

Silver Key Winners

2025



**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 Regions'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



Table of Contents

Sumlina Alam	Spring Cleaning	7
Priya Anthony	Bermuda	11
Priya Anthony	Philadelphia, rising	12
Roland Bess	Growing Pains	15
Ella Braig	Guiding Light	21
Ella Braig	One Thousand Ships	26
Ella Braig	Salvation	39
Sophia Bucher	The Painter	45
Sophie Buchowski	A Mother's Dance	49
Anabelle Chu	I H8 Ten-Year-Olds	52
Claire Coleman	A Lesson From Little Me	55
Isabelle Cox-Garleanu	Eulogy for Okasan	57
Isabelle Cox-Garleanu	Language "Propriety" in Francophone Nations: Inclusivity and Imposition	59
Isabelle Cox-Garleanu	Metamorphosis of the End	67
Isabelle Cox-Garleanu	Romanian Rhapsody	69
Aimee Dalton	The Price of Passage	71
Paige Deakin	Superheroes Need Saving Too	78
Jemma Edelstein	Lost	83

Table of Contents

Bruce Elvin	Colonial Shadows: Lasting Impacts on Economy, Education, and Identity	85
Elizabeth Elzemeyer	Tree Branches	94
Henley Ferguson	My Craft is Calling	96
Andrew Foreman	Detective Noir and the Carrot's Curse	97
Calixte Fox	Equi/Distant	102
Tommy Fussner	When The Breeze Stopped	104
Aspen Gallentine	The State of Minds	108
Sophie Hagemann	Letting Go of the Past	121
Elliot Hall	The Parade	124
Thomas Henson	Kindness of Others	125
Theodore Hollander-Bodie	Cracks in the Wood	127
Camden Hosler	Whence I Came	129
Lakin Jaeger	Alone	134
Lakin Jaeger	Endings	139
Rhea Jha	I Am An Alien	141
Rhea Jha	Where Are You From?	145
Anjali Krishnakumar	To be Remembered	148
Shauna Kruger	The Bite or The Bark	152
Riley Kummer	Where the Moon Dies	157
Abby Lanter	The Last Mile	162

Table of Contents

Valery Liang	A Soliloquy of Kites	164
Valery Liang	Birchwood Empress	168
Valery Liang	Dear Persephone	173
Valery Liang	Durum Field Dreams	175
Valery Liang	Falconry	183
Valery Liang	FBI Agent P186496, Disgruntledly Reporting for Duty	186
Aston Liang	The Qing Dynasty Dresser	190
Wing Lun Lui	E-Waste Crisis: A Global Challenge Requiring Collective Action	193
Shelby Lombardo	Designated	197
Shelby Lombardo	Hair of Gold: A Rapunzel Retelling	200
Christopher Long	A Sound Community	204
Olivia Lu	A Seat at the Table	207
Macy Lubak	Together	211
Madeline Male	Moved Out	213
Madeline Male	The Death Diamond	214
Kate Markovich	Nesting Dolls of Past and Present	216
Stella Martin	Nine Letters	219
Claire Masterson	Slip-up	224

Table of Contents

Katie Mastrosimone	Press Play	228
Azin Mofidi	Shaking the Past	233
Katherine Nguyen	Chang-rae Lee and the Critical Philosophy of Race	236
Fatima Olayinka	The Curtain to Life	244
Maggie Orton	The Innkeeper	249
Bohan Pan	Replay	253
Benjamin Patterson	Bardo	256
Benjamin Patterson	It's Getting Dark	258
Benjamin Patterson	Why the World is Confused	260
Yuktha Rayani	Funeral March	263
Ira Rodrigues	A Journey to Nowhere	266
Ira Rodrigues	A Love Worn Soft	269
Ira Rodrigues	Justice is Here	272
Isabel Sapp	Little Platte Trail, Smithville, MO	279
Isabel Sapp	Stars Rise at Noon	281
Maira Schirk	The Subway	289
Aanya Shetty	The Dangers of Selective Empathy	290

Table of Contents

Natalia Sliz	Bloom and Betrayal	294
Lucas So	Intelligent Solution or Unavoidable Force?: Artificial Intelligence Revolutionizes Africa's Future Medical Advancements	302
Lucas So	Should I be Held Responsible for What I Believe?	306
Madeleine Staker	Madeleine's Favorite Things	310
Olivia Suh	The Ethics of Killing	312
Chris Tao	The Letter	320
Mo Treitel-Knapp	DNA Chains	324
Siddhanth Vijaykumar	The Dependent Variable	326
Joe Walsh	Behind the Curtain: The Cost of Social Conformity	334
Isabella Wang	Dinner Parties	339
Isabella Wang	Lullaby for a Fifteen-Year-Old	341
Isabella Wang	Two Languages	343
Alex Wang	w.a.r	345
Molly Watts	The Extraordinary Griffin Adamos	347
Luke Williams	Introspective Reflection	355
Alisha Yin	Circadian Rhythms	358
Alisha Yin	The Breakfast After	360
Ellie Young	What Will I Become	362

Table of Contents

Sarina Zheng	The Switch	376
Celina Zhou	Aviary	382
Celina Zhou	A White Boy Beats Me at Ping Pong	386
Celina Zhou	In Polaroids, I Look Like a Ghost	387
Celina Zhou	Laws of Attraction	388
Celina Zhou	Portrait of the Physicist Giving My Eulogy	390
Celina Zhou	When We Were Seventeen, I told You “Smoking Will Kill You Someday”	392

Sumlina Alam

Grade 11, Blue Valley Northwest High
School
Flash Fiction



Spring Cleaning

The dust always returned. It always did. It was sprinkled across the room, serving as welcoming confetti when I entered.

The paintings were faded, and the picture frames were nicked from the times they fell off the rusty, blunt nails that could barely support themselves on the grimy, papery walls. With a sigh, I whipped out the ruffled dust sweeper and dusted the worn-out nightstands scattered with cup rings from years before. I noticed the half-finished journals, wrinkled papers, and whatnot cluttering the small desk. The calendar hung crookedly above it, each box scribbled with my failed aspirations in my chicken scratch penmanship. I realized it was from last year but felt unbothered to take it down.

The living room needed tending; the velvet sofa was buried with lint. The only green plant in the house sat on the rickety coffee table, dying from thirst and my ignorance.

When was the last time I cleaned this home?

Wasn't it yesterday? And the day before that? And the day before that?

I paused my sweeping. I gazed at the moss-covered windows that blocked the spring sunlight and couldn't remember the last time I went outside.

When was the last time I touched the heavenly flowers and roses?

Or when I dashed through the grassland fields?

Or when I sat under the illuminating stars and fireflies?

I rubbed the sweat from my forehead with the sleeve of my sleeping robe, halting when I remembered I stained it from the bleach I used last time. Letting out a frustrated exhale, I threw it off on my unmade bed, piled with the crinkled

bed sheets and pillowcases. *I will clean it later*, I muttered to myself. I dusted my hands to rub off the lingering bleach.

