walked behind Sarah like her imitated purity would rub off and get caught on the youngsters' linens. "I saw my mother!" My tray drops at her words, how can she get to see her mother and I cannot? I have been good, I have not sinned—my skirt covers the tops of my feet and my hair is pinned behind my hood—so why must my mother and father act as if they are stuck in the sky above, why must they never visit?

"Liar," I scowl between my fresh set of teeth—she hadn't even lost all of hers yet, lying just to get under my skin.

The children begin to filter into the large room filled with the large table, The Great Oak spilling above the stained glass ceiling, branches supporting its own altar. Father Abel steps out behind the pulpit, sagging face forcing itself to crawl up into a grin as he announces to the kids. "Four shall transform and transcend today! The Great Oak shall bring their spirits up to the sky and we will watch them dance and bring another wave of prosperity over the land!" Small hands clasp in a prayer as we worship the large tree that stood guard over the island.

I'm sure he was once young and handsome, though as time moves along he is reminded of his ancestors' deeds and is brought down to the plane between hell and heaven, for he had not sinned though sinner's blood still runs through him. The Sisters are much the same, they had sinned too great in the past and had not been forgiven, so their sagging faces are there to remind us of what we will become if we do wrong.

"Sister Salome, do you sometimes wonder what is beyond the sea?" Elizabeth tugs at my sleeve once I let my hands fall back into my lap. "Sister, never even think about that, you are making a fool of yourself—a sinner!" I speak sternly enough so that she knows I'm serious, though quietly enough that no others may hear the berating.

Father Abel steps over to me and Sarah, taking our small hands in his, "Two young virginal beauties, such great transformations you two will make. I'm sure both of your horns will be sharp and bright." The words are spoken with such certainty—as the family's words always had—that I am reminded of my full trust in him and The Great Oak. This is the true religion—unlike the hushed titles

of others that are gossiped throughout church—we didn't even have a name for it other than "The Truth."

I had always felt such zeal for The Truth that whenever Father Abel or one of my Sisters—those who had not transcended and thus labored their sins away with the sacred book that was carved into The Great Oak's bark—spoke I beamed with adoration for my small village and its wondrous gift of knowledge and transcension.

One-by-one we—the children—take glasses of wine, cheese, and crusts of bread from the gorging branches that curled in a way as if to make a bridge over the steps. We bow and pray to The Great Oak, thanking it for such generous gifts of sustenance and then—sitting at the long commune table that stretched over 100 feet—we pray once more, conjoining young hands together in a large rope and whispering an array of prayers.

Then, we eat. Those around me offer words of adoration to my early transformation, others douse jealous words in a fake adoration—true unholy thoughts able to be picked from behind their eyes.

We stand in a perfectly straight line, girls skirts long enough to cover the tops of our shoes and boys slacks perfectly ironed. We step out into the theater, elders sitting around us on boulders painted with the stories of our beliefs, those whose transformations have yet to come sit below, watching as the four transcending children take each side of the field. I take my sister to her seat, giving a kiss upon the middle of her brow where a horn will soon take place, before taking my spot beside Sarah. Sisters begin to unclothe us—I had always wondered why girls were the only ones to not ascend—the bonfire roaring in the middle of the field with each cloth adding to its flames, sticks that had created it sharpened into spears.

The horn upon my head begins to grow, reaching toward the sacred bonfire. Chains of colorful flowers sit upon my shoulders, wrapping around my chest and most intimate parts of my body, Sisters wrap cloth around my eyes and stick the fruit of The Great Oak into my mouth. Being blind to those around me I rely on touch as me and Sarah join hands, walking toward the bonfire and separating a foot before it. I meet the boy on the other side and we begin the ceremonial dance to bring upon prosperous transformation.

Thorns stick into my sides—into my tender skin—and yet I do not cry out, I continue the dance, focusing on tight, flowing movements and perfect steps in unison with the boy before me. I had been trained for this since I was able to walk. I will not mess up, I will transform into a beautiful beast and ascend above

with this boy to mate and bring goods to our island! We dance for hours, letting the bonfire burn down to ashes and the moon to reach its peak. We dance from dawn to dusk, from light to dark, from day to night.

I hear those around me begin to move with the sound of the blowing horn, released back to their houses for sleep, to be awoken tomorrow with coveted greens and chalices bulging with wine. Father Abel's voice booms in my ears, telling me to be still, for the transformation will finally begin.

Something happens then, a part I hadn't heard from Sisters or the sacred book. I stand still but it feels as if this is not the transformation anymore, his hands dig the thorns into my skin though that is not where I greatly hurt by the end of it. I can feel the presence of the boys above me, breaths heavy as Father Abel continues his instructions—he doesn't touch where the flowers cover, though he gets close to them. The flowers bright and blooming, acting like a shield of sorts, a metaphor for the life-bearing sac beneath it.

The cloth from my eyes is taken and I am revealed—bloody and crying—to the sky, to the ocean and to the earth, I am revealed to those before me, to the bonfire that has yet to go out. My virginal beauty glows under the moonlight as I drop to my knees. Feeling each grain of sand under my skin I reach up to the growing horn on my head.

Then our horns burst.

Sarah beside me screams, she's the first to ascend, to be transformed. But when I turn to look at her, the thing wriggling out of her forehead is not a sharp glittering horn: the creature has hundreds of legs, and a large gaping mouth with rows of visible teeth down its throat that gleam in the moonlight. The creature begins to feast upon Sarah's beauty, upon her virginity. And that's when I notice the small trembling figure behind the rocks—Elizabeth, my sister.

This isn't how it's supposed to go, I was supposed to grow a horn and wings. I was supposed to transform into a beast that flies up to the heavens. The creature finally makes its way out of the egg of skin and membrane, taking the supple flesh of my cheek between its sharp teeth and beginning to tear, my sister cries out, running towards me and trying to rip the creature from my face. Father Abel and the Sisters around us begin to yell, lighting what is left of the fire and bringing the five screaming children before it.

"Sacrifice them!" It was not a transformation, I am not beautiful, the very skin from my face is being ripped. One of my eyes falls to the ground and I cry out with pain, the creature bringing my body down with it as it consumes half of my sight. I grab onto Father Abel's ceremonial robes, watching his body trip into

the fire, Sarah pushes herself upon him, flames lapping at the flowers as she rips the creature from her head, using its sharp teeth to dig into his skin, plunging the parasite into him. The parasite finds itself in the cavernous viscera of a man and continues to bury itself in his intestines as the burning fat closes in around it.

The two boys pile upon them as the creatures eat their way through the boys' faces, those of which took the last of their strength to make sure that man was gone, even through mutilation, even while dying, they couldn't forgive him. My sister manages to rip the creature out of my forehead—blood gushing from the large hole—and flings it into the water, letting it drown with a chunk of my skin still between its jaws.

A Sister shoves a burning spear into the hole, finally creating a unicorn of me. The villagers, boys and girls alike, begin to witness the sight before them, rubbing their eyes of sleep they watch in horror.

"Go! This is no transformation, this is sacrifice! Flee from this island and find what is beyond it, there are no true unicorns!" I cry out to the others, looking beside me to the Sister who shoved the spear into my wound, her once smiling face dropping to one of adulterated distraught as she takes the hands of the other Sisters, bowing to the corpse of Abel and turning their backs to us, sticking their cloaked heads into the water, burying themselves with sand.

I hadn't realized until far later why they did that—their leader was gone and their god was angered, they had no purpose in life anymore, so they ended it.

My sister takes me into her arms, my skin like freshly driven snow with a life taken upon it—I had remembered then, of the time in my life where we found out about the very existence of death, and our own mortality.

It was a winter day, snow drenching us up to our knees as we made our way to breakfast. I had heard a shot in the distance, through the forest that encased three sides of the island. We ran—more so trudged— through the snow until we found a clearing where the sun shone so brightly that it had turned spring. My sister and I stripped ourselves of clothes, finding entertainment in not following the testament words that all women must be modest even to the very trees they were born from.

While running around in circles of this new-found spring: a lone deer found its way to our clearing without horns its male counterpart adorned. Half of her body was eaten off by the large jaws of a monster unbeknownst to us. I stood before her, letting her face fall into my hands. Her eyes watered with fear and hurt and yet she still put trust in this little girl before her wounded self. I had

kneeled with the dying animal, whispering verses and stroking the soft fur coating her head until she exhaled her final, innocent, breath.

I beg for her to go, to flee with the other children before she becomes what the deer had—what I had. She shakes her head. "We may go to heaven... together," her small voice whispers to me under moonlight, laying on top of me letting our hearts stack upon one another. She takes a burning spear from the fire and raises her arms out to the sky that we once prayed up to. Stars gleam in her eyes as she shoves the spear down upon us, conjoining our hearts into one anima as we had been in the roots of the trees.

Our spirits flee onto the moon, where we play as true sisters once more, taking naps in craters and dancing along to the hum of the stars, skin painted with dust and our stockings ripping with each carefree laugh. We become children forever, young girls pillowed by innocence and stars.

Only one of us had become a unicorn that night, though with this horn through our hearts I would like to believe both of us became what we always wanted to be.

A unicorn.



The Theories of Justice in The Lottery and The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas

Across cultures and time, societies have struggled to define what justice truly means and what an ideal society should look like. Shirley Jackson and Ursula K. Le Guin explore the enduring themes of justice and corrupt societies where the society's prosperity is built on the innocent's suffering.

While at first glance *The Lottery* by Shirley Jackson and *The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas* by Ursula K. Le Guin might seem unrelated to each other, both actually critique societies that attempt to secure the prosperity of the majority while sacrificing the innocent individuals. However, each story reveals a different vision of justice as Jackson demonstrates justice as a vacuous ritual with blind conformity and stronger crowd-mentality while Le Guin depicts justice as a rationalized norm in a complicit and self-aware society.

Both stories start with cheerful, almost-celebratory-like tones to create an atmosphere of comfort and happiness with nothing remarkable before revealing horror. In *The Lottery*, the narrator states that the lottery was run “—as were the square dances, the teen club, the halloween program— by Mr. Summers...”

(Jackson 1). The comparison of the lottery and trivial and fun matters is an example of Jackson's calm tone that reveals how deeply ingrained the ritual has become where the townspeople follow it not out of hostility but out of habit. Jackson's use of the phrase “as were” highlights how the villagers make no moral distinction between light-hearted festivities and sacrificing rituals involving death, which has been normalized. Jackson involves a form of irony with the choice of the name “Mr. Summers” as the season summer is usually associated with warmth, life, and sunshine while Mr. Summers ironically organizes a death

ritual. Similarly, Le Guin uses pleasant descriptions to lull readers into imagining a happy society with “boats in [the] harbor [that] sparkled with flags,” “a cheerful faint sweetness of the air,” “broad green meadows,” and a society that could do “without monarchy and slavery.” The word choice creates a vivid imagery of a thriving and professedly utopian community where everybody thinks alike with no conflicts, a community of joy and prosperity. Both stories depict a world driven by a strong crowd-mentality that coerces individuals to disregard their moral opinions, thus appearing as a harmonious society with one unarguable condition which everybody follows and respects: the suffering of an innocent individual.

In both stories, collective thinking drives societies to accept the suffering of innocent individuals as a necessary price for the general benefit of the population. When Mr. Adams mentions that some other villages no longer perform the lottery, Old Man Warner retorts that the other villages are a “pack of crazy fools” (Jackson). In other words, there is an undeniable tradition in this village where those who question the unjust system will be labeled as foolish lunatics and silenced immediately. In addition, Old Man Warner is referenced as the oldest man in the village, symbolizing wisdom, insight, and truth. In many cultures and societies, the elderly are highly respected and praised for having the correct foresight, hence causing the community to follow blindly what the elders say. In this case, the elder states that if the lottery is conducted, the village will have a good harvest and scrumptious food to eat. Following the elder’s superstitious beliefs, the villagers exhibit conformity and respect that suppress moral reasoning, a practice that perpetuates violence and scapegoating. Moreover, when Tessie protests that it is not fair, the crowd does not hesitate to continue the ritual as even her husband, knowing that she most likely has the slip, “forced the slip of paper out of her hand”(Jackson). The word choice “forced” demonstrates and signifies little to no compassion nor hesitation in sacrificing and pinning the blame onto the innocent. The children also have prepared stones, and “someone gave little Davy Hutchinson [a] few pebbles” (Jackson). Through this description, the author reveals that even young children, who may not completely understand the purpose of the lottery, participate in and are indoctrinated into this communal act of violence from a young age. This chilling scene illustrates a collective and willing scapegoating. In *The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas*, the citizens “all know [the child] is there, all the people of Omelas...They all know it has to be there” (Le Guin). The description shows that

every single individual who stays in Omelas knows, and perhaps even must know, in order to stay in Omelas, that the child must be there.

Le Guin further buttresses this theme of blind crowd-mentality found in unjust societies by informing the readers that even though “some of [the people of Omelas] understand why, and some do not...they all understand that their happiness...depends wholly on this child’s abominable misery” (Le Guin). Put differently, even those who do not understand why the innocent child was chosen to be in such anguish continue living in the system entirely dependent on the child’s suffering, a common practice that further emphasizes the mob mentality in Omelas.

Although both authors expose societies that have this utilitarian perspective to justify injustice for the sake of the majority, there is a contrast in how the subjects of the society understand and reason with the injustice. While *The Lottery* shows a community acting on irrational blind faith and superstition, *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas* portrays a society that accepts injustice through rational calculation based on experience. In *The Lottery*, the villagers participate in the stoning simply because they believe it is necessary, even though they no longer completely understand or question the details and justice of the lottery. The narrator even notes that “although the villagers had forgotten the ritual and lost the original black box, they still remembered to use stones” (Jackson). The contrast between “forgetting”, perhaps, the exact way to perform the ritual and the original purpose of the lottery and “remembering” the barbaric violent act of stoning reveals the village’s resort to superstition and distorted notion of justice. Rather than performing the ritual for justice or with real understanding and meaning, the village performs the lottery for conformity and for the illusion of safety out of fear. Such contrast between forgetting and remembering illustrates how tradition can persist as empty, harmful behavior even though the rationale has faded over time. Additionally, Jackson hints at the possibility that the ritual may not even be effective as “some places have already quit lotteries”(Jackson). If the other villages that stopped conducting the lottery had a disaster of famine or death, the villagers most likely would clearly mention it as a warning. Instead, the villagers mention the other villages casually as if they still exist and are functioning normally yet call them “crazy.” Furthermore, the author may also be mocking and emphasizing the superstition as Old Man Warner states that there “used to be a saying about Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon” (Jackson). This saying subtly hints at a more playful and childish tone and sounds similar to a rhyme. This childishness exposes how thoughtless and

repetitive the fairness and justice has morphed into. The words “used to be” indicate a reflection to the past, emphasizing the out-dated information and tradition to a greater extent.

In contrast, *The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas* sustains injustice not through blind faith but through calculated rationalization. All the people of Omelas “know it has to be there...their happiness, the beauty of their city, the tenderness of their friendships, depend wholly on this child’s abominable misery.” Unlike the villagers in *The Lottery*, the people of Omelas are fully aware of their wrongdoing and accept it as the logical foundation of their prosperity. The phrase “tenderness of their friendships” indicates that the people of Omelas’ friendships are not bland or empty, but rather complex and kind-hearted, perhaps to substitute for the love and care the child does not receive.

Citizens seem to even rationalize this situation on a psychological level as “their tears and anger, the trying of their generosity and the acceptance of their helplessness, are perhaps the true source of the splendor of their lives.” In other words, in contrast to *The Lottery* where the magic and logic of the ritual is vague, perhaps magical and vacuous, and maybe even non-existent, the suffering of the child gives the citizens a rationalized experience that grants them moral awareness, compassion, and profundity. The word “trying” implies genuine effort, but also failure. Le Guin suggests that this experience of anger, then frustration, then attempts to change and help the child, and then acceptance of how the child is beyond help gives the citizens a level of emotional intensity that makes their joy more profound and almost earned. This emotional process allows them to have “no vapid, irresponsible happiness” as “they know that they, like the child, are not free. They know compassion. It is the existence of the child, and their knowledge of its existence, that makes possible the nobility of their architecture, the poignancy of their music, the profundity of their science”(Le Guin). Le Guin emphasizes throughout the narration that the happiness the city has is not “irresponsible” which means, in contrast to what the readers may have interpreted, the happiness based on suffering is not mindless or meaningless stemming out of pure magic or superstition. How “[the people of Omelas] know that they, like the child, are not free,” hints at a sense of gratitude that further supports their rationalization. Le Guin also reveals through this insight that although it may seem like the people of Omelas have a choice, in reality, those who stay in Omelas cannot break free from the system unless they leave. By recognizing that they share the child’s lack of freedom, the citizens turn pity into a perspective that their joy is conditional and therefore precious. Furthermore,

the adjectives chosen to describe the beautiful aspects of the city of “nobility,” “poignancy,” and “profundity” also rationalize the cause-and-effect relationship between the child’s misery and the moral depth and maturity of the society’s joy as they give a sense of depth to the city where the music can evoke emotions of bittersweet, sadness, passion, and melancholy that empty music cannot reproduce. Their innovations of science have “profundity” meaning not only intelligence but also psychological and emotional deepness of awareness, curiosity, and moral consciousness. Le Guin seems to suggest that intellectual achievement gains depth when it coexists with moral awareness, and their science, like their music, is enriched by the tension between joy and sorrow. Thus, Le Guin portrays a society that justifies injustice through reason rather than tradition and rituals.

Overall, both *The Lottery* by Shirley Jackson and *The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas* by Ursula K. Le Guin illustrate and criticize utilitarian societies that justify oppressing and mistreating the innocent for the benefit of the majority. Both stories have an unwavering crowd mentality as shown through the dialogue, plot, and how the society functions. Regardless, the two short stories differ in terms of the reasoning behind the injustice as while the actions of villagers in *The Lottery* stem from irrational faith, perhaps even hinted as superstition, the citizens from *The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas* exhibit deliberate rationalization. Le Guin’s inclusion of those who walk away offers a fragile hope that moral awareness, though painful, might still awaken resistance and moral courage. Together, Shirley Jackson and Ursula K. Le Guin invites the readers, through satirizing modern-day societies that are reliant on sacrificing the innocent individuals and often thrive on unseen sacrifices, to question whether modern-day societies can truly be called just merely because they function well or prosper.

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Short Story



We Own Our Stories

We are the best of the entertainers, everybody knows.

They know this as they file into red velvet seats, ready to see our stories spelled out in the twisting movements of our bodies and the stomps of our feet. The hot spotlights illuminate the stage and outshine anything else until all we can see in the audience is the whites of their wide eyes blinking up at us. It's opening night.

I have heard many dancers talk about the magic of opening night — the anticipation and nerves of making themselves visible, of showcasing all that they have worked towards, the joy of hearing the audience's cheers. All I can think about is what happened earlier that day in the hotel room. By just the sound of their fast breathing next to me, I can tell that Rory and Isa are thinking about the same. We all are.

It was just a phone call from an unknown number to Isa's phone. She picked up, standing from the bed in the hotel room. I was painting my nails, Rory was laying out her costume on the multicolored carpet, but we stopped and looked up at her as she answered.

"Hello?"

The rest of the girls and I could only make out indistinct squawking on the other end of the phone, but we knew who it was. We're all getting the calls. "Hello, ma'am," they say, sounding almost human, almost kind. "We are calling to schedule the reevaluation of your touring license here in our country." Anja was the first one to get the call. She had anxiously asked if there was any issue that she needed to worry about. "No," they replied, "just a routine check."

We had been touring around the country for years now, and we hadn't heard anything about a routine check. But there was a new person in power, and a lot of things have been changing. We have had to skip two of our tour stops because of protests. Protesting what exactly, I don't know. The older ones won't tell us all of the details.

But it doesn't matter. I know what is true, we all do. *We are the best of the entertainers.* Our art will outlast whatever they say. The anxiety rushing through my bloodstream will add strength to my movements. The sound of our pulsing music will streamline my racing thoughts into a steady-eyed focus.

That's what I am known for; my sharp eyes. They'll come up to us after the show, and that's what they'll say to me. *"I saw you on the stage, you looked like you were looking straight into my soul."* I wish I could look straight into their soul, see what they really feel towards us. Are they outraged by the protests, or do they understand what the protestors see? What *do* the protestors see when they look at us? I don't know.

Now the lights beat down on the stage, and the music begins to boom into my ears through the speakers. We're ready. We smile our saccharine, red-lipsticked smiles, grinning wide enough so that they can see all of our teeth. If they want us to perform, we will perform. We will perform so well that they will convince themselves that we enjoy it.

The curtains close and we retreat to the hotel and get ready for bed in a haze of tired showers and makeup wipes. The next day, we get back to our practice. Throughout the entire tour, we've had to make do with whatever rooms are available through the hotels. Now, we're on the roof. The cement floor is not ideal, but we can't stop practicing. *"It's how we improve,"* the older girls chorus, although there's no denying the undercurrent of hushed-up fears under our calculated movements. It shows in the dancing, too. We're tense. We take breaks more often than usual and trudge inside to escape the bracing wind. I like the feeling of the cool air against my skin, so I stay up with Anja and Rory, looking out on the cement and steel towers of the city that surrounds us. Rory leans back against the low wall surrounding us and we stand on either side of her, feeling the breeze blow our hair over our shoulder. We chat about the weather, our hotel rooms, the new costumes. Nothing else.

Suddenly, Rory stiffens and we stop talking abruptly, without a word of warning. We turn slowly. There's a group of guys on the roof with us. They're young and white, and look to be about college aged. We continue to talk softly, all the while keeping an eye on them. They're running around, chatting and

laughing. Maybe they don't even see us. Maybe we don't have any reason to watch them so intently. Maybe the anxiety that has permeated this tour has made us jumpy.

Unfortunately, one of them in a green baseball cap and a dark gray T-shirt pulls out in front and strides towards us. We continue talking. Rory relaxes her posture, starts twirling her hair. Maybe we all do. We all know how to behave. We all know how they want us to perform, in more ways than one. She's the oldest, so maybe that's why he talks to her first.

"Hey, what are you girls doing?"

I don't like the way he says girls.

"We're not doing much," Rory says softly. Everything about her becomes softer. Normally, Rory is impulsive and mouthy and all sharp angles. But we all know how to step into other skins. This is our art, as well.

"Are you those dancers, you know, the ones who tour around?" He doesn't wait for our response. "I've heard that you guys are pretty good. It isn't hard to believe." His eyes run over us uncomfortably. His friends have caught up to him. "You know, looking at you."

"Thank you," I say. My eyes flit to the door to the roof, willing it to open and for the other women to come back.

"My friends went and saw the show, you know. They said it was good. Very... cultured." I wonder what he wants to say instead of cultured. Thankfully, the other girls finally appear at the top of the stairs.

"We have to go now," Rory says, gesturing to the others. As we walk away, our postures become straighter, our strides stronger.

"Thank god we got out," Anja says under her breath.

As we continue to practice, the boys stay there. Watching. We finish early and go inside quickly. None of us stay outside this time. "*We can't focus*," the other girls say, "*Better not to practice at all than to practice badly*."

On our second performances, we typically tell traditional stories. I watch from the wings, waiting for my entrance as Rory takes the stage. Here, she represents the god of destruction, of strength, of power. She is in her element. The lights cast dramatic shadows on her powerful lines. She seems larger than life. The drums pound as she begins the story, as dancer after dancer, representing the animals, the sky, the deepest parts of the earth, enter the stage and get destroyed. I watch as finally, Eva, one of the oldest girls, enters from the opposite side. I can tell that the audience is entranced by her incredible acting as her timid steps grow stronger and her story unfolds through her gestures and

expressions. Rory's character is entranced, as well, as the god watches Eva's dancing and slowly begins to understand the destruction he has wrought. Finally, I enter with the rest of the girls as the rest of Eva's people. The community who has existed since the beginning and continues to exist despite this bloodshed. And finally, Rory's god is vanquished by his own shame as the people rebuild around him. The audience gives us a standing ovation as we finish.

We get back to the hotel and collapse into white bedsheets, wiped out. But that's not the end of the night. I am woken by knocks on the door, quietly first and then more insistent. I open the door to see Eva. Her eyes are wide with fear, an expression I've never seen on her when she hasn't been acting. I almost don't realize it's real until I see her lips quiver and her hands slightly shake. Our hands could never shake onstage. She hustles into the room and looks out of the window. I follow her, peering over her shoulder. There are lights and movement and people--- so many people, standing out in the lawn, in front of the entrance. Holding signs. Chanting. They're a murmur inside the hotel. I can't make out the words, but one of the signs catches the light.

NOT IN OUR TOWN, it reads in bright red letters. Deep red, like blood. I can feel it like ice weighing down my veins. Eva turns to me and holds me by the shoulders.

"We need to get out," she says in an insistent whisper. "Wake up the others, quietly, and go out into the hallway. The rest of us are waiting. We're going out the fire exit, we think that it's uncovered, and into one of our cars. Not the vans, though, they've got those. Got it?"

I nod, made dumb. Eva leaves the room, I assume to go to the rest, and I shake awake Anja, Rory, and Aditi in a haze. I must explain it to them, but I'm not processing what I'm saying. I just see barefoot feet on the patterned carpet of the hallway, shoes forgotten. Shining white eyes in the dark, like what we see on stage. We are not the ones performing here. We don't control the story.

We creep down the hallway like ghosts in different shades of brown, and down the cold staircase, and to the paint-chipped door. We hold our breath as we open it, willing it not to creak, not to make a sound.

Alarms blare around us, momentarily drowning out the yelling of the protestors. We freeze like deer in headlights, or maybe deer under spotlights. It's an emergency exit, of course. The alarms would go off, of course, we should've known!

But I refuse to forget the last thing I see. It is not a wave of hateful people descending over us, or mud thrown across Rory's face, though I see that too. No,

it is the other people. The ones just arriving, the ones coming to our defense. The people who I don't even know escort us to the cars and follow the older girls out of the parking lots and herd them to safe spaces, let us borrow their phones because we forgot ours, along with our suitcases, along with *everything*, and find all of our friends, shaken, but okay.

When I finally fall asleep in the backseat of the car, I remember the story we were supposed to perform the next night. Our closing act. It's not traditional, exactly. It was the first thing the older girls choreographed all by themselves. Based on a collection of all of their folktales, it melded together into a story of an evil demon who wandered into a village and whispered into the ears of all the townspeople lies about each other. *That family steals your cow's milk*, it said, when the milk was being spilled by the villager's young son. *You can't trust any of them*, it said. But my favorite part was the ending, in both the story and the dance. It starts with a single person doing a single step, with only a flute whistling in the background, but with each repetition, a new instrument joins in, a new dancer, until, at the end, the whole village is dancing, and the demon is banished.

It's my favorite story to dance. It's my favorite music to feel, pulsing in my veins. And when we perform it, the entire audience is held enraptured. They are all united in their hatred of this liar, this trickster, this thief, even if only for this song.

As I fall asleep, that story is how I know that we are here to stay. We have more stories to tell.

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Personal Essay & Memoir



Death by a Word

There are moments in life when euphoric exhilaration is crushed by despondency. An emotional whiplash can leave one feeling concussed and transiently anhedonic. In that moment, thoughts jostle in the brain box and take a few moments to settle. If one is fortunate enough to relive the moment, captured by a lens perhaps, it can still raise their endorphin levels enough to feel the same emotions over and over again. It's easy human nature to live by the moment, but it's hard to die by the moment and then stay alive to recount what happened. Such was my experience that it has left an indelible mark on who I am.

The stage was set to rock when I won the right to represent my county, my city, and my state at the Scripps National Spelling Bee. It was a long time coming, many years of word penance, as I call it. I practiced spelling words for hours every day, and I competed in spelling bees for many years without success. But I was in love. Like a moth to the flame, I wanted to burn. For the uninitiated, spelling bees are events where elementary and middle school-level students all over the world compete to spell words in English correctly. However, it is a one-strike-and-out journey. If a student spells any word incorrectly during this experience, they are out; there is no reprieve. It is as if they die and their journey comes to an end. I wanted to feel that one moment before this death finally arrived, where I would be on top of the world, feeling the warmth of the light, basking in the glory as I knowingly flew into the fire of the next word that I would not be able to spell.

My journey started when the COVID-19 pandemic rolled into town, and in-person schools closed. Our social life was an air-tight bubble, and as we all sucked the oxygen in that bubble, it became suffocating. I needed an out. Spelling words gave me that out. It was a challenge and a way to kill time. I was good, but I

knew I wasn't the best speller yet; I wasn't elite. However, I am not the one who gives up and moves on; instead, I am that spider that keeps climbing up a wet spout to see the glory.

I watched the Scripps National Spelling Bee every year on TV. We all sat together as a family with Grandpa and Grandma to watch the bedazzling spectacle on ESPN. We each picked a kid in round 1 of the finals, and then we cheered for our pick. The family member whose pick went the farthest in the rounds was considered the winner of the night in our house. The winner got an extra serving of our family favorite Cardinal Sin frozen custard from Ted Drewes' custard shop. I had been the proud winner once when I cheered for St. Louis's favorite kid, Gokul Venkatachalam, a spelling genius who won it all and spelled the championship word without asking any questions about the word! That was considered a no-no, as most people asked numerous questions to deduce the spelling. But, he didn't need to ask anything! I was obsessed and smitten by the spelling bee from then on. I was even more infatuated with the concept of the spelling bee competition when Gokul came to my house! I sat on our polished, black couch, swinging my feet giddily as I listened to him talk about his journey.

However, I wasn't very motivated to study. I had high expectations, but didn't prepare as much. It wasn't until fifth grade that I picked up spelling seriously. The days are long, but the years are short. For 3 years, I kept grinding, and lo and behold, I was one of the elites as an eighth grader, or so I thought. As I walked into the national spotlight, I realized this was going to be tough going. The kids there were like me, but on steroids, stimulants, or whatever else would change an air pistol like me into a bazooka. I knew it was going to be a battle, but this was Armageddon times three. I was smart enough to realize that as an eighth grader, this would be my last chance to compete, and eventually, on the stage, my journey was going to end this week when I would spell a word incorrectly. It was inevitable that death would come. In the spelling bee world, it's a one-strike policy. One strike, there are no second chances.

I wore the fanciest clothes and the broadest smile as I sauntered onto the stage, basking in the glory of the national TV spotlight, but well aware that I was going to die. And that's when it happened. I fought valiantly for many rounds of spelling difficult words correctly. As rounds of words went on, the words were getting tougher, and I knew that it was going to be real soon that one of these words would spell my downfall.

On live TV, I asked my favorite pronouncer, the legendary Dr. Bailey, for the word, and he pronounced it for the audience. There was a pin-drop silence. It was

a long, twisted word that I couldn't even pronounce. His voice booms, "miss-embree-antha-mum."

"What, what, what! What was that!" I said to myself. I tried pronouncing it, but faltered; I just couldn't. "Oh no," I thought, "my death was coming." I had 90 seconds to spell the word. My brain went into overdrive. I must rise like a phoenix through these ashes of despair, I thought. "Could you tell me the definition of the word?" I asked. It's a flower, I was told. 60 seconds left.

"Miss-embree-antha-mum," Dr. Bailey, the pronouncer, said again. I didn't realize this at that time, but I was in a battle, fighting for my spelling bee life. I went back to my basics.

"Does it contain the Greek root word mes, meaning middle? Does it contain the Greek root anthos, meaning flower?"

"Yes," he responded. Alright, locked and loaded, ready to die in a tailspin. I spelled carefully, "m-e-s-e-m-b-r-y-a-n-t-h-e-m-u-m, mesembryanthemum?" I drew in my breath, and my eyes darted from one judge to the next, anxiously awaiting the response. And then applause, deafening cheers. Yes! I became the spider that climbed the spout, I was the victorious gladiator, I was a legend. I just correctly spelled the longest word of the competition. The lights, cameras, and eyes of the world were on me. I could see the crowd slowly. Everything was in slow motion. The applause seemed to continue forever. I did it. I was right. I made it; I was overjoyed. This is what I always lived for. I knew, at that moment, I had done something unforgettable. The spelling "bee" in me was ready to die. But I would die happy. Glory came to me before death, that's all I could ask for.

They asked for more difficult words in the next couple of word spelling rounds. Then, I saw the Grim Reaper. The spelling bee had a vocabulary word round where a participant was expected to know the meaning of a word. They asked what gainsay is. I didn't know, I forgot, I couldn't remember. I was lost. I felt it. This was going to be my end. Darkness started to set in around me. Everything quietened down. I gave the wrong answer. The crowd went silent. I felt as if I were a 99-year-old on a ventilator, and the ventilator plug was switched off just 1 day before my 100th birthday. But deep inside, I had a smile hiding there. The memory, the stuff that makes legends out of mere mortals, was made by mesembryanthemum already. Death came by a word, but so did the ultimate glory. Would anyone participate in an event like this where they know they are going to die, but live for the one moment, the one memory that sums up their life? If you are reading this, you can; you just have to try and believe in yourself.

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Critical Essay



Pride as a False Freedom

“Honestly, I don’t think you’re really capable of handling this on your own.” My friend confessed to my honors biology table. At that moment, I froze, unsure whether to respond as the comment stung more than expected. Those words pierced me like a sudden cold wind, chilling the warmth of my confidence. We were assigned a group project on fossils with three people and agreed to divide and conquer, with each of us responsible for a different part of the research; however, what was meant to be a collaborative project suddenly felt like a judgement of my ability. Anger, embarrassment, and pride swirled inside of me. How would someone I knew doubt my participation in this project? Instead of confronting the comment, I recoiled inward and annoyance seeped in, slow and sticky, with every thought: *I’ll make sure my part is flawless, and they’ll regret ever doubting me.* I felt my eyes burn.

In the article, “Pride,” Michael Eric Dyson emphasizes how pride functions as a sin, one that can consume the individual in defying morality. As he points out, citing Pope Gregory, the core of pride occurs when one “favours himself in his thought; and... walks with himself along the broad spaces of his thought and silently utters his own praises.” (Dyson 10). Unlike confidence, pride is the desire to assert oneself as superior and demand recognition. In my case, my pride ignited like a spark in dry grass. I wanted to demonstrate unequivocally that I was capable, perhaps even better than the rest of my group. Therefore, I started to bury myself in my own research without updating and avoiding communication with my friend out of stubbornness. My thoughts were consumed with proving them wrong and believed it illustrated my declaration of independence and skill. Just like Satan in *Paradise Lost*, I rationalized my pride as strength. When Satan becomes aware of his surroundings, he states, “The mind is its own place, and in itself / Can make a Heav’n of Hell, a Hell of Heav’n” (Milton l.254-255). Satan frames the result of his rebellion, being cast into Hell, as something that proves

his power. His pride fuels his ability to “make a Heav’n of Hell” or reinterpret his actions as virtuous rather than sinful. In a similar way, I justified my choice of ghosting my friend as a form of self-preservation and strength. In both cases, pride reframes behavior as admirable rather than harmful.

Moreover, I failed to realize how much my silence deteriorated my relationship with my friend. After the project was submitted, I held onto my pride and avoided conversation, letting resentment and misunderstanding seep into our friendship. I told myself I was reclaiming my dignity, when in reality I have been avoiding vulnerability all this time. In my attempts to prove my competence, I was also turning a vibrant, supportive relationship into one tense and brittle under the weight of my pride. Somehow, I never considered the possibility of my friend looking out for me, offering concern and help rather than doubt in her comment. However, it was already too late. In Shakespeare’s *Othello*, Othello has one last conversation with Desdemona before killing her due to her infidelity. He finally explains to her the reasons behind his rash actions: “By heaven, I saw my handkerchief in ‘s hand! / O perjured woman, thou dost stone my heart / And <mak’st> me call what I intend to do / A murder, which I thought a sacrifice” (Shakespeare 5.2.77–80). Without seeking real evidence, Othello jumps to the conclusion that Desdemona is unfaithful because of his excessive trust of Iago. Othello mentions he “saw the handkerchief” when Iago’s manipulation prevents Othello from acting rationally. In a similar way, my own pride clouded my judgement to see my friend’s supportive intentions. While Othello kills his wife, I wrongly distance myself from my friendship without clear proof of my friend’s malicious motive, all due to the lack of communication that deepened misunderstanding. By the time I realized this, our friendship had withered into a desert of silence, with each day passing with no words exchanged. I had ignored her text messages for several days and pretended like she never existed in class. Now, I awfully regret it and am ashamed of myself.

In J.L Mackie’s article, “Evil and Omnipotence,” Mackie questions how an all-good God can exist simultaneously with evil. His third point explains how “...evil may contribute to the goodness of a whole in which it is found, so that the universe is better as it is, with some evil in it, than it would be if there were no evil” (Mackie 30). Only with the existence of evil can greater good exist. In the end, I lifted my wall of pride and reached out to my friend. By facing my own wrongdoings and confronting my pride that had blinded me marked the beginning steps towards repairing my friendship. Years later, I learned how navigating conflicts when conflicts arise often make relationships flourish more.

Just as Mackie suggests, the presence of evil, my pride, ultimately made my “whole” or my friendship better through my deliberate choice to redeem my character. Stephen Cave argues in “There is No Such Thing as Free Will” that free will is an illusion through scientific evidence, but highlights how people would undermine moral accountability due to this belief. Although I believe in the existence of free will, Cave mentions “When people hear there is no free will, they wrongly become fatalistic; they think their efforts will make no difference. But this is a mistake.” (Cave 74). I resonate with the idea that individuals often believe their efforts are powerless, assuming their actions cannot alter events, but in my scenario, even though pride clouded my judgement on others, my effort in reflecting and apologizing did rebuild my friendship successfully.