Suddenly, the picture frames clattered and startled me as they fell to the floor. It was too late for me to grab them before they hit the ground — instead, the delicate material splintered into tiny crumbs, strewn across the already unkempt floor. *Drats*, I mumbled. The wooden frames cracked in half, laying with their inner bark open and seen. Heart racing, I scrambled to comb through the broken glass and chips with my withered hands. As I dug through the mess, my calloused fingers grazed the flimsy pictures that were once behind the display.

The photos themselves were monotone, the color and saturation drained; beneath the layers of waxy film were the cheeky grins and pleasant smiles of people no longer in my life: the friends and family I had lost touch with from years of isolation and unreciprocated relationships.

They were silent ghosts with glances so piercing that it felt like they were judging me for my past mistakes; my hands trembled as the pictures fell from my sweaty fingertips. They had watched me succumb to this perpetual cycle of cleaning, fixing, and sleeping. They witnessed the way I rolled out of bed at noon and rotted my time away, scrubbing every dirt and speck, only to do the same the next day. They saw my workspace was once a place of flourishing creativity, and now a hopeless dead end. *I'm sorry, I will do better*. The expressions of the ghosts remained the same, their large eyes looking beyond the surface into my soul. I could almost hear them laugh. *Yeah, right. That's what you've been telling yourself for so long*. Kneeling on the floor, my tears pooled in my stinging eyes as they dripped onto the picture, disintegrating the judgmental faces away from sight.

My neck burned, and my arm tingled. I felt an itch come over; I wanted to feel clean. The grime crawled around my shoulders and in my dandruff-covered hair. Was this from the bleach? Lice? Eczema? My brittle nails scratched away this rash, each swipe growing more erratic and harsher.

No, no, no, I can't stay here. Every ounce of work I put into maintaining this house never paid off; it was always the same problems and messes every day — the same unfinished papers, moth-eaten curtains, lousy calendar, and etched cup rings. I couldn't finish the job because of my paralyzing fear of failing; The little things distracted me from moving forward for so long that I was stuck. My dry throat could barely swallow as I heaved heavily. My lungs could not expand freely; I felt like an enclosed animal with no way out. I rushed to my broken kitchen drawer that never closed properly, snatching a lighter. My thumb frantically flicked it. *Please work, please work*. At last, a bright spark ignited, and for the first

time, I grinned. It was the only thing in this cursed house that worked. The best way to end this chaos and destroy my messes was to set fire and let it all burn. It was time to punish this wretched prison and see it go up in flames.

#

A smile crept on my face as I heard crackling. Everything was gone, billowing in the black puffs of smoke and the scent of pine. The crooked wooden logs of the cabin were no more; the flames had eaten them alive, swallowing the last of their bark. My neck still burned, and my arms still tingled from this newfound adrenaline.

The dark smoke clouded the house, concealing it as I stood a few feet away. Even though the burning smell pricked my lungs, the newfound pain was freedom; it meant the past was burning away. My body no longer itched, and the rash seemed to calm. I closed my eyes in comfort as I pondered this new life ahead of me. At one point, the crackling ended, so there was only sweet solace in the quiet wilderness. The sounds of the crickets and birds chirping, the breeze grazing the delicate flowers, and the rustling of the pine tree branches murmured in the rest of the forest. By then I had vanished, leaving nothing but the lighter.

Priya Antony

Grade 11, John Burroughs School

Educator: Katairna Fernandez

Poetry



Bermuda

We move in undefined shape on this canvas.
This time, you draw lines with intent.
I mirror you, unwillingly. I think:
“How do you stop something that hasn’t begun?”
We carve lead into the paper, and the drawing takes familiar form;
I feel familiar motion, dragging the pencil along—
Sun shines on her hair, and reflects back to your eager face—
I agree: she’s lovely.
Lovely, though bile rises, which I swallow
In faith of some clandestine code, never spoken, never broken—
I claim to be a fast learner and now I know,
We, with our sloppy strokes, form a jagged triangle.
I am well-acquainted with drawing the edges.

So, I let you go looking at her hair from the back row
I, vigilant for the glint in your eye,
trading you for her for me,
a nauseating Bermuda triangle;

I vow not to, any longer, be lost at the edges
but enough losses make you wonder
just how many triangles you can lose in.

Priya Antony

Grade 11, John Burroughs School

Educator: Katairna Fernandez

Poetry



Philadelphia, Rising

If love glowed luminescent,
she'd light up like a Christmas tree
at the mere thought of him.
Crossing the street, she hears his laugh—
It's not him, but she snaps around instinctively.

He immobilizes her from miles away.
If the cars come at her now, armored in their militant lines,
They will glance off her, easy as light. She stands, rooted
To the spot where she sees him now.

I am forced to abandon her to obsolescence:
The frail in her chest diminishes further as I,
And the boy who sounds just like him, walk.
She asks the cars, now deafening, surging forward,
If maybe he was right to do that.

She recalls the walk of shame from the airport,
Clawing her way through the future she built with him.
He looked at the sky, the ground, the people in her town

with a resignation that told her not to hope any longer.
She tried to take his hand, but holding it was transient;
it was cold, and clammy,
he looked at her,
half-pitying, half-exhausted,
his eyes told:
Anything she holds is not truly his anymore.

Arriving at the LOVE sign, she lets go, asks a passerby
To take a photo. Even had it not come out blurry,
The distance between those two bled through pixels.
Right there beside her, but she'd already lost him.
What a place to fall out of love in, she'd thought.
What a cruel joke.

It's not as though he's tried to; he's not a spiteful man.
Yet he's emaciated her from the inside out,
With a strange sort of illness that takes hold, grips and grips
And never lets up.

Any time she comes back home, she can't help but think
Of what, maybe, she's lost; of what, maybe, she never even had.
The frat house where she surrendered herself to a boy
She didn't even like, hoping he'd fill the space her man left
Unattended and discarded, as if it never mattered to him.
Walking past where one meets the ghosts of Philadelphia,
She feels like she's left her own, of hope, somewhere.
The last stop of her trek is the Liberty Bell, once an omen
Of something unbreakable: she sees a new crack splinter
Her reflection into two. As for him, this is the last place he

kissed her, and told her they were through.

Philadelphia, rising

In her stomach, in her gut, in his eyes

And hands, and lips. It kills,

And mortifies her, to know that this isn't her city anymore,
not really.

Now, as the last of her crumbles to dust, the roving cars kick her up

Across the street, to the sidewalk, into every crevice of his city

Every precious piece of her, which I look for every time I'm in Philly,

Hoping that when he returns, he'll remind her gently

That to him, she was never really obsolete,

not really.

Roland Bess

Grade 12, Parkway Central High School

Educators: Jason Lovera

Critical Essay



The Box

“Daaaad! It hurts! It huuuuuurt!” I wailed from the backseat of our white Honda Odyssey.

“What hurts?” He asked.

“My shiiiiiiiins” I whined loudly. My shins felt like they were about to snap, and my sleeping baby brother wouldn’t stop drooling on me as his head swayed from side to side in his booster seat. We were on the way back from my grandma’s house after Christmas one year, and I’ve never overcome my struggle to fall asleep in the car on the way back from that place.

“Roland, it’s probably just growing pains.” My dad said dismissively. Dismissively, of course, because the cause of my whining was something nobody could fix. This was not the first time I’d gotten “growing pains”, and it would not be the last. Usually, the transaction following my diagnosed growing pains included my dad chasing me (and whoever else showed symptoms) and offering to karate chop their leg off to help the pain subside. This interaction was karate-chop free, though, because Dad was driving. I actually do remember the aches and pains I used to get in my shins as a little kid, and they were worth complaining about. I also remember the sheer terror I felt at the thought of my leg being chopped off, which effectively distracted me from the pain in my shins. Nevertheless, I want to remember and talk about my growing pains.

I’ve been alive for 18 years, but I’ve only really grown physically for 17 of them. My growth plates have been fixed for a little over a year, but even now, I still feel all sorts of growing pains. Over the past four years in high school, I’ve gone through a redemption. I’ve grown both physically and mentally, and the lessons I’ve learned taught me that growth comes from pain.

“Did you do the reading?” I asked Zeidan, looking over my shoulder.

“Yeah dude, did you not?” He replied. I had not. It was October of my sophomore year, and the truth was, I hadn’t read *The Count of Monte Cristo* in close to three weeks. I had been slacking my way through Mr. Lovera’s honors English II class, and all of my other classes in turn. Looking back I always wish I had put forth more effort, but I also always cut myself some slack. At the time I was doing both marching band and cross-country before and after school, on top of taking all honors classes (something I prided myself on, but didn’t really manage my time well enough for). Experiencing the drawbacks of doing almost no schoolwork at home, I entered a very dark mental state sophomore year. During that time my insecurities consumed me, and I felt like I would never measure up to what I wanted to be or what I was supposed to be. I was letting myself down in almost every aspect of my life, and I hated myself for it. I felt like the problem was with me: that, inherently, I was someone just not cut out for better things and shouldn’t reach for them. In a sense, I felt evil. Both freshman and sophomore year I would typically only eat one meal a day which was our family dinner, and I used marching band and cross-country to effectively starve myself to lose weight. I let other people’s opinions dictate who I was, and who I needed to be. In his essay “Evil” featured in *Time Magazine* about the existence of evil, Lance Morrow describes evil as, “A perverse, efficient logic” and claims that, “identifying others as evil justifies all further evil against them” (Morrow 50). This is exactly the way I justified treating myself so poorly. I thought that since I wasn’t doing as well in my classes as I wanted to or measuring up to the standards of achievement my peers set, I didn’t deserve to feel good about myself. I was the problem, I wanted to change, and I wanted to change so badly that I developed a pretty gnarly eating disorder. Every day after school that fall I would come home, lay in bed until dinner and frequently fall asleep, and then sit on my phone and watch TikTok until late in the night. Surprisingly, this led to a decline in my academic performance which in turn had me feeling increasingly drained, on top of hours of running on a team I didn’t feel like a part of, and marching in a band that felt like a punishment. I felt so lost, and I punished myself for it.

I couldn’t seem to do things that benefitted me no matter how hard I tried. In Roger Shattuck’s article featured in the *Atlantic* magazine titled “When Evil is ‘Cool’”, he delves into the fixation and elevation of evil in our culture, and divides evil into four categories (natural, moral, radical, and metaphysical). This categorization comes near the end of the article, and Shattuck uses it to expound

that we reap a greater understanding of evil from narratives and stories, because these works include characteristics of our existence. The area I wish to focus on, however, is the introduction of the article. When talking about Charles Baudelaire as a poet, Roger Shattuck refers to him as a “bored bohemian”, stating that “Through the absence of meaningful occupation he became the victim of sudden willful actions that seemed to serve no personal interest” (Shattuck 74).

Sophomore year, I was a victim of my own behavior and bad habits fueled by my self-loathing. I would sometimes wake up as early as two in the morning because I had fallen asleep on my phone without showering after practice that day, and have to get up at five-thirty the next morning for marching band. I was so unmotivated to get on a good routine and genuinely take care of myself because I felt like anything I did would just make things worse, I deserved to live like this, I was evil.

Beep! My chip foot hit the trackpad beneath me, hard. Just one mile left, 7 minutes tops, hang in there. “You can do it, Roland! Let’s move here!” I heard my family cheer. It was the last cross-country race of my junior season, and since my low sophomore year, I had come so far. Second semester of sophomore year, I ended up dropping honors English II, which was conflicting because I wanted to be in the class and do well, but at the same time didn’t really work that hard for it. I had to learn to forgive myself and get back up, to fix the things I didn’t like about my life for me, not for anyone else. Which placed me somewhere in early October of 2023. I was nowhere near perfect, but had seriously come a long way toward reaching my goals and my ideal self. I finished that last race around a minute slower than my personal best from sophomore year, but after an injured foot in the spring that carried into a summer of no running, I was completely okay with it. In fact, I was elated at the fact that I had finished at all. That’s how I had felt all season after every race. I hadn’t learned all there was to learn yet, but I had learned to let go of the past and focus on the present. Moments during those cross-country races all blur together in my mind, but I can remember one similarity across all of them: desperately wanting to quit.

Every race before junior year I had never really felt satisfied with my results in running. I hadn’t medaled, I hadn’t placed at conference, I hadn’t gone to state or been able to hold my times over others’ heads. I saw my running abilities as a flaw. After all, I only started running because I didn’t check any of the other athletic boxes. I’d had my swing at almost every other sport and none of them really stuck. Running had previously been a vessel for my self-deprecation, but in junior year I learned that it didn’t have to be that way. I

wasn't the bad guy, nobody was sitting there waiting for me to fail and laugh in my face, it was just me myself and I in those races. I would keep running because giving up would be not only giving up on a race but also on myself. I wasn't going to fall back into the deep pit of self-hatred I had previously dug, and that allowed me to see running for what it truly is. In J.L. Mackie's seminal essay "Evil and Omnipotence" he critiques belief in a good God by exploring the problem of evil. Mackie delivers his argument by comparing solutions to the problem of evil, separating them into two separate categories, adequate and fallacious. In the fallacious solutions section, he brings forth previously argued solutions to the problem of evil and contrasts them with beliefs about God's omnipotence and power. The solution I want to focus on is the first one J.L. Mackie offers: "'Good cannot exist without evil' or 'Evil is necessary as a counterpart to good'" (Mackie 28). I learned that running made me stronger both physically and mentally, even healthier when I allowed it to. I ate right, worked out with my friends, and spent time doing things I enjoyed instead of rotting on my phone. I essentially had started over after my foot injury, and even though I started very slow and it felt difficult, I steadily improved. Junior year I didn't set a personal record in a single race, but I can confidently say that it was my best running season throughout my high school career. Improving my running through difficult workouts and races led me to realize that in the same sense, I had learned to improve my life through hardships and shortcomings. The resilience required to drop a C on a chemistry test and then get on the bus to go run until I felt like I couldn't breathe anymore was immense, and I hadn't realized it but all of the tough times and failures and setbacks had turned me into a tough person. I identify heavily with the first "fallacious" solution to the existence of evil debunked by J.L. Mackie. The good I felt in my life junior year couldn't have happened without the evil I let take me over my sophomore and freshman years. My life was much better, but there was still room for improvement.