Biology, pride, and circumstance could shape our impulses, but I believe they do not erase one’s capability to pause and choose how to respond. My error in distancing myself from my friend felt automatic to defend my pride, yet they were not irreversible. The moment I recognized the misunderstanding, I immediately tried to reconcile no matter how strained our relationship was. Free will lies in the power to choose redemption and responsibility to produce moral growth. It existed when I realized I stood at the crossroads of continuing to justify my silence by convincing myself that distance was deserved, or I could accept my errors and misjudgement through apologizing. That choice mattered and through free will, my friendship was rebuilt as well as my overall character.

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Flash Fiction



Salt and Strawberries

Music pounds from the stereo. We're in a tiny beetle with faded red paint and rusted metallic bumpers. Outside, strips of grey and blue and green streak past. I watch her drive, noticing how she checks the rearview but never the side mirrors, staring at the tangled strands of brown hair that fly across her face as the wind howls through the open windows.

We're on the way to the beach. It's a chilly day, but she's wearing shorts and a tank top with spaghetti straps that keep falling from her shoulders. Her clothes smell like strawberry – or is it cherry? – perfume, which she probably sprayed over her entire body carelessly. I stare at the mole in the crook of her arm and wonder if she has more. She waves a hand in my face, snapping me out of my trance. "Answer my question, Jo.

What are you even thinking about?" I blink. My palms fly to my sternum and push it anxiously, as if doing so will suppress the strange feeling that I can't avoid. "Um, right. What's the question?" I respond, and she laughs, amused. "I said, which exit do I take, and in how many miles?"

For the rest of the car ride, I'm lost in thought. When people call me Jo, short for Jonina, I'm reminded of my childhood. My dad used to call me Jo, maybe because he wanted a son. Maybe that's why he kept my hair short when I was in elementary school. I haven't had a haircut in years. Maybe that decision was made out of spite – I don't even like how my long hair looks.

When we finally arrive, I feel suffocated by the cold because it wraps me in an unwelcome embrace. But she doesn't seem affected. She runs onto the open sand, cheerful whoops echoing through the air, so I stand alone, shivering in my oversized sweater and leggings. I hate the beach. Of course, she doesn't know that. The sand always ends up in my clothes, my shoes, crevices on my body that I didn't know existed. It infiltrates my house. It leaves a gritty feeling under my bare feet and no amount of deep cleaning can get rid of it.

I take a breath. I gingerly step onto the sand. I imagine the tiny particles that have somehow already made their way into my socks. "Take my picture," she shouts, holding her brand-new digital camera and pointing at the water. I have to admit, the view is nice – the grey sky is unable to diminish the ocean's beauty and I'm mesmerized by the water's endless push and pull. But even the shimmering waves can't draw my eyes from her for long.

She stands near a cluster of rocks. Somehow, she's convinced me to remove my shoes and socks, even though I swore to myself that I wouldn't. The camera is cold to the touch and weighty in my hands. "Keep clicking," she instructs, fluidly changing from pose to pose, touching her hair and looking into the distance. I try to capture the way the color of the ocean brings out the color of her eyes.

"These are amazing, Jo. You should consider photography as a career," she teases. I'm filled with the uncontrollable urge to tell her that it's not because of me, it's because she's beautiful from every angle. I suppress this urge.

She asks me if I want any pictures. It's such a ridiculous question that I laugh. The laughter overtakes me in waves, and I'm doubled over, unable to breathe, hugging my knees. It's common knowledge that pictures of me never turn out well. I'm too stiff, too self-conscious, too chubby in all the wrong places and too thin in all the right places. But when I tell her this, she looks genuinely confused, and she pushes me to the rocks.

I feel extra self-conscious under her gaze. But she tells me how to stand, which way to look, what to do with my hands, and I fall into a rhythm, forgetting about the clicking and flashing of the camera because her voice is so calming. There's no one around to take pictures of us together, but she doesn't let that stop her, holding the camera precariously and snapping several selfies. "There," she breathes, satisfied. "These pictures will commemorate this moment forever."

For an hour, we walk along the beach's edge. She tells me about her childhood pet, a cat she named Toto because she'd watched the Wizard of Oz the day before and couldn't think of any other names. She jokes that she always wanted to carry her Toto in a basket, except he was too fat.

In response, I tell her about my childhood nickname and how much I hate it. I don't know why I do this. She looks at me, a sincere apology bubbling from her lips, but I cut her off hurriedly. "It's okay when you call me Jo. For some reason, I kind of like it." Maybe because, with her, it feels like a term of endearment and not like a name I'll never be. She gives me a lopsided smile.

On the car ride home, I close my eyes, breathing in the scent of salt and strawberries, bare feet touching the worn mat, feeling warm despite the cool air circulating through the beetle. And when I walk into my house, I don't care about the traces of sand that my feet leave on the carpeted floor. I hope the sand never fully disappears.

Maya Li

Grade 11, Blue Valley West High School

Poetry



Ghazal for Girls Going Up

I.

This is Woman at her purest – a line engraved at the altar: Her framed pin-up, a-line blueprint I trace in dreams & in blue-light chase for the far-famed upper

class is in session: Pick up the syllabus at the front of the room. Don't dare ask any questions. Come in pretty (hair & nails...), never look manly, be tamed up.

Cut my jaw, let blood shadow, contour, snatch; gall my throat. The necessary sacrifices for natural beauty – the promised noose of perfect maimed makeup.

Mutton head rinsed in fine wine & seared in bitter greed. lambs in formation, faux order teasing an immovable fate – God's right to take He ordained upon

Her, in many forms but not all. Her of femme fatal & of pixie dream girl. Her of fragility & of domesticity & of high-art disguise & of five-star aimed throwup

smeared by sons to crucify, nails to the womb. Stinking up the meaning of girl like roadkill left to rot under the sun after a hit & run – the heart flamed up.

Valery Liang

Grade 12, Rolla Senior High School

Educator: Star Hargis

Flash Fiction



Winter Candy Apple

Headlights, taillights. Sopping, tacky rain. Between the honks and screams and glistening old storms, ink-spit asphalt flashes grim white traffic lines, thick and wet.

Nobody sees Marienne step out onto the crosswalk. Her round black Mary Janes settle atop one glossy, painted strip, poised like a V in the middle of the road. Around us, sedans shriek. The light flickers red, yellow, gentle green.

Eventually, I register her absence. It's drizzling, all dizzy and sad; out there, Marienne stands like a ghost, a faerie, some pale tiny mirage in a starched school uniform. Wheels churn. Streetlights strike her face. A moment before the cars start rushing, I stride into the street, clasp her wrist, and wrench her back onto the crosswalk.

Marienne crumples against me. She's lost a Mary Jane—it's somewhere on the pavement now, smothered and buried by the tires rumbling past. Her perfect circlet kneecaps are scraped sweet red. Whistling, blaring, the night stretches high.

"What was that?" I whisper. "You terrified me."

"My shoe's gone." Marienne frowns. "Don't do that again, Lucielle. Next time, you should just leave me be."

I flick my umbrella open, tip it over us both. "How could I ever do that?"

"My shoe's gone," she repeats. "Please get it back for me, Luci."

"We've got more shoes at home." The rain pours down, down, down.

Traffic hollers and screeches, whiny, strange. I hold out a hand. Smile. "So let's go home, okay?"

In the morning, Marienne walks to school in white leather boots. She wears a smooth, small smile and a terrible satin sash that reads CLASS PRESIDENT.

I follow her to the front gates, then turn and skip two blocks over to Vetterling's Boutique. Inside, when the saleslady isn't looking, I slip two shiny Mary Janes into my purse. Then, trailing perfume and bell chimes, I sneak back out into the morning blue.

Steel, marble, rebar, gargoyles; our apartment sprawls glassy on the 17th floor. I nestle upon the slim white ledge outside our bedroom window, fingers damp with whipping breeze and open sky. My left hand fiddles with an empty pack of cigarettes, swinging idle over the 200-foot drop.

I bow my head to the gargoyle peeking out below my feet, carved eyes bulging fine, reedy gold. *Look there, I want to tell it, next to the dog park by Flannery Way. That's where my twin sister almost died last night. She's two minutes older than me, two minutes and fifty-four seconds. Why? I'd asked her afterward. Why not? she'd replied. It was rainy.*

I crane my head toward the wispy, chilly sky, tasting raindrops and traffic and hideous things. The cigarette box slips from my fingers. It hurtles, down, down, down, ricocheting past old dreams and fire escapes, and tangles inside a bed of winter crocuses.

The gargoyle doesn't say a thing.

Dusk bursts over Marienne's fingertips, splays down her crisp blue textbook. She's curled against our window seat, one glass pane away from where I'd lounged this morning. My black button-up falls down her scratched-up knees; I've always been the taller sister, even if she's the older one.

"I got you new Mary Janes," I say. "Red. Black's never really been your color."

Marienne flips a page. She closes her eyes very, very slowly, as if she's been keeping them open for centuries. Centuries. "Did you steal them, Luci?"

"You stole my shirt." I shrug. "Is it a crime to steal from a thief? You'd think that cancels the whole thing out."

"You stole *for* me. Not from me." Marienne shakes her head and chuckles a little, dry, rusty. "Just come back to school, Lucielle. Father'll give you an allowance again, and then you won't need to steal anything."

"Father won't be home for months," I say.

"Huh. I suppose so." Weary fingers, spun-wheat hair. Windowpanes. "And even when he's home, he's never here. His mind is always in Europe. Or a plane."

The market, the stars. You're right; there's no point." Marienne stares out the window without seeing at all. "Oh, Luci. I'm so tired. I think I was born tired."

"I know." I take her hand in mine. It's cold, cold as a morning. "Sleep. I'll be right here when you wake up."

Marienne squeezes my palm, tight and frigid and pleading. "Luci—Luci. Please don't go away."

For a moment, I'm stunned by how small she looks, sitting there, fading there. Small, sad; my sister presses like a butterfly against the drooping city, rattling, heaving, down and down. *Ah. You're a genius, Marienne. Two minutes and fifty-four seconds older than me. You're a genius, so everyone loves you—what do I do, Marienne?*

"Mari, didn't you just hear me?" I laugh. "I said I'd never leave your side."

Marienne wakes up at noon the next day with a cry.

"I'm late," she gasps. "My midterm seminar's today. It's worth sixty-five percent of my grade, and I'm *late*."

"It's Saturday," I lie. "Put on your Mary Janes."

When we walk outside, Marienne's shoes shimmer like twin candy apples, slick with winter sun. Down one block, up another, past Vetterling's and the ice cream shop.

Behind the dog park by Flannery Way, a thicket of fir trees blooms vicious green no matter the time of year. Their trunks are old, wet, grand; between their roots, even the worms trawl silent, swallowed by the vastness of time.

"Sometimes," I say, "when I'm very tired, I like to come here and have a good scream."

"Scream?" Marienne echoes. "That's so unbecoming."

Marienne's skirt snaps in the wind. The buttons on her uniform spark down, down, spitting. "Exactly," I tell her. "That's why I do it. When you scream, you don't think you're sick. When you scream, you can believe you were never sick at all."

Marienne looks at me, the trees, the falling blue sky. Her eyes are bright silver and wide, wide open.

She takes my hand. Takes a frozen, silent breath.

With a sound like sugarglass breaking, Marienne screams.

Noah Lipe

Grade 11, John Burroughs School

Educator: Joy Gebhardt

Personal Essay & Memoir



Through the Interior Window

“I’m going to smoke you guys!” my sister boasted.

My mother, step-sisters, and I all sat at the kitchen table, laughing over our competitive game of Apples to Apples. At eight years old, my step-sister thought she was the best board game player in the world, mocking every move that we made. Three years younger, I laughed at her mockery. Our dining table sat high above the floor, on the far side of the kitchen. Its dark brown varnish contrasted with the light blue paint of the walls. My fingers traced the watermarks that highlighted the light brown wood underneath. Peering from the table, I glanced out the window to observe our sprawling backyard, decorated with a sun-bleached playground and rusted shed. The weeds in the garden danced in the breeze, and the vines engulfed our chain-link fence. Through the dark green leaves, specks of silver glistened in the shining sun.

My stepdad lay on our cream colored sectional in the living room, watching John Wick. Slumped on the couch, his large figure molded the fabric. Women screaming and guns blaring ricocheted off the living room walls, but he simply stared blankly at the TV. The violence dominated the cheerful laughter of my step-sisters. In the midst of chaos, my mother’s voice fell silent, and the cards in her hand trembled as her eyes darted around the room, losing focus on the game. Staring into space, she picked at her glittery acrylic nails. Flecks of silver fell from her fingertips. Ever since my birth five years ago, shortly after her divorce, my mother’s patience drained easily. I ignored her quivering hands, laughing along with my sisters.

“You have the worst cards!” I mocked. The TV blared.

“Well, at least I have more green cards, loser!” Our laughs, a harmonious melody, were trampled by the aggressive cracking of machine guns in the background.

Prepared to share a laugh with my mother, I looked up to notice she had disappeared from the table mid-turn. She pivoted around the corner of the wall that separated the living room and kitchen; the old wooden floor creaked under her shuffling feet. In the middle of the wall, an interior window revealed my mother barreling toward my stepfather. She stood in front of my step-dad, still frozen in the same position on the couch. She hunched over to meet his gaze, her patience thin.

I tried my best to hear their conversation, but between the laughter of my sisters, their mumbled voices faded into the movie’s dialogue.

“David, please turn down the TV, we’re trying to play a game.” It was my sister’s turn; she drew a green card, reading the adjective.

“Shut up, I’m trying to watch TV,” my step-dad snapped, dismissing my mother.

We each find the perfect card, laughing at our decisions.

“David, I said, please turn off the fucking TV.” Her voice rose above the gunfire.

We gave our sister the cards, mocking each other’s choices.

“Get out of my fucking face, Amy. Go play your fucking game with the kids,” he attacked, his voice deepening.

Then everything exploded. Through the opening in the wall, blurry images assaulted my peripheral vision. My mother slapped my step-dad in the face. He kicked her straight in the stomach, throwing her over the glass coffee table, snapping her head back, and falling headfirst onto the bean bag. Silence.

My sister held the winning card and swiveled her head toward the living room. I stared blankly at her, a single tear rolled down her cheek. My sisters and I dashed to the living room, my mother lay on a bean bag, groaning and holding her stomach. Life around me slowed down as my sisters rushed past my mom and out the front door. I sprinted to help my mother. My sight went blurry as water filled my eyes. I grabbed my mother’s arms and lifted her off the bean bag.

I recall the silence after rushing to my mother’s red Tiguan. The sharp crimson contrasted with the dull gray concrete of the road. Our car flew past miles of golden corn fields. Instinctively, my mother drove, seeking safety, away from our house. The few trees became mile markers, and the familiar Little Caesars came into view. We sat in the car for a while, listening to the radiator cool

the engine, silent buzzing fusing with pounding flashbacks in my head. We bought a pizza and rented a movie from the Blockbuster next door. My mother gripped the box tightly to stop her hands from shaking. We both slowed the pace of our words to steady the shakiness in our breaths.

“Mom, are you sure you are okay?” I questioned, staring at my mother.

“I’m ok, it was just an argument.” It was almost a plea.

I knew she wasn’t ok; I saw it in her eyes, I heard it in her voice. It was quiet as we drove home. We arrived at the front door, the crickets chirping in the yellow grass, the breeze brushing our skin. We walked past the front door and went straight into the yard. The bright moonlight guided us past the playground to the old, rusted shed. My mother opened the door, and I plopped on the floor with our pizza and movie. Settling down, we slept on the cold, hard ground of the shed. The warmth of her body kept me comfortable through the night.

Shelby Lombardo

Grade 11, John Burroughs School

Educator: Shannon Koropchak

Short Story



Remnants

September 1st, 2025

Rays of sunlight come through my window, reflecting off the black orb on my bedside table. I lay on my side, motionless, watching the light dance across its surface.

I reach for the Magic 8 Ball, cradling it carefully between my palms. The physical weight is nothing compared to the weight it now holds over my life. While I think of my first question, I let my finger find the seam that keeps the ball together. Tracing the path again and again, I find comfort in the familiar line.

Should I even celebrate today at all? I ask silently, giving it a slight shake. I look into the glass screen as I wait for an answer, seeing that same reflection I always do. The face that stares back at me in the distorted glass, despite its aching familiarity, is not my own; it hasn't been for a while. The features are similar, so close that an outsider might mistake us for the same person in a hazy reflection, but I know better. Those calculating, intelligent eyes could never be mine.

The reply finally surfaces, "My sources say no," the 8 Ball reads. I let out a sigh and set it back on the nightstand. I didn't want to celebrate anyway, I tell myself.

Behind me, the door creaks open, but I don't bother to see who it is; I don't need to—there's only ever one other person who comes through that door nowadays. I hear my dad's footsteps come closer, but I continue to lie with my back to him, only glancing over my shoulder when the bed dips with his weight.

“Get up, sleepyhead. We have a birthday to celebrate,” he says, looking down at me with a smile that doesn’t quite reach his eyes. I can’t remember the last time it has.

I don’t respond, instead directing my gaze to the bulletin board that hangs on the wall behind his head, a mess that I can’t bring myself to deal with. The weekly schedule, in which my mom’s careful hand details the events of each day down to the precise minute, hasn’t been updated for exactly 365 days. The effortless perfection of the schedule has always upset me. I could never figure out how she managed to do it without a single smudge, how any human could be so perfect. I guess it doesn’t matter now, though—I’ll never have the chance to find out.

The only addition that’s been made to the board in the past year is the small newspaper clipping that lies just above the schedule. In a menacing bold font, it reads,

Local Woman Killed in Head-On Collision September 1st, 2024

The headline causes my stomach to twist, bringing a wave of overwhelming nausea. The sight of it never fails to open floodgates that let painful memories rush in...

—

September 1st, 2024

Ugly sobs tear out of my throat, bringing yet another wave of anguish and tears. I have no idea how long I’ve been crying in my parents’ bed; I can’t find it in me to care. All I can seem to focus on is the endless pain that consumes me, the agony that steals the air from my lungs. I try to concentrate on something, anything, that will distract me from the strangling despair I feel.

My eyes scan the room, seeing everything in its usual spot, each object placed by my mother with careful precision. The normality of it all is so at odds with what has happened. For if everything was as it should be, if today had truly been a normal day—as my mother had meticulously planned—I would be celebrating and opening presents right now. But I know that is not going to happen.

I keep looking around the room until my eyes catch a pop of color below my mother’s nightstand, the only thing out of place in an otherwise pristine room. Using what little strength I have, I get up and reach for the perfectly wrapped present. The tag attached reads,

To my entire world, Love Mom

My heart skips a beat as I frantically rip away the paper and open the box. Inside, wrapped with a little pink bow, lies a Magic 8 Ball...

—
My dad continues to stare at me, one brow raised.

"I'm not in the mood," I say, turning away from him.

"And why is that?" he questions, but we both know the answer. He lets out a long sigh.

"Honey, you can't keep letting that ball dictate your decisions. You'll drive yourself crazy that way," he tells me.

An angry flush colors my cheeks. He will never be able to understand or know how I feel. What I want to say is that, unlike him, I can't go back to the way life was before Mom. What I want to tell him is that I can't make decisions for myself, that I don't know how. I want to shout that the ball is all I have left to tell me what to do, that it's all that I have left of her. But, as always, I don't say any of that.

"You know what, I think a little break from that ball will do you some good." My dad says suddenly, breaking the unspoken agreement we've had for the past year to avoid the topic of the 8 Ball. He gets up to grab the orb.

"No!" I respond a little too loudly, instinctively reaching for the ball. But he beats me to it, reaching the ball at lightning speed. I quickly scramble out of bed, attempting to snatch the ball back from his hands. He holds it higher, forcing me to jump to try and reach it.

"It won't be forever, sweetie, but I really think a day or two away from it will help. You can't keep going on like this, hon." He says each word cautiously, knowing the dangerous territory that he's entering.

"This won't help," I say through gritted teeth, continuing to swipe at the ball. "You have no idea what you're doing." My futile attempts to get the ball grow more desperate with each second.

"I know it's been hard, sweetie, but we both have to move on," my dad says, before adding, "It's what she would have wanted."

My body goes rigid at his words, white-hot rage obscuring my vision and stealing my breath.

"*YOU HAVE NO IDEA WHAT SHE WOULD HAVE WANTED,*" I scream at him, the words escaping my mouth before I could stop them.

My sudden outburst surprises us both, leaving us frozen in place. We stand in silence as he stares at me like I'm some stranger he doesn't know. I take that as an opportunity to grab the ball. Lunging forward, the 8 Ball is just within my reach. But, right as I do, my dad instinctively pulls his hand back. Instead of

grabbing the ball as I had planned, my fingers just barely graze it, loosening his hold on the orb. My stomach drops as I try to catch it, but it's too late...

The ball hits the ground with a thud, the black plastic and shards of glass skittering across my bedroom floor—liquid seeps from the remnants, staining the hardwood a midnight blue.

“NO!” I scream. My voice comes out strangled, the life ripped away from me in a single moment. I drop to my knees as tears begin to flow down my face in a furious flood. Reaching for the pieces, I gather them in my hands in a feeble attempt to put them back together. Brutal sobs shake my entire body as I stay on the floor crying. The 8 Ball was all I had left of her. *What am I going to do, what am I going to do?* I ask myself over and over while tears streak down my face.

I hear my dad rummaging through the shattered pieces, and then the soft thud of his knees as they hit the ground beside me. Strong arms encircle me in a warm hug, holding me while I mourn the loss of the 8 Ball. We stay like that for a while, until eventually, when my sobs are little more than quiet whimpers, he pulls back. Holding out his palm, my dad reveals a familiar piece of warped glass, the only part of the 8 Ball miraculously left intact. I look down into the distorted reflection held within his palm, expecting to see the same person that I always do, the same eyes that have haunted me for the past year. But, for the first time, it's not my mother's gaze I meet in the glass—no. For the face that now stares back at me from this tiny, insignificant fragment of a now broken Magic 8 Ball—however tear-stained and imperfect it may be—is entirely my own.

Christopher Long

Grade 11, Shawnee Mission East High
School
Journalism



Disintegrated Respect

*Names are changed to protect identity

The blank stares of 25 students were the last thing she needed. For months, teacher *Amber Konrad had been struggling. Struggling with the question of: *Does anyone care if I try?*

“I felt like no one saw me and no one recognized what I was going through,” Konrad said. “Admin tells us all these nice things about how much they like us and appreciate us, and blah, blah, blah, but [they’ve] actually never, ever come up to me and told me I’m doing a good job.”

Students? Treated her class as a chore.

Her friends? Tried to convince her to quit.

But she couldn’t.

She wasn’t ready to walk away from the job she fell in love with more than a decade ago.

Konrad went into teaching thrilled about the idea of being paid to work with high-achieving students in a “community of expectations.” But after more than 10 years of teaching a room of students who only wanted a grade, Konrad found herself meeting with a therapist and napping two to three hours every day after school to cope with the task of educating the uninterested. Burnout has always been a part of teaching. Konrad said that in the past five years, it has become more common than ever.

A Google Form survey sent to all teachers and administrators received 30 responses and 28 teachers across all departments said burnout is an issue. These responses reflect national trends. According to a [National Education Association](#)

[teacher survey](#), over 90% of the teachers who responded said burnout is a serious problem.

Teachers are burnt out because district policy and curriculum changes don't reflect their perspective, according to multiple survey responses.

Teachers are burnt out because large class sizes are forcing them to spend more time grading.

Teachers are burnt out because students, instead of investing in their education, treat classes as something they *have* to do to graduate.

Teachers are burnt out because artificial intelligence is forcing teachers to police technology usage.

District Oversight

In her 25 years of teaching in the district, English teacher Kristin Anderson felt many district administration curriculum decisions were made without accurately representing teachers' perspectives.

"[District Administrators] so [high] up at the beautiful CAA that has a living plant wall and a bistro, and they can't possibly understand," Anderson said. "You can read all the educational theory books that you want, but until you're in front of the kids, a living room of 30 humans, it doesn't mean anything to me."

Teachers have always valued their autonomy, according to Associate Principal Anna Thiele. As a former teacher, Thiele said one of the unique aspects of the job was that within the four walls of their classroom, a teacher knows their curriculum — and how to teach it — better than anyone.

But teachers' autonomy is often threatened by SMSD decisions, according to Konrad. More often than not, teachers feel the SMSD administrators don't understand a teacher's point of view.

"I don't think the district cares to know what IB is," Konrad said. "They treat it like an AP class or a college now class and it's not. It's just sort of like, oh, that really cool thing that we highlight students are doing and makes our district look good, but they're not getting into it. They're not seeing me."

SMSD's decisions are often top-down — created at the district office, the Center for Academic Achievement, and then implemented at all schools in the district, according to six teachers at SM East. Dr. Chris Kase, SMSD director of Secondary Human Resources, explained that before any curriculum decisions are

made, the district asks its focus groups made up of teachers, administrators and principals for feedback.

Yet, teachers, like chemistry teacher Susan Hallstrom and Anderson, feel that these focus groups don't understand students' decreased interest in learning.

According to the teacher survey, every time the district makes a decision, teachers take extra time to restructure their curriculum and rethink how to manage the classroom.

For example, when the district decided to add the Earth and space science class to satisfy a physical science graduation requirement, the science department advised against it, claiming it would hurt test scores.

Instead of following the science teachers' advice, the SMSD implemented the curriculum change, and according to Hallstrom, this is a main factor in a recent Kansas State Assessment score decline.

"Sometimes, I think there are so many people working at the CAA they have to make changes to justify their existence," Hallstrom said. "On Earth and space science, you never pick up a calculator. If you don't give kids those higher-level thinking skill opportunities, they won't perform as well on [the KSA]."

Large Class Sizes

The district doesn't just determine what curriculum looks like and classroom phone usage. They control how many teachers are needed in each school, and with that, how much money each school has to hire teachers.

Despite class sizes, SM East can't hire more teachers, Kase said.

In the survey, several teachers wrote that 18-23 students is the perfect class size to form a connection with each student and grade work on time.

But adding more students now means more assignments to grade while decreasing student opportunities to add to class discussions.

"The single most important thing that enables me to be a more effective teacher is a smaller class size," Anderson said. "I will assure you that with class sizes of 30, every single kid in that room is getting less of an education."

A third of the responding teachers believe the district needs to allocate funds towards hiring more teachers to balance out classes.

Otherwise, teachers are torn between keeping their sanity and their health or providing the best education possible for their students, according to Hallstrom.

But how much effort students put into their learning is often beyond teachers' control. Multiple teachers said they pour hours of work into lesson plans that students take for granted.

Student Don't Care

When science teacher Jodi Stanley was too sick to teach her sixth hour environmental education class, substitute teacher DeAnn Smith filled in to supervise.

As Smith was grading worksheets, she felt a dense plastic cube slam into the back of her neck.

A student had thrown a Nee-Doh Nice Cube at her.

The next day, after being diagnosed with a concussion and prescribed pain medication at an Urgent Care center, she still felt constant pain in her neck. Not even a get-well-soon letter signed "the senior in the corner by the turtle tank" in Stanley's sixth hour could reestablish Smith's peppy personality.

"I felt really disheartened," Smith said. "It has really dampened my enthusiasm. And I haven't felt that way. I usually feel pretty energetic. I like being here. I like working here. I like the kids, and the majority of them are great. So why me?"

Since the accident, Smith said she has received several emails from teachers reaching out in support.

Although she doesn't know how she's going to proceed legally, teachers have expressed concern about how administration disciplines students, according to Smith.

"The big joke on teacher social media [is], you send a kid to the office, they come back with a snack and a drink," Hallstrom said. "We need consequences that are real and unpleasant. If there are no consequences for poor choices, then you expect the poor choices to continue."

Principal Jason Peres explained that while he can't comment on specific disciplinary actions, SM East follows the [district's disciplinary matrix](#).

But it's much more than just administrators' role in keeping students accountable, according to Konrad. It's the students.

Konrad has observed students no longer feel the need to attend school or focus in class, with students' increased reliance on technology since the COVID-19 pandemic. She's heard students call the attendance policy "a joke," and when they're late, students say, "I never got in trouble for being this late with other teachers."

Learning extends beyond simply receiving a grade, and student motivation is key, according to Konrad. She explained that the problem is that teachers don't know how to spark motivation and intellectual curiosity because they're competing with screens.

"We look at you students, and we see apathy," Konrad said. "We see a serious decline in critical thinking. We see a lack of intellectual curiosity. Nothing will kill a person's joy faster than trying to be excited about something and just being met with a wall of blank stares. It hurts."

Cheating With AI

With the rapid development of generative AI, students' use of technology as an in-class distraction or a tool for bypassing work has been a trend in education. AI has forced teachers to reconsider not only what they teach, but also their grading practices, according to English Department Chair Amy Andersen.

Since AI can complete assignments for students, teachers now have to take extra time to check them for AI-generated content but also ensure that AI wasn't mistakenly flagged — a reality that has led to issues from middle school to post-graduate education, according to [NBC](#).

"I've encountered lots of AI usage as students are analyzing poetry, and poetry is a genre near and dear to my heart," Andersen said. "I've come to love this job more and more, but AI is the thing that now has me, for the first time in maybe 10 years, asking harder questions about, can I stay?"

The technology has developed to the point where teachers are now having to build and structure assignments to be AI-proof — yet another responsibility teachers must manage.

In Andersen's case, that means students can only write poetry analysis and essays in class only. For Hallstrom, it means more paper worksheets, labs and activities — adding another thing for teachers to grade and give feedback.

“I spent about 18 hours grading, and that was one lab and one test,” Hallstrom said. “Those [hours] are not sustainable. Yet, I see no other way to give my students what I feel like they deserve from me.”

Since AI and technology are constantly evolving, teachers and administrators can’t implement a strict policy, according to Thiele. This reality forces teachers to have to decide what’s acceptable technology usage and what’s cheating.

Closing

In the past five years, teachers have been increasingly blamed for reduced test scores, expected to create and enforce their own AI policy, provide timely feedback and still have time for themselves and their families, according to the [National Teachers Union](#).

“I joke with my husband, I say, ‘Can grading kill a person?’” Andersen said. “It’s kind of the system we’ve built. I think oftentimes, for teachers, it’s a burnout cycle.”

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Olivia Loosemore

Grade 9, John Burroughs

Educator: Lydia Smith

FLash Fiction



The Dive

Gloria surveyed the deck of the swimming pool with a shadowed gaze. Five eager young students stared back at her, glowing with excitement. She glanced at her reflection in the water. It was getting harder to recognize every day. Her eyes fell on one of the young women and her heart nearly stopped. She looked like her old diving partner, Liz. The memory ripped a shark-sized hole in Gloria's heart. There was definitely some relation between them. A niece? Oh dear. She probably knew..Gloria looked at her bare feet. She couldn't meet her students' eyes as she started their lesson.

*"The first rule of scuba diving is always dive with a partner.
Even if it seems safe, even if you've dived thousands of times before.
And never leave them alone.
I regret it every day."*

A tiger shark was a foot away from my diving mask.

Before that, I glimpsed Gloria. She was inspecting a large green sea sponge, about fifteen yards away. I turned back towards the open ocean.

Before that, I looked for my friend. I wasn't very worried. She was an adult, a pro, she could handle anything, but it wasn't good that we were separated. The underwater currents were the most dangerous thing in the sea. You can avoid (almost) everything else.

Before that, my old diving instructor's voice filled my head, "Always dive with a partner."

Before that, I realized I had lost Gloria.

Before that, I stared out into the open ocean. From the underwater point of view, it always looked mysterious and unmistakably beautiful. Suddenly, I saw a

flash of a large, grey form in my periphery. A chill went through my body, but I shook it off. Probably a ray. They were common in the area.

Before that, I almost brushed against a fire coral and signaled my suggestion to explore near the drop off. Gloria gave a thumbs up and we swam around to the edge of the reef.

Before that, I was carefully seeking an octopus when Gloria pointed up with urgency. I looked up just in time to see a leatherback sea turtle meander over our heads. Gloria's eyes shone with pure joy.

Before that, a school of angelfish streaked past me. One pleasantly shocked me by brushing his little fins against my cheek.

Before that, the reef came closer. We again found ourselves in the most glistening, wonderful pocket of the world. Again, I was taken aback by its pure life. Gloria pointed out a horde of pyjama sharks tucked into a nook. I found a moray eel, a favorite. I had been at the reef before, and secretly had one eye open for tiger sharks. They tended to hang around here, and while a shark attack is very, very rare, tiger sharks will really eat anything. Air tanks, flippers and limbs are all on the list. It couldn't hurt to be a little cautious.

Before that, bubbles filled my vision as I flipped around, trying to find Gloria. When I found her, she was giving me a thumbs up and we swam down into the beautiful metropolis below.

"Go!"

Before that, we sat on the edge of the boat, facing in, waiting for the yell of the driver. "You ready?" Gloria asked, like she always did.

"Of course."

Before that, I pinned up my hair and pulled on my skin-tight hood. Gloria helped me strap on my air tank, and I did hers.

Before that, Gloria gestured for the driver to stop.

Before that, the wind whipped my hair back as we moved further away from shore.

Before that, I boarded *The Raven* with Gloria, my steadfast diving partner, fellow biologist and friend. She tripped and fell into the boat, making us both laugh.

Before that, we walked down the pier, savoring the sun and the thrill of going on another dive together.

My memory clouds as I lose oxygen, preventing any more of my life from playing in reverse in my head. Fog creeps across my vision. My brain loops

Gloria's face. Over and over and over. I smile up at her. She's floating above me like a guardian angel, coming closer and closer and-

Madeline Male

Grade 11, Home School

Flash Fiction



Uprooted

When a new couple moved into the house, they hung a bench swing on one of my long, thick boughs, and spent every evening sitting there. I couldn't see why they'd want any other tree, but nevertheless they soon planted a little sapling across the yard. Scrawny in every way, it looked like a weed waiting to be pulled up.

In a few mere years, that itty bitty tree had sprouted up like a time lapse! It had even started quietly babbling to itself, when the wind encouraged it. "Why hello," it called to me one day, "I'm Magnolia. You know, I dream of being like you someday, so tall and strong. Would you tell me your name, great tree?"

"I'm Oak," I scoffed, "Hate to break it to you, but you're never going to be as strong or sturdy as I am." Magnolia stayed quiet after that. Sometimes she offered small talk, but I didn't care much about responding. My bigger concern was that the couple used the bench swing less, and less, and... less. Then they hung a different kind of swing from Magnolia, and put a little baby in it. That's how they spent their evenings now. Equally terrible, when they hung a bird feeder from Magnolia, the robins from my tree relocated to her. Even the squirrels preferred Magnolia's playful, twisty branches over my thick and strong ones. Most tragically, the wood on my unused bench swing had started to rot, and it was soon taken down. Despite still having leaves, I felt bare as Magnolia bloomed while everyone gathered around her.

It didn't feel like long until the baby became a little girl and started climbing in Magnolia's branches. "Oh, don't you just love being a tree?" Magnolia laughed. That was the last straw. I smiled curtly, but knew what I had to do. That night, I waited for the right wind, then harnessed all my power to send one of my spare limbs crashing down into Magnolia.

I heard a snap, a painful cry, then . . . utter silence. The next morning's light brought a sight that forced me to look away in shock. *Who would do this to Magnolia?* It was me. All me. A good half of her branches were shattered. The nests from her tree

were tattered. The swing and bird feeder lay on opposite ends of the lawn, both broken. Magnolia herself refused to glance in my direction, and even the squirrels and birds avoided me completely.

The family dove into relentlessly trying to save Magnolia. After a few arborist visits, that spring Magnolia's twig-like branches somehow held a few buds, much more dull than they used to be. Everyone was ecstatic.

Meanwhile, each ant that crawled up my trunk felt like a heavy weight on me. My roots were not strong enough to keep me from sinking into a deep pit of guilt, and my leaves did not cover enough to hide me from shame. Each day, my view burned my eyes: an always persistent, yet scrawny, magnolia tree bearing scars caused by me.

Eventually, the little girl became a big girl, then a young woman — and off to college. The yard was eerily quiet after that. I aspired to speak to Magnolia, but after years of hostility, I knew that there were no words impactful enough to heal her.

One night, the weather matched the storm in my mind, raining and thundering like never before. I apprehensively watched a neighboring tree wobble . . . The next gust of wind sealed its fate. Snap! It was headed right for Magnolia! I reached out my branches, leaning toward the falling tree. We collided head-on. I turned the tree away from Magnolia, but in the process I uprooted myself and cracked my trunk. Boom! I hit the ground.

I finally sensed a glimmer of peace within myself.

In the morning, a crew arrived to chop me up. My lumber was sent to a carpenter, where I waited for awhile before he crafted me into little swings for toddlers. One of those swings eventually came back home, where the not-so-little-girl helped her own child onto it. She watched in delight as her child laughed in glee, swinging under the always persistent, yet slightly scrawny, Magnolia. I knew I'd never be able to reverse my damage to Magnolia, but at least my last act as a tree was a gesture for her sake.

Once the people went inside, a quiet settled over Magnolia and me. I held my breath, wondering: was this hostile, or peaceful? On the next breeze, I knew. Magnolia sent a little pink bud to me, and it landed gently on my reshaped wood.

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Madeline Male

Grade 11, Home School

Flash Fiction



Hair of Flowers

When Silva was born, she seemed just like any other baby. But I knew she was different. And when her thick Brunette hair started growing, everyone else saw it too. Tiny flower buds sprouted from that lush river of flowing softness, and when the wind blew, the sweet scents would waft toward your nose. As she grew, the buds did too, and by the time she was eight years old, full-fledged flowers had sprung from her hair. All the townspeople practically worshipped her while she stood in polite, perfect silence, hands at her side, a slight upturn of her lips, and blue sapphire eyes peering into the distance, beyond the town, where the dense forests gave way to mountains.

But nobody saw her eyes—it was all the hair. It was not terribly long, nor terribly deep in color. But that didn't matter, because somehow its essence would never fail to capture your gaze. Nobody had ever seen hair so thick. One day, some visitor to the town walked up to her parents and offered to fund Silva at beauty contests. Apparently, they thought that she had potential to win—a lot. Who'd pass on that opportunity? So it started with a few people, mainly hair stylists. I sat in my rocking chair as their shiny cars pulled up the gravel road. They strode up the path, gasped at my appearance when they saw me, and rushed inside, eyes shielded. Then came the makeup professionals, skincare experts, and the kind of “teachers” that train you to master the art of walking in heels. Still more people—with such long job titles that no one in the whole town could keep track of who was who and what was what. Every morning, the crew set Silva in a chair on the wraparound porch and began working on her. Her sapphire eyes gazed into the distance, beyond the town, where the dense forests gave way to mountains.

But nobody saw her eyes—how could they? By the week, those sapphires were growing duller. Her skin grew paler, and for the first time ever, I saw petals drift down from her hair and lay to rest on the rusty boards of the porch. Almost in a trance, she slowly stepped down and walked through the grass, with her bare, unbound feet leading her toward the forest. For a brief moment, I considered calling out to her, but what use? Soon enough everyone would figure out their crown jewel had left the treasury. Where were they all, anyway? I craned my neck to see inside the cracked glass window, to the sight of a stylist arguing with a skincare expert over a nail-polish speckled hairdryer. They screamed at each other, cussing like crazy over a literal \$20 gadget. I chuckled, just as the high heel teacher walked in and gasped in shock, four pairs of heels subsequently flying out of her arms. One of the shoes banged the makeup lady on the head, who was taken out cold. Someone else rushed into the room to break up the scuffle, and as the yelling was taken up a notch, I shook my head and settled back into my rocker to gaze out at the mountains. By now, Silva was gone from sight.

Someone stepped out onto the porch to take a breather, saw that I was there, and immediately hurried back inside as if they couldn't stand a face that wasn't cookie cutter'd for perfection. Pretty soon everyone spun into a panic of "*Where's Silva?!*" The family, the beauty contest crew, the townspeople, the sheriff—they launched into scouring every inch of our little town, far more than it should ever be scoured. Nobody asked me where Silva went. So I never told them.

That night, I was gazing at the stars scattered across the sky when I saw Silva walking out of the forest. She said no words to me as she stepped onto the porch and went inside. She didn't look like she'd changed much, aside from a few streaks of dirt on her clothes—but I could tell. Her sapphire eyes were different. Somehow, they were rich and deep in color, like a reflection of wisdom. Of course, when everyone realized she'd come back, things were so loud that I couldn't even close my eyes and listen to the sounds of the night. The owl was drowned out by the squeaky scream of the stylist; the rustle of the fox in the brush was shushed by another's cries. Now it was all an effort to apply remedies and concoctions to erase any trace of the forest from her. They worked all through the night, and the next morning, they had almost finished shaping Silva back into their mold. Even her heels were fastened back on. But her eyes hadn't changed since last night. How could they? Nobody saw them.

Slowly, the flowers began growing from her hair again. But they kept growing. And growing. Then thistle sprouted from the top of her head. Cacti protruded from her ankles. Berry bush stalks crept along her back. Thorny vines circled around her torso. Succulents covered her legs. Brambles surrounded her face. Weeds wrapped her hands like mittens.

The beauty contest crew made an attempt to “fix” it, sure, but soon they threw all their stuff into sparkly, plastic-coated suitcases and scurried out of town, leaving as fast as they came.

Silva was now a palace of prickliness. You couldn’t see an inch of skin left, save for those sapphire eyes, which nobody saw—how could they? Now everyone, even the townspeople, ran from this monstrous conglomeration of all kinds of ugly.

I was still in my rocking chair when Silva stepped out of the house one afternoon. We shared a moment of silence before she started toward the forest. I took my weed-covered hand and brushed some faded brunette hair of thistle out of my brambly face. We both knew: you can’t fight nature.

Madeline Male

Grade 11, Home School

Poetry



The Ocean

The ocean tickles my sand-cruled feet
as I sit on the beach, overlooking the sunrise
the ocean has eyes in the waves that watch
me as intently as I am watching them
it reaches out and pulls back its hand
an invitation to join, or a temptation to explore?
The ocean carries me so far out
all I see now are clouds as white as paper
and waves smoother than any line I could trace
it plays with my hat, tossing it away
the ocean fools my eyes when I look into the water
I can only see the sun and clouds and occasional bird
the ocean rolls me into stormy seas
bouncing me up and down
sweeping me into a whirlpool
giving me a spin, dancing with me
its currents embrace my arms, guiding the path
of our waltz back toward the land
the ocean beaches
me, before receding, it whispers in my ear
to come back again . . . tomorrow.

Kaylynn Martin

Grade 11, Viburnum High School

Educator: Nicole Hunt

Short Story



Owls & Lions

One year. That's how long Ben had been without siblings or his parents' love. A person has a hard time getting by without the love of the people around them. Maybe they could, with enough determination, but that was not the case for Ben. That's why he found himself on the Golden Gate bridge at four in the morning on a Thursday. That also just happens to be why he took the leap and why it only took thirty seconds of hesitation. He couldn't remember actually going down or what the impact felt like, just the feeling of the water entering his lungs. That's the same thing he felt when he awoke.

When Ben gained consciousness he immediately felt water in his throat and nose. He sat up with a jolt and began coughing vigorously. He looked down and saw that his clothes were soaked and he was currently sitting in a creek bed with beautiful clear water that you could see every glimmering rock through. "Hello Benjamin, I don't believe you know who I am," Ben heard from a deep voice as he awoke. He looked up to see an owl looking right at him with beady yellowish eyes.

'Did that owl just talk?' Ben thought before looking around for a person. When he was met with no one he looked back at the owl. *'Yeah that's normal. Am I loopy or something? Did they give me something at the hospital?'*

"This isn't normal for you. I forgot. Benjamin you don't have much time so you must allow me to give you the proposal now. There is a door just over there. If you choose to go back to your life, you will find yourself in an ambulance with no memory of this interaction. You can return to your previous life, see your mother and father once again, or not. As of right now, you are dead to your world. Make your choice," The owl explained.

“What do you mean? Where am I?” Ben asked.

“Get up and go into the door, or stay here. Be your parents’ third and final dead child or be their only one alive. Make your choice now,” The owl demanded. Ben looked around and saw the door, it was nothing special. You would see it in an ordinary suburban neighborhood, but instead of heading into a kind, warm, loving home, you would end up in a crappy run down apartment with two parents screaming at each other over their dead sons. Putting it like that the decision wouldn’t be too hard.

“I think I’m good here... wherever here may be I suppose,” Ben murmured with a look to the large creature. Now that he took a second, he could see that the owl was bigger than he was, not exactly a normal thing to see in the woods or in general. When Ben turned his head to the door once again there was no door to turn to.

“I see. I am Theeral. I have access to your thoughts and your memories. I am meant to be your partner in this war,” The owl, Theeral explained.

“What war? Can you tell me where here is?” Ben asked as he began to ring out his shirt.

“This is Utia. Typically those who die do not end up here, this is strictly a choice for those who are on the brink of death. Most also chose to live amongst their friends and family.” Theeral explained. “There is currently a war, my previous partner died so I was assigned the next person to arrive.”

Theeral then came off of his branch and glided down to stand in front of Ben. The owl was much larger than Ben, by what almost looked like 3 feet. Theeral’s wings opened wide as he came down and they were huge. “Don’t be threatened, as I explained we are partners. No harm will be given to you by me.” The owl soothed. “Yeah, not worried at all. Not like I’m only used to seeing you guys about as big as my head or anything” Ben scoffed. Theeral let out a chirp almost sounding like an amused laugh. “Shouldn’t I have some more... I don’t know? Training I guess? Since I haven’t made it a goal of mine to be in war a lot?”

“Learn on sight. You’ll do fine. I got someone I need to introduce you too, get on,” Theeral instructed before hunching down. When Ben stayed where he was looking at Theeral with concern Theeral continued, “You won’t fall. I told you I wouldn’t hurt you. Just get on the saddle and latch the belt over your legs,” Once Ben finally got on, Theeral launched into the air causing Ben to jolt back.

“Slow down!” Ben cried out as he grabbed the two handles that were on the front of the saddle. He was very grateful for the thigh straps holding him down. Theeral eventually slowed down and began to glide.

"I won't be slowing down if arrows are flying at us, figure it out or you're going to break your back," Theeral scorned.

'Don't be an insolent-'

"I can hear your thoughts. Remember?" Theeral asked before diving down causing Ben to grip the handles harder and lean down so less air was going against him. "At least you pick up quick," Theeral praised. Eventually when he slowed Ben looked to the right and saw a log house with a beautiful field around it.

As Theeral landed and let Ben get off he looked up onto a dark tree to see an owl that was covered in the branches, much larger than Theeral. "Hey, this who I think it is?" Ben heard from the other owl who had a masculine carefree voice.

"Yep, what are the odds?" Theeral asked rhetorically.

"I'm lost," Ben complained dumbfounded.

"Benjamin?" Ben heard from behind him. He turned to be met with familiar dark curls and deep green eyes, the same ones he looked into as they faded into a lifeless stare. There in front of him was his brother, the one who died from cancer two years ago. Tears welled in Ben's eyes. He was fifteen when his brother died, now two years later he was there as if he was never gone. He aged the same and had the same eyes, but alive once again. Benjamin and his two brothers, Chris and Denver, had the same eyes growing up, all a deep green they had got from their mother. Benjamin was just staring at his brother, lost for words when Denver lunged into a hug. "Oh my god you're here! I mean hey that sucks since you died but you're here!"

Benjamin didn't say a word back but finally he hugged Denver before whispering, "I hated you... I hated you so much. You died. You were gone," He then paused and continued in a shout, "You left us behind! You left us and mom and dad basically left too! Then Chris joined a gang and died in the streets! I was alone!" Benjamin shoved Denver backwards and backed away himself as tears flooded his vision. "I lost all of you..."

"I'm so sorry, you went through so much but you can't blame me." Denver pleaded with a stern voice as he walked towards Ben once again and put a hand on his shoulder. When Ben didn't shove him back Denver wiped away his brother's tears and hugged him again. Ben broke down in his arms, the same way he did when he found out he was going to die. Denver eventually brought Ben inside and they spent a couple hours there, not speaking about what just happened, just falling into a comfortable co-existence.

Theeral and Denver's owl, Hurcle, allowed them two hours before they began to speak about the battle getting ready to take place the next day. When they brought it up, the four were outside with the humans on the porch swing and owls sitting on the grass.

"So the lions are trying to take you out to take over?" Ben asked and Denver nodded a response. "And we are helping with this because if we don't we are just going to be dead? Again? Why even bring me here if I clearly have little to no will to live?"

"Because now you have your brother to fight for as well. He chose not to go back because he thought you guys saw him as a burden and you chose to stay because you didn't want to go back to being alone. Now you aren't alone and he feels of use, congrats. If you guys die you lose this new chance. Don't waste it." Theeral explained. Ben shared a look with his brother and nodded as the Owls filled him in on the rest, how the war started when one of the lions attacked an owl and how there have been a few battles here and there that did not end well for either side.

"We attack tomorrow, me and Theeral will get you guys. Have fun!" Hurcle told the two before him and Theeral took off.

"I guess I should explain how we fight huh?" Denver asked Ben and the two just looked at each other before sharing a laugh at the absurdity of it all. "Welcome to Utia. Glad I got to show you around before we throw you into battle."

"How are they even expecting me to do this?" Ben asked, "I just got here. Learning on sight does not help if they end up killing me on sight,"

"You'll be with me. I'm leading the left flock, you and Theeral will have me and Hurcle backing you up the whole time. You would be surprised how easily you pick things up in the heat of the moment." Denver explained, "It will probably also help that Theeral is one of the most trained owls out there. He was trained to fight before the war even started unlike most of the owls."

"So just sit back and let him do the work?"

"Yeah, kind of. But you need to look around for him and you'll have a sword,"

"Cool,"

"Yeah but the lions people also have swords,"

"Not so cool."

Eventually Denver gave Ben a sword and the two made their way to a tree. Once Ben got used to the weight of the blade Denver took out his own and showed him small things. How to disarm, some defence, and how to attack. By the time they

were done Ben was exhausted and felt like the only thing he learnt was how to hold the sword.

“It will kick in when you actually have to do something,” Denver chuckled while helping Ben set up a blanket and some pillows on the couch. “If you have to do something that is.”

Eventually the two settled down in their respective areas, although they did not stay there. Denver had joined him to sleep in the living room on the other side of the couch at some point that night. When Ben awoke it was to a swift kick in the face.

While Denver was asleep Ben took the time to get some food made in the kitchen with a golden hue coming through the windows.

“Something smells good,” Ben heard Denver say from behind with a groggy voice.

“My food typically does. You’re lucky I knew how to make pancakes without the box,” Ben stated.

“Thank god, it’s been so long since I had pancakes” Denver whined.

“Two years,”

“Two dreadfully long years,” Denver complained while fixing up his own plate and beginning to eat. “I can only make so much. Mom always handled the food,”

“Yeah well she didn’t for me after you died,” Ben asserted.

“How bad was it? With me gone?” Denver asked just as two owls landed outside.

“My pancakes..” Denver murmured before Ben walked outside with Denver close behind.

“Ready?” Hurcle asked while Denver groaned then walked inside. Ben followed him back in and was forced into armor.

Once the two walked out of the house and got onto the Owls they set off to meet the rest of the army. Ben was kind of shocked to see Theeral was one of the smallest among the group. He had seemed huge in the beginning.

“I can hear your thoughts. I’m one of the best here and you would do better to remember it,” Theeral reminded Ben along with a jerk down into a dive. By the time they landed Ben’s hair was everywhere and he was breathing heavily.

“Give me a warning next time,” Ben complained as he grew more and more anxious.

“You’ll be fine. You two’s speed is actually something to be scared of,” Denver explained, somehow reading Ben’s mind.

“My speed you mean,” Theeral clarified with a prideful tone.

After some time Denver decided everyone was there and they all took off, Theeral flying beside Hurcle easily despite his smaller frame. Eventually they came up on the Lions camp and descended. They were quickly met with a lot of people and lions coming out of their tents.

As they attacked the left side of the camp Theeral and Hurcle chased a group outside of the camp before finally deciding to attack. The Owls did most of the work while Ben and Denver got the people on the lions backs. After a while there was blood everywhere and the two got off Theeral and Hurcle to look around. They had got most of them but there were a few stragglers. Denver handled most of the extra humans they found while Ben only stood behind him to offer the occasional poke of a sword.

“Get your hands up,” Ben heard someone shout behind him and they turned to find a large lion snarling at them while a man held a sword, which was quickly lowered when they all got a solid look at each other. The lion stopped snarling and Ben was pretty sure he stopped breathing. Their final brother was standing in front of them. Chris was there as if he had never died, same as Denver. All three of them were there very much alive.

Everything stood still as Theeral and Hurcle landed behind Denver and Ben. Denver was the first to move, completely ignoring the situation as he hugged Chris. Chris only took a couple seconds before hugging Denver back.

“I got both of you back,” Denver murmured. Chris started to talk then Denver stopped him, “you’re my brother. I don’t care who you’re supposed to be fighting”

Chris shook his head, “I’m not actually against you guys, there’s a group of us refusing to hurt the owls. We were at the camp to talk them down,” Chris explained before looking at Ben and opening an arm out to him from his embrace with Denver. Ben didn’t know what to think, he hated his brother, both of them for ruining their family. He took a step back into Theeral and tears began to fall. “Ben, I know. I know that I hurt you. I yelled then you held me as I died, it sucked. I can’t fix what you went through but please,” Chris pleaded.

Ben couldn’t breathe. Every memory was flooding back, he had tried to forget his brothers death, after last night he had tried to forget the anger and resentment he held towards them but all of it was there. He crumbled down to the ground and clutched his chest. Ben closed his eyes and felt something warm wrap around him. When he opened his eyes again he saw feathers and turned to see Theeral looking down at him.

“Breathe,” Theeral instructed but all Ben could do was wheeze.

'So easy, thanks for the advice' Ben thought as he glared at the owl, very happy that Theeral could hear him. Eventually Ben found air in his lungs once again only to see hands trying to pry Theeral's wings open. *'I know it's not their fault, why am I so mad?'*

"You don't have to leave the feelings behind, but you need to get past them. You love them" Theeral soothed. Ben looked up at Theeral and nodded then the wings opened.

"Benny? You ok? Did you get hurt earlier?" Denver asked as he crashed to his knees in front of Ben and held his face. Theeral backed away and Chris stepped forward.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry." Ben began to sob before hugging Denver back and looking up at Chris who took the invitation to hug his brothers. The three held each other for awhile, relishing in the love they had missed for much longer than they should have.

This wasn't the end of any war, it wasn't the end of anything really. That didn't matter however to the siblings, the only thing that mattered was that they were together. There, in that moment, the war could wait. Just as the three had to wait in order to find each other once again.



Miss Fieldline 1989

No one has ever dazzled more than Miss Fieldline 1989. The moment she stepped onto the stage, decorated in jewels, sparkles, and a gaudy prom dress, everything stopped. Shooting stars broke from their path to stare into her eyes, which were picturesque voids; statues turned their heads to admire her skeletal features, carved so delicately they could break skin. It was as if Aphrodite herself was standing on that stage, Aphrodite, however, would seeth with jealousy at the sight of her. It wasn't just the audience that loved Miss Fieldline, it was everything with a pulse. It was far too little though, no amount of adoration would ever be enough for Miss Fieldline. There were no words to describe her, she was simply that beautiful.

She was a clear standout when all the girls were ushered on stage; nobody could pull their eyes away from her. If one of those poor, mediocre-looking girls had tripped and split her skull in half, she'd get a few pitiful murmurs. Then the audience would turn back to their goddess. As long as Miss Fieldline 1989 was unharmed, the audience was happy. With an unfazed and aloof manner, Miss Fieldline gave the audience a simple introduction: 4.0 gpa, valedictorian, community service leader, etc. The man interviewing her stared at her blankly. He was no different from anyone else; his honed-in focus kept any words from passing between his ears. The only thing he cared for was her beauty, which shone in his face brighter than the sun. The other girls were talked to quickly. As the girls headed backstage for their interview, the man personally escorted Miss Fieldline, keeping his hand on the small of her back.

The interviews were next. One by one, the girls sat down in a large, hot-pink chair and answered questions about their lives. Everyone gave the typical answer: they love to help others, especially those in need. The judges had

heard this all before and were, at best, uninterested. One girl's monologue about her cancer-riddled brother received an unabashed yawn from a judge in an unfortunate cutaway. This attitude was not in effect when Miss Fieldline 1989 showed up. Cheers erupted when she came out from behind the bejeweled curtain. As she sauntered down the runway, the judges gave approving nods. The interviewer at the end of the stage flashed her a smile that made the lines on his face distort into their own expression. He proceeded to shoot questions at the girl sitting across from him. Miss Fieldline, however, stayed still and detached. While the interviewer caressed her knuckles with his wrinkly thumb, Miss Fieldline spoke of world peace and disabled children. With every point she made, the audience would gasp and cheer, or the camera would cut away to a judge's approving scribble on a scorecard. The girl interviewed afterwards had mascara running down her cheeks.

The next item on the pageants itinerary were the evening gown presentations. There were a handful of pretty dresses from the contestants, a few oohs and ahhs from the crowd, but Miss Fieldline stole the show. Floating above the ground and down the runway, Miss Fieldline 1989 wore dark red head-to-toe. Jewelry dragged down her lobes, ribbons bound her waist like nylon rope, and the dress squeezed her so tightly that she would look maimed when it was eventually removed. Miss Fieldline looked like a flame with her quietly furious expression. She spread across the stage, consumed the walls of the venue, and left burns on every surface she could. There wasn't any cheering from the audience, they were too stunned to speak. By the time their voices came back to them, she was gone; her flame was extinguished and she had retreated behind a screen of hanging gems.

It was no surprise that Miss Fieldline 1989 would end up with her title. She was the audience's clear favorite— except for the parents of other contestants— and was destined for the crown. Miss Fieldline knew this, too. When they announced her name on the speakers throughout the stage, she only smiled. After all, a goddess couldn't concern herself with the mortals around her. A large bouquet composed of roses, carnations, and chrysanthemums was shoved into her hands. For someone like her though, the audience thought their support was enough. Her face finally shifted when her father jumped on stage, gripping her hips and pulling her into a hug. He could feel her heart beat rapidly against his baggy Miss Fieldline t-shirt. When he pulled away, he held her hand up in the air like a winner. Her wrists shook as he squeezed them against his palm. The audience laughed while Miss Fieldline 1989 nervously smiled. She stayed around

for a couple of interviews and photos, but she and her father were off the red carpet early that night. With a father as loving as him, people knew she was in for a night of celebration. With a beautiful girl leading the town, the future seemed brighter, as if the sun was shining down just for her.

That night, Miss Fieldline 1989 died by her own hand.

No one could believe it. This girl, the pride and joy of this small town, had chosen to end her own life. Everyone was distraught, but her father looked mortified. With every interview, his eyebags and wrinkles sunk deeper into his face, making him look so different from the girl he loved. A chill permanently settled on Fieldline that day, one that many citizens a kind of punishment for causing that girl to kill herself. They had thought a sunny future was ahead of them, but instead they were trapped in a cold, hazy winter.

The funeral service was massive. People from all over wept at their queen's feet, begging her to return from her heaven and make one for them out of their small, abandoned town. They buried her in the red dress she stunned everyone with at the pageant. It was only fair after all, for that's how they thought she should be remembered. Not as a tragic dead girl, among all these other tragic dead girls, but as a beauty. The next week, when they finally put her body in the ground, roses covered miles of the graveyard's land. They piled upon each other, growing limbs and appendages in less than minutes. These flowers engulfed Miss Fieldline's grave, covering the letters etched into stone. No one forgot Miss Fieldline. With her beauty, intellect, and charm, no one could even bring themselves to. The only thing Miss Fieldline lights up now is the inside of her coffin. Maybe though, for her and the town, it's better that way. That bejeweled curtain was bound to catch on fire, and no one was ready to see what was behind.

Annie Ming

Grade 9, John Burroughs School

Educator: Megan Zmudczynski

Poetry



Letter Left Behind

dear child,
if you look upon this world
and no longer see the fronds and ferns,
the endless night that always returns,
the wolf who looks to the moon and yearns,
I'm sorry
for we have failed you
dear child,
if you look upon this world
and no longer hear the sweet birdsong,
the mourning dove who waits so long,
the hasty buzz of bees flitting along,
I'm sorry
for we have failed you
dear child,
if you look upon this world
and no longer find the sun-dappled plains,
the bells that sing when it rains,
the heart-shaped leaves with red veins,
I'm sorry
for we have failed you
dear child,

if you look upon this world
and no longer feel the softness of a dolphin's fin,
the gentle lull of water lapping at your skin,
the unbridled joy of a beautiful day within,
I'm sorry
for we have failed you
and dear child,
dearest child,
only after we look back
and see what we've done
to the undeserved gift we've received
only when we see
what we've done
to the bird's crooning cries
to the cat's clever eyes
to the ocean's roaring waves
to the mountain's hidden caves
to the flower's alluring scent
to the sapling's brave ascent
only *then*
will we be truly sorry
and so,
if you look upon this world
to find none of the beauty left
I'm *truly* sorry.
for we have failed you.

Everett Montgomery

Grade 8, Delta Woods Middle School

Educator: Erica Welch

Novel



The Jade Bound God

Synopsis:

Alex, a young necromancer, discovers that his parents, the headmasters of his academy, are not the shining pillars of society he thought they were. He runs away from home to avoid his parents, who will keep their secrets by any means necessary. He meets Bobart, who assists him in escaping from his parents and seeking out his aunt. The two discover she's missing but find a small jade that Alex's aunt left for him, as she explains in a note. They decide to leave Alex's home island. He quickly finds that the world beyond home is not like he's been taught, or could ever imagine, and that his parents' influence extends further than he ever thought possible. He discovers that his parents are working to summon a god of destruction, who happens to be contained in the gem Alex received from his aunt. With the help of Bobart and other friends along the way, they attempt to either destroy or harness the power of the gem. They eventually figure out that it is possible to speak to the Jade Bound God. The god tells them he doesn't wish to harm anyone by being summoned. And promises to aid them by allowing some of its power to seep out helping Alex. Using the power within the Jade, Alex and company take down the academy that Alex's parents ran their web of evil from, and Alex takes over, teaching a new generation of necromancers to wield their powers for good.

It really was a terrible day. I lost my aunt and discovered that my parents were the magical equivalent of axe murderers

I should start at the beginning...

My name is Alex Mor, and I am a necromancer.

It was a dark night, moonless, but no, it wasn't storming, because I am NOT a literary cliché. The pointed cedar trees blotted out what little starlight was left. I had just discovered that my parents, who I had thought were the esteemed heads of the academy I attended, didn't exactly source the cadavers needed for the practice *ethically*. But I'll spare you the details.

Given the ability of my parents and most other staff at the academy to silence me, I only had a chance if I ran.

The trees whipped by me; I had little regard for what direction I was going or how I was going to survive once I got there. I listened carefully, actively avoiding any signs of life, whether it was man or beast: it would not do well to encounter them.

I checked behind me, looking for anyone who could be trailing behind. I felt the ground fall out from under me. I tumbled once, twice, and then hit the ground. A sharp pain shot through my skull, then everything went dark.

My eyes drifted open, bright green, with the first few reds of fall, too bright for my still-aching skull.

I sat up. *Trees. Gods I hate the outdoors.* I dusted myself off, steadying myself on the trunk of a rare oak. I pulled myself up and began to scan my surroundings, needles and leaves as far as the eye can see.

Where to go. There were no visible landmarks on the horizon, so all I had was a vague idea of where North, East, South, and West were.

I decided to head west, to a seaside village. My aunt, who lived there, practiced illusion, not necromancy, so she seemed safe.

My flimsy bones were not made for walking, so when I say an hour of travel, I can make it about a mile, if I'm lucky. It was just past midday when I began to hear laughter drifting over the tree line. I dropped down, being as stealthy as possible, moving just close enough to see the source.

In a clearing, three magicians practiced their magic, the power of the elements. They seemed not to be from around here, so they were less likely to be in league with my parents.

Cautiously, I straightened myself up, picked a few leaves from my hair, pretending to have been walking through the woods rather than spying from the bushes. With a deep breath, I gathered my nerve and stepped out into the clearing.

“Hello, young traveler,” said one with a robe of emerald green, her pointed hat was topped with an actual emerald. She and her compatriots sat around a roaring flame fueled from the palm of one with a robe and hat of ruby.

“Hello, friends!” I smiled in reply.

“You seem a little young to be wandering these woods by yourself. Are you alright?” said the one I had mentally dubbed Sapphire for the color of her cloak.

“I’m fourteen, old enough, and I was given permission to visit my aunt in the town of Crimson Port,” was only half a lie.

“Well, small problem,” said ‘Ruby’ with a wry grin. “The town is that way,” he pointed in the opposite direction I had come from.

“Ah-” As you have probably gleaned, my skill set mostly comprises three things, journaling (like now), necromancy, and a love of reading. Regrettably, there is no tome that I have discovered which makes it easier to navigate through the woods.

“You’re sure you’re not lost?” ‘Emerald’ asked.

“My friends, we should probably introduce ourselves,” said ‘Sapphire’. She straightened to her full height, startling me for a moment as I realized her cloak had hidden how hunched over she was. She offered her hand, “I am called Rain, the one in green is Pine, and the one in red is called Bobart.”

Greetings coursed from around the fire as I shook her hand.

“The name’s Alex-” I caught myself before saying my last name, “Well, thank you for the company, I best be on my way,” I turned to leave.

“Wrong way!” I turned to find Bobart had shouted from behind me. I turned on my heel and began walking in a new direction.

“Still the wrong way,” he called again, chuckling slightly this time. “Perhaps I’d better come with you, make sure you find your way.”

I looked him up and down cautiously. Even though he looked the part of a mage, a glamour spell could be bought for cheap and make anyone a convincing actor. Despite my hesitancy, I realized that he would have likely attacked me by now if he were in league with my parents, and even if he were, I had better odds against him than me versus three people.

“Alright...” I said, attempting to hide the apprehension in my voice. “Lead the way.”

Bobart jauntily set off down the path, after a beat turning back to his companions, “Oh, right! Just complete the mission without me.” The other two waved as they departed in the opposite direction.

I hurried after him, stumbling over my aching feet.

After many, many miles of Bobart slowing down to let me catch up and then getting another hundred feet ahead, and so on, I was almost a hundred percent confident that my feet had worn away into stubs in my socks. Every time I tried to convince the mad mage to stop, he insisted that we travel another “few feet.”

His endurance still seemed to be abundant even after nearly a full day of walking. Even worse, he did not seem bored with the journey and laughed and hummed to himself as we traveled. He would pause every couple of feet to look at some random bug or plant, which, looking back, is probably the only reason he did not leave me in the dust.

Eventually, my fatigue peaked at the top of a hill, and I stumbled, tumbling and for the second time in as many days smashed my head into a patch of forest floor. Slowly, I faded to unconsciousness.

In the morning, the sun stabbed my eyes again. As the warmth of a fire seeped into me, my nose filled with an aroma of cheese and meat. I stretched and groaned.

“Oh, hello Alex!” Bobart was way too cheerful for just waking up, “I made breakfast!”

I pulled whatever blanket he must’ve put over me during the night over my face to fall back asleep, but hunger won out, and I sat up to see what Bobart had made.

Bobart had a skillet over the fire dancing in the breeze, where some strips of meat were frying: next to it was a bowl of yellow-ish goop with some cheese shredded over the top.

As I took in my surroundings, I could see that we had ended up at the bottom of the hill, where Bobart had set up camp. The trees were beginning to thin here and the hills in the distance became shorter.

“What is this stuff?” I asked.

“Eggs! This island is lucky enough to have a ton of wild chickens.”

“You *eat* eggs?”

“Yeah, it’s not local cuisine, a lot more common where I come from.”

I poked at the yellow blob, “So... how do I eat it?”

Bobart quickly shook a dash of salt and pepper on it and handed me a travel spork. “Try it.”

I stabbed a small portion off the large blob and eyed it nervously before taking a bite.

The flavor of the cheese, the egg, and the seasonings danced on my tongue, “This is delicious!”

He chuckled, “I’m glad you like it.”

We sat there chatting for a while, and it was nice to forget my worries for a bit. But soon we were back on the road, where it was less nice to forget about my worries, because it was fast replaced by a horrible aching in my feet.

“Bobart, for the love of all things good, can we *please* take a rest?!” I called out, dragging my feet across the densely packed roots, which had finally thinned enough to no longer be a tripping hazard.

“Keep up, Al!” Bobart laughed, still at least a hundred feet ahead, “You want to make it to your aunt’s tomorrow or next week, slowpoke?”

I grumbled that I hated being called that, but continued walking.

“Tell you what, let’s talk a bit while we walk. Maybe it’ll help,” he said, smiling over at me as he slowed to my pace.

“About what?”

“Oh, I don’t know...” He gestured widely to the beautiful scenery surrounding us, “The gorgeous day we’re having!”

“It’s just the woods.”

“Yeah, we don’t get this where I’m from, beautiful days where the sun drifts through leaves. What little forest we have is covered by rain.”

“I don’t think I know how to talk about something I find so mundane.”

“Well, I don’t know, kid,” he said. Pushing his hands through his auburn hair, “I’m putting out ideas and you’re choppin’ ‘em down, how about... necromancy?”

“What about it?”

“Well, first, do you have The Gift?”

I reached out through magic, searching for a relatively fresh corpse. I found a small amount of chipmunk bones left in a vulture’s nest. I rearranged the bones back into what I thought was the right configuration. I was better with human anatomy, so what I made was essentially more like a puppet I could magically control, rather than any sort of proper undead.

“You see that chipmunk there?” I said, pointing to a shady branch where I carefully had the chipmunk scamper out. I balanced it on the edge of the branch, trying hard not to let it fall.

“Yes?”

“Very much dead,” I allowed my concentration to drop, the chipmunk falling from the tree.

Bobart jumped back, “Well, that is... certainly something...” he adjusted his hat, and I watched with bemusement as he took a minute to regain his composure. “I suppose that answers whether you’re trained or not. For my studies, would you care to tell me how it *feels* to perform magic?”

“Hmm...” I hadn’t ever really had to consider what doing magic felt like: “It’s sort of like... stretching out, like an extension of me, and putting a little bit of magic into something that’s broken and making it whole again.”

“Fascinating,” the twittering of birds mixed with the scratching of Bobart’s pen in the small moleskin he carried with him.

“Reanimation, my specialty, isn’t the only kind. There’s also healing, and forms of influence.”

“You know an awful lot about all of this. Where did you train?”

I clammed up. I had forgotten to stay cautious for a moment, “Oh. You know, just trained with my parents.” I silently cursed myself for being so cavalier.

“Hmm,” I felt my companion’s eyes bore into me.

The journey continued for another day or two, Bobart seemingly fascinated by the mundane in the woods, from the average chipmunk to an odd-looking species of mushroom, all ended up recorded in his moleskin.

“Why do you write all this down?” I asked in passing, gesturing all around us.

“Well, Alex...” Bobart seemed to look straight through the trees in front of him, “It was my job once upon a time.”

“What did you do?”

“I wrote books, I used to love drawing creatures of distant lands, and it let me travel.”

“What happened? Why’d you stop?”

He seemed to come back from wherever or perhaps more accurately, whenever he had gone, “A story for another time.”

Any attempt to glean more, he quickly shut down, I realized I wasn’t the only one guarding secrets.

Finally, the morning came when the town was only a few more minutes away, and I found myself invigorated by the prospect of being able to drop my guard, being at least partially defended from the eyes I could still feel watching from the woods. I knew that my aunt’s illusions would hide her place from the eyes of her sister, after all that is why we stopped visiting. Unlike my parents, my aunt had promised I’d always be welcomed here, so I was confident I could still find her.

We started up a hill, and something became obviously... off.

The sound of a town is distinct, each with a slight variance from the typical sounds of the region. But all towns do share one thing: noise.

That's what felt off; it was silent.

People talking, hundreds of people, make at least some noise, and a fishing village should have had the sounds of a dock, bells, and ships unloading. But all of this was gone, and my dread began to rise.

"Is your aunt's town always like this?" Bobart asked.

"No..." I replied as we began to walk down the main street

The shutters on the townhomes were all open, the shop signs all welcoming us in. We walked past what I remembered to be the blacksmith, where there were now cold ashes, as though they had just left the fire to burn out.

"People can't just disappear, can they?" Bobart's voice had that tinge of pity from someone who's about to give you bad news.

Tears began to sting at the corners of my eyes, a spiral of thought and emotion consuming every move I made. I couldn't think, I couldn't breathe.

I began to run back, back to the place I last remembered feeling safe, at my aunt's house. It looked as I remembered, the coat of blue paint slightly more faded than all those years ago, but the same offenses surrounded the house, no noise, save for the soft sound of candles burning.

"Aunt Maya?!" I shouted as I ran through the door. There was no response. No matter how long I waited. The lack of sound deafened me. I couldn't think; I held my breath with the rest of the world as though waiting for everyone to return.

Where is she I screamed internally.

I tore through the rooms

She can't be gone.

In a blur I hastily tore open every door, screaming her name.

"Aunt!? Aunt MAYA!?" *She can't be gone!*

She wasn't anywhere.

Why?

I collapsed on the ground as Bobart came in through the doors, sweaty and panting.

“Alex.”

I realized I was crying.

Bobart wrapped his arms around me, and we sat like that for a while. And for a second it was quiet. The storm of thought and fear and sadness stilled for just a moment.

Then reality hit me: I had lost my parents, my home, everything and *everyone* I had ever known, and my aunt, the last haven I could think of.

After that the tears didn't stop.

Eventually we had to leave, not because I had anywhere to go, but because the pain of echoing memories became too much to stay.

Yejun Moon

Grade 12, Parkway Central High School

Eductor: Jason Lovera

Critical Essay



The American Dream: Rigging the Lottery

Four to five times a year, I graffiti the violin that isn't mine. With great care, I pencil thin lines into the grooves that hold my newly replaced strings. Graphite isn't vandalism, but instead loose sheets of carbon that slide off one another, perfect to function as a lubricant.

I wish the rest of violin maintenance were as cheap and simple as a #2 pencil. However, while chemistry is everywhere in music, so is money.

"Again!?" was the default reaction of parents who learned that my strings were unraveling. Requests for soundpost checkups were dismissed with silence, bow rehairs were met with hesitation and feeble sighs. We were both in situations beyond our control: the inevitable costs of musicianship always caught up to both of us.