The time spent with teammates who were friends on the team during that season is a time I will always cherish and wish I could spend all over again. Along with turning my evil into good, I feel that junior year was the first time in a long time I'd felt any sense of real pride. I've always been a pretty acute people pleaser, and this never-ending adaptation of my personality left me questioning who I really was. Cross-country helped me step into that. I knew that in order to be the person I wanted to be, I would have to let go of what other people thought and do things for myself that I could be proud of. In *Pride*, the last book in a collaborative series between The New York Public Library and Oxford University Press,

Michael Eric Dyson examines the pliability of pride. Dyson asserts that pride, one of the seven deadly sins, may in some cases not be a sin at all. In his introduction, Dyson quotes the philosopher Lawrence Becker who says, "If one concedes that pride can be trouble, there is always the question if that is all there is to it...when it comes to defining the virtuous person, pride, often seen as a vice, might be a necessary feature of her identity" (qtd. In Dyson 1). My thought process sophomore year was that I should be ashamed of who I am because others tell me I should be, and my opinion doesn't mean as much as theirs. Junior year, complete 180. I began to understand that comparing myself to others would never make me feel truly whole, that it would lead to a life half-lived, and that I should be unapologetically myself in everything that I do. Nobody can stop me, nothing should ever take priority over me being someone I can be proud of.

Today, I'm writing this paper in the bottom weeks of my first semester of senior year, on my second time around in Mr. Lovera's class (in the fourth English credit equivalent; I didn't fail honors English II). I'm in a bit of a strange place now compared to those that I've been in before because all I think about now is how I came from such low lows to such great heights. Winning over my prior evil brought about such a great time for me, but I think I bask in it far too often. Though I'm looking back on it grateful for my hardships, it makes me worry I'm entrenched in the past. Senior year meant the passage of my final cross country season, and this season I set a personal record in my final race, finally beating my times from sophomore year. Through it all, all I can think about is where I used to be, and how thankful I am for how much I've grown. This personal growth journey throughout high school I am near completing pairs very well with the Latin phrase *felix culpa*. This directly translates to "fortunate fall", and the concept of the *felix culpa* lies at the heart of John Milton's epic poem. In *Paradise Lost*, this concept is explored in the redemption of Adam and Eve post-fall. After Adam and Eve sin against God by eating fruit off of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, they immediately feel shame for their actions and pray to God for forgiveness. The Son of God points this out to God, saying, "...what first fruits on Earth are sprung / from thy implanted grace in man, / ... / Fruits of more pleasing savor from thy seed / Sown with contrition in his heart, than those / Which his own hand manuring all the trees / Of Paradise could have produced, ere fall'n / From innocence" (Milton 11.22-23...26-30). The Son of God remarks that Adam and Eve's prayers now mean more than they ever could have before they ate fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. My return to health and confidence in myself would have meant nothing if that was how I felt from the

get-go. I had to first face adversity in order to grow and attain sight of the person I wanted to be.

Coincidentally, the x-ray that uncovered the fact that my growth plates were fixed when I was sixteen was one conducted to scan my foot to see if my injury was a stress fracture. It wasn't, and these details don't really matter outside of the context that I was done growing, physically. Back then I thought that meant I had no reason to expect any more growing pains. But I have learned that growing pains don't end when you no longer check your height every birthday. Through my experiences, I've grown so much and learned that growth comes from hardships and tests, from all the moments when you want to give up but choose not to. In those hard moments you almost want to forget, the most interesting thing happens: you grow. You become something greater by pushing yourself and picking up after yourself, while still loving yourself. The last four years have been a period of immeasurable change and growth in my life, and the next four likely will too. I look forward to every mistake I'll learn from, every setback I'll recover from, and every failure I'll have to claim as my own. Every negative experience I've had has been part of the journey, and while my 17th birthday may be the last height mark on the hall closet door, I'll never stop growing.

Ella Braig

Grade 12, Ladue Horton Watkins High School

Educator: Abigail Eisenberg

Journalism



Guiding Light

Fastening bolts into place with a crescent wrench, senior Ella Hamlin is elevated by an aerial lift, meeting the newly-installed spotlights at eye level. Gradually, she tightens C-clamps for Ladue High School's spring musical, "The Drowsy Chaperone." On Feb. 21, 2024, she will sit in the technical booth and instruct her fellow crew members as they run the lights for their first dress rehearsal. After moving to the balcony in the Performing Arts Center, Hamlin flips a switch on her lighting board and a spotlight pours light into one fixed area. Then, she flashes a thumbs-up to the production's director through the sound-proof glass. This can only mean one thing: it's showtime.

IN THE BOOTH

Hamlin first forged an interest in theater after attending the St. Louis Shakespeare Festival's production of "Romeo and Juliet" in 2018. From there, she joined the festival's Shakespeare Squadron, which gave her the opportunity to perform before each mainstage show. However, at school, she preferred to work behind the scenes, serving as the head of stage crew for Ladue Middle School's production of "Hairspray" in 2019.

The first show Hamlin designed the lighting for was Ladue High School's spring musical, "Mamma Mia," in 2022. Since then, Hamlin has served as the lighting designer for nine different shows, including various Ladue productions. Most recently, she has designed lighting for "Puffs" and "The Drowsy Chaperone."

"You're working with angles, color and texture, and it's not a super common art medium to work with," Hamlin said. "So, you have to start thinking differently about how you can make art onstage with this new [creative outlet]."

Hamlin has worked with numerous performing arts directors over the course of her high school career, including Stephen Howard and Kurt Knoedelseder. As of her senior year, she is studying under Jessica Winingham, head of Ladue's drama department.

"Ella is like working with a professional, so it's really nice for me because I can speak to her like an adult about tech theater," Winingham said. "Specifically, she is incredibly knowledgeable. She's also very calm. She's fast. She's considerate."

Outside of theatrical productions, Hamlin has run the lights for various schoolwide functions, such as faculty-lead presentations and band concerts. For these types of events, she reports to Activities Coordinator Greg Kendall.

"She is very passionate about making sure that the things that she's responsible for are done perfectly," Kendall said. "I think that she is dogged in her pursuit of perfection."

STAGE BUSINESS

In the summer of 2023, Hamlin was hired as a deck electrician at STAGES St. Louis, a local performing arts center, for their production of "Aida."

"I wanted to do more theater over the summer going into my summer after junior year," Hamlin said. "I had done 'Bonnie and Clyde' with [the Gateway Center for Performing Arts] as a spotlight operator the previous fall and had a lot of fun, but [I] was looking for somewhere where I would get more lighting-focused experience and a slightly higher professional level."

During "Aida's" run, Hamlin's primary role was to prepare the Asteria tubes, or large LED staffs that the actors portraying palace guards used as weapons. After "Aida" performed their final show, she requested that her contract be extended and was hired as a swing technician for their production of "Clue."