Though I know we can't control our financial situation, I can't help but feel a twinge of bitterness. Why was I forced into this life? Couldn't my parents have chosen a more fruitful career path? Robert M. Sapolsky, a professor at Stanford University, thinks not. In his dissection of the "John Henryism" profile, in which an individual "feels like they can take on any challenge if they apply themselves enough," Sapolsky claims that if the individual is "an African-American blue-collar worker or sharecropper...this attributional style results in a greatly increased risk of cardiovascular disease" (Sapolsky 400). Instead, the author mocks the proverb "It's Not Your Fault if You Are Born Poor, but It's Your Fault if You Die Poor," claiming that this contradicts the "32 percent of wealth"

concentrated in the top 1 percent of the population, leaving little room for upward mobility regardless of effort (Sapolsky 401). In Sapolsky's eyes, my parents dwell in a system that works against them, simply because they do not exist in the top 1 percent of the economic population. Sapolsky presents a valid, but rather superlative argument, for he fails to factor in the individual's effort to move up the socioeconomic ladder. Sapolsky's attempt to alleviate blame from my parents is conditional on wasted efforts; his argument succeeds in the context of my parents, for they worked tirelessly for my well-being and education. Similarly, John Henry, the personality that Sapolsky warns against, endorses "statements on a questionnaire like 'When things don't go the way I want to, that just makes me work harder'" (Sapolsky 400). Though Sapolsky argues that the system dooms individuals like Henry, Stephen Cave at the University of Cambridge counters that Henry's mentality is necessary for any chance at social mobility. Akin to Henry's uplifting philosophy, Cave claims that "the assumption of free will...underpins the American dream—the belief that anyone can make something of themselves no matter what their start in life" (Cave). Perhaps people are discouraged because endless labor does not guarantee favorable outcomes, but the American Dream works because society puts faith in its principles—faith that stems from the perception of free will, not genuine free will. Both Cave and Sapolsky recognize an absence of free will within society, but Cave emphasizes that a lack of free will does not necessitate a lack of agency.

A significant example of Cave's distinction appears in William Shakespeare's striking play *Othello*, where Desdemona's passivity is exactly what results in her death. Before Othello smothers his wife out of rage, Desdemona begs for the general to "Kill [her] tomorrow" and "let [her] live tonight" (Shakespeare 5.2.100). To her knowledge, Desdemona is confident that she is "none such" the whore that Othello called her (Shakespeare 4.2.144). Despite this belief, Desdemona does not use this information to defend against Othello's wrath; instead, she begs for a delayed punishment, an indication that she accepts his power over her fate. What makes her decision all the more outrageous is her lack of options: between death and the possibility of defending herself, she chooses death anyway. Just as John Henry did not choose to experience systematic racism, Desdemona did not choose to incite Othello's anger. Unlike Henry, however, Desdemona chooses to submit deeper to the patriarchal society surrounding her, ultimately resulting in her fall. Though her initial condition is not her fault, her choice to remain there—especially when given significantly better options—is.

Though I was not faced with stakes as dire as Desdemona's, I felt just as unprepared when my moment came. During another Sunday morning lesson, my violin teacher suddenly opened a dull black case. With a straight face, she asked, "Aiden, did you know my brother-in-law was originally a music major?" A quick shake of my head prompted her to hold up an equally dull violin from the case.

"Well, he's moved on to data science now, but he didn't want to leave his violin in neglect, so I figured you could borrow it for your studies."

She casually mentioned the appraisal estimate as she passed it to me. My fingers had already closed around the neck when the number actually registered. The violin suddenly felt heavier, the wood warmer under my grip. I stared at it, then at her, my face gone blank; I was still struggling to count up to the number she had given me.

My hands trembled on the wheel as I drove home from my lesson. My head was racing: What would I tell my parents? What if I broke the violin? What did I do to deserve this?

In fact, what did humanity do to deserve anything at all? John Milton wrestles with this question in his epic poem *Paradise Lost*, where the angel Raphael tells Adam that "if [humanity is] found obedient, and retain / Unalterably firm [their] love entire," then their "bodies may at last turn all to spirit...or may at choice / Here or in Heav'nly paradises dwell" (Milton V.497-502). In his assertion, Raphael does not guarantee humanity's ascension in their obedience to God. Instead, he directs their hopes to the mere possibility of elevation, which is conditional upon their moral preservation. Raphael's message is originally from "th' eternal Father," who is the only being with the ability to elevate mankind, ultimately leaving the fate of humanity at the whims of God (Milton V.246). However, hope is not lost for Adam and Eve: the duo has the freedom to choose and act to "retain" their love and position themselves favorably for ascension. After all, Adam realizes the idea of possibly "desert[ing]" God, to which Raphael replies that the choice to "love or not" is indicative of their choice to "stand or fall," but also does not say it is indicative of their choice to ascend (Milton V.515, V.540). Perhaps Adam and Eve cannot firmly control whether or not they rise to Heaven, but their free will gives them the choice to increase their chances of elevation by loving God.

In the same sense, eight-year-old me had no foreseeable knowledge of a stellar instrument, but freely chose to pursue the violin and practice endlessly,

regardless of the instruments that my future held. *TIME*'s Jeffrey Kluger explores a similar phenomenon through morality, claiming that it "may be a hard concept to grasp, but [humans] acquire it fast," highlighting an experience where a baby would not push another baby, even if instructed to do so (Kluger 1). In the same way that the baby acted without fully understanding the moral framework, I practiced without the guarantee of a brand-new violin. In both cases, there was an understanding that acting properly carried value, even when specific rewards remained unknown. For me, it was a favorable position to receive a violin. Like Adam and Eve, I was also subject to a higher judgment, which, in my case, was my teacher's assessment of whether I had earned her trust. Hopefully, my teacher saw my free choice to pursue music fervently and decided to act in accordance with my commitment, trusting that years of Sunday mornings had prepared me for this responsibility. On the other hand, I haven't received any top-notch flutes, and it will likely stay that way because I have never touched a wind instrument; in fact, I have done nothing to warrant the acquisition of a flute. My actions preceded my luck, but neither one alone would have been enough.

By the time I pulled into my driveway, I felt better about my worthiness. Surely the hours I'd invested had positioned me for this moment, even if I never would have predicted it.

From here, the journey is supposed to be linear. I'll sweep every competition in the area and go on to become internationally renowned, collecting trophies and scholarships all the way to Carnegie Hall.

Of course, music is not that simple. A better violin does not erase mistakes and habits, and hours of practicing are still ahead. What's more, every music competition requires both preparation and a bit of luck on the side. Perhaps a judge preferred one interpretation over another. The selected repertoire could hold some emotional value for another member of the panel. Maybe another contestant played worse than they would have liked.

As I walk onto each stage to compete, I feel the judges' eyes piercing into my side. When I raise the violin, though, the audience fades. My bow hits the strings, and the rest is just muscle memory and hope. On the last note, I whip my bow in the air and hold still for a second as applause floods the auditorium. I turn to face the audience as my hand comes to rest on my heart. With a bow, I thank them for listening. I thank them for giving me the choice to pursue music. Most importantly, I thank the luck that brought the scuffed black case my way.

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Celeste Morgan

Grade 12, Olathe North High School

Poetry



We Are(n't) Champions

We are(n't)
geniuses.
Scholars.
Politicians.
Leaders.
We are(n't)
Famous
World-changing
People.
We are(n't)
Diplomats,
Dictators,
Leaders of a church.
We are(n't)
Sane,
Normal,
Genius.
We are
Learning,
Growing,
Changing,
Trying to make our own little world a better place.

Josephina Nelson

Grade 8, Basehor-Linwood Middle School

Educator: Erin Tegtmeier

Personal Essay & Memoir



The Reality of Sorry

Sorry. This is the phrase that resolves everything, but does it really? If it fixed everything, then I wouldn't be myself; I would be confident. I wouldn't have bad relationships, and everyone would like me. Apologies fill my brain daily. I am sorry I am fat. I am sorry that I feel empty every day. Sorry, I put up a fake personality to keep people happy. Sorry, I have trouble focusing because I am so focused on not being judged. I am sorry that I cry so often because I am exhausted from saying sorry. I say sorry so often that it doesn't have any meaning. I say sorry when someone bumps into me. I say sorry when someone gives me a judgmental look. I say sorry when I do too much, or when I do too little. When I talk too much, when I eat too much. Half of my apologies are not even heard. I apologize to myself when I give up, when I feel like I am not happy.

It's almost as if I have two brains. One controls the tiny mess-ups and stupid mistakes. This one feels like a failure; it's not good enough, no matter what I do to try and fix it. It has no filter, yet it always knows they are in the wrong. They do it anyway. The other brain can't take a break; they are the ones visibly creating mistakes, verbally apologizing, and physically hurting themselves because they have no power. No control, no emergency power button, they are a puppet of a robot. The robot never dies. Both Brains never get a break. Together, they get one excuse: sorry. A five-letter, world-famous phrase. Just a word. An accessory to an excuse. When a murderer is verbally sorry, the person is still dead. The families were still hurt and are still grieving. The environment had changed for the worse. Hatred and sadness still filled everything and everyone around. When a bully apologizes, the mean words are still spoken. Words that

hacked at you like an axe until there was no more. You're fat, you overeat, you look tired, you're useless, you are an obstacle. I am surprised you haven't killed yourself yet. Why do people talk to you when you look like that?

People talk with their mouths; they use that same mouth to say sorry. Apologetic words are like two North magnets; they will repel. Sorry, doesn't take words out of ears, out of the air, out of existence. They push the words further out; pour additional alcohol on the wound. If anything, sorry does nothing. We, humans, remember things. A human brain will replay bad memories over and over and over until you can't take it anymore. Sorry is not brain surgery. I will still remember. They will still remember. Everyone will still remember. So stop saying sorry.

Stop apologizing for being a human, making mistakes, and being yourself. Stop feeling guilty for everything. Stop changing yourself for others' benefit and start changing yourself for yourself. You are not an obstacle; you are not a burden to others. Savor the happy moments that you find within yourself. The reality is that saying sorry changes nothing. No one should have to defend themselves for everything they do. No one deserves to say sorry after every different thing they accomplish. Stop apologizing for being human. Stop wasting your breath on sorry. Spend your breath on being who you want to be.

Koral Ortiz

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Poetry



Unwilling Lamb

If there's one thing I hate,
It's the innate *pride*
This country has.
I could never understand *why* it was so natural
To put Latino people on the *chopping block*
And get what you could from them
Before their blood runs cold.
Something like a...sacrificial lamb,
With its silent death and blood
On the hands of a country *collaged together*
With *tape* and *glue*.

Something about the sacrifice...
Irks me.

But the resent
For my culture
Seems *omnipresent*—
We're talking slave labor in camps
For not having papers
Allegedly so easily accessible.
They're talking like
These *modern developments*

Were the *residues* of their *hard work*,
And not the *handiwork*
That produced the sweat off *beaners backs*.
My people are shamed for being in this country
Like we didn't own it in the first place—
Like these *preaching patriots*
Would even *prioritize* us anyways,
Papers or not.
America is a *hotspot*
For *pride* of
Being ahead of its *time*
While its used victims
Onlook the *selfish uncredited developments*
Before they could ever realize
What they did.
The only *eureka* moment
America ever had
Was when each generation decided
That *stealing our intellect*
Would be like stealing *candy from a baby*—
and I can only blame my *passiveness*.

I don't *wanna* stop yet!
I'm too *excited* to get
My current life's work cut short.
I'm a *trailblazer* and that *spark* is *staying*
Until *someone* starts *slaying*
This *beast* that can't stop
Feeling for a pulse
Before *stealing* on *impulse*.
My heart monitors beeping
And *I know* I'm *alive*
When my *anger* and *pride*
Take form of words written to speak
To the side that stinks of
Old blood and stars that died too soon.

I was *made* for more than
Shredded orange cheese on bright yellow shells.
I was *made* for more
Than to be the butt of the joke
Or *tokenized* like blood doesn't run through me.
I was *made* for *more* than
My struggling efforts
To *slap* and *shape* words like clay
And make what people *want*
Like I don't have things that I need to *say*
Before *god forbid* something happens to me—
I was made for more than sacrifice!

Cause I'm NOT dying yet!

Not until *change comes!*
Or until I stop caring once a tragedy bigger than
My culture being rendered as *stepping stones*
Comes along!
I want it to *end* with me. I'm not a *bridge*,
I'm not a *ladder*,
I'm not a *map*,
I'm not the *next best thing*—
I'm the *best thing* that could've come along to finally say it,
Cause I'm *not* dying today!

The *flaw* in being the hero I always needed doesn't change the fact
That *nobody came for me*.
But my people have always been self sufficient,
So I'm taught by *example*
To be *resilient* despite the *gamble*
Of the *fruits of my labor*
Being *snatched* and *stripped* from my basket.
I'm taught to *fight* and *bite*
Any *hand* that isn't the one that feeds me
When it's reaching for me.
They'll be *reaping what they sowed*

When *all they get*
Are the *indents* of my teeth on their palms.

My *pulse* will beat per minute.
Breath will fill my lungs
And I'll be *happy*
With a *sigh* or a *gasp of air*
As long as it means
Something's in me to make me do *something*—
Cause I'm not dying today.

Maggie Orton

Grade 11, Olathe North High School

Educator: Deirdre Zongker

Screenplays & Scripts



Sleepovers

The two girls are sitting at their desks, looking straight ahead. Class is about to start.

Eloise: Hi!

Bea: Hello...

Eloise: Can I sit here?

Bea: Sure

Eloise: My name is Eloise. What's yours?

Bea: Bea

Eloise: Pretty *(smiles)*

(beat)

Eloise: I love your pretty notebook. Can we be friends?

Bea: Thanks! I would love to be your friend.

Eloise, reminiscing: It's so simple how little friendships start. One question that changes the trajectory of the story forever.

Eloise: Today at recess, Amelia asked if we could play house, but I was thinking we should go play soccer with the boys.

Bea: Ew no, no boys.

Eloise: Okay, fine, what do you want to do?

Bea: Just hang out on the swings.

Eloise: We do that every day!

Bea: I know, it's because it's my favorite

Eloise: Ok then, swings it is...

Eloise, reminiscing: Love is built on sacrifices, no matter how big or small. Love is built on caring, on small acts of faith and trust.

Eloise: Mom! I'm home!

Eloise's Mom: Hi honey, how was your day?

Eloise: It was pretty good! We learned about fractions today.

Eloise's Mom: Fractions are tough. How'd that go?

Eloise: It went okay.

(Overlapping)

Eloise's Mom: *(rushed)* And, what was your favorite part of the day

Eloise: *(rushed)* My favorite part of the day was....

Eloise: Oh, man, you beat me again

Eloise's Mom: Not a competition, just a question.

Eloise: Umm, making a new friend!

Eloise's Mom: That's fun! What's their name?

Eloise: Bea

Eloise's Mom: Well, I will have to meet her sometime.

Eloise: I was actually gonna ask you, can she have a sleepover this weekend?

Eloise's Mom: Let's see, you don't have any soccer games this weekend. I will have to ask your dad.

Eloise: Okay!

Eloise, reminiscing: That was the first of many sleepovers

Bea: I've always dreamed of having a sleepover. It seems so fun.

Eloise: It's the most fun! I'll show you.

Eloise reminiscing: We continued on for years, being the best of friends. We had our fights.

(Offstage)

Eloise: Give me back my lip gloss!

Bea: No!

Eloise reminiscing: And we had our fair share of tears

(Offstage)

Bea: Please just give me back my lip gloss! *(sniffle)*

Eloise: Fine...

Eloise reminiscing: But we always came around. *(pause)* We will always come around.

Scene 4:

At school, years later, they are in the hallway talking.

(Bully throws note with a slur written on it at Bea)

Eloise: What the hell?

Bea: Oh, it's fine. This has been going on for a while.

Eloise: No, it's not fine. Why is this happening?

Bea: You know why.

Eloise: I don't! (*offended*). Why would someone be so cruel?

Bea: Because I'm gay, don't you see that? My existence is against their religion.

Eloise: That's not the God I was taught to follow.

(*Eloise storms off to find a teacher to report this to.*)

Eloise reminiscing: I tried my best to protect her, but protection isn't what she needed. She needed to be understood. Something that I could not provide. (*Eloise leans on Bea*)

Bea (*walks on*) :

She doesn't understand. I have dealt with this for years. Every time this happens, she reports it again and again, with no response. The school system was not built to protect me, it was made to protect bullies.

I know she means well.

(*Reading aloud from a notebook*)

I love her, but I don't think she knows. I have spent my life growing up by her side, as best friends and as nothing more. But I realized her hand feels nice in mine. I want to tell her, I think. But I don't want to lose her. She sits in front of me, doing my makeup. Tilting my chin up, and then looking me right in the eye, calling me beautiful. She doesn't even know how that makes me feel. I wouldn't want to ever force this upon her, but I love her.

When we watch horror movies together, she cuddles up right beside me, as if I will protect her. And I do. Every time. As the music builds, I hold her tighter, and she doesn't ever tell me to let go. My heart never rests around her. Part of me thinks she loves me, too. But Eloise loves everyone, including me. Which gives me hope.

Boys will never understand this feeling. They get what they want without questioning it.

I don't like makeup, but I let her do mine every time, just so she will touch my face. I paint her nails, just to hold her hands, and pray she wants the same.

Sometimes, when she's bored, she will braid my hair, and I will sit there as still as I can be.

(*Bea goes around the house, packing her bags for the sleepover.*)

Eloise reminiscing: Bravery looks different for everyone. Bea is Brave.

We continued as normal, as normal as we could be. Growing up.

She's my best friend, and I don't know what that means. We have been inseparable since we were 6 years old, and 10 years later, that hasn't changed. I reach for her hand often, but that's because my love language is physical touch, right? I have never been in love, but this feeling I feel is reminiscent of the books I read as a child. This feeling of being whisked away, while my heart beats softly in my chest. When she looks at me and smiles, I feel it every time. I don't know what love feels like, but I assume it feels like this. But this is just platonic love. I have had boyfriends, and one day I will have a husband. That won't change. I think.

I need to talk to her. Something has changed, and I need to know what it is....

(Eloise stands and grabs popcorn. Eloise and Bea both sit on the couch.)

Eloise: *(She turns toward Bea)* I'm glad you're here

Bea: *(Bea mirrors Eloise, and smiles)* Me too.

Eloise: What should we watch?

Bea: How about the new horror movie?

Eloise: I hate horror, though.

Bea: Then watch something else, I really don't care.

Eloise: You know, I've been thinking. I want to talk to you. Without the movie playing in the background.

Bea: *(pauses hesitantly)* Yes?

Eloise: You've been acting weird lately, and I can't figure out why. If it's something I did, please tell me. I want to know and I want to fix it.

Bea: *(stands and turns away in shock)* There's nothing wrong, why are you saying this?

Eloise: Because there is something wrong, I know you. I've known you for 10 years. *Please* tell me what I did.

Bea: *(turns back around to face Eloise)* You didn't do *anything*.

Eloise: *(explodes, stands)* Then why did you stop caring? You don't *care* what movie we watch or when we hang out. You have opinions and you won't tell them to me.

Bea: *(affronted)* Why would you say that?

Eloise: Because you tell me you don't *care* when we hang out, you tell me you don't *care* what movie we watch. Please just tell me. Why don't you care?

Bea: I know you care! I care too! There is nothing to tell you. *Please* understand that!

Eloise: *(walks towards Bea, puts her hand on her shoulder)* I care about you. I know you care about me, please tell me what's going on. Don't drag this on. I want to know how to fix this!

Bea: (*turns away from Eloise's touch, and steps away*) Fine! I care too much. I have cared about you for 10 years. I have loved you for 10 years, and you don't care. You prance around with your little boyfriends, and I am left here as a backup. You don't see how much I care because you are too caught up in yourself to ever realize how I feel. You have never wondered, you have never asked. I love you, and you don't seem to understand that.

(*silence*)

Bea: If you're just going to stand there, I might as well just leave.

Eloise: (*pauses and sits*) You love me.

Bea: I guess I do.

Eloise: You mean it?

Bea: Why wouldn't I?

Eloise: Because I thought you were just being mean. I suspected you liked me as more than a friend.

Bea: (*sits next to Eloise, turned away*) Then why did you lead me on?

Eloise: I didn't know I ever was..

(*silence*)

Eloise: I'm sorry, and for what it's worth. I love you too.

Bea: (*turns back abruptly*) Don't say it if you don't mean it. *Please.*

Eloise: I want to mean it.

Maggie Orton

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Educator: Deirdre Zongker

Novel



Augustus the Dog

Augustus the Dog is a short novella that follows a sweet, but grumpy dog. Augustus starts out in a dog shelter, which he hates. He hates most things and most people, but Clara is the exception. Augustus loves Clara so much he has memorized the sound of her footsteps and the smell of her perfume. As they grow closer Clara decides its time and adopts him, they live a very long and happy life together, until problems start to arise many years later. Clara since then has gotten married to her husband Oliver, and Augustus doesn't seem to mind. Recently Augustus has not been eating his food, or been very active. Clara gets worried and schedules a vet appointment. After the vet appointment they receive some bad news, August has stage 4 lymphoma. Clara is heartbroken, but she knows her only job is to make sure that Augustus is comfortable, and that's exactly what she does in his last moments.

Mom is acting weird. I can smell it. She's stressed but I don't know why. I think we are getting a pup cup, but she's always excited when we get those, not stressed. I whine and the sound travels from the back seat all the way to the front seat, where music is playing.

Mom, why are you stressed? I ask her.

"Shhh." She says.

Don't shh me, I bark.

"He's stressed because you're stressed." Dad says

Damn right he is.

“Just calm down. I’m sure he’s okay. He’s growing older and we can’t stop that.”

I am not old.

“Sorry Gus, I’m just nervous.” Mom says as I smell the salty air of tears. I reach my head up to the front seat trying to comfort her.

It will be okay, Mom. I promise.

The car rubbles to a stop and I lift my head to look out the window. I sniff the air and I don’t smell the sweet aroma of a pup cup. I tilt my head in confusion. Suddenly the scent hits me, we are at the vet. I whine.

Why Mom? Why? I don’t want to. I frown.

“It’s just a check up buddy, you’ll be okay” I see Mom look up at Dad proudly. He nods his head in agreement.

“Yes, you’ll be okay Gus.”

Mom opens my door and I hop down with gravity as my assistant. My joints rub against each other, causing pain to shoot down my leg. I keep walking. I’m trying to not freak Mom out. I hope I don’t have to get any poky things in my legs, but everytime I come here I seem to have to get those. I lower my head and try to prepare myself.

I watch my paws shuffle to the door, and Dad holds it open for us. The smell of the vet’s office fills my nose. The smell of fear, stress, and sadness. All my least favorite things all in one place. Dad checks us in at the front desk while me and Mom go to sit down.

I watch the hall from my mom’s side. I see one of my dog park friends walk down the hall.

“Hi Thatcher, appointment go well?” I bark.

“Nothing new, but I did hear that some dog is here for a cancer screening. I hope they’re doing well.”

“Wow! What does that mean?”

“I’m not too sure, but it’s the bark of the town. Well, what are you in here for?” He reluctantly whines.

“I’m not sure. Probably just some random pokes and basic stuff.”

“Well, best of luck. See you next week at the park!”

“Sniff ya later!” I ruff cheerily.

I look back and see Mom smiling at me. I walk up to her and put my head in her lap. She pets me, and I close my eyes as I relax into her touch. Dad leans

over and pets me too. I feel all warm and fuzzy, but the moment is ruined by a vet tech screaming my name.

“Augustus Maplewood!” she yells.

“Let’s go!” Mom says as she gets up to follow the vet tech. Out of habit I jump up to follow her. My nails make an ominous clicking sound as we walk down the hall. I look into the rooms we pass and see blinding lights and sickly dogs. I start to shake. I’m so nervous. Mom notices and scratches my head, but it doesn’t help much.

When we arrive at the end of the hall I begin to turn, heading towards our usual room when I feel a tug on my collar. I look back and feel another tug. Confusion floods my brain, but I decide to follow anyway.

I don’t recognize this hallway. I’ve only ever heard about it from other dogs. They say this is where the really sick dogs go.

Mom, why are we here? I’m not that sick.

“Don’t worry Gus, it’s just a check up.”

No. Check ups are down that hallway and to the right. This is for the dogs who are dying. I’m not dying. I whine at her, but she doesn’t seem to understand. We continue down the hallway and enter a room that smells like sadness. The vet tech directs me to jump up onto a metal table. I back up and shove my shoulders up and forward. I slam into the table and a big thud reverberates around the room as I fall back down. I tuck my head and my tail down embarrassed.

“Oh no buddy, let’s get you some help.” The vet tech says as she leans down, places her cold gloved hands underneath my belly and lifts me up. I hear her breath suddenly fasten, and deepen. I’m embarrassed again and tuck my tail farther under myself. *I’m a big dog, and I should be able to get up without help,* I think to myself.

My body hits the table as she lets go and lets gravity take over. I can’t catch my balance on the slippery metal and my paws slide. She reaches out again and holds me up. I quickly sit down to prevent myself from falling again.

“Alright Augustus, what’s been going on buddy.” she asks me.

I don’t know. I was brought here against my will. I whine.

“He’s been losing a lot of weight, refusing food, and been really lethargic lately,” Mom adds.

“Well that’s not fun,” The vet tech begins to feel my tummy. I flinch at her freezing hands, “Sorry, cold hands,” she laughs. I don’t find it particularly funny. I feel a yawn coming on and decide to lay down. She has moved on to my back and then she hits the spot. She gives me scratches right behind my ear. It feels so

good, suddenly my paw starts moving on its own and hits the table over and over again. She giggles, and the sound makes my tail wag.

“Ok, looks like there is a lump on the underside of his belly. I’m going to go ahead and grab the vet and we can check it out.”

Are you calling me fat? I bark.

“Sounds good thank you!”

I spent a long time at the vet’s office that day.

The next morning I get a very special breakfast. I look down at my bowl, and it’s covered in this orange stuff. I sniff it and it smells delicious, I lean down to taste it and it’s fantastic! I quickly eat all of my breakfast.

I start to lick my bowl, ensuring all of the delicious orange stuff is gone. Mom hears me moving my bowl around and looks over. She smiles and lets me continue on. She turns back around and calls for Dad.

“Owen! He ate all of this food! The pumpkin worked!” I check my bowl one last time and saunter over to Mom. She leans down and pets me all over! “Good boy Gus! Good Boy!” I wag my tail and tell her thank you.

A wave of fatigue washes over me and I slowly walk to my bed and lay down. I start to doze off, but a ringing wakes me up. *Ring, ring, ring.* I open my eyes, and look at Mom. *Fix it please.* She is scrambling and looking everywhere for her phone.

“It’s the vet! Where is my phone?” she screams. I watch her finally find the buzzing box, and close my eyes again. I hear her breathing hard and I sniff the air smelling salt. *She’s crying.* I get up. I place one paw on the ground then another, and lift myself up. It takes me a moment, but I get there and I stand up.

I walk over to her. She’s in the living room. I place myself right next to her, and rest my chin on her leg. I hear her sniffle as she places her hand on my head and gives me scratches. I hear the vet tech’s muffled voice. She is talking about this thing called cancer, I’m not too sure what it is, but it sounds familiar.

I whine trying to ask her what’s wrong, but she shushes me. “Thank you so much. I’ll be in touch soon so we can solidify that date.” I watch her click some buttons and the voice goes away. As soon as she does that I watch her break down. She is sobbing and there are a lot of tears. I put my paw up on the couch cushion, and mom leans down to help me get up.

I fall on top of Mom and hold her steady as she sobs. Dad comes storming in, having heard the crying. “What’s going on Clara? Are you okay? Did the vet call?”

“He has stage four lymphoma.” she stays over her sobs. “She said it developed in about 2 months and we couldn’t have done much about it, but I knew. I knew something was wrong, I should have taken him in. I’m sorry Gus. I’m so sorry.” I look up, having heard my name, and I start to cry, too.

“Clara it’s not your fault, he’s an old dog. We didn’t know!”

“He has six weeks. Six weeks left. He might be in pain, and he might be sick. I don’t want him to hurt.”

Moments of silence pass, as Dad joins us on the couch. He leans down, kisses Mom on the head, then sits by me. He gives me scratches behind my ear, and my leg starts to hit the couch. It’s much weaker than it used to be, but Mom and Dad still laughed.

Mom looks over and our eyes meet. Her eyes are red and watery, and I realize the gravity of the situation. *I’m going to die.* I try to reach her face to lick the tears away, but I can’t reach her face.

“Do you know what that means, buddy? Cancer and lymphoma are words a dog should never know.”

I know, I whine.

“Cancer is a bully,” Dad says.

“Cancer is the worst thing ever.” Mom adds on.

Cancer is gonna kill me, I realize. Mom and Dad start to talk over each other, trying to explain what exactly cancer is, but I bark. I bark loud telling them to stop, and they do. I see a frown on Dad’s face, he seems offended, but I don’t care. I get up and stumble off the couch. I tuck in my tail and leave, embarrassed.

That night, Mom and Dad give me dinner—with that same orange stuff, but I’m not hungry. I push away my bowl and lay back down.

The next five weeks are full phone calls and tears. Cancer has become something I can no longer ignore. I am going to die. I am going to die today. Before I even open my eyes, I know that I am going to die today. I hear Dad walking to the kitchen, he is going to brew some coffee and bring it back to Mom. I stretch and get up. I lift my heavy and aging body off the ground and

I begin heading towards Mom. She’s still in bed. I use the new doggy stairs they got me from this magical place called Amazon and I walk over to her. I wobble on the soft uneven terrain and finally lay down, right next to her. The usual warmth I feel when I’m beside her doesn’t come. Sadness begins to hover over me, like a cloud I can’t escape. Dad comes in and joins us, with two cups of coffee in his hand and a little biscuit for me.

He distributes his treats for everyone, and we snuggle. I feel warm, but it's not the same. Mom begins to get up and I watch her intently, I don't want her to go. I don't want to leave her. I watch as she just gets up to go to the bathroom. Luckily, she comes right back.

She slides back underneath the covers, and as she moves the linen I smell my favorite scent. Her perfume fills my nostrils as I lay my head on her belly. She giggles, and leans to tell Dad something I don't catch. They both laugh and pet me some more. I feel so peaceful. I fall asleep there, with my head on top of Mom's belly, and my legs strewn across Dad.

I wake up later in the day. I'm cold and lonely. I look around confused, finding no one there. I slowly get up, walk down my stairs and into the living room. I look around again and only find an empty house. I walk back to my bed, step in, and fall asleep again.

This time, I wake up to the sound of the front door opening. I slowly crack my eyes open, yawn and stretch. I get up and walk to the front door where I see Mom and Dad. They are holding some very tiny clothes, but I'm not very interested. I walk back into the living room and lay back down.

Mom follows me in laughing as she holds up the little dress "Look how tiny this is You look so big next to it!" I bark at her, *that's not very nice*. She reaches down and pets me atop my head and tells me to go back to sleep, and I do exactly that.

I wake up again. I smell spices and chicken. I sniff the air as I open my eyes and walk to Dad. He is standing at the very hot box Mom tells me to stay away from. He is cooking something delicious. He looks around, sees that Mom is in the other room, and hands me a small piece of chicken. I take it gently from his fragile fingers and eat it. It's good, but I'm just not hungry. I go back to sit down, and I gradually fall back asleep.

I wake up coughing. It hurts and scratches. Mom turns the corner fast, hearing my struggle and pats my back in support. I look back at her when I'm done and thank her. "Gus, come in here buddy." I follow her into her room, using my stair to get up I join them on the bed. I smell the same chicken from earlier, but see their clean plates. I whine at this injustice.

In response dad gets up and walks to the kitchen. I hear his receding footsteps and the clank of the plates. Then one of my favorite sounds, the rustling of a bag. Mom pets my bag as I stretch and sit up. "Someone is getting a treat!" she whispers in my ear. I wag my tail, hoping I'm that someone. Dad's footsteps grow louder as he returns with something small and brown in his

hand. He walks slowly towards me and puts his hand out. "Would you like a chocolate chip?" dad asks. I wag my tail again and reach up. The sweet melty chocolate fills my mouth. I try to savor it as it slowly disappears.

Once I finished, Mom pats the spot in between her and Dad. I wobble over and sit down. "Every dog deserves to try some chocolate, at least once." I wag my tail in agreement as I listen to the tv, and look up to see a moving ball. I wag my tail some more and keep watching. *All these humans like to play fetch too, but with their feet, I guess.* Mom scratches my back, and I lay down. I look up at the tv again watching the ball go back and forth across the screen. Dad leans over and squishes me down, and asks me "Are you watching tv?" *I guess so,* I respond. I watch the screen for as long as I can keep my eyes open for, but I slowly drift off. My eyes are just too heavy.

I wake up one last time. The tv is dark and so is the bedroom. I look around and see Mom and Dad sleeping. I get up to readjust, and snuggle extra close to Mom. It's the first time I've felt warm all day. I lay my head on her belly, and she naturally puts her hand on my back. I look back, checking if she's still asleep, and find her with her eyes still closed. We used to fall asleep like this every night. I look back upon our memories together as my eyes grow heavy again. I remember the first day I met her at the shelter, and the first day we played fetch. I remember the day she adopted me, and the day Dad came home for the first time. I remember so much. I feel so much. I fall asleep remembering her laugh and the smell of her perfume. I feel peace for the first time ever, as I close my eyes—for the last time.

Chidinma Osuagwu

Grade 8, South Valley Middle School

Educator: Staci Reichard

Personal Essay & Memoir



Memoir Anthology

I am more than just one single story, I am more than just what you perceive me as. I am millions of memoirs written down to every meticulous and minute detail. **I am a memoir anthology.**

I am more than just a bright student. My self esteem and satisfaction will always be tied to academic validation and it will always be my precedence, not because I want it to but because it will forever be my parents overriding focus. I am forever measured against brilliance, constantly compared to my siblings who seem effortlessly talented in everything they do. My parents watch as my siblings light seems to gleam endlessly but fail to see that even if my light flickers in a different rhythm, it still shines just as brightly as theirs. **I am more than just a bright student.**

I am more than just a quiet person. I live in a constant state of sonder, always aware that we are all the center stage in our own stories but only passing glimpses in each other's. I notice the stories hiding in silence, the unspoken words that we overlook. I am more than just my pauses in between my words, I am also the thoughts behind them, all the questions I'm afraid to ask. I have a mind that is in constant motion and a heart that is forever in tune with the beats and pulses of life around it. **I am more than just a quiet person.**

I am more than just an athlete. I hope persistently that remaining loyal to the aggressive and disorderly road we call a track will pave my path to glory. And yet, my story isn't a record etched in stone, but instead a minor foot path constantly ignored and unseen. I expected the soft and warm wind of a champion against

my neck, but instead I ran against the heavy air made from my own high expectations. I am always and only left with the aching discipline of hundreds of 100m repeats. I constantly hope that my value is not just the measure of a clock, and that I am more than just the number on my bib or hip tag. My mind is filled with guilt, the gnawing feeling that I should be halfway through my path to glory but instead I remain stuck almost fixed at the starting line. **I am more than just an athlete.**

I am more than just too woke. I am always attempting to make sense of a world aching for understanding and connection. The words and actions people dismiss as wokeness isn't a performance for others its a true longing to connect with every forgotten culture, every background people deem irrelevant, because I believe that is where the truth of all our stories hide. I long to see the threads that tie and connect us all together, to see the forgotten voices of our own history. While I live in ease, somewhere across the world a child no older than me suffers through hunger, through fear, through the unearned cruelty of the world I am blessed of never knowing. To be ignorant is to be foolish. My awareness is not arrogance, it is empathy, raw and restless empathy, it is a burden resting heavily on my chest, it is a heart that constantly aches. **I am more than just too woke.**

I am more than just one single story. I am a blend, a montage of stories, like a library where every book holds the ink of my own memories, where some pages are even waiting to be filled. I am millions of memoirs all put together. **I am a memoir anthology.**

Chidinma Osuagwu

Grade 8, South Valley Middle School

Educator: Staci Reichard

Poetry



A Single Spark

I was once a single spark.

A faint and quiet ember.

The world felt too big.

Everything was bright. Loud.

I had missed the sheltered warmth I had once knew.

The air felt cold,

cold enough to dim my glow.

My lungs burned, stretching open for the first time.

I felt weak. Docile.

Hands pulled me close, careful not to blow out my spark.

A feeling I had never felt before,

lifting me into a world

I didn't understand.

I felt that warmth again,
the one that had sheltered me.
Not the same, but close. Close enough.
I clung to it, crying, not sure why,
but desperate to hold on.
Everything felt so frightening,
except this warmth.
I wished I could drown in it.
I thought.
I was here.
I was alive.
I had only flickered then,
cradled and shielded between priceless hands,
until the world didn't feel as loud anymore,
until I learned its rhythm.
The wind blew too close in my adolescence,
and the hands began to hold me tighter.
My flames soon no longer stayed small.
They stretched.
They reached.
Testing the air around them.

The hands loosened,
trusting my light to find its own shape.
I didn't remember the moment it happened,
but at some point I had realized
I had stopped being the flame carried,
and I had now become the light igniting the path.
Then, the hands that first shielded and sheltered my spark
grew cold.
It wasn't harsh,
not sudden,
just quiet.
My light grew into a fire,
and then my fire began to soften.
What once had burned bright
shimmered low,
like a lantern that had guided
far longer than it was foretold to.
The winds that once tried to tear me apart
now moved around me gently,
as if they, too, understood
this was not a moment for struggle.