"I just rotated through [shadowing crew members] until someone needed me," Hamlin said. "One of our [assistant stage managers] got sick for three days, [so] I went and did her job for three days. Then, one of the electricians ended up having to go back to college early, so then I filled in for him for the last week of 'Clue.'"

At 18 years old, Hamlin was the youngest person working at STAGES over the summer. In the early phases of her career, she worried that it would be difficult for her to forge connections with her co-workers due to their difference in ages.

"All my friends were about to graduate college or had been out of college for a few years," Hamlin said. "I was a little nervous [about] how that would turn

out, but we ended up being really great friends and we hung out all the time outside of work.”

Fortunately for Hamlin, the tight-knit community of technicians working at STAGES welcomed her with open arms. For her, help and support from her co-workers were a highlight of the experience.

“Being such good friends [with my fellow crew members] made the work 10 times more fun,” Hamlin said. “I was learning so much about lighting and electrics, but I was learning it from these people who I really loved and I considered my friends.”

MORE THAN WIGS AND MAKEUP

Although Hamlin’s knowledge of lighting design and technicality is expansive, she isn’t always taken as seriously as her male co-workers with an equally broad skillset.

“I have worked with male directors who absolutely underestimated me and did not believe that I had the technical skills that I did,” Hamlin said. “[They] were really rude about that, and disrespectful, and didn’t want me to do my job because they thought that I couldn’t do it.”

In many professional theater settings, lighting and set crews are composed of predominantly male engineers. As one of two girls on the electrics team at STAGES, Hamlin was initially concerned that she would receive the same demeaning treatment from her male co-workers that she is so often used to.

“Especially going into [lighting design and engineering] at my age, it was definitely a little nerve wracking to show up to STAGES [on] my first day, knowing that most of the electrics team was going to be [composed of] men and I was going to have to prove myself as an 18 year old girl who was still in high school,” Hamlin said.

At STAGES, Hamlin initially felt misunderstood, since she was a young woman working on a professional stage crew.

“I had [undergone] multiple times when I was first starting at STAGES [where] people asked me, once they found out that I was in high school, ‘Do you [work with] costumes or makeup?’” Hamlin said. “I was like, ‘No, I do lighting. I’ve done the lighting design for the past few shows.’ People automatically make the assumption that you’re in one of those fields if they don’t know [that you aren’t].”

However, to Hamlin’s delight, she was generally treated with the same amount of respect as her male co-workers.

“I never once really felt doubted or undermined because of my identity and being a woman [at STAGES],” Hamlin said. “But, that is to say that my experience does not speak for everyone. I’ve heard many, many, many stories of other women in the field having that doubt placed upon them just for being a woman. So, I do assume that I will encounter that in my future.”

Despite the profound lack of women pursuing male-dominated fields in technical theater, Hamlin is hopeful that, in the future, more girls will be eager to take on jobs that are similar to her own.

“There’s definitely been improvements in the last few years to get women into those fields, especially lighting, sound and technical direction,” Hamlin said. “So, I think we’re on an upward trend of women getting involved.”

FINAL BOW

Since her freshman year, Hamlin was commonly regarded as the backbone of Ladue’s technical theater program.

“Before this year, I was [engineering and designing lighting for] shows by myself,” Hamlin said. “I was [stripping] everything and rehanging lighting fixtures, focusing and programming an entire show by myself. So, it took a lot longer, but it was also just hard because I didn’t have people to help move stuff.”

Preparing to graduate high school, Hamlin prioritized building up Ladue’s technical theater program. It was important to her that her fellow students learned how to run tech for the spring musical, which would prepare them for the following year, during which she will not be present.

“I actually was not at [‘The Drowsy Chaperone’s’] closing show,” Hamlin said. “[The lighting crew] ran the whole thing and did a fantastic job. I’m incredibly proud of them.”

In January of 2024, Hamlin was one of three students to be awarded a technical theater scholarship at the annual Missouri State Thespian Conference, which took place in Kansas City. The scholarship was granted to her after her portfolio was examined and reviewed by members of the Educational Theatre Association.

“When I won the [scholarship], it felt like all of the work that I put in, especially in the last few years, and all of the time that I spent on my portfolio — compiling photos [and] gluing photos into my giant portfolio notebook — all of that had really paid off,” Hamlin said. “It validates that this is what I should be doing. I’m having fun, but [I’m] also going to be so successful [pursuing my] passion.”

The scholarship will be particularly helpful as Hamlin goes through the process of applying for colleges. Ideally winding up at a conservatory, she plans to earn a Bachelor's Degree in lighting design.

"A conservatory program is essentially just more hardcore than other programs," Hamlin said. "So, you're spending more hours in the theater and more hours in theater focused classes. A lot of your classes are either work time to work on shows, or will eventually become independent study time to work on your own work."

While it's no secret that Hamlin has left a lasting impression on Ladue's performing arts department, the time for her to pursue working with professional productions is on the horizon. Although "The Drowsy Chaperone" may have been the last show she designed lighting for in high school, it's safe to say that Hamlin has a bright future ahead of her.

"[Hamlin] makes sure that she's an expert as much as she can be for every lighting component," Winingham said. "It's a huge strength. If something comes up, she will always find the answer."

Ella Braig

Grade 12, Ladue Horton Watkins High
School

Educator: Abigail Eisenberg

Dramatic Script



One Thousand Ships

SETTING: Sometimes Helen's bedchambers, sometimes inside her memory. For moments taking place inside her memory, the set should stay the same as it is when she is in her bedchambers and repurpose the pre-existing furniture.

(Helen is perched on a stool, being doted on by handmaidens who wield combs and are frozen in time.)

HELEN

There's nothing like the city of Sparta at night.
It's the only time of day when everything is still.
Nothing is ever still anymore.

Not since the War.

The last time I spent a night in Sparta was the eve of my kidnapping.
Wait. Hold on.

It's not as bad as it sounds.

I was asleep in bed.

He came through the door like it was nothing
and he picked me up and took me.

He carried me through the streets and shipped me out to Troy by boat.

You would think I'd struggle
or push him away

or scream for my husband,
but I didn't.

I wanted him to take me away.

I think I did, anyway.

Yeah, I did.

(The handmaidens suddenly animate and begin to pamper her.)

IRIS

Weren't you worried about how Menelaus would react if he found out?
What he'd do to Paris?

HELEN

No.

I wasn't thinking about that.

I was just looking at him.

At his face.

ANTONIA

Weren't you afraid when he took you away?

4

HELEN

It was impossible to be afraid when I was with him.

He had the city of Troy at his every whim.

He kept me safe.

IRIS

But he kidnapped you.

HELEN

Well

Yeah.

I guess so.

But not really.

IRIS

Not really?

HELEN

No.

No, it wasn't like that.

IRIS

Then, what was it like?

HELEN

It was like

being brought home after years of living in a dark cave

and there's food on the table

and laundry in the dryer.

And besides, I asked for it.

IRIS

You shouldn't blame yourself, Helen.

HELEN

No, really.

I asked for it.

Every night before bed, I prayed to Aphrodite
that someone would take me away from here.