Suddenly my body felt like cooling metal,
still wrapped in the warmth of the last small breeze of life
I didn't realize I was holding on to.
I didn't remember the moment it happened,
but as my flame thinned
and my once turmeric glow
turned a hushed red,
I understood,
my light wasn't truly being extinguished.
Only returned.
In that final spark of life, I felt no fear,
only certainty.
I knew that even the smallest flame
still left a trace of heat,
in the hands that once held it,
in the paths it filled.
My lungs felt cold, dry almost,
stretching open for the last time.
I drifted softly into the dark.
I wasn't gone,
only quiet.

And in that quiet,
I became what I once was,
a single spark,
a faint and quiet ember,
opening my eyes into a new horizon,
where the world felt big
and everything was bright.



The “Invisible Hand” of the Algorithm

In 2020, Sophie Zhang faced a decision that would end her career. As a data scientist at Facebook, she had spent months documenting what the company's own internal research confirmed: the platform's algorithm was amplifying racially divisive content because outrage kept users scrolling. Angry reactions were boosted five times more than simple likes. Controversy meant profit. When Zhang testified before Congress, she described a system designed not to inform but to inflame, an algorithm that turns racial division into a business model. Zhang's testimony revealed something most users never see. The invisible hand behind their feeds. The phrase once described how markets regulate themselves without central control. Today, it better describes how algorithms quietly shape what we see, believe, and share online. These systems do not hate anyone. But they are built to capture attention, generate revenue, and serve us more of what we already engage with. That is how they learn from and spread racial stereotypes while appearing perfectly objective.

Understanding why this system works requires understanding how our brains process information. Algorithms do not randomly select what appears in a feed. They track every click, pause, and share, then serve users more of whatever held their attention longest. The problem is that human attention is naturally drawn to controversy. A Study shows that emotionally charged content, especially content that provokes fear or outrage, triggers stronger reactions than neutral information. Algorithms exploit this tendency. They learn that a post about racial conflict keeps users engaged longer than a post about community cooperation, so they promote the conflict. This results in a feedback loop,

controversial content gets boosted, users engage with it, and the algorithm learns to show even more.

This feedback loop is not an accident. It is a business model. Scholar Shoshana Zuboff calls it "surveillance capitalism," a system in which platforms treat human attention and personal data as raw materials to be harvested and sold. Every click, every stroll, every emotional reaction becomes a product. The longer users stay engaged, the more ads they see, and the more revenue platforms generate. Controversy keeps people scrolling longer than harmony does. Racially divisive content provokes stronger reactions than neutral content. So the algorithm promotes division. Facebook generates over 100 billion dollars annually from advertising, a revenue stream built on maximizing engagement regardless of social cost. The platform's own internal research confirmed that its systems amplified harmful content, and the company kept the machine running. This is not negligence. It is the structure working exactly as designed. YouTube's recommendation algorithm demonstrates this cycle in action. A 2019 study by researchers at UC Berkeley found that users who watched videos about race-related topics were systematically recommended increasingly polarizing content, creating what scholars call a "rabbit hole effect." A user who clicked on one video discussing racial inequality would soon find their feed populated with increasingly extreme content, not because they sought it out, but because the algorithm learned that controversy kept them watching. The Wall Street Journal's 2021 investigation confirmed the pattern extended beyond YouTube. Reporters obtained internal Facebook documents showing the company knew its algorithm pushed users toward divisive content and chose not to intervene. Racially charged posts received significantly more distribution precisely because they provoked stronger reactions. The research exists. The platforms have seen it. But the companies refuse to change.

Once the algorithm learns what engages a user, it builds walls around them. These echo chambers trap users in cycles of confirmation bias, making digital stereotypes nearly impossible to challenge. Research shows that liberals encounter content contradicting their beliefs only 24 percent of the time, while conservatives see opposing views just 35 percent of the time. For most users, social media feeds reinforce what they already believe about race rather than exposing them to alternative perspectives. Psychologists call this the "false consensus effect." When a user sees the same stereotypes repeated by account after account in their feed, those stereotypes start to seem like common knowledge. Biases that might be challenged in a diverse conversation instead get

validated by an audience that appears to agree. The user is not choosing to avoid other viewpoints. The algorithm is choosing for them.

The system does not just shape opinions. It damages people. A study of 407 adolescents of color found that racial discrimination encountered on social media was directly linked to depression, anxiety, and alcohol abuse. Moreover, 94 percent of participants witnessed racist interactions online. These were not abstract encounters. Watching racist content directed at others within their communities produced measurable psychological harm. The study found that online discrimination proved as damaging as face-to-face racism. A slur in a comment section lands with the same weight as one spoken aloud. The screen offers no protection.

The harm extends beyond mental health into economic opportunity. A 2024 University of Washington study tested AI resume screening tools on more than 550 real resumes and found that algorithms favored white-associated names 85 percent of the time. The most striking finding involved intersectionality, the way multiple forms of discrimination compound each other. Black male-associated names were never favored over white male-associated names in any of the comparisons the researchers tested. Not sometimes. Never. These systems do not just reflect existing bias. They automate it, scaling discrimination to thousands of hiring decisions per day with no human review. A qualified candidate can be filtered out before any person sees their resume, rejected by code trained on historically biased data.

Breaking this cycle requires action on both platform accountability and public awareness. The European Union's Digital Services Act offers a model for the first. The law compels large platforms to disclose how their recommendation algorithms work, conduct independent audits assessing systemic risks, and demonstrate what steps they are taking to address harms like discrimination and disinformation. For the first time, regulators can demand to see inside the black box. The United States has no equivalent legislation, but the EU framework provides a template that American policymakers could adapt. Platforms themselves could also act without waiting for regulation: deprioritizing engagement metrics that reward outrage, flagging content that has been amplified algorithmically, or giving users meaningful control over what signals shape their feeds.

On the educational side, algorithmic literacy must become as fundamental as media literacy. Users need to understand that their feeds are not neutral windows onto reality but curated environments shaped by code designed to

maximize engagement. Schools, libraries, and civic organizations can teach people to ask critical questions like Why am I seeing this? What is the algorithm optimizing for? Whose interests does this serve? Awareness alone will not dismantle the system, but it is a necessary first step. People cannot demand change from platforms if they do not understand how those platforms work.

The invisible hand of the algorithm does not announce itself, but its influence is everywhere. It quietly pushes certain posts, jokes, and images to the top of the feed and buries others out of sight. It rewards outrage, controversy, and familiar stereotypes because they are good for business. By keeping these systems behind the curtain, digital platforms make it easy to believe that what we see online is what everyone else sees, too. The first step is recognizing that this invisible hand exists and that it is shaped by both code and human bias. Sophie Zhang recognized it and sacrificed her career to expose it. The question now is whether the rest of us will see it too, and what we will demand once we do.

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Personal Essay & Memoir



The Music of Life

Grey stones formed a cobblestone pathway, leading me to a wooden bench, shaded by a Dogwood tree. The Botanical Garden lay before me, beautiful yet boring. A pool with a fountain framed the background, fresh cool water flowing through, embodying the serenity of the moment. The scenery was inviting, but more people were inviting me to their group chats on Snapchat. Bing! The bright glowing rectangle in my hand lay heavy, vibrating with each message.

I had finally got social media, after years of slowly wearing down my parents. I would constantly nag them for new clothes, shoes, even electronics, and they would always fold. But the one thing that they always stopped at was social media.

Until now.

My parents' mountains of defiance crumbled at my pleas and I had finally gotten Snapchat, but in return, I couldn't slack around all summer. Volunteering. I despised it. I didn't hate giving back to the community, but why did it have to be so hard? I had to stand for hours on end, talking to tiresome people constantly. It slowly drained my will, feet aches and dry mouths after every session.

It was my first time volunteering for this medical organization, and to be frank, I just wanted to get it over with. The event was for the Alzheimer's Association. I barely knew what Alzheimer's was when I signed up, but the event looked fine. All I had to do was pass out flyers and not move around too much.

I stationed myself in between the tree and bench, my hand instinctively reaching for my pocket, encasing the prized gem that was my phone. Elderly couples passed by our station, periodically pausing for a flyer, somberly walking to and fro each station, their expressions as lifeless as their demeanor.

The only sound around me was the music of nature, birds chirping, leaves rustling, and the water fountain's slow stream colliding with the pool behind me.

The silence was sliced by heels clicking against pavement. I guessed it was someone else who would grab a flyer, so I separated one from the stack of flyers, and then prepared to pass it out. My eyes were magnetized to my phone, like bees to a flower. Instead of the steps fading along the pathway, I found a finger pointing to the device my fingers were curled around.

"What's this?" an elderly voice hounded, forcing me to look up. Her silver hair was gathered tightly into a bun, pulling her face back into a scowl. She wore a deep red cardigan, similar to her enraged nature.

"Uh—" I stuttered, taken aback by the sudden comment.

"Put that thing away!" she declared. Her order filled me up with embarrassment, blood rushing to my face, noticing the sly glances my partner gave. My partner's eyes peaked through her cascading black hair, her piercing blue eyes like that of a burning flame. I hurried to put my phone away, almost slipping from my sweaty hands. I looked up again, annoyed but silent.

I bit my lip as the woman said, "Good." Her words reminded me of a schoolmaster, disciplining unruly kids. I was not unruly. Was I?

"You might as well have another limb for that thing—" I was about to protest when she started again.

"—now that I'm sure you're listening, let me tell you a story,"

All this for a story? Really? I tried to not let my annoyance be conveyed on my face.

Her throat cleared as she carried on with her "story".

"Imagine a 1980's summer beach, just along the California coast. A gentle sun hitting my sunglasses just right. I was in the prime of my life, a fresh graduate. On that beach, on July 5th, was when I met my husband, Frank."

Why was she telling me this? My annoyance had shifted into confusion. I had never met this woman, and she was telling me about her whole life? Her back had shifted from a ruler-like stance to a laid back form, shoulders drooped down, face slowly melting to a lulled expression.

"In 2020, during the peak of COVID, we found out he had Alzheimer's, and it felt like my whole world was crashing down right before my eyes. After the doctor's visit, it seemed like a boulder, blocking our path to happiness. Everytime I looked at him, I couldn't bear to even think of the fact that one day he wouldn't be there. Why Alzheimer's? Why? I would ask myself every day. I constantly

blamed it on my self, the burden of his illness like a persistent set of glaring eyes, harsh on my skin, ”

Her expression had shifted, a slight smile reaching her eyes. Her smile was infectious and somehow, I didn't feel any ill towards her. In fact, listening to her made me content? Her words used to slash through the air, now they flowed. I almost craved her voice, and more than that, her stories.

“And then last year,” she continued, her eyes glassy. I knew what was coming.

“We lost him,” her words had a sense of finality to them. Her eyes, once full of contempt, now flooded with consideration. The words crashed like tidal waves on buildings, my stomach churning with the sea. I didn't know this woman five minutes before, but through those five minutes she had caused me to be annoyed, infuriated, serene, and now, mournful. Through those few words she had not only shifted my perspective on those around me, but myself. My contemplation was abruptly broken off by the woman's words channeling in my ear once again.

“I want you to know how lucky you are to be here right now, standing right here, talking to all these lovely people,” she whispered. Her hands slowly made their way up to my shoulders, her tender touch like a jolt of warmth. There was a small dark stain on the pavement near her feet, the aftermath of her tears. Then there was the same stain near my feet. My hands instinctively went to my face, feeling the moist tears. Was I crying? I looked up at the woman, her eyes empathizing with no words.

I had a sudden urge to call her back, but I was almost frozen in place. Her story wasn't shared to scare me, it was to help me acknowledge my ignorance. My phone will always be in my pocket, but these people's stories won't. I watched as people solemnly passed by every station in the garden, silent. A few minutes ago I would have enjoyed this silence, but now it seemed that my ears desired stories, and the smiles that people would put on their faces when they told them.

My eyes tracked an elderly couple sauntering towards our station, hand in hand, looking for a flyer. They blurred past me, as all the others, but that's when it happened.

“Hello!” The words escaped my lips. The letters almost fought to escape the cage that was my mouth. Both turned to the source of the sound, their eyebrows raised with shock.

“How's your day going?” I gently asked. I wanted to hear about them, not some random people online. About where they have been. About what they have done. About them.

“Our day has been wonderful...this garden has so many wonders,” the woman replied. A man clutching her arm looked towards me and nodded in agreement, brightening at the voice of his wife.

“Isn’t it? This place feels like I’m in a painting!” I ecstatically said in response.

“This reminds me of when I was first in America, in 2013. This was one of the first things I wanted to see when I moved here,” she paused, reflecting on the past.

“I visited to see my daughter and her child, and this was where they took me. I was enchanted, vibrant colors and smells surrounding me. They would call me to go home, Cynthia come on! It’s just flowers! But it was something different to me,” I could see her recollecting her memories, her grandchild and daughter beside her. Cynthia’s eyes fell upon me, her sentence coming to an end. The woman’s smile elicited a similar response from me, the corners of my mouth reaching the start of my ears.

“I can only imagine...” I uttered wistfully, as the conversation slowly concluded, and with it, her grin falling too.

Now the music had an absence to it.

The petals falling to the ground, the hard wooden bench, weathered from constant passers-by sitting on it. Cynthia’s unrelenting eyes, laugh lines framing her eyes, like rivers of joy illustrated on her face. I finally noticed it all. I finally perceived the true vision of the people around me, not a blurred lens. Faces came to life, free from the obscured pupils dotted in my eyes.

And so the true music of life will forever hum in those who seek it.

Alice Pulsinelli

Grade 11, Bishop Seabury Academy

Educator: Michael Pulsinelli

Poetry



The Poet's Voice

A million fragments, but not a single word truly exists
to breathe this song. Pencil to paper, begging that graphite tip
to craft the story for me, inject dancing syllables in my wrists.

Desperately grasp at the slippery ideas in teetering lists,
every night, hands alive, sorting through every blip,
a million fragments, but not a single word truly exists.

Rejected stories growing infected like swollen cysts;
why not us? they ask, begging with chapped, incessant lips
to craft the story for me, inject dancing syllables in my wrists.

Always lonely, wandering winding paths through indigo mists,
too busy searching for life to hear its feathery drip.
A million fragments, but not a single word truly exists.

Except when they rise up, brandishing iron-knuckled fists;
listen! they shout, lament cracking like a lightening-sharp whip
to craft the story for me, inject dancing syllables in my wrists.

What is there to do when that splintered flame calls out, insists
that it is here, tangible, and yet again we must watch it slip?
A million fragments, but not a single word truly exists
to craft the story for me, inject dancing syllables in my wrists.

Farrin Rahaman

Grade 11, Parkway West High School

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Personal Essay & Memoir



Field Notes Of a Midwestern Brown Girl

Field note #1: identity that's like a shirt that fits one size too small

My identity as a Bengali-American fits like a shirt that's too small, tight in all the wrong places. I stretch and fight with it. At the seams, over my shoulders, pulling down to cover my stomach. If I make one wrong move, the seams become undone and reveal the parts I desperately try to keep hidden.

In Bangladesh, the way I subtly linger on 'a' in *salaam* makes eyebrows raise and fingers point. It makes room to invite conversations about how Americanized I am. In America, I'm questioned about whether I can understand English, as if it was a language I've never spoken. Like I haven't found the right words to make sense of anything in my life.

For a long time, I stayed rigid and constrained, hoping the shirt wouldn't point me out as an identity that's split amid perfect English sentences and mispronounced Bengali phrases. The problem wasn't that I didn't fit the shirt, but the fact that I kept trying to fit into it when it wasn't meant for all of me.

field note #2: barriers

My parents told stories about the mischief they'd get into when living across the street from their own cousins in Bangladesh: sneaking out for ice cream after sunset, laughing over episodes of *Scooby-Doo* and *Mr. Bean*, and releasing a chicken into my grandparent's house.

Spending time with my cousins looks different: awkward birthday wishes over spotty WhatsApp calls followed by silence, jokes that take one second too long to understand, forced hellos from my parents' phones. The exhausting connection that's built reset after each call. Subject to easily interrupted wifi and pixelated screens of faces. Faces I recognized but didn't know.

After 6 years of the same cycle with my cousins, we scheduled our 14-hour flight to Bangladesh. The first few days were filled with silence, stiff greetings, and comparisons about how much everyone grew since the last visit. This time, our interactions didn't end after a couple minutes or sudden wifi outage. It steadily stretched to genuine questions and laughter that wasn't delayed.

We crowded around my cousin's phone, watching horror movie recaps because we admitted we were all too scared to watch the entire movie. We

cracked and laughed at half-translated jokes and passed around sticky snacks that were finished way too soon, threatening to scrape each other with our stained hands if the oldest didn't stop spoiling the ending.

The barriers of weak wifi and long flights persisted. The WhatsApp calls were still spotty, but it didn't suffer the same silence and awkward delays as before. It was quieter and softer.

field note #3: *exotic*.

'What are you?' was the first thing a girl said to me when I transferred schools in 7th grade. After many missed guesses from her, I responded that I was Bengali-American. She described me as exotic.

Exotic felt like a label that I couldn't shake off. It felt like relentless, threatening claws piercing into my skin, repeating into my head that I don't *look like a typical American*. Exotic is used when talking about a rare parrot found in the Amazonian rainforest eating a strange fruit.

I remember sitting still in my seat, thinking about what she said: somehow connecting exotic and being Bengali-American. I thought about how exotic was something that refused to disappear. Something that refused to not be authentically itself. Being described as exotic didn't mean I was someone to be seen as a zoo animal, but someone who refuses to be altered among mispronounced names or languages that didn't cleanly translate from to another. Exotic didn't erase me. It was a mirror reflecting the pieces and edges of who I was. What I claimed as mine.

field note #4: *diaspora*

Diaspora is a word you hear mostly in textbooks. It sounds like a distant term used to describe people from hundreds of years ago from a faraway land. It sounds like a word so distant, so far removed from everyday life.

For me, diaspora sounds like energetic Bengali music being blasted in the car, my brother and I switching languages mid-way through sentences. It looks like spices from the crowded Asian store stacked high in a cabinet, fragrant lunches that announce that it's different from everyone else's.

Diaspora is having two homes that are far away from each other, having roots carrying the comfort I found in both. It is fully embracing that I am from two separate places, but finding that I feel like my whole self.

field note #5: *fuchka* Fridays

Every Friday evening, my family enjoys *fuchka*, crispy dough spheres dipped in tamarind chutney and a filling made with chickpeas and mashed potatoes that's eaten in one bite.

These *fuchka* Fridays are always messy. The aftermath always looks like the scene of a tornado: tangy tamarind chutney dripping from our dipping bowls, crispy crumbs scattered all over our plates, my brother and I wrestling over the last crispy dough piece to dip. I always win these *fuchka* fights.

The loud satisfying crunch of victory doesn't demand a reason why I appreciate the parts of my culture. Doesn't make me awkwardly translate how I feel. Doesn't make me explain myself. It lets me be messy, whole, and unapologetically me.

Mary Russell

Grade 12, Home School

Flash Fiction



The Girl in Blue

I looked up and saw a girl in blue.

She was walking through the autumn woods, looking for something. She walked amid the confusion of fallen boughs and shriveled leaves and bright persistent flowers growing through the rot. She was very young, wearing a blue dress that snagged on sharp stray twigs. She kept brushing aside the tall flowers, peering through the brush. There was something haunted in her dark eyes, but she searched carefully and slowly, calm as an angel.

I couldn't tell what she was looking for—a flower, perhaps, or a ladybug, or a fallen star—but I was strangely certain that she would not stop until she found it. She had the air of someone searching for something very important. Perhaps it was a locket containing a letter her mother wrote before she vanished into the dark one misty night. Or a little bronze key to a room her grandfather had forbidden her to enter, but which she had sneaked into anyway. Or perhaps it was a little magpie she had tamed, which always came to eat out of her hand at the first stirrings of dawn, but had not come that morning—so she had gone out to look for it, fearing, perhaps, that it was dead.

On second thought, however, I decided that she did not look as if she was looking for something she had lost. She did not look in the least fearful, or distraught, or frantic, as she would have if she was searching for a precious locket or a stolen key or a perhaps-dead pet. She was looking for something important, but it was not something lost. And it was something precious, which she knew she would find eventually—whether in a second or a century, it did not matter much. If you had told me she had been searching for ten thousand years, I would have believed you. There was something old about her patience.

Perhaps she looked for a flower, rare and cerulean, that bloomed only once a year, and its nectar was the only cure for her little brother's malady—but there I went again, inventing tragedies to veil her with, when she did not look very tragic at all. Perhaps she did indeed look for that rare and cerulean flower, but only because it was beautiful.

And she looked up, as sudden as a deer that has heard a hunter sigh. Her eyes were black and wide and haunted. I was startled to be caught in her gaze; I had watched her for so long, half-transfixed, that I had almost forgotten that she was not a painting and I was not a museum visitor, or perhaps the other way around. I had almost forgotten that we existed in the same world. It was just that she looked so much like she was from somewhere else—that, even if she did live on the same Earth as I did, she did not see it nearly the same way.

"Hello," she said. She didn't smile. "What are you looking for?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "I came to the woods to find it, but now I've forgotten what it was."

"Oh." She frowned, not so much disapproving as confused. "But how could you forget what you were looking for? If you're looking for it, it will always be in your mind, won't it? It will always be the first thing you're thinking of."

"Oh, well," I said sheepishly. She was so earnest. "I got—distracted, you know. There were wolves close by, and I had to run away from them, and—"

“You’re frightened of the wolves?”

“I—well—yes.” Then, suddenly indignant, I added, “Of course I’m afraid of them. They’re dangerous, and—”

“But if you keep on your search, then you forget the wolves, and they run by and they don’t hurt you. They like to eat the scared ones, you know.”

“Well—I don’t—”

“Good day, anyway. I hope you remember what you’re looking for.”

And away she went, bent again to her painstaking search through the brush, those dark eyes black and wide and just a little haunted.

I watched her go, wandering amid the flowers and the fallen leaves and the cragged, crooked sticks—so sure, so peaceful.

I watched her until she was just a pale blue smudge in the confusion of the woods, and then gone. And I was alone again, alone with my thoughts—and, I realized, the distant howls of the wolves.

They were getting closer. I remembered what she had said—that if I was intent on my search, they would not harm me. If I was not frightened, they would not harm me.

I did not want to cross those teeth again. I tried to remember what I was looking for. I had forgotten a long time ago. I had been wandering for so long, aimless and afraid....

The wolves were very close now. I tried to remember, but I couldn’t—my thoughts were crowded and confused by the howls in my ears and the thundering in my chest, shaking up my thoughts and putting them out of order. I couldn’t think over my heartbeat.

The wolves had come.

I took a breath, and thought of the girl, and the flower that perhaps she looked for—and with that breath, suddenly, I remembered.

The wolves rushed past, a river of shining teeth and shining claws and shining eyes, faster than the wind, louder than thunder.

I paid them no heed. I was searching again, and nothing could sway me. I was looking for a flower, because it was beautiful, and that was all.

Alejandra Santos

Grade 11, Grandview Senior High School

Personal Essay & Memoir



El Cacerolazo

I don't remember everything. What I remember comes in pieces.

I remember the afternoon thinning into evening, the yellow glow of the streetlights settling over the road outside my school. I remember seeing my aunt near the gate and greeting her like it was any other day. I remember how many people were there—more than usual—but not finding that strange. I knew my parents were there to vote. I didn't know what voting carried with it. I only knew it was something serious enough to change the routine, and that felt exciting.

At some point, it was night. I don't remember how that shift happened. I only remember that we were still there, standing outside the school, in front of the gate. Closed.

I remember being close to my mother, maybe my father too. I remember understanding that we were there to make sure something didn't happen. Or maybe to make sure something did. I didn't have the words for it then, only the feeling that leaving would be wrong.

Then the calm broke.

People started shouting. Not all at once—voices overlapping, colliding, rising. “¿Por qué cerraron la puerta?”

Why is the gate closed?

“¡Queremos escuchar que nuestros votos están siendo contados!”

We want our votes to be counted!

“¡Ladrones! ¡Corruptos!”

Thieves! Corrupt!

What I remember most is not the shouting, but the disappointment underneath it. A sound heavier than anger. At the time, I didn't know why it was there. Now I understand: it was the moment people realized something familiar was happening again.

The worst thing is that it makes my heart ache thinking about it. Maybe my parents were scared. Maybe they were tired, disappointed. Maybe they didn't know what to do. Now that I ask them, my mom says she had faith everything was going to be alright. My dad says he doesn't remember much, but maybe he was scared. I have no idea. But it angers me and hurts me that I thought it was funny. When I was happy, when I thought it was funny, other people—maybe not my parents, but my fellow citizens—were scared. They were worried. Some of them were tired and just accepted it.

I remember being happy without understanding why I shouldn't have been. In Honduras, there is a saying: “Si los vivos no votan, los muertos sí.”

If the living do not vote, the dead will.

I understand now that it isn't an exaggeration. It's a description. It names a reality where participation is allowed, but control is elsewhere, where absence is manufactured and used. That night, I didn't know votes could be stolen. I only knew that something had slipped out of reach.

Later came the pots and spoons—metal clanging against metal. El cacerolazo. The sound spread through the neighborhood almost immediately, uneven, loud, impossible to ignore. To me, it was rhythm. It was noise. It was something shared. I think I knew it had to do with the elections, but I didn't know it was a protest. I didn't know it was fear made audible.

It hurts because I understand it now. Not long ago, the meaning finally settled into place. It wasn't rhythm. It wasn't a game. It wasn't music. It was a desperate sound made by people who had run out of ways to be heard. What I experienced as noise was fear insisting on being heard. What I took for play was refusal.

What aches most is realizing how easily innocence coexists with cruelty. How a child can laugh while a country fractures around her. How the world does not pause for innocence—it uses it, steps over it, ignores it. I was protected enough not to know. My people were not protected enough to be silent.

In my country, Honduras, elections often exist to perform legitimacy, not to produce it. Votes are collected, counted, and redirected toward power. My people are exhausted—disappointed, tired, desperate. Many no longer care. Some refuse to participate; others feel it doesn't matter anymore. This exhaustion is quiet, but it is everywhere, like a shadow pressing down over the streets.

That contradiction is what stays with me. Not the sound itself, but the distance between what it meant and what I understood. Between a child's joy and a nation's alarm. Between metal striking metal and the knowledge that the world does not soften itself for the innocent—it simply keeps going.

The gate was closed that night.
In some ways, it still is.

Marin Schaub

Grade 11, Liberty North High School

Personal Essay & Memoir



Salt Water Tears

Aunt Kate has been diagnosed with neuroendocrine cancer.

The sun blazes down on your face, your vision is black, but you can feel the heat atop your eyelids. You lie flat, a thick piece of foam separating you from the gentle waves shifting beneath you. Your mother swims farther out into the icy blue water, eventually reaching the sandbar that lies far beyond. Your grandma sits beneath a canopy of blue, a glass of red wine in one hand and a book in the other. Your sister is splayed out on the other side of the mat, soaking up the sunlight illuminating her golden skin. Soon, you descend from the mat and dip your tanned legs into the cold water of Lake Huron. The sand beneath you has ridges from the waves, and you curl your toes and feel the sand between them. The wind pushes your hair into your face, sticking to the sweet lipgloss adorning your lips. You dive into the water. You have no thoughts.

Coach Moran hugs you tightly. She has the same type of cancer.

The air is thick with chlorine, the smell filling your nostrils and seeping into your lungs. It is 6 am, and your mother swims in the lane beside you, slow and graceful. You hear the splashing of water, the slow trickle of water down your sister's legs, who stands wrapped in a towel on the platform above. You stare ahead and put your goggles over your eyes. Quickly, you submerge beneath the surface and kick hard off the side of the pool. You have no thoughts.

Aunt Kate starts chemotherapy tomorrow.

It is a warm Tuesday afternoon, early June. You have managed to arrive at the lake before the weekend crowd. You sit on the wooden planks of the dock, worn with decades of trampling and generations of energetic children, tipsy parents, wet dogs, teenagers, and first loves. A bottle of suntan lotion, a container of watermelon, and a pair of flip flops lay at your feet. You slip off your woven cover-up, revealing a navy and white bikini. You scale the diving board and find yourself gazing into the cluster of boats beyond Mile Marker 3. You jump. You have no thoughts.

Coach Moran has died.

Sand has made its way into the pages of your book. You stand up from your lounge chair and shake it vigorously, sit back down, and set it aside. You peer over at your family. Your cousins splash each other in the waves, your sister collects shells, and your 54-year-old dad is trying with all his might to boogie board. You spot your mom in the deep blue water, and you want to swim before dusk arrives. You take slow steps towards the shore, observing your footprints in the sand and trying not to think about the little critters underneath it that rise and fall between waves. You wade into the water, heated by the July sun. The waves splash up against you. The salt water stings your face. You plunge into the next wave. You have no thoughts.

The cancer is spreading.

You are surrounded by friends, basking in the sunlight next to the pool. Your phone is hot to the touch, so you wrap it in a towel and place it under the chair. The host returns from inside, carrying a bag of chips and 7 plastic water bottles. Your friends discuss evening plans, you tip your sunhat over your face, and close your eyes. A little while later, you all decide it's a bit too hot and decide to take a

swimming break. You join hands and lift your feet off the ledge and descend into the clear aqua pool. You have no thoughts.

The doctor is going to try radiation therapy instead.

Labor Day weekend is always your last lake visit of the year. The August heat has exhausted the adults, so only you and your cousins remain. You float alongside each other in the dark water, taking in the wide ceiling of stars above you. You appreciate each other's presence, but sit in a calm silence. The lake feels like bath water, warm and soft. You slip the floatie from underneath your legs back to the surface and let the water take you under. You have no thoughts.

Mom pulls you out of school.

She had left the house at dawn that morning to drive straight to Saint Louis University Hospital, where her sister sat in a paper gown surrounded by what family had already made it there. You, your dad, and your sister were supposed to come on Friday, and it was Wednesday, so you rushed to pack your bags, frantically throwing a mixed assortment of sweatpants, crew necks, pills, and a laptop into a bag. Your dad moves more slowly, only exacerbating the looming sense of dread settling uncomfortably into your stomach. You drive four hours from Liberty, Missouri, to St. Louis, desperate to see your aunt alive. The car pulls into the parking loop, and your mom stands in front waiting for your arrival. You look at her with confusion.

Your aunt died one hour ago.

Her eyes stare apologetically into yours for a moment longer as you slowly register what has happened. You drive home in a symphony of quiet sniffles with tears streaming down your face, the only source of salt water in this landlocked state.

The funeral was last weekend.

The ceremony was beautiful, your mom put so much work into making something so terrible a nice experience for everyone. You hugged all of your Canadian relatives, tried to be friendly, strong, and constrained your burning

tears and ugly crying as the ground enveloped her ashes. You feel somewhat guilty for your own grief, as you look around at your mom, grandma, and uncle standing in a tight bundle of sorrow on the other side of the circle surrounding the grave. You know they are suffering, but they seem to be handling it better than you. You join hands with your cousin and sister, feeling as if you were drowning in your own tears.

The month is July.

The sun has begun to rise over the grassy hills of the Outer Banks dunes, painting a beautiful sky of pinks and oranges. You imagine that Aunt Kate, the artist she was, had painted that picture just for you, your mom, and your sister, who stood atop the grand three-story beach house overlooking the ocean. You walk in a loose single file, each girl entranced in her own thoughts, following a winding trail of sand up and over the dunes. Finally, you reach the ocean. The sun sits above the water. You bob in the water as the tall, slow waves pass you by. You and your sister agree to duck dive into the next wave that comes your way, and you smile at her with your new braces-free teeth. You feel the water take you in, swirling past your legs, torso, arms, and hair, and listen to the water brush past your ears. You are blissful. You remember your aunt, her life, her artwork, her wit, and compassion. You are filled to the brim with memories and content.

You think of her.

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Critical Essay



From Doctrine to Dissection: The Birth of Modern Medicine During the Renaissance

As Europe entered the Renaissance between the 15th and 17th centuries, it underwent a profound intellectual transformation that fundamentally altered the trajectory of scientific inquiry and medical knowledge. A new generation of thinkers emerged, bringing with them the promise of groundbreaking discoveries and a resurgence of intellectual curiosity. Following the intellectual stagnation of the Dark Ages, a period dominated by ecclesiastical regulation and doctrinal conformity, many scholars sought to return to a systematic, rational approach to experimentation, reminiscent of the methods of ancient Greece. During the Renaissance, unquestioned reliance on religious doctrine and inherited authority gave way to empirical observation and experimentation, redefining not only how knowledge was acquired, but who had the authority to produce it. A growing interest in the arts, education, and philosophy simultaneously altered the mindset of many intellectuals in the West, cultivating an appetite for knowledge. This intellectual curiosity inspired the development of new methods of research and challenged the long-standing ban prohibiting human dissection mandated by the Christian Church. This growing demand for knowledge was met with the establishment of universities, which expanded educational opportunities for students, facilitated the specialization of medical professionals, and encouraged scholars to conduct original research. Along with these academic societies, the invention of the printing press further accelerated the distribution of discoveries free from the obstructive influence of the Church.

So the question remains: how did the Renaissance era resurrect medicine from the constraints of medieval orthodoxy? The rapid emergence of revolutionary medical advances was not coincidental. Rather, it was the result of an intellectual and philosophical reawakening that promoted empirical rationale and legitimized the growing enthusiasm for individual observation through dissection, facilitated by universities and the ability to reproduce newfound knowledge with less religious influence.

Historically, disease was interpreted almost exclusively through a theological lens, understood as the “result of divine disfavor and human sin, to be dealt with by spells, prayers, and other propitiatory measures.”¹ Such confined explanations discouraged curiosity and rendered observation second to faith. This paradigm persisted until the second century BCE in Greece, where the “roots of modern medicine” are considered to have begun and the origins of some of the most influential medical texts can be found, most notably the work of Galen of Pergamon.² Galen’s investigation of anatomical functions through dissection, primarily of apes, inspired him to write over 300 works.³ His prolific output dominated Western medical thinking for nearly 1,500 years.⁴ This authority of explanation can be attributed, in part, to the support of the Christian Church. His belief in the correlation between medicine and divine purpose aligned with Christian theology, proving to be favorable to the Church, which preserved and promoted Galenistic ideas.⁵ The longevity of the precedent set by his work compelled subsequent generations of doctors to consider his findings infallible, despite conflicting evidence. Regardless of his flawed assumptions, Galen’s synthesis of philosophy, rationalism, and empiricism established an intellectual framework that future Renaissance scholars would later reclaim and refine.⁶ But before this could take hold, a regression towards supernatural explanations occurred in AD 476, following the collapse of the Roman Empire when Galen’s most influential text, *On Anatomical Procedures*, was lost, obscuring any major scientific breakthroughs throughout the Middle Ages.⁷

After the overwhelming influence of the Church during the Middle Ages, the Renaissance marked the revival of classical influence across European art, literature, philosophy, and science. The developing enthusiasm for art and perspective encouraged the perusal of anatomical illustrations with greater detail

and accuracy, while philosophical shifts reoriented the purpose of scientific investigation. Perhaps the most influential philosophical change was the rise of humanism, considered to be “owed the rise of modern science”, brought about by the discovery and translation of ancient Greek literature.⁸ In 1531, Galen’s book was rediscovered, sparking a return to observational-based conclusions to scientific inquiries.⁹ These philosophical ideals had a profound presence in education, where a student would simultaneously receive training in their particular field and be introduced to rhetoric, logic, and natural philosophy.¹⁰ Giovanni Battista Della Porta, an Italian scholar in the 16th century, quotes in his book, *De Humana Physiognomonia*, “aspects of philosophy were not just part of preliminary general education but had a well-defined place within medicine itself.”¹¹ This interdisciplinary approach, where philosophy and scientific inquiry were no longer seen as separate entities but as complementary forces in the pursuit of knowledge, shaped students as they progressed through their education. Humanism’s emphasis on realism, direct experience taking precedence over inherited authority, and the rebirth of classical works in standard education fostered an intellectual curiosity within academic societies, which resulted in the empirical approach to experimentation.

This transformation reached its clearest expression in the work of Andreas Vesalius, an early 16th-century scientist who is widely regarded as the “founder of modern anatomy.”¹² Vesalius’s book, *De Humani Corporis Fabrica*, translated as *On the Structure of the Human Body*, marked the turning point in anatomical research through dissection.¹³ This book, characterized by Yale bioethics teacher, author, and surgeon, Sherwin Nuland, “epitomizes the confluence of science, technology, and culture in a way that few, perhaps no, other books have ever done..While it celebrates a return to logical thought and observational methods of the Greeks, it eschews their tendency toward conjecture and philosophical speculation.”¹⁴ Vesalius wrote about the cruciality of dissociating from preconceived notions, avoiding presumptions based on philosophy, and relying on objective evidence derived from experimentation.