Preferably, someone with great bone structure.

So, when he came into my room,

I assumed she sent him.

IRIS

5

But, how could you have known it was him, specifically, that Aphrodite sent?

HELEN

(Thinking it through first.)

I don't know.

I just figured it was him.

IRIS

But he could've just been some guy.

HELEN

But he wasn't.

He was wonderful and spontaneous.

Every day was something new with him. He made me excited to be alive.

Menelaus hates excitement. He says it wears him out.

(Menelaus enters. Or, at least, Helen's
interpretation of him. We are now watching a
memory. Helen's bedside dresser becomes a
dinner table, and the couple sits on opposite
sides of it.)

HELEN

(Full of adoration.)

What do you want to do today?

MENELAUS

Uh,

I don't know.

What do you want to do?

HELEN

We could have a picnic by the lake
and you could read prose to me,
like you used to when we first met.

MENELAUS

Don't you think we're a little too,
I don't know,
far into our relationship for all that sentimental stuff?

HELEN

Um,
Yeah.

6

Yeah, you're right.

Sorry.

MENELAUS

See, that's what I love about us.
We don't need insane romantic gestures to keep the spark alive.
We can just enjoy each other's company.

HELEN

(Full of annoyance.)

Uh-huh.

(Menelaus exits. Helen is back in her
bedchamber.)

ANTONIA

I don't understand.
You both seemed so in love.

HELEN

We were.

We are.

Sort of.

Maybe that's what drove me away.
Everything in our marriage was so consistent.
Nothing ever changed.
I know this sounds bad, but I've never really
Strived For Stability.
It doesn't work for me,
you know?

IRIS

It's a miracle he took you back.

ANTONIA

Well, he started a whole war for her. I'd sure hope he'd want her back.

IRIS

Oh, right:

"The Face That Launched A Thousand Ships."

How could I forget?

ANTONIA

I wish my face could launch a thousand ships.

7

IRIS

Hey, don't say that.

That's

like

insensitive.

It's a real problem for her.

ANTONIA

Wait wait wait wait

No no no no no

I didn't mean it like that.

I'm not like

pro-the War.

I just mean, wouldn't it be so cool to be able to say that your face was so beautiful,
so Earth-shatteringly gorgeous
that men went to literal war over it?

HELEN

It is sort of flattering, I guess.

But that doesn't mean I wanted it to happen.

The War.

I would've never prayed to be taken away if I knew what would come of it.

IRIS

But you didn't do that.

HELEN

I did. I asked the Gods for it every single night.

IRIS

No, I know.

But you didn't know it would actually happen.
The War between Sparta and Troy isn't your fault, Helen. That's crazy.

HELEN

Still, though.

IRIS

And like,

Paris?

He's mostly to blame here
if we're being honest.

He was the one that kidnapped you. You didn't force him to do that.

8

He could've just
not done it.

ANTONIA

What was it like?

When he was carrying you to the boat,
how did it feel?

HELEN

Honestly?

It was freeing.

It was like letting all of the animals loose at the petting zoo.

I know it's ironic, but for the first time since marrying Menelaus—
actually, for the first time since maybe ever—

I felt completely liberated.

Even though I was being held against my will,
I felt like I was finally in control of myself.

(We re-enter her memory. This time, it's of Paris,
who enters and scoops her up in his arms.)

HELEN

Where are you taking me?

PARIS

Does it matter?

HELEN

I guess not.

But I would still like to know.

PARIS

I'm taking you to Troy,

my kingdom.

I have everything I need and more there.

I can give you anything you want.

Just say the word, Helen.

HELEN

If you have everything you need in Troy,
what do you get out of taking me with you?

PARIS

I'm not taking you.

9

You already belong to me.

You were promised to me.

The goddess Aphrodite offered you up for me to love.

So I will love you, Helen of Sparta.

I will love you until I get a mouthful and choke on it.

I will love you until it kills me.

It just might.

HELEN

If it's my husband you're worried about, you have nothing to be afraid of. He
wouldn't hurt you.

PARIS

I wouldn't count on it.

HELEN

He doesn't have it in him. I promise.

PARIS

(Setting her down.)

Maybe I should take you home.

HELEN

No!

No.

Take me away from here.

Take me away so that I can be

Helen of Troy.

Yeah.

That has a nice ring to it.

(Paris picks Helen up and sets her down on the
bed. He stands behind her, crushing the satin

pillows beneath his feet.)

ANTONIA

But, it must've been a little scary.

I mean, you were out at sea for days.

(The bed becomes a boat. Paris pulls a hidden oar out from behind the bed and begins to row.)

HELEN

Well, I guess it was somewhat scary. I had never been on a boat before.

But the thing about being in the middle of the ocean is that, everywhere you look, it's the same view.

10

It's as if time stands still for a while, and then, next thing you know, you're in Troy.

(She stands up on the bed and Paris exits. We are back in the bedchamber.)

IRIS

Helen, get down from there.

HELEN

Oh, come on.

I never get to have any fun.

(She sits on the edge of the bed. Iris sits behind her and braids her hair. Antonia fishes her nightgown out of her dresser.)

IRIS

Tell us about Troy. What was it like living there?

HELEN

Well, it was like Sparta, only greener. In Sparta, there's stone everywhere you turn.

Troy's not like that. It's full of trees, grass, and flowers.

(Antonia holds her nightgown out for Helen to step into while Iris undoes her dress.)

I remember this one time, Paris and I were walking through the palace gardens, and he spotted this flower that was a brilliant shade of saffron

(A memory of Paris enters with a flower. Time stops.)

and put it behind my ear.

(He puts the flower behind her ear.)

He said they were in season and that saffron was my /color.

PARIS

/Saffron's your color.

HELEN

You couldn't pay Menelaus to say that sort of thing.

I know it's wrong, but

I sort of wish I could go back.

(Paris exits.)

ANTONIA

But, it's only your first day back in Sparta. How could you possibly want to return already?

IRIS

You're Spartan through and through. It's even in your name.

11

HELEN

Not anymore. You've heard what the people call me. To them, I'm Helen of Troy.

I'm not even sure they want me as their queen.

They just want the War to end.

ANTONIA

Now, why would you say that?

HELEN

Because I let Paris take me.

Because my face started a war.

Because all of this is my fault.

I wanted passion and now there's a war.

The people don't love me. Menelaus doesn't love me.

Paris certainly doesn't love me, or else I'd still be in Troy.

I want to be loved.

Not because I'm "of Troy,"

or "of Sparta,"

but because I'm of myself.

But every time I think that love is going to stick, someone gets sick of me.

And they take the pieces that they want, like my face and my spontaneity, and they leave the rest.

Paris got sick of me.

He loved me until he got a mouthful and started choking on it.

And, eventually, I guess I got sick of him, too.

A relationship can only be new and exciting for a short amount of time.

After that, it starts to feel a lot like your old one.

ANTONIA

Did you love him? Ever?

HELEN

Well, I...

I...

(Paris enters. This is a memory.)

PARIS

I said, do you love me?

HELEN

I do.