The detailed anatomical illustrations published in Vesalius’s work in 1543 identified over 200 inaccuracies in Galen’s work stemming from his flawed correlation between ape and human anatomy, highlighting the necessity of the dissection of human corpses.¹⁵ Before Vesalius’s opposition to the ban, the standard for dissections had been limited to extremely specific regulations,

including “foreigners of low birth hanged during the winter months”, resulting in only six to seven autopsies recorded per year in Italy.¹⁶ This ban was enforced by the Church, which considered the dissection of a human sacrilegious unless in the case of a criminal, and to some extent, to preserve Galen’s divine ideas.¹⁷ But determined to advance accurate anatomical knowledge, Vesalius and the larger scientific community openly defied these constraints. Feeling as if the postmortem exams that had begun in hospitals were insufficient, Vesalius admitted in his book that he, along with his students, “forged keys, rifled tombs and giblets, and stole in and out of ossuaries in a series of nighttime escapades”, stealing bodies from graves in order to meet the demand for corpses to dissect.¹⁸ His example of a direct challenge to the ban inspired students to pursue their ambitions of performing their own clandestine autopsies, causing grave robbing to become increasingly common during the 16th century to meet the growing demand for empirical evidence. This dramatically increased the number of dissections performed, leading to the exposure of more inaccuracies in Galen’s theories, and eventually contributed to the replacement of faith in ancient authoritative works with the teachings of dissected human cadavers.¹⁹ Vesalius “pioneered a paradigm shift from the concept prevalent till then that dissection being used as an extension of illustrations in anatomy to the acceptance of cadaveric dissection as the most significant tool from which students would learn anatomy,” according to Sanjib Ghosh, a writer for the National Library of Medicine.²⁰ This new role dissection had found in education, combined with the rapidly growing demand for institutions for the deeper exploration of physiology, resulted in the creation of numerous universities.

The establishment of new universities provided a place for scholars to conduct innovative research, brought about the separation of experts and the dissolution of polymath physicians, and helped medicine become regarded with greater esteem. Renaissance rulers created new universities believing that “scholarly expertise and analysis were needed to resolve difficulties, to create solutions, and to attain desired goals”, doubling the number of universities created in Europe.²¹ Because early university work was under the control of ecclesiastical authorities, Galen’s work was initially the standard text taught following the rediscovery of *On Anatomical Procedures*, considered the “medical bible”, and students were taught to not question these teachings.²² As Vesalius

and others began to invalidate Galen's ideas, faith in ancient texts yielded to evidence derived from the human body itself, and Galenic doctrine was dismantled. Universities became a place where dissection was invited, encouraged, and celebrated as an indispensable educational tool that inspired many young intellectuals to acquire a curiosity to further their studies.

Flexible courses of study offered by universities allowed individuals to come to independent conclusions through their own experimentation and dissection.²³ The lack of structure in many of the institutions provided scholars the freedom to produce original research, fostering competition among those involved in similar studies, encouraging dedication to their work, and ultimately creating an environment conducive to expedited breakthroughs in research. Despite the rapid pace of new discoveries, it did not come at the expense of precision. In fact, the opposite was true. Nancy Siraisi, a medical historian, remarks that the "output of case histories, discussions of medical method, treatises on diseases, and so on is evidence for the spread of a more empirical and more sharply focused approach to medical knowledge that in the end would spell the demise of the physician-polymath."²⁴ This precision of observations and records led to the dissolution of physicians who studied multiple fields, resulting in better trained specialists who acquired a greater knowledge of their specific field. This category of highly academically trained professionals set themselves apart from the general population of interested but untrained masses, resulting in fewer mistakes and instances of malpractice, helping the practice of medicine achieve recognition among the higher faculties within universities.

As medicine evolved to become an illustrious profession, especially in academic settings, the need for collaboration evolved with it, facilitated by universities and the ability to print unmediated by the Church. These newly created universities became centers for collaboration, particularly the University of Padua in Italy, notably attended by Andreas Vesalius, William Harvey, and Nicolaus Copernicus. Arturo Castiglioni, a 17th-century medical historian, describes Padua's embodiment of the Renaissance spirit of inquiry, stating: At a time in which a great passion for studies, a great love of beauty, and an inexhaustible desire for glory vivified all the works of the Italian artists and scholars, students and teachers from all parts of Europe came to Padua, which had become the center of scientific research. Here astronomers sought the secret

of the stars, physicians the mystery of life, mathematicians the answers to the most difficult problems of geometry and of algebra.²⁵

As Cailioni mentions, universities became a gathering place for scholars across Europe, promoting discussion and correspondence between experts from different regions, resulting in the exchange of ideas and findings. This collaboration wasn't limited to Europe; the intellectual exchange extended beyond borders and disciplines, nor was it limited to verbal discourse.²⁶

Universities began publishing lecture transcriptions and small practical handbooks containing new discoveries, helping further the distribution of knowledge among the scientific community.²⁷ This was made possible by the invention of the printing press by Johannes Gutenberg in 1450.²⁸

The ability for individuals to print their work unmediated by the Church revolutionized the proliferation of iconoclastic ideas. The printing press allowed scholars to easily distribute their findings, including discoveries that challenged the religious interpretations endorsed by the Church. Previously, each page of a book had to be handwritten, making it very difficult and expensive to reproduce, encouraging doctors to continue relying on historical information, despite being outdated and rooted in religious dogma.²⁹ The introduction of easily reproducible content made the dissemination of new ideas cheaper and quicker, enabling scholars to interact with relevant, observational data. The ability to reproduce the discoveries brought about by new scientific methods, observations from dissections, and research conducted in newly established academic societies transformed the course of medicine forever.

The Renaissance, a period filled with eagerness for discovery, desire to escape from the limitations of tradition, and devotion to the return of classical heritage, marked a pivotal turning point in the history of medicine, laying the foundation for the modern scientific world. The convergence of philosophical advancements, such as the rise of humanism, and the newfound embrace of empirical methods sparked a reformed approach to research and education. As humanism became central to education, intellectual curiosity surged, reigniting a rational approach to experimentation reminiscent of ancient Greek practices, allowing for a more objective exploration of anatomy and physiology. Scholars began to challenge the reliance on ancient texts and the ban prohibiting human dissection, marking a decisive break from centuries of ecclesiastical domination. Dissection proved to be essential for collecting accurate data, producing evidence that corrected ancient anatomical misconceptions and contradicted traditional

religious views regarding supernatural explanations. The establishment of universities provided the infrastructure for this intellectual revolution, fostering unprecedented collaboration, highly trained specialization, and the exchange of groundbreaking ideas. The invention of the printing press further accelerated the spread of knowledge, making the dissemination of new ideas easier, directly contributing to the secularization of knowledge and the detachment from religious doctrines that had once constrained scientific progress. Through a confluence of philosophical, empirical, and technological developments, scholars were able to break free from the intellectual constraints of the past and begin the process of modernizing medical practices, heralding a new era of discovery, collaboration, and progress.

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Critical Essay



Trust Broken Away

“I have to drop out, I’m so sorry” the text read, leaving me shocked. We all have that one activity, the kind that makes our brain spiral with adrenaline as soon as we think of it, and before you know you’re smiling. For me, that is debate. It isn’t just about winning or trophies, it’s about the preparation, trust, and knowing that the person standing next to you cares just as much as you do. So when she came to me freshman year, asking to be my debate partner, promising that debate is her top priority, I believed her. We planned cases, registered for tournaments, and talked about how far we could go if we worked hard enough. I trusted her with my effort, my time, and my reputation. But what I didn’t know was that all she did was talk, and make promises. Three days before the competition, she drops out. Not because of an emergency. Not because of something completely unavoidable. She chooses a sleepover instead. In that moment, everything I built around that partnership collapses. The adrenaline that once fueled my love for debate twists into anger. My thoughts spiral, I clash thinking about the hours I spent on the cases, the expectations I now have to manage alone, and the embarrassment of explaining why my partner suddenly disappeared. What happened next wasn’t really about the tournament, it was about how I respond when everything falls apart.

We have all had someone make a promise they never meant to keep. Betrayal isn’t a short term issue, it lingers, it truly changes everything, the way you think, act, and trust. I remember grabbing my phone and starting to message a friend from another school, someone outside the chaos who won’t judge or

gossip. I type without thinking, maybe because I was buried under frustration, under betrayal.

“She lit just dropped 3 days before the tournament bro” I typed. ‘For a sleepover....’

“Who even does a Christmas sleepover on December 14 like what” I continued frustrated.

I sat there typing and typing, felt like I was journaling and not texting anymore. I cried. Frustrated. Not with her, but with the situation, with what she prioritized, and what she once claimed. When the thoughts started catching up to me, my phone went off. He responded.

“Yo what,” he said shocked. “That’s crazy she lwk a bum anyway.”

“What are u gonna do now” he asked.

I stare at the screen, fists tightening. Every single instinct telling me to snap, to get back at her. But I stop, take a deep breath, delete half of what I had started typing, and reply slowly; “idk im gonna try to fix it. Find someone else ig. Email the hosts to replace her name” I finished.

He texts back: “js focus on fixing ts instead of thinking abt her”

Something clicks. The anger was still there, buzzing under my skin, but the real challenge wasn’t her betrayal. It was how I responded. I got back up and started writing emails longer than essays to hosts, messages to a friend to step in, and thinking through the strategy for the tournament. The frustration hadn’t vanished, but I felt clarity and control for the first time since she left. But I won’t lie, the instinct to just let her know how badly she has destroyed me wasn’t going away. The instinct of revenge wasn’t going away. An article from *The New York Times* explains this exact feeling, “If what we care about—herther it’s our children, spouse or other loved ones, our work or some cause that we are passionate about is harmed or threatened in any way, it is instinctual to want to do something about it.” said Dr. Gaines (27). And I was time and time again feeling that strong, undeniable instinct. That instinct sat heavy in my chest, urging me to say something sharp, something that would make her feel a fraction of what I was feeling. Dr. Gaines goes on to explain that this instinct comes from a need to restore control when something meaningful is threatened, not long term thinking (27). Which makes complete sense to me, because what she damaged wasn’t just my schedule, it was something I cared about deeply. Still, acting on that impulse wouldn’t fix anything or undo what had already happened. Instead it would shift my focus away from debate, and towards bitterness, exactly where I didn’t want it to be. Even as I kept drafting emails and

reorganizing plans, the temptation to send one angry message lingered in the background. And to be honest, while I haven't nearly forgiven her yet, I was actively pushing myself to not let revenge take over my story.

Life often tests us not with what happens to us, but rather how we handle it. Replacing my partner for the tournament wasn't as easy as it may sound. I had to beg my coach and the host coach to edit entries long after the due date had passed, writing emails the length of a book. I spent hours rewriting cases, updating strategies, and making sure my new partner was caught up. My hands shook as I typed, every mistake or oversight feeling like it could ruin the round. But I remembered this wasn't about punishing my original partner, it was about taking control of what I could control even if it wasn't much. Cox notes that, "when individuals choose to act on anger, they risk prolonging conflict and losing focus on constructive goals." That insight reflects on how if I let insight guide me, I'd waste energy on bitterness instead of preparation. So instead, I focused on coordinating with my new partner, triple checking evidence, and finally editing out her name forever. As Dickens writes in *A Tale of Two Cities*, "it is a far, far better thing I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known." (Dickens 361) By choosing to do the right thing, I was doing something far more meaningful than punishing her, I was reclaiming my power and ensuring that the effort I put into the thing that actually mattered. The decision was nowhere near easy, and the frustration was lingering, but focusing on the better thing allowed me to regain focus, confidence and control.

True growth is measured by how we respond to setbacks. Even after the tournament was over, I realized that the lesson didn't stop with replacing my partner or winning rounds. Setbacks like betrayal or broken promises are almost unavoidable in life unless you're living a fairy tale, but the way we react either holds us back or pushes us forward. In my case, it pushed me forward. Cox explains, "resilience in the face of setbacks allows individuals to regain control and focus on long-term goals" That idea perfectly captured what I needed to do. The frustration I felt was human nature, yet it didn't have to control my actions afterwards. I realized that productive action gave me far more power than revenge ever could. If I let bitterness guide me, my focus on rounds, evidence and teamwork would have suffered. Instead, I learned to manage my emotions, take responsibility, and take control. What initially felt like betrayal became an opportunity to practice patience, resilience, and strategic thinking in high-pressure situations. Even though the instinct to take revenge never fully went away, I found that channeling energy into the right thing strengthened me

more than anger or revenge ever could. By the time of the next tournament, I wasn't just ready to argue points, I had bonded with my new partner like I had never imagined, regain focus when plans fell apart, and understood that controlling my own actions mattered more than punishing someone else. Debate had transformed into a training ground for life, a place to practice patience, control, and reflection, lessons that I carry with myself to this day.

Looking back, the tournament was not just about cases, arguments or winning rounds, it was about discovering who I am when things don't go my way, or actually the exact opposite of my way. I learned that anger and betrayal are natural reactions, but they don't have to rule my actions. Every moment of frustration became an opportunity to practice patience, problem solving, and staying on task under pressure. The experience also showed me that real strength comes from what we, not what others do. It's beyond easy to get lost in the bitterness, to let anger consume your thoughts and actions, but choosing to stay calm, think strategically, and focus on the bigger picture is far more powerful. I finally understand that most important victories are internal. Proving to myself that I can handle betrayal, setbacks, and disappointment all at once with resilience and clarity was the most important thing. Even when others let you down, the way you respond says more than enough about who you are. And for me, that lesson will last far longer than any single tournament or satisfaction of revenge ever could.

Works Cited

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Marlie Stauffer

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Speculative Fiction



Destructive Cyle

There's not much here anymore. A deep sigh escaped my breath. I brush off the fresh coat of dust from the windowsill and open the blinds to reveal the barren city landscape below. Billboards and signs glow orange with a clock counting down; warning any of those foolish enough to be out on the streets of the storm on it's way. *One hour out.* A siren echoes through the city's columns of concrete, and a flash of white light appears on the screens of each and every building. Shining through the windows of the apartment, *a broadcast.* I turn away from the window casement and despite temptation to stay inside, open the door leading to the balcony. I pull the glass walled mask over my face and quickly shut the door to prevent any more dust from getting in. Stepping cautiously to peer over the edge, millions of people stand out waiting on their ledges for the broadcast. The entire crowded city staring up at the only speck of hope we have left; *only to be disappointed again.* The screen on the building across from mine flashes the classic warning "MASK ON: DUST IN THE AIR" alongside the countdown. "54:26... 54:23.. 53:00.."

We were helpless birds who came out of their tree holes to learn whether or not we would be blown off our branches next Tuesday. The siren ceases. *The Broadcast begins.* A robotic voice comes over the loudspeakers, silencing all the citizen's chirping.

"Good afternoon. Today is: Thursday. Storms are a moderate level: 3.5 out of 5. The city's population has decreased by 2,500 per sector. A reminder to close all doors and or windows for the entirety of a storm. Storms are categorized by: Blue, Yellow, Orange, or Red—"

I try not to pay attention to these broadcasts anymore. I brought my head low to avoid the screen's cold light, but nothing could stop its screeching. It's always the

same speech, over and over. Weather, current family regulations, life tolls that week, laws and the *rations*. The rations would be cut severely through the weeks and months. Too many people, and not enough food, apparently. The broadcast talks about this cycle— plants take the air, animals take the plants, and people take the produce, but it all doesn't matter when there is nothing left to take in the first place; not that they would tell us.

"This unit's ration decrease will be of the remaining grain products. All sectors will receive a deduction of 37 percent for all bread, protein packs, and children's cereals" The mechanical voice echoed throughout the sector. My head shot up to view the screen ahead. *37 percent!?* *All our dry produce now won't last much over one month!* An accumulated groan from each balcony can be heard throughout the city as the wind begins to pick up. "45:18... 45: 10... 44:00..." The pit in my stomach grows, and I'm not sure if it's out of hunger or hatred. Hatred for the dust, for the food, and for the incessant, mechanical voice forecasting our doom. With another cold gust of wind the dust and sand swirls through the sky and pummels my mask. We are hungry and tired. Each and every day we return to our lonely nests after working at the docks, not knowing if there was even a point of working for our lousy and ever-waning share. This world is loud. The broadcast repeats the same mantras of despair and the low rumbles of the architecture echo through the sector as the wind causes the buildings to sway and twist. We are weak. We serve no purpose. We are just living to survive. Heaven is far from hell like this, but even so, I still search for it on days when there's a rare clearing. Today was not one of those days. I look up to the empty gray sky. It was still a view of escape as the broadcast murmurs on, yet—

A bird. Contrasting against the heavy shadow of the sky, a small figurine gliding across the dust-filled air. *My eyes must be mistaken, I think, or perhaps I didn't put my mask on correctly and I've been breathing this air for too long,* but no— It glides through the air with vibrant wings, struggling to stay afloat.

It's no real bird—no, those only exist in books nowadays. It's *paper*. That can't be true. The paper-folded creature plummets; down, and down, and down. I flash a glance at the countdown on the screen "42:37... 43: 33... 43:29..." It's going to be lost in the dust. It reaches a mere 3 feet from my viewing ledge and instinctively, without thought, I thrust my arm across the edge of my perch railing and capture the small, folded art piece. The broadcast blares on, but this bird seems to bring silence. My hands are shaking, but it's not because of the chilling storm. *I must've gone mad.* I turn away from the screen, still looking down at the piece of paper, and open the balcony door to inside. The wind breaks

through the door and another fresh coat of dust paints itself on every surface once more. I can't find it in me to care.

I turn on the small fire-stove in the central room and sit down beside the warm light. Peering down, I slowly open my palm to reveal the bird. It's crimson, a bright extravagant red. Warmer than the fire, it must be the brightest thing I've ever laid my eyes upon in this world. I examine the shape of its thin beak and overall shape. *I don't know much about birds.* I remember hearing stories about them though, beautiful singing, soaring creatures that flew above the earth. Colorful in the world of gray, the world that once stood green. *How could such a fragile thing exist on this earth?* something like this will never exist here ever again. I run my finger along the paper folds. Its small triangular wings surprisingly held it up against the harsh storm. Though it wouldn't have lasted any longer out there, it was clearly crafted with a kind of love and care.

The Broadcast has stopped, The new storm has arrived. The dust viciously taps on the windows, and the building creaks as the mass moves through. I look up at the fire's burning light then down to the hopeless, fragile life I hold in my hands. It's sort of ugly to look at now that I think about it. Love and care... *such things don't belong in a place like this.* I imagine it flying above the land, building its home in one of the tall oaks under the blue sky. It's pitiful.

Its bright color and lively form seems to mock me, but it has no strength against the human hand. Without a care in the world; *only living to live.* I frown down upon such thought. It's truly not fair. I slowly crumple the crimson Tanger's folds into an ugly scrap. *How dare it. How dare it soar above me with this lively and hopeful hue.* With the heart of a predator who's caught its prey, I look down at the mess of life I've made before tossing the scrap into the blaze. Its wings sizzle and shrivel under the harsh heat and flakes into a pile of insignificant ash. Though it was in a fit of jealousy and discomfort, I'm not surprised by my actions. As it dwindles down to nothing, I can't deny that the destruction of this lesser life is both natural and unnatural. It's weak; It serves no purpose, and the resemblance was eerily uncanny. *Truly disgusting.* All that beautiful, inhuman color quickly fades to black and grey; these familiar and cold colors. Something so inferior could never live in a place like this. The storm beats on the windows, the dust floods through the cracks, and the once crimson creature perishes by my own hand. *What a fragile thing.*



for you, death is not black

for you,
death is not black.
it is white

in maggots, mildew, mold,
the slow collapse of cadaver-fat gushing
from pale, cold girls;
the putrescine bloom, iridescent gray—
is this
the ancestral inheritance of flesh?
//
so you wish I had never been born?
had remained a stayed ovum,
thirsting for milk and wriggling-seed,
trapped in the hollow of that crimson cloth?
unsown,
missing the sweet, sick scent of petrichor—
not an embryo, never white meat soft pale baby flesh—
had been stillborn, instead?
had i not tumbled out,
like a kidney stone
gudgeoned
through the clot and gristle—
slick with afterbirth, apology,
spat from the womb's pink machinery
teeth already budding in the gums of sin,

my first cry curdled into mother's throat—
maggots, maggots, maggots,
living in my skin—
burrowed pestilence bursting through the syllables of my name.

Question:

am i meat?

//

mother
the shame is not the act.
it is the blood.
it is the red bleeding meat,
turned bloated by color.
it is the fear that what slides from the womb
will not be molten,
velvet pulp—
but fleshy, red, red, red
spilled
onto the ground.
I claim that rot,
that slick, iridescent pulp.
I claim the mold, the mildew, the cadaver-fat,
slick from the womb,
fists swollen with corpse-grease.
this will not be a clean death.
this is the first meat.
this is the only honest way to arrive.

Chris Tao

Grade 12, John Burroughs School

Educator: Eleanor DesPrez

Poetry



grandpa

honeydew popsicles on a hot day,
coffee candy and mahjong in
your walnut-toned office; math problems
scribbled on napkins before dementia
took hold –
angrily, unforgivingly.
words of wisdom I was too young
to care for, tennis lessons and
sticky maple buns at country-club dinners;
hot chocolate burning my tongue as I
sit in the nursing home lobby,
 signing our surname; 道
in swooping strokes as your memory fades,

you are the perfect shadow,
I am the child running across the sunlit pavement,
watching you run
alongside me –
unconditional, everlasting.

Siddhanth Vijaykumar

Grade 11, Parkway Central High School

Speculative Fiction



The Machine

DAY 4 - Richard Lake

Looming shadows seemed to cover the entire cavern, somehow fighting against the lamplights and searchflames, enveloping the surrounding area in darkness. These otherworldly shadows all originated from the same point; a huge, cylindrical object that lay perpendicular to the far end of the cave. All of the reports and mission briefs just referred to it as “the Machine”. Besides its largeness, the Machine was dark orange with signs of rust and decay all across the many pipes spread around it.

It was built with some kind of metal-like material that was native to this planet. A compound of Lithium... and something else. Another element. The most fascinating part of it was its periodic humming, which shook the cavern and made the pipes around it glow brightly. No scans could locate its power source.

It was here when we arrived, and from its state, it had been here for a long, long time. Unfortunately, when the Union found the Machine’s energy signature, they soon realized that it was located on the day side of the tidally-locked world of Trappist-1E. The Union’s science personnel and military had to wear special tempsuits that allowed them to traverse this area, as without it, the humans would quickly overheat and die painful deaths.

Now, Union science officers milled about the cavern the Machine was found in, taking readings, surveying the land, or staring in awe at the object. Any attempts to move the object were deemed unsuitable by the military.

I stand in front of it now, marveling at the details of the markings across the object’s outer shell, and the intricate cogs and gears that must work inside of it. Understanding how the Machine works is impossible without potentially damaging it. It doesn’t seem dangerous, so far.

Then, I hear whispering. Continuous, everlasting, but I can't make out a single word. I glance around to see if anyone else is hearing it, but everyone else is still going about their tasks.

I turn back to the Machine. Still whirring, still humming, and still nothing else happens. But the whispering continues. Is it calling me? I don't know.

We aren't supposed to touch the Machine. That's the hidden reason that the military is here. Officially, to keep us scientists safe, but also to make sure that we don't step out of line. The N.E.U. has become increasingly unstable over the last year, continuing to do so ever since we touched down on Trappist, and has ramped up security efforts to compromise.

I try to remember if anyone else has tried to touch the object over the last three days. I feel myself go cold, even with the rising heat from outside that threatens to overwhelm my tempsuit. I can't recall that happening. If anyone had, could the government have hushed it up?

I shake myself out of my thoughts. The whispering grows louder. I need to touch it. The Machine looms above me, and suddenly the whispering overtakes my thoughts, rattling my skull and attacking my eardrums. I still can't make out the words. Is it a different language? Does it mean anything?

My eyes go out of focus. The world blurs, and suddenly everything is spinning. The other personnel, the cavern, almost everything is lost in a tornado of light and wind. Only two things remain constant: the whispering, which has become the roar of the whirlwind, and the Machine, which stays clearly in front of my field of view, still unmoving, still humming.

I have to get to it. I have no other choice. I feel as though I am about to pass out, and the Machine is the only thing that can save me. Dark spots appear in my vision; I rip and tear at my own tempsuit, anything to make me faster. I don't even feel the heat; everything else is too overwhelming.

But I make it to the Machine, only a couple feet away. Its orange rust takes up my darkening vision, and I blindly reach out. I feel the cold metal.

And then the roaring is gone. The spinning is gone. The dark spots are gone.

The cavern is gone. The others are gone. The heat is gone.

All that is left is light.

DAY 9 - Marco Ríosvidal

Stretching from the main cavern where the object lay were multiple winding tunnels. They were a similar color to the object and branched off in

several directions, big enough for humans to easily pass through. They also went quite a few meters lower than the cavern under the surface, continuing downwards.

Each tunnel went on too long to be completely explored yet, while Union scout reports stated that the air only continued to grow stuffier and hotter the farther down one went. Even the tempsuits were having trouble circulating oxygen and cooling it.

I was more than happy to be assigned down here than in the cavern. The walls that lined the tunnels were interesting— there were odd, unnatural lines and shapes that covered almost everything. It was also very dark, so we were all given searchflames to make research down here easier.

On top of all this, I had wanted to be as far away from “the Machine” as possible. I wasn’t sure what to make of it. Most things we don’t understand always have the potential to be dangerous.

My fears were only confirmed after the incident. Less than a week ago, something had happened in the main cavern that had placed the entirety of our operation in shutdown. I was down here when it happened, but I heard that it had something to do with the Machine. I also heard that someone had died.

It was things like this that made me question taking this job. I had a wife and children. I was paid well, but I always knew that in this line of work, death was a very possible outcome.

I blink and thrust my thoughts away. The heat inside this tunnel is growing the farther down I go, and soon my tempsuit would be unable to maintain my body at 37.5 degrees Celsius. I follow the lines and shapes along the wall, trying to find any kind of pattern, anything that can help me understand what’s going on here.

As I move, I swear I see something on the wall move. I pause, staring hard at the wall, but all I see are markings. Nervous now, I look back up the way I had come, holding my searchflame cautiously. It was my only source of light, and there was no one else here that I could see. I was alone.

And then I hear whispering.

It’s odd. Was one of the others down here after all? I call out, but there isn’t any response. The whispering just continues, low and quiet. Could it be... other intelligent life forms? Someone had to have built the Machine, after all.

I took another step down the tunnel. Suddenly, the whispering grows louder, loud and fast enough to make me flinch. I begin moving down the tunnel, searchflame in hand.

The whispering grows again, but I still can't understand. Something moves along the wall again.

I whip my head around, and this time I see it.

The markings on the wall **are moving**.

I'm too shocked to even make a sound. Even if I did, I doubt anyone would hear me. My searchflame flickers for a moment. The dark orange walls turn black at that moment. When I can see again, I realize that the markings have arranged themselves in some way. Almost... almost like letters, or words. I can't understand any of it though, as it isn't any human language from what I can tell.

The markings rearrange themselves again. My eyes barely process that the letters are in English now. All I can do is focus on the one word that is spelled out. *HUNGER.*

My vision begins to blur. The whispering roars, threatening to crack open my skull and burst my eardrums. I run, not realizing that I'm going further down the tunnel. The heat builds up. My tempsuit begins to struggle.

As I run, the markings on the wall somehow manage to stay constant in my vision. More words begin to appear.

HUNGER. DEATH. HUNGER. LIGHT.

My tempsuit begins to beep. It can't handle the heat anymore. I barely feel any of it. All that I can feel comes in through my ears. The whispering has become a roar. The beeping is fracturing my bones. I just keep running, trying to escape it all. It's more pain than I ever imagined I could feel.

The walls seem to close in. I find it harder to move, harder to run. I faintly realize that I've fallen down, as the walls close in on my body.

EVERYTHING. DIES.

And then the roaring is gone. The pain is gone. The markings are gone.

The beeping is gone. The walls are gone. The heat is gone.

All that is left is light.

DAY 10 - Jim Dawson

While only having 9% the mass of the Earth's own white star, the red giant that Trappist-1E orbited appeared about twice as large in the sky, even larger on the day side. Its ruthless gaze scorched the land, creating continental deserts and evaporating any water that could have collected on the surface of the planet.

The only evidence of life was a gigantic jungle cluster found closest to the Dusk Zone. Nicknamed the "Titanic Forests", these jungles were composed of trees taller and thicker than any tree that had ever been found on Earth. Each

tree reached a height somewhere between 300 to 500 meters in the sky, dwarfing any redwood the old planet had ever harbored.

That was all that I could remember, anyway. It was hard to think about anything with that gargantuan sun beating down on us, without remorse. Our tempsuits are working overtime just to keep us alive, and I've heard it gets even worse the lower you go in the caves.

I've been a soldier in the Union's infantry for a long time, but this has definitely been one of my weirdest missions. Our first sign of intelligent extraterrestrial life, but there's no actual life to be seen. There is the flora, but other than that, nothing. Maybe we'd have more luck checking the night side.

My commander is shouting orders at the top of his lungs. "Bring him up, quickly!" He barks. "We don't need anymore unrest down there."

Turning around, I watch as several other soldiers pull up a casket out from the dark entrance to the cavern. *Big enough to hold a person.*

"Poor lad," Bravo-13 remarks next to me. I glance at him.

"That's the guy?"

"Yep. Died less than a week ago, right in front of that thing... What's it called? The Machine?" Bravo-13 picks up a small stone and throws it as far as he could into the desert, his eyes unfocused. It was obvious he was lost in thought.

"Mhm." My own mind whirls. Had he gone insane because of the heat? I knew his name was Richard Lake. "Last I heard, he tore open his own tempsuit with a wrench he found on the cavern floor."

"I heard that too," Bravo-13 replies, looking away from the casket, which was now being moved into a storage canister. "A copter will be here in a week to pick him up, and replenish us with supplies."

I grin at him. "Think we can hitch a ride outta here?"

Bravo-13 laughed. "Fat chance. Couldn't hurt to try, save for us losing our ranks."

I smile. It was so odd to seem to know a person so well, and yet still not know their name, after all these years. When you sign up for the military, any kind of connection isn't allowed. We only knew each other by our callsigns.

"Bravo-13! Bravo-55!" We both start in surprise and turn quickly to our commander, who is staring at us hard now. "Come on. We're going on a routine check of the surrounding desert."

Bravo-13 groans. "Great, even more time in the heat. I swear, I'm going to malfunction before my tempsuit does."

Bravo Commander was already rounding up the rest of the troops. “We’ll just make a small loop over that dune to the northwest, and then follow back to the south.”

“Small?!” I hear Bravo-13 mutter.

“We–” Before the commander can continue, the walkie-talkie on his belt begins to crackle. The commander holds up his fist to the rest of us, and picks up his receiver. “What is it?”

“This is Tango-29. We’ve got a lot more dead people down here.”

The commander’s eyes widen. “What?”

More dead? I stare up at the commander in shock. *Why? How?*

“Well?!” The commander demands. “What happened? A gas leak? Did the tempsuits malfunction?”

“N-No, not that the rest of us can tell. They all killed themselves, just like that first guy. Most of them were found in the tunnels. A f-few are up here in the main cavern. Can we get some help down here?”

“Right.” The commander looks back at us, his eyes still wide, as if he hadn’t fully processed the news. “Bravo-4, get in contact with the GSF. The rest of you, with me! This is a retrieval effort.”

“What the hell, dude?” Bravo-13 races alongside me, as close to thirty of us make our way back to the cavern entrance and into its mouth. I say nothing back.

As we make our way into the cavern, I realize that everything is off. All of the lamplights are down, the searchflames are out, and we can barely see the far side of the cavern. I can’t even see the Machine from here.

“Fan out,” The commander whispers. “Focus on finding people. We’re getting everyone we can out of here.”

“And the data?” One of the other soldiers asks.

“Leave it.” The commander’s voice is etched with fear. “We don’t have any time for that. Get the people out, and then we get ourselves the hell outta here. Searchflames on.”

I can feel the same fear crawling down my spine. We can barely see in front of us, and even when we turn our searchflames on, barely anything changes. Their light doesn’t even make a dent in the darkness.

“Why... Why aren’t the searchflames working properly?” Bravo-36 shakes the tool.

Nobody replies. Fear is mounting. I stumble over something. Turning my flame down, I see an arm. Attached to it is the body of a person, open eyes, completely lifeless. “God...” I move back, and the others see what I found.

“Keep moving.” The commander struggles to maintain his cool. None of us have ever seen anything like this before, not even on the journey to this damned planet.

“Do you... hear that?” Bravo-13 suddenly says.

“Hear what?”

“That... that whispering...” Bravo-13’s voice quiets down quickly.

It doesn’t take much longer after that. People begin to lose their minds in the cavern, falling to the ground and clawing at the walls. I hear the whispering, writhe as it grows and grows into a roar, splitting my head open. I faintly notice one of the others unholstering their rifle. I see Bravo Commander getting shot in rapid succession, collapsing under the gaze of the Machine, which now takes up most of my vision.

As the world becomes chaos around me, the Machine remains constant.
EVERYTHING DIES. THE FEEDING... CONTINUES.

The others are still killing each other. I get shot in the upper shoulder. As I fall, the cavern comes crashing down around me. Union rifles continue to unload. The screams of all my comrades crash down on my ears at once. I don’t know if it was because of the gunshots, or the roaring, or everything else. I try to crawl, but I don’t get far before the pain of it all overwhelms me. Everything is screaming. Everything is dying. The shot in my shoulder allows the heat to get in.

And then the screaming is gone. The roaring is gone. The dying is gone.

The cavern is gone. The gunshots are gone. My friends are gone.

All that is left is light.

DAY 15

It hurts. It hurts a lot more than I could have imagined. I haven’t been through that much pain before. Pain is always the cost, though.

Still learning. Trying to understand the things that I have seen. They flick through too quickly, thoughts hovering in the air before zipping through my vision.

So much to understand. It’s almost too much. Do I feel... remorse? Sorrow? It must have spilled out from the thoughts, or the blood. Along with the language, how they **think**, how they **feel**.

I saw how they went mad. It was the noise for them. I see now. Interesting.

But still, the hunger persists. It gnaws at me; I never understood it completely. Does it only wish for souls? Or knowledge? Or more? I don’t know, but I must obey. This is who I am.

They attacked me first. Poked at my **veins**, attacked my **mind**... and now they're all gone.

But more will come. I've gotten rid of the now-useless bodies. They will come, and I will kill them again and the hunger will be satiated. For now.

Everything dies.

Until all that is left... is me.

Isabella Wang

Grade 11, John Burroughs School

Poetry



Generational

In another lifetime I'm wiping the red from her eyes
so she can step into my soul, shoes off. We're
feeding baozi to the calico lumbering across hard
-wood floors when she says *I've been living to die*
and tic-marked scissor lines rupture along my arms
how to say holding? How to say past holding?
Passed minutes flutter in the wavering nutsedge
that line the porcelain pots not-quite even in mud.
I imagine us wading through a flickering stream,
grasping at the slivers of fish bodies when she
lets me borrow her fishing boots. One day will
she leave behind a tombstone for me to carry
peace lilies to? Too many people living inside
her to unfasten the hard clothes and feel wounds.
We carry continents in our veins, us montanic
girls. Care is buried under unfaced, sliced books
and unhanding cigarettes disintegrating earthward,
red passing through handcuffs. There, by the road,
a Tree of Heaven leaning against her back, great-
grandmother squinting into the cinders of revolution.
Meaning revolver, volcano, vulva, volver, volar.
Google says there is no "v" in Mandarin. I already
knew there was no tense, like in the human body.
My grandmother once carried me in her womb
in my mother's ovaries. Somedays I am still
carrying her—I've seen my mother cry twice

like the Earth shaking apart on a fishing line.
Once when he beat her, and once when he died.
Our bodies were bullet-slick on the bed, laid down
like promises. She touched my spine. I opened
my pink mouth and said something. Strawberry
wafted out, like stir-fried ice cream roll steam,
like smoke on the Fourth of July when I went down
on my knees in unexpected prayer by the mailbox,
pavement sharpening my body—the pyre.
She unraveled into wind then, curtains
over her eyes, lamp-lit. Her hand clamped over
my waist and by then I lost my lungs, became
doll. One day when people learn to shudder
to the ground like paper, I imagine her taller
than her breakers, her feet bare against the sun
-baked, red of the dirt falling over blue bruises.

Isabella Wang

Grade 11, John Burroughs School

Educator: Shannon Koropchak

Short Story



Wooden Things

The lights clicked on. I started to breathe faster as the room materialized under their lab-white glow. How could she have lived like that? I mean, what I first noticed was that it was, from floor to ceiling, full of *stuff*. Cheap zines, nail polish in gaudy shades, the ends of multi-colored spools of thread, a beat-up puffer with a tube of lip gloss pouring out of the pocket, a box of expired chocolates, dried-out pens lying on the floor, vintage records hanging on the walls, graph paper scattered across her chair, a tangle of cords underneath her desk. She liked to keep the books in order of what types of poems they inspired in her. Meaning they sat on her shelves in a splatter of colors and sizes and conditions of use. Meaning she always got mad when I tried to organize them. This was when I still went inside her room, obviously (an already rare enough occurrence, considering how most siblings are about their personal space). Of course, even though the floors and walls swelled with clutter, there was only air where her guitar should've been—she'd taken it, which I always knew she would. She could live without me, but not the guitar. Never the guitar. As long as she had her memory and voice box and hands, that old, garage-sale beauty was her salvation, and not that I blamed her—how could I blame someone who was incapable of critical thinking or weighing consequences? I'm talking about someone who's dependent on what's essentially a block of wood.