Of course I do.

12

PARIS

Do what?

HELEN

I think you know, Paris.

PARIS

Well, yes,

I think I do, too.

But can you say it?

HELEN

I've said it before.

PARIS

But, how about now? Can you say it now that you're going back to Menelaus?

(Silence.)

We may never see each other again.

HELEN

I know.

PARIS

So,

say it.

If you love me, just tell me so.

(A beat.)

HELEN

I don't know if I can.

PARIS

Well, do you love Menelaus?

HELEN

I don't know.

PARIS

Two men went to war for you and you can't say whether or not you love either of them?

HELEN

I didn't choose for either of you to go to war! I didn't make that decision.

But you, Paris,

13

you chose to take me back to Troy with you!

PARIS

I had every right to take you!

Your love was awarded to me through divine intervention! I earned your affection!

HELEN

You didn't earn me because I'm a human being.

That's not a thing.

And even if it was, I was not yours to take.

PARIS

You wanted it.

And if I'm remembering correctly, I tried to bring you back home, but you refused.

You wanted to be taken.

HELEN

I thought I did. I really thought I did.

PARIS

You're a fool, Helen. You don't know what you want.

Troy is burning at your hands. But hey, at least you're pretty.

(Paris exits. His memory is gone, Helen thinks, for good. We return to the bedchamber. Helen removes the flower from behind her ear.)

HELEN

Troy is burning.

IRIS

What?

HELEN

Troy is burning and it's all my fault.
(She buries her face in her pillows. Iris and
Antonia join her on the bed and try to console
her.)

IRIS

How is any of it your fault? You were taken. It wasn't anything you could control.

HELEN

14

I asked for it.

I asked to be taken.

ANTONIA

Did you really want that?

You really wanted to be taken away from the place you've lived your whole life?

To be taken away from your home to go live in a stranger's palace in Troy?

HELEN

I don't know. Maybe.

But I didn't really know what that entailed until it actually happened.

I know now.

And, if you were to ask me now, I'd say I didn't want it.

I thought I did.

But I didn't.

ANTONIA

So,

where do we go from here?

IRIS

We could join in on the War.

We could grind his city to bits.

We could take everything from him.

Make him sorry he ever blamed you for his mistakes.

HELEN

No.

We don't have to do any of that.

I chose Sparta. The War has been won. That will cause him plenty of damage.

For now, we should rest.

(They begin to make their bed.)

Tomorrow is a new day.

The first day we get to spend thinking about anything but Paris

or Menelaus.

If they want to blame me for a war they started, let them.

Troy is burning,

but we don't have to light the final match.

Let the men fan the flames if they want to fight.

(The handmaidens pile into bed and hold one another. Helen places her saffron flower into the
15

vase on her dresser, which holds a bouquet of white flowers. The handmaidens beckon her to join them.

Helen is embraced by both versions of herself.

At last, she sleeps.)

Ella Braig

Grade 12, Ladue Horton Watkins High
School

Educator: Abigail Eisenberg

Short Story



Salvation

While Wesley and Norton were up to their hips in coal black water, their legs attached to their body only in theory as they could not see them, Gracie Bess could think of nothing but the sardine tin full of redcurrant in her hand. She wasn't the type to waste paper plates, which she had found scattered about the vast fairgrounds only hours prior. Often at a festival as large as this one, people were careless about how they disposed of their trash. Though, in their small, Midwestern town, the inhabitants were careless about the majority of how they chose to live their lives. Wesley and Norton were the rule, not the exception, which made it consistently difficult for Gracie Bess to tolerate them. Nobody loathed careless individuals more than she did, as she took her time with anything she got up to. In her choice of cutlery, she carried a set of wooden utensils with her everywhere she went.

"See, when you do stuff like that," Norton pointed out, unconstructively, "it makes people look at you like they hate you. And that can't happen, because then people start to hate us, too." Wesley, never bold enough to defend her, only nodded in agreement. Whenever his lack of a spine revealed itself, it was always disappointing.

"Plastic does harm to the environment," Gracie Bess explained to her friends, mouths agape as if to swallow and eventually choke on their own misunderstanding. "Which means one day it'll end up harming us all, too. And I'm not in the business of doing anyone any harm."

The boys, on the other hand, clocked into the maltreatment of others as if it was their nine-to-five and they were making six figures with great health benefits. Instead, they received payment in the form of a newfound feeling of superiority. You see, they were the type of boys who felt the tremendous weight of inadequacy from a very early age. To them, it seemed as if their peers were much more colossal than they could ever dream of being: in size, in wit, in social relevance— in everything that mattered to a young man. So therefore, they saw to it that they would make others feel the same terrible way. Instead of using force, Norton pummeled others with his cruel language until the scapegoat was nothing but a pulp of their formerly confident self. It was a lesson in shrinkage, or how to make one's enemies reduce two sizes in the eyes of the terribly insecure. Wesley, on the other hand, merely enjoyed supporting his friend from the sidelines. This was because bystanding required much less boldness from an individual than perpetrating the insults did. They didn't have many friends, the two of them.

If you were to ask Gracie Bess why she stuck around, she would say that it was because she was the only person in school with thick enough skin to not take their projections of inferiority to heart. Even if the boys would never admit it, they needed her to hang around them, otherwise they would have to find someone new to consistently pick on. It was a symbiotic relationship: they granted her companionship when nobody else dared to and Gracie Bess gave them plenty to tease her about. For starters, she hand-made her own clothes out of old curtains that her grandmother, with whom she lived with, had no use for anymore. The floral patterns did about as much for her complexion as her blonde hair, which was a strangely similar shade to her skin tone, did. It was sandy like the bank of a backyard creek and hadn't hardly ever been run through with a comb, so she fell short of being a great beauty like many of her even blonder sisters were. Her teeth were small and white, but her left canine incisor stuck out proudly and bravely fought for space in her crowded mouth. Many people at her school disliked her on principle because she behaved in such a way that made people consider whether or not she had received proper socialization. Though, the boys did not pity her at all, rather they used her lack of options regarding company to their advantage and teased her all they wanted to.

At this point, the boys had both raked in armfuls of paper lanterns. Manual labor was their strong suit as it required very little critical thought. Consequently, they were determined to really earn their volunteer hours and get the work done quickly. Inscribed on the floating lights were a combination of statements

memorializing deceased loved ones, unspoken ambitions and Bible verses. Neither Norton nor Wesley considered himself particularly religious. On the other hand, Gracie Bess held on to her faith much longer than many folks at her private school, who had since become disillusioned to the fruitfulness of Christianity, could manage to. Interested in one lantern in particular, she set the sardine tin down and lifted it up from out of the water to examine it. Written on one of its four soggy sides was John 13:14, a personal favorite of hers.

“If I, therefore, the master and teacher, have washed your feet,” Gracie Bess mumbled to nobody but herself, “you ought to wash one another’s feet.” She hardly noticed the way in which the lantern leaked lake water that pooled in the pit of her hands. “In all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.”

“It’s like you’re brainwashed or something,” remarked Norton. “If you want to serve someone other than yourself, get on in here and help us.”