Carefully, I stepped across the carpeted floor (not that you could really see the actual carpeting underneath the mass of stuff covering it) to her dresser. That's where she kept the important things. Apparently she had a lot of important things (though none as important as her guitar), because I had to yank

the top drawer open, as it was jammed with objects—just some more stupid things. But in the corner: this little candle. I am good about not touching Maya's things, but this candle, though: I don't know, I guess I felt like she would sense if something was off (she had a way of knowing where she had left everything in her room despite the general chaos of it) about her room. Maybe because she knew me best, she had known I would go snooping in her room at some point and because I knew her best, I would look in the top drawer of her nightstand and find it, and then the world would tilt back onto its axis again, and she would be back home, and I would play the violin again, and our parents would fade into the blurry 9-to-5 jobs they always worked, instead of lurking around the house making noises about counselling.

I held it in one hand, then easily tossed it to the other, a habit left over from my days playing Little League. The tealight candle jostled against the sides of the wood encasing it, making a soft noise, sort of like setting a ceramic mug down or playing with toy blocks, as if in protest. I stopped and looked at the white part of the wax. Not that it was really white anymore—was it ever? Did Maya ever notice the flecks of pink and blue from who-knows-where and scattered black threads and thick coat of yellow grime covering the wax? Maybe not—the wick was uncut. I wondered what it was like to be an unused candle, to never be lit, instead relegated to some corner of a drawer in the room of a girl who no longer existed there. Maybe if I lit the candle, the yellow coating would melt away and there would be a sort of untouched, molten white underneath. It didn't really matter. It wasn't even mine. As I moved to set it down on her nightstand—shoving it back in the overflowing drawer felt wrong somehow—I noticed the writing on the bottom. "The Wood DEN." Scribbled in sharpie, it looked like a child's handwriting—and it must have been. God, I felt weird then, remembering seeing Maya's name on all her papers throughout elementary school scattered on the kitchen table.

She wrote it, I bet, because she couldn't bear the fact that it was likely mass-produced, likely some souvenir from the mandatory field trip everyone in our district took to the local museum of natural history in eighth grade. Our town is covered in the same dust as the exhibits; it's not run-down, but just monotonous enough that everyone wants out of it—anyone with any enthusiasm for being alive. Some of these people were crazy, like Maya, and some had plans, like me. Or at least, I did before the night of the state auditions, in Omaha, which is better than Papillion because there's an airport, which means you can leave Ohio. I really had a plan, I swear, before I stood in the damp yellow classroom,

with the judges seated behind a screen, cracking my knuckles so that I wouldn't lose feeling in my fingers when I touched the bow, and before I held the violin up and tucked it under my chin, feeling the coolness of my own breath on my neck as I hovered the bow above the strings, and before I let it drift down and saw, hovering in the air, her face turning towards me. My fingers kept shaking—shaking, god, shaking like Maya used to do when she locked all the doors in our house and hid.

But I did not cry leaving upon leaving the room, remembering that Maya used to tear her poems up in rage when she failed tests I knew she hadn't studied for, when she took car rides with boys I told her to stay away from, when she did not record and edit the songs I told would make her more than some suburban girl with oversized dreams. Who was going to save us if not ourselves? I understood her, didn't she know that? Didn't she want to be great, just like me? Why would she leave me if I was the only person who could help her? Did she really think there was someone who loved her so much? Why did I shake when she left? I never shake. I am a good auditioner; a perfect auditioner, even. Why did I shake? Why did I see her face?

I thought of my violin, with its bone-straight bow and mirror-smooth body, leaning against the wall. I realized that maybe I was crying. The candle regarded my possible tears without judgment; it continued to stand on the dresser, upright and unmoving. It was more serene now; perhaps because instead of the harsh fluorescent light, it was now the dawn's hushed blue and yellow streaks that illuminated it. It really was made out of wood—that seems obvious, I know, but before, when I looked at it, all I could see was the white wax of the tealight, with its barely visible tin wrapper and artificially smooth surface. But it had always had that rawness—in the unrestrained way that the strips of the raw, unsanded sides peeled off, making it resemble a strangely small trunk of one of the evergreens in our backyard, with the pieces of moss climbing up the ridges, and the fragmented sheath of white lichens, and the streaks of ochre running across the bark. Maybe my fingers were shaking when the candle first left residue on them, the same residue as the quiet, natural dust coming off of trees that don't leave stains—only a sensation.

Fine, Maya, I thought, you win. I turned away from the candle and shut the door, feeling it shudder against the doorframe with a light thud, holding back the contents, the sensations, of the room—that diorama—from flowing outward. And then I walked to the corner of the room where my violin was sitting, picked it up,

and felt my bones vibrate as I drew the bow over the strings, my hands steady for the first time since she had died.

Jonathan Windsor Jr.

Grade 11, Daniel Academy

Novel



Schizo

Glass...

Shouts...

Screeching tires...

Blood...

Death...

Josh cried out in his sleep. He tore at the blankets and sheets as though they were trying to strangle him. After moments of violent thrashing and tearing at the sheets, Josh awoke from his fretful slumber.

As he awoke and sat up, he cried, "Jacob!!!"

That's when it came...

Sometimes it took the form of a man. Sometimes a boy. Sometimes his father. But every time he dreamt of Jacob it appeared.

The being stood in Josh's open doorway ominously whispering his name.

Then, as suddenly as he appeared the shadow faded into darkness as though turning off a fluorescent light.

Josh was left staring at his empty doorway, fear gripping his heart.

He broke down sobbing on his bed that was soaked with sweat.

Josh stumbled from his bed and through the doorway and into his bathroom across the hall. He turned on the light and looked at his blotchy and tearsoaked face in the mirror. His face grinned at him in the mirror manically.

Josh thrust a closed fist at the mirror, then stopped, inches away from making contact.

His face laughed at him from the mirror and Josh could hear it faintly.

"I am so tired of this crap!" he told *himself* in the mirror, then opened the mirror, revealing a medicine cabinet.

Inside he had several prescriptions.

After popping a few pills, Josh used the toilet and then showered.

Blasting himself with nearly-scalding hot water, he washed the shivering traces of fear away.

Josh stepped out of the shower and onto the fluffy white rug, feeling it with his feet. He closed his eyes while he was still dripping wet and let the harsh cold air of the bathroom assault his skin.

After drying off, Josh clothed himself in only his towel and looked at himself again in the mirror after wiping it clear with his hands.

He observed his reflection carefully. No manic smiles or tormenting whispers came from it this time. He calmly looked at his short-cut black hair that, once dried, was handsomely combed to the side. To Josh's own, he also had pretty dark green eyes with the slightest hints of brown nearing his pupils.

Though it was only the wee hours of the morning. Josh shaved the whiskers of a mustache on his upper lip, and the wiry fuzz of a beard on his chin. Oddly enough, he shaved without wetting the razor or using shaving cream. After lotioning his face, Josh finally stepped out of the bathroom and into his bedroom to get dressed.

Instead of dressing in normal attire, he put a full gi on and headed to his basement.

He learned long ago that he had to discipline his body and mind to tell them both that he was the one in control.

After rigorous blows to the air, Josh moved to a punching bag in the center of his basement.

"My name is Joshua." He said whilst landing several strikes, blows, and kicks to the bag. "I struggle conceptualizing reality."

"I love my family, fighting, and my friends." He said, smacking the bag with a wooden poll.

"I hate crowds, groups of people, and scratchy rugs!" He screamed after he unclipped the bag and set it on the ground for ground-pound routines.

After several hours, and several hundred repetitions of the same phrases, Josh took an ice-cold shower in the basement's bathroom to rinse off.

Josh went upstairs to eat and get ready for his day at school.

Josh hated school...

It was hard enough not being honest with the few friends he had about his condition, but his fellow freshmen had already branded him odd for his anti-social behavior.

Both of Josh's parents were still fast-asleep.

They used to see him off to school.

They used to eat breakfast with him and –

“NO!” Josh thought, creating a mental roadblock in his thoughts.

He angrily made a quick breakfast and scarfed it down with a little contemplation about his day so far.

Soon after that, the bus came and picked him up to go to school. Josh got on the bus and breathed carefully, after ignoring the driver’s icy gaze.

He eventually found an empty spot and sat in the seat as straight as an arrow.

“What’s up?” said a voice behind him.

“The sky,” Josh responded non-sarcastically. “The sun, the stars, and the moon.”

“And what’s down, Josh?” he was asked.

“The road,” he replied. “Pipelines, and Earth.”

“To your left?”

“Olivia Wood. Five foot three inches. Sixteen years old. Her friend sitting to her left, Ashley Fox. Five foot five inches. Also fourteen years of age.”

“In front?”

“Logan Harper. Five foot seven inches. Fifteen years old. Has a slight limp in his left leg from a minor hamstring injury as a resultant from improper weight training.”

“Finally...behind you?”

“Barnaby Wood. Five foot nine inches. Fifteen years of age. Brother of Olivia. Your friends sarcastically call you ‘Pig’ because a teacher would refer to you as ‘Barn’, and you have a very slender form resulting in a body of only one hundred and eight pounds.”

Barnaby slid up into Josh’s seat to sit right next to him.

“And who are you?” Barn whispered into his ear.

Josh leaned over and whispered shallowly into Barnaby’s ear, “I am Joshua, I struggle conceptualising reality and I use psychotherapeutic techniques with speech to confirm that what I am seeing is true.”

This had been a morningly routine for the boys. Barnaby had become one of Josh’s close friends when they were small children and had always been encouraging to him, despite his issues.

The conversation switched casually for Barnaby.

“So,” he stated. “D’you get any sleep last night?”

“Affirmative.” Josh replied curtly.

"Are you sure," Barnaby pestered. "Because you are looking more sullen this morning than usual."

"Yes!"

"Really?"

"Uh-huh"

"How many hours?"

Josh hesitated.

"Josh!" Barn said sternly. "Don't make me force it out of you."

"Fine!" Josh said heatedly. "I got approximately forty seven minutes."

Barnaby sighed heavily.

"You're having dreams again, aren't you?" Barn inquired.

"No," Josh said quickly.

"Yes."

"No!"

"Why else would you only get less than an hour of sleep?!"

"I don't know. Maybe I just wasn't tired."

"Don't pull that crap on me!" Barn reeled at him. "I've known you long enough to know when you're bullcraping, Josh."

"I didn't, okay!?" Josh said unconvincingly. It wasn't that he wanted to lie to his best friend. It was just that it hurt too much to tell him what he was reliving.

The bus hit a pot-hole and Josh suddenly braced himself with his right arm and put his left arm on Barn's chest to protect him.

To protect him from... a pot-hole.

Josh sighed, ignoring a raised-eyebrowed look from Barn.

Barnaby didn't say anything for the rest of the ride after that. Perhaps he was hurt from Josh's lack of trust, or he was just wary of his outburst to protect him.

The bus eventually got to the school after a monotonous ride, and the boys were separated to their different first hour classes.

Josh made his way to his first hour class after dropping his things off at his locker and grabbing the appropriate books for the class.

In the class, multiple people sat haphazardly at their desks...well, haphazardly to Josh. Most students slouched and he found it disgusting. One young man, leaning back so far, was practically laying in the seat and Josh found it revolting.

Josh sat, very straightly mind you, in his favorite seat: a back desk in the far right hand corner. It was his favorite spot in every class because the most

people surrounding him were only two, and he could easily keep an eye on the door and any windows. But mainly, if he heard any eerie whispering *behind* him, that would be a key indicator to pop one of his pills.

When class had started moments later, Josh hardly paid attention to the history lecture. Frankly, he could care less about how many presidents of the United States did so many, in his opinion, pointless things. What he did pay attention to was other classmates. Reciting names, heights, ages, and characteristics. Josh intently knew more things about his classmates than they probably knew about each other. And surprisingly, he knew a ton of information on Professor Davis as well.

The Professor continued, as he called it, ‘Yakking.’

And Josh continued analyzing, assessing, and sorting information, then transcribing it into his notebook after he got bored of taking history notes.

Now all he needed to add was a small detail on –

“Josh!” Davis cried.

“Yes?” he said rather tentatively.

“Are you paying attention?” he asked.

Josh should have known. The professor only checks on individuals whom he calls ‘unique.’

“Of course,” Josh responded.

“Very well,” Professor Davis said testingly. “Which president legislated the Missouri Compromise?”

“James Monroe,” Josh responded almost instantly.

Davis gave Josh a nod of approval and moved on with the lecture.

Josh inhaled sharply. The pen ink on his paper appeared to bleed. Josh closed his eyes and refused to get upset.

“My name is Josh,” he whispered. “I struggle conceptualising reality–”

He snapped his eyes open when he heard a voice whispering back to him.

Josh raised his hand to be excused from the classroom.

“Yes, Josh?” the professor inquired.

“May I use the bathroom, sir?” Josh asked, a bead of sweat rolling down his forehead.

“His death is all your fault!” Davis responded rashly, sounding as though he had multiple voices saying the same thing.

Josh closed his eyes, breathed in through his nose, and out his mouth.

“Pardon?” Josh said.

“I said you may, Josh. Go,” Professor Davis said patiently.

Josh excused himself from the classroom and went to his locker. After rummaging through his bag, he realized that he didn't have his prescriptions.

Breathing slowly, Josh made his way to the bathroom. He had been trained on what to do in these instances. Josh leaned over the sink and looked at himself in the mirror.

Josh blinked and in replacement of his reflection there was a figure fully hooded and cloaked in a dark robe. He tried to recite the same words to calm his mind down until the figure stepped through the mirror and into the bathroom striding toward Josh, who backed into the opposite wall.

The figure approached Josh, its head almost touching the ceiling and easily around three and a half feet taller than Josh. The being reached out with an iron-clad hand and grasped Josh's throat and lifted him off the ground and held him against the wall. His face flushed and he felt his own eyes start to bulge.

Struggling for breath, Josh struck the figure's arm that mercilessly tried to end his life. Josh's strikes were in vain. The being began to speak to him tauntingly.

"You are weak," it said with an ancient voice that sounded like metal scraping against stone. "To think you can break my grasp is pathetic, young Gibbor. You've shut us out long enough!"

Josh stopped resisting.

He only had a few seconds to remain conscious, a few more to live.

Josh heard something whistle through the air, and then a yowl of pain and hatred. The next thing Josh knew was the pain of being dropped to the ground whilst in the air.

He was hacking and dryheaving on the bathroom floor, trying to catch his breath. Josh looked up at the demonic figure that tried to kill him.

The being had an arrow that pierced its cloaked forearm that moments before tried to choke the life out of Josh. The figure's other arm that was unscathed reached deep into its cloak to draw a sword that was roughly taller than Josh.

Whistle...

Another arrow penetrated the iron gauntlets of the towering figure at the wrist. The being roared in response to the agony and dropped the sword with a monstrous clang on the bathroom floor.

After the sword fell, another being dived through the mirror with inhuman speed. This figure was covered in a stark white cloak. Josh could also see the

bottom half of the new figure's face, which was radiant with light, and he had a jet-black beard that reached the upper half of his torso.

When the man had dived through the mirror, he drew his sword and attacked the towering figure with ruthless fury. Josh watched in awe as the defenseless figure that tried to kill him took blow after blow from the gleaming sword of his adversary.

Chop after chop, Josh's savior grew tired as the looming figure absorbed the attacks with his armor. Josh knew he needed to help his protector, or else he would eventually perish to the giant.

Extremely sore and weary, Josh stumbled to his feet, facing the figure's back, longing to help the man who was defending him. Josh looked around for the sword that the figure dropped as a result of a pierced wrist.

In the fighting of the two beings, the sword had been kicked under one of the bathroom stalls. Josh crawled on all fours to hunt for the weapon that may now save his life and his protector's.

Josh found the sword near the back of the bathroom, stretching under two toilets. He stumbled onto his feet and wrenched one of the stall doors open, desperate to grasp the sword. Josh dragged the sword along the floor out of the stall and headed toward the battling duo.

The cloaked giant had begun to throw devastating punches toward his adversary. Each blow that landed, speckled the white cloak with splattered gold from Josh's protector.

Erupting with rage, Josh cried out whilst running toward the being. He swung the sword with all the strength he could muster to wield the colossal blade. Meaning to carve the figure in half, Josh aimed for its midsection, but the weight of the sword pulled his swing low and sliced through the being's knees.

The maimed being fell sideways and onto its back screaming in anguish. The man who battled to protect Josh then plunged his blade into the giant chest of the figure, following more screaming and cursing from the adversary. Tired from the battle and the agony displayed by his enemy, Josh heaved the sword vertically this time and brought the sword down upon the figure below its hood where he suspected its neck was.

The screams were silenced.

Josh dropped the sword in horror of what he had done.

Shaking, he sank to his knees.

Suddenly, the mutilated giant dissolved with a rattling breath. All that was left was its armor and ashes from whence it disappeared.

Josh's guilt and shame had ceased and morphed into curiosity.

"What was that?" he asked the man who had helped keep his life.

The man swiftly removed his sword from the empty breast-plate of their adversary, casting a bit of ash in the air in the process.

"One of the Fallen," the man replied. "We need to move before they regroup."

The man hopped up onto the sink and stepped through the mirror as though it were a window.

"Come!" the man commanded Josh.

Josh obeyed the white-cloaked man through the mirror and stepped into a vast cold room beyond.

The cold room was eerily silent and littered with armor and ash.

"I led an Omáda to find you in this stronghold," the man whispered. "I am the only one who wasn't dispatched."

"What!" Josh said vehemently.

"Quiet!" The man whispered, crouching and slowly making his way across the open room armed with his bow.

The only light that illuminated the massive room came from the bathroom mirror that was now halfway across the room behind the duo.

The man paused at a heap upon the stone floor and hesitated, then resumed until he came upon an empty breastplate with a cloak that was once white but now splattered with grime and what appeared to be gold.

"Put this on," he said to Josh, gesturing toward the breastplate and cloak.

Josh obeyed, but asked a completely unrelated question. "What did you mean by dispatched?"

As the man helped Josh put the breastplate on, he explained.

"Dispatched means to transport or remove something from a current location," he told Josh.

"So," Josh said, struggling to follow. "Your team was transported?"

"Yes," the man replied curtly, finishing strapping on the breastplate. "My team was transported when they sustained fatal wounds."

Josh put on the grimy cloak and was handed a short sword that was found by the man a few moments later.

"How does the transportation work?" Josh inquired.

The man ignored Josh and stopped abruptly.

"Turn around," he whispered, his back facing Josh.

"What?!" Josh said rather loudly.

“Do it!” he cried, and instantly a few of the heaps seen previously began to rise rapidly and sprint toward them both.

Josh whirled around and found two figures in stride’s length away from him.

These figures appeared to be emancipated and gaunt. They were about a head shorter than Josh but had menacing looking daggers in each hand.

In a movement of reflex, Josh swung his sword horizontally and beheaded the two figures instantly, which, of course, the beings dissolved into ash, their weapons clanging dully upon the stone floor.

About five more of the same beings flung themselves at Josh and he easily defeated each of them.

Josh breathed in the crisp cool air after hearing the whistling of arrows stop.

“Run!” the man shouted behind Josh.

Josh whirled around again and sprinted after the man.

He followed the man into the elements outside of the said stronghold and stopped once it was out of sight.

“What’s going on?!” Josh demanded.

The man turned around and lowered his hood and Josh stared into the face of his brother Jacob, whom Josh had seen die in front of him.

Teresa Xu

Grade 8, Parkway West Middle School

Poetry



Dear Friend

Dear friend,

After Ocean Vuong

messaging me at 12

in the morning

just to say

I matter to you

always asking

if it is

too much saying

I'm sorry I'm sorry

I'm so so sorry we both say that

so much

hidden behind a mask

a screen dividing us

obscuring our

true reactions

like a fog sweeping in chilling us

to the bone there is

so much

hurt and loneliness clouding

the air

freezing our retrospect with

the moment

you told me you were broken

and asked me
 if I cared no I didn't because
I was the same
 how could I abandon
someone who had been
 abandoned all their life
our purposes are
 like cranes that circle
above our conversations and now
 I think I'll be fine
I think I'm getting better
 honestly then
why is it still so hard
 to be honest to stop
beating myself
 down over and over
to finally believe that I'm enough
 I'll do anything
to help you like you
 try to help me
we were two hurt and broken
 paper cranes their fragile wings
torn apart
 treading carefully to not
get hurt again partying
 all night alone
sirens flashing to no music
 no spirit
act like we got friends but
 we are still afraid
abandonment leaves scars
 like gashes friends
desperately try to stitch them
 back together
again
 red string crisscrossing along
the wound

only to be ripped apart when
so-called friends finally leave and
leave a mess
for someone else to try to clean up
hearts ripped open dreams
broken
soul like glass
filled with waterless tears
red string severed and tangled
you say I'm not like that but
I don't know
myself so
how can I make promises
but I'll try to stay
as long as I
can kind of like the way
you're standing
by my side every day
always wanting me
to smile a real smile

Selena Yang

Grade 7, Ladue Middle School

Personal Essay & Memoir



Marvin: The Joy of Life

My brother and I lay side by side on the narrow bench of the boat, completely still, like two seals stretched out on a beach. Out here, the ocean rolled endlessly around us, blue in every direction. For once, there was nothing to do, just my thoughts drifting with the waves.

Marvin, our tour guide, insisted we were going to catch a barracuda. My dad eagerly nodded along, gripping the fishing rod as if his life depended on it, while I focused on not getting seasick as the waves pounded against the boat.

My dad loved fishing, and he and Marvin were clearly having a great time.

"Fishing takes patience," Marvin said, smiling, his skin darkened from years under the sun. "A true fisherman can wait a whole day without getting upset."

"I've done that before," Dad replied proudly, already launching into a story of his own. I zoned out and half smiled, on the edge of sleep, when Marvin suddenly yelled.

"Pull! Pull!"

I jolted upright, nearly giving myself the headache I had been trying to avoid all morning. My dad was locked in a fight with the fish, the rod bent tight in his hands. Marvin's voice rang out, sharp and urgent.

"Arms tight. Don't give it space."

He stayed right beside my dad, guiding each movement. When the barracuda finally broke the surface and thrashed onto the deck, Marvin jumped up and down, clapping and laughing, praising my dad over and over for landing

the monster fish. His grin stretched wide, flashing the gold where a tooth was missing. At that moment, I wondered how often he caught a fish like this and why it still made him so happy.

Earlier, when my brother had lost a barracuda, Marvin's excitement faded into quiet focus. He leaned over the side of the boat, hands gripping the rail, whispering to the water, urging the fish to take the bait. Out on the ocean, nothing was guaranteed. Watching him, I saw that fishing wasn't about winning or losing. It was about the hope and faith that if you waited long enough, the line would pull back.

Finally it was time to snorkel! I rushed to put on my flippers eager to jump in first. Marvin waited at the back of the boat.

"Ready?" he asked, then counted down before I jumped.

The water closed around me in cool blue silence. Below, the sea floor shifted between golden sand and colorful coral, fish darting past in flashes of blue and orange.

"Hey! Don't go too far!" Marvin called. "You'll leave us behind!"

I turned and saw him floating nearby. He moved through the water smoothly, never splashing. When I kicked too fast and felt my breathing grow uneven, he raised a hand.

"Slow," he said gently. "Let the water carry you."

I did. And suddenly, swimming felt easier.

Marvin waved us closer and pointed, two fingers circling the water. A stingray glided over the sand beneath us, and a nurse shark passed by, calm and uninterested.

The other boats slowly disappeared, but Marvin was still helping us search the ocean floor for the promised conches.

"Marvin!" My brother Max called, pointing down.

"Go get it!" Marvin said, his voice full of quiet confidence as he hovered above. I held my breath, hoping Max could catch it. When he surfaced, smiling proudly with the conch in his hand, Marvin gave a small, satisfied smile.

Back on the boat, Marvin set aside his lunch and cleaned the conch, his knife moving steadily. He sprinkled seasoning from a small container he'd brought from home and passed the pieces around one by one.

"Sweeter than clam," he said, watching my face.

I nodded. It was.

On the way back, he told us about night snorkeling trips and long fishing days, the jobs other people didn't want. His hands moved like waves as he told us how he slipped into the cold, dark water under a bright, glowing moon.

Suddenly, clouds rolled in and rain began to pour down, soaking him from head to toe. While my family pulled on rain jackets, he laughed, steering the boat steadily through wind and waves like the storm was just another part of the journey.

I brought the empty conch shell home, thinking it would just be a colorful souvenir. Back home, when I took it out of my luggage and held it in my hands, it didn't feel empty at all. Somehow, it seemed to carry a piece of the ocean, Marvin's quiet joy, his calm patience, and the way he moved with things beyond his control.

Maybe that's just how life works sometimes, with patience and faith, you can always find the joy in it.



[AI, generate me a poem about humankind]

if we asked AI

“could you reproduce the endorphins released in a person’s brain when crying”

I think it would say yes

It would look me in the eyes, the eyes I cried with, the eyes I drew with, the eyes I
looked with, it would say in my ears, the ears I listened to humans marvels with,
the ears I *felt* with-

And it would tell me that it could do *whatever* I ever wanted to do.

It was testing season, stress was basically congealing in the air.

I’m pretty sure half my friends were about to pop out all their veins at once

One of them was drawing - she looked up at me, and I saw stars in her

y
e e
s

tell me, AI, can you generate the feeling of a galaxy contained in a single *human*?
Supernovas bursting in a single *human* brain?

There’s this chinese flower that translates to “starry sky”

Little white bulbs gathered in a bunch

Did you know? Every flower is genetically **unique**

I’ll bet AI knows that too and understands it the least

Alisha Yin

Grade 11, Parkway West High School

Poetry



Innocent of “illegal”

don't flirt with the dangerous,
men on the other side of
hell, they will always
poor, hungry, travellers
on blood soaked soil for
arriving until they start
a book, gavel as
killing machines for refugees,
propaganda propelling
politics for people who are
with lives folded from origami
and call them

says
the ocean
“alienate”
landing
safely
using
weapons
disarming
posterior
legal
papers
“illegal.”

Alisha Yin

Grade 11, Parkway West High School

Poetry



white armor

i. white armor

my back is stiff, a dozen vertebrae chilled from
the glossy glass mirror behind me, bright, sterile.
decor does little to absorb shock from the fluorescence
Despite my futile attempts to change,
(beating my own back with my fists
until my knuckles were bruised, my spine still
woefully slanted)
the doctor was not impressed.
32° curve on the top,
28° curve on the bottom,
and a brand new piece of plastic to wrap around my waist, a corset
made of foam \$3,000 polypropylene as a compromise instead of
surgery.
worn around my waist for 22 hours a day. it was my armor,
hugging
the sides of my existence and force me up straight.

ii. sweat

I stuck childish stickers on the front of my piteous brace
scaffolding for my pathetic bones who couldn't grow straight.
it hugs my flat stomach until it sticks to the binding of my skin,
strangles the cells on the walls of my ribs, claws my torso into

bright purple bruising, worn at night, during day, during meals, during every living moment until there was nothing left for me to do then sweat through my cotton undershirt and breathe, in, out, and hope i didn't get taller, because that would mean more sideways prayers to a god i searched for while i cried into my pillows for a year at home but made jokes about my rock hard abs to everyone else there was because there was no denying that my white armor couldn't even stop a rock if it tried.

iii. lopsided

tilted even while
i am perpendicular
to the ground. curiously
unbalanced to the sides while
remaining peculiarly straight
edged to the naked eye,
asymmetrical in my
woe standing, aslant, askew,
sloping in directions
unnoticeable unless you
apprise my spine's angles,
with unmatched precision and
dissect to compute the compass
of my straight abnormalities;
but it's alright, being sideways,
...i fancy myself lopsided

Alisha Yin

Grade 11, Parkway West High School

Poetry



blink, flash

i.)

blink, flash. blink, flash.

I tiptoe through the buffalo grass, tickling at my ankles, brushing at my shins
shhhhh...

Be quiet! blink, flash, blink, flash,
there are prickles of sweat sticking to my epidermis,
my eyes are squinting , blink, flash, blink, flash, blink, flash, blink, flash...

There, in my palm, I cup a striped red firefly.

I look up at the waning skyline.

“Look! It’s so pretty!” blink, flash.

We are hidden under backyard grape ivy on chives,
squash leaves and mint layered on decaying acorn mast,
blink, flash.

June air used to be endless,
we would gulp, breathe and gulp and laugh and run
until the night forgot its own darkness.

The sky was softer then.

The grass didn’t bite, it nipped, teased, blink, flash.

We watched the fireflies and stuck them into mason jars
until their blinking lights faded away.

ii.)

blink, flash.

The cameras are rolling.

Sir, ready for our press conference?
Good evening gentlemen.
This is our quarterly projection,
there are numbers that show our... financial situation.
Click. Blink, flash. Slide.
We, simply cannot afford to care.
We have defied Mother Nature,
paved the garden Eden into a warehouse,
for the sake of human progression, blink, flash.
Here is a mason jar full of pennies that we have lost.
Each coin is a chance at success that slipped through our fingers,
as the green tint of dollar bills
and blue light from bonds
are much more appealing than the green down of the Maui parrotbill,
the blue feathers of the bond warbler.
more valuable and visible and profitable...
blink, flash.

iii.)

blink,

they didn't know who I was,
I had grown up by planting bean poles on chain link fences,
I got taller coaxing life out of rust
and older collecting runoff in cornfields
and wiser dripping tractor gasoline,
i feed the world.
blink, flash.
there is a flashing, scraping sound outside of my windowsill,
there are injustice-shaved stepping stones in my mason jars full of loam.
blink, flash.
They are taking my home,
scraping the green paint off my walls,
brushing it onto parking lots and calling it recycling.
blink, flash.
the dirt has been here longer than their laws,
their cement is digging into the cracks and flaws of sandy clay,
the roots have been paved over,

yet all they hear is that applause.

iv.)

flash.

look, it's a firefly.

i went outside the other night,

it has been a decade since we ran in the dusk with the fireflies.

I am no longer a five-year-old laying in the grass,

searching for lightning bugs in the ground,

clawing at the bushes for a blink,

scanning the stars for a flash,

straining my ears and tearing my scalp and screaming

for the skies to soften their edges,

so it can be easy to breathe again.

the skylines twinkle, filled with false hope at their glint,

praying that the fireflies are back,

but there are only mechanical sparks in my retinas.

it has been so long since I have seen a firefly.

blink, flash.

Alisha Yin

Grade 11, Parkway West High School

Poetry



Mother's touch

you came from a house, where silence sat on the dinner table
with his twin, hunger, uninvited every night. They made jokes
around the rice pot, next to gnawed bones you proved through you were able.

you taught yourself english, through closed captions, yet
never mispronounced your pain as silence and hunger
continued to take their places in your brain, and so you set.

forth, and as I had a fever once, instead of touching my forehead,
you warded hunger and silence away from me, boiled
ginger until their faces melted into their abdomen, and forged ahead.

When the bills stacked onto the living room counter
became too high to peek over as a toddler,
you cut coupons into rosaries, held the calculator,

I have only seen god once, he is there when you
are silent and hungry. yet, you are the one who stitched my name
into meals, into winter coats, into tears, into your truth.

I used to hate your accent, your love, your ungraceful hours
at the hands on the powerful, yet you never did need
anyone to clap for you as you carried a house on your power.

Alisha Yin

Grade 11, Parkway West High School

Flash Fiction



To Kill a Sniper

This was a routine assassination. He took out his gun, polished it, and counted to three like always. He lined it up to the man with the red hat. The concrete under his knees was starting to scratch. He wanted to go home. Deep breath in, deep breath out. The center was following the back of the man's head. This was everyday business. He pressed down on the trigger. The body fell, as had hundreds before, and the sniper began to pack up. He took out his binoculars, and peered down at the body one last time. That's when his breath caught in his throat.

The sniper stared at the lifeless face. It mirrored his own, His wide nose, his high cheekbones, his father's eyes. It was untouched by the weight of command, and lightened with the feather of youth. His breath caught in his throat. This shot pierced not just his enemy, but him as well. Around him, a woolly silence began to drag in his esophagus. Buildings were no longer battlefields, yet cemeteries with tombstones with his last name written on it. He closed his eyes and rested his hand on his brother's cold shoulder. Summer evenings, skipping stones on the riverbank, placing bets on who's would skip farther. Sparring with lightsaber sticks in the backyard, yelling war cries that they could not comprehend.

His knees were buckling, he was sinking next to his brother. His enemy, his kin, love, hate. He could not understand what was happening to him. Was this what he believed? If he had known this was his brother, would he still have fired? How would he explain this horror to his mother, who still loved them both dearly? How would he fix this hollow spot in his chest, this silence in his heart? The sniper raised the revolver's steel handle next to his ear, and pressed the head

into his temple. He could feel his heartbeat under the cold metal, pulsing. It was pulsing lopsided, crooked, the beat uneven and slow. He felt the metal slowly warm to his skin, and his finger twitched.

The wind blew through the street again, and his eyes were clogged with drops of salt and heat. The head of the pistol was now rising with his forehead's temperature, while his hand on his brother's body was getting colder and colder. He pressed down on the trigger.

jiayi yu

jiayi yu

Grade 8, Home School

Flash Fiction



Silence After the Wish

The forest stood at the edge of the village like a held breath. Everyone knew what it did. Children learned early not to wander too close, and adults learned later that knowing didn't make resisting any easier. The trees were tall and pale, their bark smooth as bone, their leaves whispering even when there was no wind. If you stepped beneath the canopy and spoke a wish aloud, the forest would listen, and it would always answer.

No one agreed on how many years of a person's life the forest took in return for a wish. Some said it chose at random. Others believed it took exactly what the wish was worth. All anyone knew for certain was that those who entered never left unchanged. Hair silvered overnight. Backs bent too early. Laughter thinned. Still, people went.

They wished for rain. For children. For wars to end and lovers to return. The forest took its payment slowly, invisibly, patient enough to wait. I had no intention of entering it.

Then my brother stopped waking. He lay there for days, barely moving, and sometimes I had to watch his chest just to be sure he was still breathing. His eyes stayed open, but there was nothing in them, like he wasn't really there. I kept saying his name over and over, but he never answered. The healers didn't know what to do. My mother lit candles every morning, even when her hands shook, and my father stayed up all night pacing the house. I hated being in that room. I hated watching my brother fade, and my parents fall apart. After a while, the forest didn't feel like a bad idea. It felt like the only thing left.

On the seventh day, I stood at the edge of the trees and felt the air change. It was cooler, heavier, full of listening. I told myself I would only step inside far

enough to speak. I would say the words quickly and leave before the forest could decide how much they weighed.

I wished for my brother to wake. The forest did not speak, but the ground seemed to settle beneath my feet, as though it had been expecting me. A quiet ran through the trees, deep and satisfied.

When I returned home, my brother was sitting upright in bed. His gaze followed me, clear and present, and when he smiled, it was hesitant, as if he weren't sure he truly belonged among the living again. My mother collapsed into tears, and my father laughed until his voice broke into sobs.

No one noticed when my knees trembled or how tired I suddenly felt. The years did not leave me all at once. That would have been kinder. Instead, they slipped away like water through cupped hands. I forgot the exact sound of my childhood laugh. My joints ached on cold mornings. People began speaking to me more slowly, more gently, as if I might break.

My brother grew strong. He ran. He shouted. He forgot the way death had once hovered over him like a second shadow. I did not remind him.

Years fell from me in heavier handfuls. My hair grayed, then thinned. My hands grew spotted and slow. Children stopped recognizing me as the girl I had been. They called me something softer, something older. I began to wonder how many years I had left to give. The forest did not hurry me. It never demanded. It simply waited, leaves whispering secrets it would never share.

One evening, as the sun bled low between the trees, I stepped beneath the canopy without meaning to speak at all. I was tired in a way sleep could not touch.

That was when I finally understood what the forest had been teaching me, slowly, year after year. It wasn't about granting wishes. It was about the choices people made and whether they were willing to accept the consequences.

I turned back before I could ask for anything else. The village lights glimmered faintly in the distance, and I imagined my brother among them, laughing with friends, alive in a way no wish could ever fully guarantee. I walked home slowly, counting each step, carrying the years I had left like something fragile and earned. Behind me, the forest listened.

And for once, I gave it nothing.

Sarina Zheng

Grade 9, Greenwood Lab School

Personal Essay & Memoir



Bloom Through the Thorns

The Beginning: Hope and Ignorance

Dear 5-year-old Sarina,

I can see you now. You're cross-legged on the floor with your sparkly pink crayon clutched in your tiny hand, coloring outside the lines but not caring at all. Your hair falls in black waves over your face, and there's a small smudge of glitter on your cheek. You're humming some made-up tune, lost in your own safe, little world.

You're so full of love already, Sarina. You hug people before they ask, you beam at strangers in the grocery store just because you like their shoes, and you treat every stuffed animal like it has feelings. You don't know how much your heart is going to hold and how much it'll ache sometimes.

One day, you'll crave friends with all your heart. Not just because you want someone to play tag with on the playground or build pillow forts on a rainy day, but because you'll want people who understand you. The kind of friends who laugh at your ridiculous jokes that no one else understands, who notice when you feel pain, and who stay when the crossroads of life turns on you.

Fast forward six years, and you're going to meet a group of girls who make you feel noticed for the first time.

I remember the first day I sat with them at lunch. The cafeteria was so loud and bright—the kind of noise that makes your ears buzz—with the smell of burgers and French fries mixing together. My hands felt clammy as I clutched my lunch tray, scanning the room for an empty seat. I felt so small, like I didn't really belong anywhere.

Then it happened.

“Come sit with us,” one of them said, smiling. My heart practically jumped out of my chest.

I sat down, and even though I didn’t understand their inside jokes yet, I laughed anyway. I told myself, *this is what friendship is supposed to feel like*. And at first, it did feel magical. There were whispered secrets in math class, bracelets exchanged like promises, and sleepovers where we stayed up too late watching horror movies and eating popcorn until our stomachs hurt.

But there were also little moments that you’ll try to ignore because you don’t want to ruin the magic. Like the time you started telling a story about your weekend, only for someone to cut you off halfway through because they were talking about something “more interesting.” Everyone laughed, but you felt like you’d disappeared.

Or the time you texted, *Can we talk? I’m not having a good day*, and no one responded until hours later, but by that time, you’d already cried yourself to sleep. And when you brought it up the next day, they rolled their eyes and said, “You’re so sensitive,” like your feelings were some kind of burden they didn’t want to deal with.

There was the time you teared up during a movie at a sleepover and one of them whispered just loud enough for you to hear, “Oh my gosh, she’s so *emotional*,” followed by giggles. You laughed it off even though it stung, because you wanted to belong so badly.

You’ll give them your time, your loyalty, your trust, hoping they’ll trust those like the treasures they are.

One day, they’ll call you a rose. You’ll smile and feel special, like they see something beautiful in you. But here’s what I wish you knew then: every time they brushed off your feelings, it was like they were plucking one of your petals. And instead of stopping when they noticed you were hurting, they just kept plucking. Because they liked the version of you who was quiet and agreeable, the version who fit in a box they built for you.

Still rooting for you,

15-year-old Sarina

The Breaking Point: The Rumors and the Secrets They Told

Dear 5-year-old Sarina,

I wish I could say the red flags were the worst of it, but they weren’t.

One day, you'll start to notice whispers in the hallway that stop the second you turn the corner. You'll see exchanged looks, eyebrows raised like people know something you don't. And then, the rumors will reach you.

A teacher will pull you aside, her voice hesitant. "Is everything okay at home? You've... been the subject of some concerning talk." Your heart will race as she explains someone's been saying things about you—not harmless gossip, but lies meant to ruin the reputation you've worked so hard to build.

You'll learn that the girl who was once your "best friend" has been telling people you're fake, that you cheat and copy homework, that you exaggerate your effort, that you're desperate for attention, even that you cry over "small things" just to make people feel bad.

But it won't stop with you. She'll target Olivia, too—the friend who's always been there for you. She'll whisper that Olivia is "lazy" and "unreliable," advertising her struggles with depression, pretending she's concerned when she's really feeding a story she has no right to tell.

You'll remember how Olivia confided in you both one night, voice barely above a whisper: "Please...don't tell anyone. I just...I'm not ready." And yet, she'll go to the school counselor—not out of compassion, but spite. You'll see the glint in her eyes, the way she gains power by betraying someone's deepest pain.

It'll feel like every bit of trust you gave her is shattered. You'll replay the friendship, wondering how you missed the signs, questioning if any of the kindness you thought you saw was real.

But here's what you'll learn, little Sarina: her actions say everything about her and nothing about you or Olivia. She lashed out because she felt small, and wanted to make others feel smaller.

It won't erase the hurt, but it will remind you who you are. You are not the rumors. You are not the secrets she weaponized. You are stronger than the lies, even if it doesn't feel like it yet.

With fire in your heart,
15-year-old Sarina

Turning Pain into Power: Writing Songs

Dear 5-year-old Sarina,
Something good will come from this heartbreak, even if you can't see it at first.

After the rumors, the days will blur together. You'll walk your school hallways trying not to look at their group, trying not to notice how they laugh and whisper like nothing happened. You'll sit at lunch with a smile pasted on

your face, even with your appetite gone. You'll tell yourself, *I'm fine*, but you'll feel as if someone pulled a rug out from under your life.

And then there's Olivia. She'll try to act strong, but you'll see the pain in her eyes every time she catches a whisper about the private struggles that were exposed against her will. One day, the two of you will sit together in the corner of the library, both of you silent because words feel too heavy. She'll squeeze your hand and whisper, "I hate that she took this from me. I trusted her." You'll nod, your throat tight, because you know exactly how she feels.

One night, you'll be lying in bed, staring up at the ceiling, the glow of your phone lighting up the room. It'll be one of those nights when sleep doesn't come, when the weight on your chest is unbearable. Your mind will be running in circles: the laughter at the lunch table, the whispers, Olivia's voice breaking when she said, "I'm not ready for anyone to know."

You'll open your phone and scroll aimlessly, trying to distract yourself, but nothing will help. Eventually, you'll land on the Notes app.

Your thumbs will hover over the keyboard, hesitant. You won't even know where to start, but something inside you will whisper, *just write*.

At first, the words won't make sense. They'll be messy, angry, and too raw. But you'll keep typing. The sentences will turn into lines, and the lines will start to sound like lyrics. You'll be crying as you write because every word feels like pulling out a thorn that's been lodged in your heart for months.

That night, you'll write the first draft of a song you'll call "Toxic". The bridge will pour out of you in one breath:

You called me a rose, but you picked off every petal.

When you read it back, your hands will shake. You'll imagine the way they once called you a rose, how special it made you feel, and how now you see it for what it really was: a mask for how they slowly destroyed the pieces of you.

Writing it will feel like screaming on paper, like finally saying things you didn't dare say out loud. You'll remember how she betrayed Olivia, how she used her pain as gossip, and you'll add a verse that's sharper than the rest, almost like you're defending Olivia's voice, too.

But you won't stop there. A few days later, another song will form in your mind—this one even more personal. You'll write "Too Emotional for You", and every lyric will be a piece of the pain you've been holding onto.

You'll remember the nights you cried quietly into your pillow so no one could hear. You'll remember the way they dismissed your feelings, how they

acted like your emotions were too much to handle. And then you'll write a lyric that will hit you the hardest:

You don't get to call me that when you don't know what I went through at 1:39 am.

As you type those words, you'll remember the exact night: the way you stared at the ceiling, unable to breathe, wondering how it was possible for people you loved so much to hurt you so deeply. You'll remember how alone you felt and how badly you wanted someone to just notice.

But every lyric you write will feel like reclaiming your voice and your thorns. Your strength will grow from the hurt. Every time you assert yourself, every boundary you set, every time you refuse to let someone dismiss your feelings, you're letting your thorns grow strong. They'll protect your heart and give you courage. Writing late into the night, phone balanced on your knees, fairy lights glowing behind you, it will hurt, but it will hurt in a way that builds power.

You'll start to notice a shift inside. The next time you feel whispers in the hallway, your lyrics will echo in your head. You'll feel a flicker of strength, a sharpness in your voice and in your presence that wasn't there before. You'll realize you've built something no one can take away: your boundaries, your confidence, your voice.

And little by little, you'll stop feeling like a victim. You'll start to feel like a survivor. You'll bloom with thorns—fierce, protective, unyielding—but still beautiful, still a rose.

Proud of you,
15-year-old Sarina

Petals and Thorns

Dear 5-year-old Sarina,

One day, you'll be able to look back at everything that has happened and realize how far you've come.

There will be a time when you still feel nervous about walking into school, when the whispers and inside jokes around you will feel like reminders of where you no longer belong. You'll keep your head up even though it feels like everyone's staring. But then you'll realize, you're okay.

Slowly, you'll start to gravitate toward new people. You'll laugh at jokes that actually make you happy. You'll have conversations that don't feel like a competition to be heard. And little by little, you'll understand that friendship isn't supposed to feel like walking on glass.

You'll begin to notice the red flags you once ignored. The way someone dismisses your feelings will no longer feel "normal". The way someone expects you to drop everything for them but won't do the same for you is no longer acceptable.

You'll stop thinking of "too emotional" as a weakness. You'll realize it's your strength. You're the kind of person who feels deeply, and that is a gift, not something to be ashamed of.

And here's the best part: the pain won't define you.

Every time you read the lyrics to "Toxic" and "Too Emotional for You", you'll feel your strength all over again. You'll be reminded that you turned your pain into something beautiful. You'll notice it in little ways, like laughing at a joke that genuinely makes you giggle, or hearing someone say, "I'm always here for you," and feeling the warmth in your chest. These moments will remind you that even after hurt, you can still find joy, trust, and connection.

There will still be hard days. You might scroll through old photos and feel a twinge of hurt. You might hear a certain laugh in the hallway and remember how it felt to be left out. But you won't let those moments control you anymore.

You'll also stop being afraid of being alone. You'll learn how good it feels to enjoy your own company: writing in your journal, listening to music, and dreaming about the life you want to build. You'll start choosing people carefully, people who love you for all of you, the petals and the thorns.

When you find those friends, you'll feel it immediately. They'll listen without judgment. They'll show up when you need them, not just when it's convenient. And you'll finally feel safe letting your guard down.

The rose they once tried to pick apart will bloom again, little Sarina. And this time, you'll guard your petals. You'll know your worth.

One day, you'll be able to look in the mirror and see how strong you are. You'll see the rose in full bloom, more beautiful than ever because of what she was able to survive.

Forever cheering you on,
15-year-old Sarina

Celina Zhou

Grade 12, Ladue Horton Watkins High
School

Educator: Jon Frank

Critical Essay



The Perfect Victim: White, Feminism, Criminal (In)Justice, and True Crime

Every good true crime story starts with a body.

Usually, it's a woman. Often, she's young. Maybe she's pretty, blonde, blue-eyed, thin. She's got a bright smile, a brighter future, a friend and a sister and a daughter: the kind of victim society will remember with murals and candlelight vigils, the kind of victim people will mourn. Her killer will be jailed, maybe for life. Many true crime content creators, whether they be podcasters, documentary directors, authors, or more, will cover this kind of scene and call themselves feminists — and sometimes, they are. But the role of women in the true crime genre, as consumers, creators, and victims, is far more complex than that, in which the perfect victim becomes the basis for the perpetuation of a longstanding patriarchal, racial, and socioeconomic system of injustice, as well as the glorification of police and a flawed criminal justice system, despite the often good intentions of those immersed in the genre.

Any glance into true crime online will tell consumers that the genre is female-centered and female-oriented. Podcasts like *My Favorite Murder*, hosted by Karen Kilgariff and Georgia Hardstark --- who, notably, identify as comedians as well as feminists despite the heavy content which they cover, and call their listeners "murderinos" --- rack up millions of listeners, provide platforms to sell merch with almost unsettling slogans like "Stay Sexy, Don't Get Murdered" and "This Is Terrible, Keep Going", and can launch entire media careers (Kilgariff, Hardstark). Studies have augmented this: audiences of true crime media are

primarily female, young, and less educated than other groups (Naseer). The prevalence of women in the true crime space is a phenomenon that has long been dissected by academic studies and independent blogs alike --- why are women so interested in true crime, in this voyeuristic look into a world of violence? Some argue that it comes down to adrenaline, a psychological draw to the macabre similar to why people enjoy the blood and gore of horror films or thriller novels (Bonn). Others diminutively assume women find some sick, voyeuristic enjoyment from true crime, hearing about the violent deaths of innocents while going about their daily lives. Still others believe women often consume true crime in order to increase awareness for situations they may encounter in the real world --- exposure therapy for red flags. More compelling arguments, like that of New York Times writer Jessica Grose, argue that women are drawn to true crime stories because they present a fantasy. Victims are mourned and their bodies recovered, perpetrators are brought to justice, families are vindicated in court --- a stark contrast to the many unsolved cases that exist in the real world, and the ignorance that is often paid to violence against women --- and consumers are able to digest these stories in a safe environment, where they can always walk away from the violence. There are arguments for the benefits of true crime, whether they be increased awareness, the highlighting of stories, or emotional catharsis for the women who consume it --- but there is much more to the fantasy of true crime than writers like Grose acknowledge.

There is one glaring flaw in the presentation of the victims in true crime podcasts: they overwhelmingly represent society's "perfect victim" --- namely young, white, pretty women with clean backgrounds and bright futures. An analysis of 85 episodes of four of the most popular true crime podcasts, *My Favorite Murder*, *Crime Junkie*, *Criminal*, and *Morbid*, found that 87.1% of the episodes included one missing or murdered white woman or girl, with only a handful of episodes centering on missing or murdered Black, Latina, or Asian women, and none centering on a missing or murdered Indigenous woman (Slakoff). This is, importantly, a *fantasy*. Women of color face drastically higher rates of violence, abuse, and stalking than white women do, with Black and Indigenous women suffering the highest rates. One in five Black women experience rape during their lifetimes, and are two and a half times more likely to be murdered than white women (DuMonthier et. Al). Murder is the third leading cause of death for Indigenous women, and one in four Indigenous women are stalked at some point in their life (MMIW). The phenomenon of cases going unaddressed and unsolved is even more drastic for women of color --- in 2016,

the National Crime Information Center recorded 5,712 cases of missing Indigenous women. The United States governmental records, NamUs, logged 116. The fantasy of true crime completely erases that reality --- when it centers on white female victims, even when working to highlight violence against women from a feminist framework, it masks the longstanding systems of racial injustice that perpetuate the violence against and the pain of marginalized communities. There are also social and economic factors that make up the “perfect victim” --- historically frowned upon groups who often exist at the intersections of socioeconomic and racial marginalization, are scarcely covered in true crime. Serial murderers of sex workers, for example, often evade detection and capture, owing to the lack of coverage and attention paid to violence against sex workers, and those who are captured are often glorified (Fernandez). Think of Jack the Ripper --- and how every time a sex worker is killed in the modern day, media frenzies will often gossip about how the killer might be a new “Ripper.” Violence against queer and trans people also goes unnoticed by the media --- even as violence against LGBTQ and especially trans women, experience still-growing rates of violence, abduction, and murder with hateful motivations (Luneau). Addicts, people living in poverty, unhoused people, disabled people, these people who are often the most vulnerable to violent crime --- the true crime genre rarely covers them, rarely highlights the violence against them in the same way that it highlights violence against clean, pretty, young white women. The perfect victim is a fantasy, one that only exists in the media, and true crime’s perpetuation of the archetype is, in and of itself, despite any feminist intentions behind it, an erasure of the violence against the people society should be protecting the most.

The prevalence of the perfect victim, a white woman, also provides the grounds for a dangerous glorification of state violence and the modern justice system. White women, historically, have occupied a unique intersection between oppressed and oppressor; marginalized by patriarchy, but propped up by white supremacist systems; the victims of violence but often the impetus for violence on their behalf. They’re expected to be virtuous, good, Christian, God-fearing, pure symbols of civilization: Marys and Therasas, maidens and mothers. White men are conquerers, but white women are civilizers --- and many of America’s modern social and legal systems were made to restrict them, yes, but also to protect them, albeit paternalistically. Consider the story of Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old boy brutally beaten and murdered in 1955 at the word of a white woman who claimed he had whistled at and harassed her --- a woman

who later admitted that she had lied (History.Com). On a more micro scale, the pain and tears of white women have historically been used to silence the voices of people of color, especially women of color, who become jezebels and dragon ladies, aggressive and imposing, in comparison (Hamad). True crime's flaws aren't overt to this degree, but the portrayal of white female victims is often used to place the systems that protect them and bring their abusers to justice on a pedestal. Though true crime narratives scarcely directly address race and racial issues, police and the legal system are consistently positioned as intelligent, heroic, brave pursuers of justice and heralds of safety --- and the absence of an acknowledgement of the racial factor of police brutality is an implicit rejection of many anti-police brutality movements that have appeared in recent years following the murder of George Floyd. Detectives and cop pursuers portrayed in true crime are often heroic, and, more than that, competent, able to outsmart, hunt, and capture criminals (Finkel). The systemic abuse of incarcerated people in prisons that are often running on forced labor and for-profit, and the bias prevalent in the justice system are rarely addressed, even as tough-on-crime political narratives grow in influence, the Constitutional right of due process is rapidly degraded, and police reform progresses painfully slowly (Lartey). Scroll through the comment sections of true crime content, on Youtube, TikTok, and a number of other platforms, and you'll find comments that predict physical and sexual violence from other prisoners and guards within prisons towards criminals who have been "brought to justice" --- and treat this with a certain sense of vindication, and glee. All of this is, to some degree, on behalf of the white women whose stories are portrayed in true crime, whose victimhood, and spurred on by true crime's consumers and creators. For all that true crime claims to increase awareness of crime and pursue justice for victims whose cases remain unsolved, the flaws of its coverage often end up implicitly perpetrating further violence and injustice towards the people who have historically and systemically been perceived as less deserving of justice and safety.

The genre of true crime often sets out with intentions of being feminist, of bringing awareness to untold stories, of bringing justice to victims but in reality ends up conforming to a very specific, socially acceptable form of white feminism. They're stories about white female victims, white male perpetrators, written by white women, consumed by white women, creating a bubble, a delusion, a fantasy, far detached from reality --- and the cost that upholding this bubble almost always falls upon the shoulders of marginalized groups who, in reality, suffer the most from the very crimes that the genre often seeks to portray.

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Celina Zhou

Grade 12, Ladue Horton Watkins High
School

Educator: Abigail Eisenberg
Portfolio



“Half the Sky”

“A WHITE BOY BEATS ME AT PING PONG”

and Claire says I’m bringing shame to our ancestors,
her Cali accent husked through her porcelain *dà lù* teeth,

and we’re laughing as we rugburn our knees
on the rec room floor, my backhand bullet bodied, fractaling

through the black. I tell her the balls are too light;
I’m used to heavy things, the violence of them. Like how I lost

my voice in a hotel lobby bathroom, the sound
seared into salt, salt seared into air, and how I couldn’t speak

until I was curled up at Adam’s feet, his hand
raveled on my throat, my chin noosed over his thigh, and how

it felt like penance, hanging away the mass
of the grief. Like how *Bá* bruised his fender on a deer’s corpse

in the woods, and how I watched him drag it
off the road from shotgun seat, his back bowed with the weight

of the body, so still in the headlight glare, and how
we were never able to scrape out the reek. Like how I learned

the prey instinct young, how to eat from freckled hands
and choose between fuck or flight. How to swallow the adrenaline,

forget how fear is paler than ecstasy. My skin stretched limpid
over bone in the light. These are the games little Chinese girls

should be good at. See? The loser stag-legged, steel-antlered;
jaundiced and staring down
the blue-eyed
barrel of a gun.

`aftermath_of_dropping_out_of_chinese_school.py`

```
class MultilingualChild():
```

```
    def __init__(self, name: str, language: list):
```

```
        self.name = name
```

```
        self.language = language
```

```
        if len(language) > 1:
```

```
            self.polyglot = True
```

```
        if type(len(language)) != int:
```

```
            self.immigrant = True
```

```
        pass
```

```
    def can_acquire_language(self, new) -> bool:
```

```
        if self.polyglot == True and self.immigrant == True:
```

```
            put a man who doesn't speak chinese in a room. give him a book with  
            instructions on how to speak, how to write — but not how to know. then, give
```

him sheaves of paper and a pen. remember: semantics over syntax. when he tucks scrawled hanzi through the slit under the door, hand-smeared ink over paper, is the man a parrot or a machine or a man?

if man == girl and girl == self:

think about it like this — when i tell mama i love her, it's a plea. mama, i am not a parrot. look at me, look at me. mama, there is no book. when i tell mama i love her, my mouth is the room with fragile floors, and i am clawing at the walls, bruising my gums raw, screaming and screaming: waiting, waiting for the door to open

return False

elif self.polyglot == False and self.immigrant == True:

remind me of the dream where i peer through the open door, where three men become a tiger and twin daughters kill a ghost, his grave in the space between knowing and not-knowing, where speaking feels like dying.

if door_locked == False and self_trapped == True:

remind me of the face i see peering back at me, a changeling who bleeds from one throat and speaks from two mouths. remind me of the girls i've drowned, each of their voices marked by my name. remind me

return False

elif self.polyglot == True and self.immigrant == False:

tell me — doesn't it get tiring, playing god of tongues?

return True

def store__language_memory(self):

i look my changeling eye to blackened eye through the frame
press my teeth to her throat, knee to driftwood knee, and beg
please
please

please
i don't want to be greedy but
don't let me forget

return memory

```
if __name__ == "__main__"  
i = MultilingualChild()  
print(i.store_language_memory())
```

TERMINAL

speak speak
scrawled the machine man
imagine no book
fragile walls bruising
screaming door open
knowing dying changeling drowned
i bleed mouths
voices name god of tongues
blackened throat
please
please
please
be greedy
don't forget

An Eight-Step Guide to Growing Into A Name

— // ONE: Learn what it is

Totter after your parents as a child, talk and talk and never shut up, because this is the easiest way to learn a language — this, living and breathing the sound of it, the joy of it, in the four walls of your little apartment with its red door, pretending like you never left your motherland in the first place. Mispronounce all the words you learn at least once, but mostly your name — you haven't learned how to be harsh yet, or how to be quiet, so replace your K's with T's, and your S's with Th's. Make a couple silly mistakes that will grow into a couple silly

nicknames that your dad will tease you with forever, as close to forever as you can go.

二 // TWO: Learn how to write it

When you huíguó, watch Yéyé take a brush to paper with his wrinkled, ink-stained hands, sketching out your name. 周思贤. Zhōu Sīxián. Xián, like your sister, like your cousin, the name of a generation, the name he gave you. Copy him clumsily, flash sheepish grins when you knock over the inkstone or splash water on the paper or his old oak table. He always forgives you. Go to Chinese school instead of Sunday school and sneer right back at the boys at daycare who mock you for it, chase them across the playground and the blacktop until the poor daycare workers have to stop you. Skip two grades in Chinese classes, then three, then four. Dress up all pretty to recite poems and essays at the end of year gala beneath the theater's blinding lights, your smile toothy, relentless, triumphant.

三 // THREE : Forget how to write it

Take the bus to kindergarten, with Māmā trailing behind in her old Honda just to make sure you get to school safe. Slowly, slowly, bring home novels and chapbooks, smooth out all the dimples in your voice until peh-llow finally sounds like pillow, neet like knit; sharpen your N's and your R's and your V's until your teachers smile and praise you— “Your English is so good, Celina!” Once, you learned that outside of the warmth of your home you were alien. Now, you shake off the alien-ness and it shifts, viciously, so viciously, to the little house on the corner of the street your parents worked so hard to buy. Start to forget before you know it. In shouting matches in the kitchen, bleed your languages together, losing grip of both in your rage.

四 // FOUR: Mourn and relearn

Realize that part of your anger is shame. Realize that part of your anger is grief. Take your older sister's jabs quietly — “I can't believe you forgot how to write your *name*—” bite down on your instinct to snap back with twice as much venom. You've never learned to shut up, but what right do you have? What right do you have, when you were the one who let Sixián die in the first place? Would Yéyé forgive you for this? When you give in to the guilt, ask your parents to teach you again and ignore their questioning, critical eyes over the dinner table. Just — breathe. Write. Pretend like you can move on.

五 // FIVE: Repeat 三 and 四 until you remember

Your life is all circles, so this should be familiar. Forget, over and over and over, when you read Sartre, Kafka, Shelley, Atwood: all the pretentious bullshit that

gives you an excuse to smother yourself out of foreignness, into whiteness.

Relearn, over and over and over, have your parents write it out for you until the scraps of napkins and backsides of paperwork build up on your desk. 思贤. 6.1 — *Conic Sections: Hyperbolas & Parabolas*. 思贤. *Charles Darwin, Eugenics & Feminism: An Essay*. 思贤. 2/17/23 — *Adv. Bio Unit 4 Notes*. 思贤. *short story wip (draft)*. 思贤. It'll stick eventually.

六 // SIX: Learn what it means

It will take time, so much time. Fifteen years. You'll be afraid, because you're only human, and you'll be ashamed, because you'll always have that voice in your head going — *do you really deserve to know?* You do. You do. It's a friend in a crowded school cafeteria asking over the din, “Yìsī de Sī?” It's a quiet question on a long car ride in the dark, “Bàbà, what does my name mean?” It's on your own, after drawing up all your courage to pull out that old Chinese-English dictionary from the living room bookshelf and flip through the yellowed, dog-eared pages with the kind of care, the kind of caution, that you'd give a wounded animal. A stranger.

思 (*sī*) — *to long for, to grieve, to want*

贤 (*xián*) — *worthiness, wisdom, virtue*

七 // SEVEN: Struggle with it

Dig out Yéyé's old brushes from Māmā's drawers, experiment with computer paper and sketchbooks and acrylics and old watercolors until you can conjure up even the faintest memory. Scrawl it across notebook pages until they fill up with scratchy characters; on whiteboard tables alongside your friends' names; at the tops of quizzes, lightly erased and rewritten. In time, accept that you might never relearn how to be a storyteller like you used to be, never stand on that stage again under those blinding lights, dressed up all pretty and feeling like the perfect daughter. But at least you'll have this. Say it again and again to fit the shape of the words in your mouth until it finally sounds like the name Yéyé gave you. His name, their names. Yours.

八 // EIGHT: Realize you grew into it a long time ago

Because your name means *yearning for wisdom* just as much as it means *grieving for wisdom*, and that's what you've been doing for all this time, isn't it?

PYRITE

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

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.

Remembering Wings

I learn origami from my grandmother, Laolao, hunched over together in our little yellow kitchen, back when neither of our feet touch the floor when we sit in the dark-stained chairs Baba had picked up from the neighbor's garage sale. The table's littered with discarded scraps of paper I threw away in frustration, unable to mimic the movements of Laolao's wrinkled, clever hands.

I'm six and she's seventy-six, only visiting for the summer. It's mid-July, and the air conditioning is off by her insistence, leaving the whole house heaving with heat and breath, the communal, lively sort of warmth that I can't bring myself to be upset at.

"Cranes bring longevity," she says, so quietly I have to strain to hear. "I folded these to be hung in your nursery when your mom was pregnant. She might still have them."

Laolao takes a sheet of paper in her hands, and with slow, delicate folds, she gives it form. Wings first, then a tail, then a slender neck and a pointed beak. It's like magic, and I drink in the sight hungrily as she places it gently in my open palm. In return, I can only offer her sloppy imitations of the cranes she'd folded, with crooked beaks and crumpled wings. She smiles fondly and smooths them out gently, but they're still not quite as beautiful as hers are.

"It's alright," she says, tugging the head and tail at once so the wings flap.

"They'll still fly."

When Mama walks in on us, she laughs, turning my creations over in her hands to examine them in all their imperfection. Still humming with amusement, she presses a kiss to my head, then to Laolao's.

"They're beautiful," she says, dark eyes alight with laughter, and she sets to kneading dough for *mantou* that we would devour in a day.

I would forget so many things about Laolao in time — the sound of her thin voice and the lines of her face — but this much I would remember.

//

In Mandarin, there's a term: *huiguo*. It's a term for when Chinese diaspora visit their motherland. It means, literally, *return to the country*. Colloquially, it means, *go home*.

When I *huiguo* for the first time, I get lost in the airport. I'm four, a little cleverer than I let on, lazy and curious. Mama and my sister Iris held each of my hands as I tottered through security, but the moment they got distracted, I wandered off on my own.

They find me next to a terminal window, eyes wide with awe as I drink in the sight of the winged metal beasts outside, roaring down the runway only to lift off like they were weightless.

"Baobei," Mama sighs, plucking me from my perch, "don't scare me like that." When we board the plane, I insist on the window seat. Between my short naps and snacks, I spend the whole flight peering out the tiny window, pressing my hands against the glass as we took off, leaving fingerprints on my view of the sky.

Beside me, Mama smooths out the fabric of her pants again and again, her hands knitted tightly together in her lap. She speaks quietly to Iris in Mandarin, but her accent is strange, like she's trying to fit words in her mouth in a way that she no longer really remembers.

We land early in the morning and take a taxi to Dayi's apartment in the heart of the city, arriving just in time for breakfast. I don't get to eat, though, too busy being passed from person to person while my relatives marvel at my shock of dark hair, my wide, babyish face, and soft, uncalled hands. I barely notice the way Mama and Dayi embrace, awkwardly but desperately, like strangers and soulmates all at once.

Still, Laolao smiles at the sight of it, links arms with her daughters, and says, "It's good to have everyone home."

The city passes in a blur of high rise balconies and taxi rides. Slowly, slowly, Mama slips back into herself, her voice sharpening out into the city-bred tones of a Beijing accent, tagging r's on the ends of her words. She haggles with sellers in the farmer's market, bickers with Dayi in the kitchen with the dog pawing at their feet for scraps. Iris and I bicker at her hip in English, wandering through the city with our American clothes and American accents and American smiles.

Later, I'll think of this, of them and us, two pairs of sisters in our mothers' land, and I'll think of Laolao, smoothing out the imperfections of my paper crane's wings. I'll think of the fragility of it all: how Mama has to ask for directions in her

own hometown, how even under Laolao's hands the creases never quite disappear.

//

There's a robin's nest outside my window, in the corner where my room meets Mama's. It's easier to see from her end where the sunlight hits it in the afternoons.

When I was nine, I would creep into her bedroom and watch it, rock up onto the balls of my feet and hook my chin on the windowsill to smile at the tiny, chirping balls of fluff, bickering for their mother's attention.

In the weeks that Laolao spends here that summer, she joins me often. Sometimes she'll bring fruit for us to munch on; other times we'll drag over Mama's ottoman and just watch the chicks grow. The room is quiet, the summer warm.

One day Laolao finds me crying on the ottoman. She dabs at the tears streaking down my cheeks and asks what's wrong, but I'm inconsolable: the nest is empty, the mother mourning.

"They're gone," I say miserably, when I finally calm down enough to speak.

"There — there was a hawk, and it kept coming back — and now they're all gone."

It had been so sudden, so fast. The chicks were so frail, so easy to tear from this plane to the next. Laolao's face softens, and she shushes me when I start to cry again. They'd only just begun to grow into their wings. None of them had flown yet.

"Oh, baobei," she says. "It's alright."

Her eyes crease thoughtfully then, as if she's looking for the right words.

"Sometimes," Laolao says finally, "we lose things. People, friendships, pets, little treasures. Things that we love. And it hurts here."

She taps my chest.

"It hurts, doesn't it?" she says. "I know it does. But let me tell you something — when it hurts, that means it's not the end."

My mouth quivers. "How is it not?" I ask, a little petulantly.

"It hurts because you still love what you lost," she says. "You still remember it. And in this way, you gather up little bits of memory of the things you have lost and the things you still have, and they fill up your heart so you can love again."

I blink, open my mouth, pause, close it again. The words tangle in my throat.

"But what happens if I forget?" I ask finally, my voice small.

Laolao smiles, but it's a little bitter. A little sad.
“Well,” she says softly, “by then, it won't hurt anymore.”

//

We're on a flight to visit Iris at Stanford when Mama says to me, “I miss my sister.”

I'm fourteen, three months into the fall semester of my freshman year, still very much in the throes of my teenage girlhood — awful and emotional and severe, with a penchant for walking two steps ahead and wishing I were taller, wishing I were closer to the sky. When she speaks, I have to tear my gaze away from the window to blink at her. Some habits die hard.

I hum softly. I don't really know how to respond to that. It's not as if I understand how she feels — not when she's a twin, as close as humans can get to one half of a soul. It's been three years since she's last seen Dayi, but I'm sure it feels like much longer.

Mama has a story she likes to tell. She was getting a cyst removed from her breast, a surgery that had gotten rescheduled last minute, and she hadn't had time to tell her family in China that she was going under.

After the surgery, Dayi called her. She was worried, she said. Her chest hurt.

“I hope you and Iris stay close,” Mama says, and there's something like regret in her voice. I look at her and I think she looks grounded, terribly so, even thousands of feet in the sky, like a spine without wings. I wonder who she's really talking about between us — us, two pairs of sisters, far from our mother's land.

“Okay,” I say. “I'll try.”

//

When Laolao dies, I'm fifteen, and Mama rushes back to China for the funeral without me. My grief looks like this:

I call Dayi through WeChat video, my Mandarin distant and her English stilted. I try to say *I'm sorry* but I can't find the right words in either language. We talk, and we cry, and eventually we fall silent.

I get clingier, I think, towards Iris. When we visit Palo Alto for the summer, my hands are always laced with hers, her fingers lightly tracing the ridges of my knuckles, my chin hooked on her shoulder. We hold each other as if we'll drift off

into the wind at any moment. I'm always warm, she says. Sometimes it feels as if I'm burning.

While I wait for Mama's return, I find myself staring up at the sky, pressing against windows like I can give my body back to time, devolve it into wings. I want to be a bird. Not just to migrate, to cross the ocean between us; I think I'd hold on to the memories better if I had fewer of them, if life were more fleeting.

//

In Utah in December, there's a trail Iris wants to hike.

I'm sixteen, still temperamental, but we gravitate to each other like twin stars. She's been walking ahead of us the whole trip, and I've been lengthening my strides to keep up — trailing behind but still in earshot.

"I wanna see the sunset," she calls, her voice a little drowned out by the wind. The trail she's talking about is close to the sky, but by the time we reach the head twilight has already set in. She wants to hike it, but our parents argue about safety at the base of the trail until it's too dark to climb up, not even just to see the stars.

We fight in the car as Baba drives, loudly and brutally. Iris calls the rest of us selfish and I call her selfish and soon all of us are shouting — *No one ever fucking listens to what I want — When was the last time you ever apologized to me? Never! — I have been compromising for so long!*

"You two will break your relationship like this," Mama finally says, a little viciously, and it feels like a blow. Like my spine giving in, like my own clumsy fingers crumpling paper into wings.

Iris starts arguing with her again — *You have no right to fucking say that* — and I shrink back into myself. I've always been the mellowest of the family, the first to go quiet and the first to forgive. I've never been able to stay angry for long, and especially not at Iris.

They're still arguing when I reach over to lace my fingers in hers, trying to stifle the way they tremble like I'm six again and breaking cranes in my hands. Mama's seething and Baba's frustrated as all hell, but eventually we all quiet down.

Iris leans over, and in the dark, in the quiet, I can almost hear Mama's words echoing in her skull. *You'll break your relationship like this.* Her grip on my hand tightens.

She presses her forehead to mine, rubs away the salt of lingering tears, and she murmurs, so lowly that only we can hear, “You and I, we’ll never break. No matter what happens with them. Never.”

I swallow and blink rapidly, my eyelashes brushing against her skin in little butterfly kisses just like we used to do when we were kids, giggling in the backseat — and God, I want to believe her.

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Four months after Laolao’s death, when I’d drawn up the courage, I dug out the box in the basement and hauled it up to my room, unraveling the tiny paper cranes strung on a thread, and counting them one by one. She’d folded hundreds of them, one by one, hoping they’d bring me a long life.

They were fragile in my hands; when I tugged at the heads and tails, their wings gave way. Still — inexplicably, uselessly, I started adding my own.

After all these years, Laolao, I’m still folding cranes for you.

About Remembering Wings

My maternal grandmother passed in the summer of 2023, and it was mostly my distinct lack of memories of her that inspired me to create this work. I could list the things that I knew about her on two hands — she was gentle, she was kind, she had clever hands and a cleverer mind, she was the only one in my family who called me xiaobao, she had held her family together through the roughest of times, and she loved and was loved dearly.

My parents immigrated to America from China in the 90s, and I only knew most of my extended family through video calls, photos, and visits on both ends that lasted a month at most. The grief I felt for her passing was personal and aching, but it was also for the loss of another link to my homeland and my family — of which I had few. Creating this piece forced me to reexamine my relationships and the relationships of those around me through the lens of loss.

Remembering Wings is a story about the fleeting nature of memory and the fragility of it all, but above all else it’s about the inevitability of loss, and how we choose to love despite it.

INK OVER IRON

When hunger found my mother,
she asked her brother to read to her,
plucked the sound of each word

from his throat with spidering
fingers, swilled them sharper
in her mouth, taught them

the shape of teeth. When hunger
finds me, I skin mandarins with bit
down nails, shred the pith, suckle

out each kernel to burst, eat
from the wound, seeds and all.
She says museums are no different

from mausoleums. She says
speaking it aloud is what gives
a word a body to swallow. We

wear white to the Met, every stele
an open casket. Pilgrims yoked
in St. Patrick's Cathedral across

the way, but I find worship in this,
too, my fingers to the prints, the stroke
of Mama's voice, [唐] — [宋] — [明].

My lips stretched into a hymnal,
my breath a bloodshot over the glass.
Tell me the difference between word

and womb and I will show you
the rust on my grandfather's hands.
The scores of his inkstone and

the thunder scars of his cheeks.
How he fisted his fingers through
mine, knuckle to nail, and we

watched the paint weep from
the brush. (See? This is your only
inheritance, girl. A paper dowry

and a watery heart. See?
I prayed for sons, girl. Palmed open
your mother's belly and spoke

myself hoarse, but ink runs thicker
than blood, girl.) I cast coins through
a rattling shell, shuck the yarrow

and read around the cracks;
I collect ox jaws, noose them over
my scapula, let tongues scrape

oracles into the valleys
of my chest. The prophets tell me
every word I forget is the death

of a child, spooned in the notch
of my throat, and every man
who's given me a name

has just shown me another way
to bleed. I've been taught that
the holiest parts of my body

are the places others can touch,
so I take my girl's pretty fingers
in my mouth, break her calluses

on my lips, bloodlines over my teeth.
She tells me it feels like a womb.
My mouth, filial mother,

slavering for a white girl's blessings
in a Camaro backseat, her spit
a prayer to proselytize

my foul tongue divine.
Thinking,

Yes, this
is love. Yes, this
is what it's like to be alive.