“Yeah, Jesus would want you to do your job,” Wesley guffawed. Though he had a brain of his own that could theoretically generate new ideas, he never did have any original comments saved up.

And so, Gracie Bess unbuttoned her collared blouse. She had no interest in laying waste to the embroidery her grandmother put so much effort into embellishing her clothes with. They were geraniums, the kind of flowers planted right in their front yard. Her grandmother often swore the ornamentation looked nearly identical to the real thing, as if they were a projection of a photograph. When the boys began to tease her for caring too much about matters that they deemed unimportant, she told them of all of the love that was poured into making the garment just so.

“Grandma picked up embroidery as a hobby,” Gracie Bess defended herself while pulling an ivory button through a blue eyelet. Then, she shook the tunic off and balled it up so that she was left in a plain, white T-shirt. Gracie Bess set it on the rock she was just sitting on for safe keeping. “I like to encourage her when I can. Not much else brings her joy.” Her grandmother had recently fallen victim to rheumatoid arthritis, which brought a debilitating ache to her joints. At first, it came slowly. Then, she felt it all at once, and the suffering became much like a flood rupturing an unstable dam. Understandably so, the aging, bedridden woman wanted to put her fingers to work while she still could, as they were the only bits of her that still functioned without hassle.

“Still, though,” began Norton. He was walking a thin line and he knew it, for the boy lived to push the boundary of what was admissible to say. “You ought

to care less. It doesn't do you any favors." Gracie Bess inhaled through her nose, but since the inside of it was all dried up, that didn't bring her much peace. Still, she plunged into the water with a most un-elegant dive. There was work to be done, and bickering was the furthest thing from productive. Dissimilar to many young people who were often unforgiving, Gracie Bess saw it fit to treat even the most rotten little boys as if they were the salt of the Earth. Inside her, grace was forever unfolding, and she shared it with the unworthy for free.

When Gracie Bess rose from beneath the lake, her skin-blond hair was stuck to her forehead and cheeks. Her curls looked like ivy growing wildly about a silver stone wall. Although it was without reason and hard to explain, her features worked together in greater harmony when she was undone than when she was made up. At that moment, Wesley recalled seeing her at the last Sunday service and thinking, *Something isn't right*. She wore a white dress that brought out her sandy complexion and made her look like an orange tabby cat next to the rest of her sisters, who were all regular gray-eyed snow angels. He had to contain his laughter while he sat across from her in the pews, but in private he had a laughing fit. Gracie Bess never found out. It was the only time in which he tried to preserve her feelings.

In the present, Gracie Bess was consumed by the sable blackness that surrounded her, but her face was illuminated by the tea lights' flaxen glow, and she was but a floating head. Soon enough, she was gathering her own lanterns. But while the boys were focused on clearing the lake of the festival's remains, she spent a long while observing them. Gracie Bess read every single memorializing letter, every unspoken ambition and every Bible verse. Mentally, she was cataloging the latter for her time alone with God that night.

"The point is to go fast, Gracie Bess," Wesley chastised what was now merely his friend's shoulders and above. "Throw it away." It wasn't in her nature to go along with what she knew to be pointless, and so Gracie Bess continued to absorb the information written on the drenched parchment. After a moment, more forcefully than necessary, Wesley took the lantern out of her hand and tucked it away inside the trash bag Norton was holding open.

"You don't care about anything," murmured an offended Gracie Bess whose heels were now dug firmly into the sand.

"It's not that we don't care," retorted Norton. "It's just that we're supposed to get this done quickly."

"One day it's gonna deck you in the face," Gracie Bess continued in total disregard for what he just said, "that you went your whole sorry lives without

caring about anything, and you're gonna have a big, purple bruise that you'll have to tend to forever."

"You are a mean girl, Grace Elizabeth Spiller," Norton spat, "and you have never felt hurt by anything. You don't know all the hurt that comes with caring." The misguided little boy searched for something he could do to her that could boost his plummeting assurance. Scanning his surroundings, his eyes landed on her most cherished balled-up blouse, right there on the rock. He turned to Wesley and ordered with a pointed finger, sharp and cold like an ice pick, "Throw that—that, right there— into the lake."

Gracie Bess laughed and so did Wesley. Surely he wasn't serious. Surely he wasn't wicked enough to destroy what he knew her to revere so deeply. If there was anything she cared about, it was her grandmother's handiwork. Aside from God, not much else was valued above it. Following their bout of laughter, it was made clear to Wesley that Norton was nothing short of serious. The less misguided boy composed himself and began to trudge through the sand over to the boulder that cradled the fine tunic. Wesley didn't think of much else as he dropped her beloved shirt into the lake, which swallowed it up but didn't dare beg for more. Whether the shirt was ruined or not was anyone's guess, but the embroidery was surely frayed and damaged from the water. And that was the end of it.

It was only after Wesley had wronged Gracie Bess that the weight of his actions trampled him like a steamroller. Here she was, this poor, irreproachable girl with a sick grandmother and an open heart that loved the Lord, and he had done her in. There was no sense in seeking forgiveness, he determined, for he did not deserve it.

On the other side of the lake, Norton was too busy running out of the water as fast as his legs could carry him to reckon with the weight of his actions. He didn't stop running until he reached his porch, and even there he did not seek salvation.

After wringing filthy water out of her undershirt, Gracie Bess plunged a long, gangly arm into the frigid water and fished her dear blouse out from where the rocks and filth resided. Once she had retrieved it, she began to pick small stones out of the fabric that had been caught under the threaded geraniums. Norton was long gone, but Wesley saw it downright wrong to leave the place at a time like this. And besides, there were a few more lanterns to dispose of, which he did in a matter of minutes.

Giving up on salvaging the shirt, Gracie Bess joined Wesley in what he assumed to be a begrudging act of kindness. “You don’t have to help me,” he promised her. “I did you wrong. I don’t deserve it.” He thought of her in church, how the ends of her eyebrows crinkled when she prayed, and felt indefinitely worse about what he had just done. Maybe he wouldn’t be so sympathetic if he wasn’t just then reminded of her humanity. Although it was thought out of frustration, Wesley wished he had no heart at all and that it could sink to the bottom of the lake to keep her shirt company.

Gracie Bess wouldn’t listen. Instead, she smeared her drenched hands against her hips in an effort to dry them and offered, “Let me wash your feet.”

“Naw,” he declined. “I certainly don’t deserve that.”

“None of us do,” Gracie Bess reminded him. “Let me wash your feet.”

Saying nothing, Wesley let Gracie Bess guide him to the large rock, where the abused shirt was hung out to dry. It wasn’t as white as it once was, but the damage was nothing bleach couldn’t reverse. It was the embroidery, which was already starting to frizz, that had reason to be fussed over. When he sat down, he was mindful that he didn’t touch her tunic.

Knees creating moon-like craters in the sand, Gracie Bess approached Wesley’s feet with cupped hands. Right there within the fairgrounds, she trickled water over his pale skin until it had all sifted through her fingers.

Wesley told Gracie Bess of his revelation, claiming, “You have washed me clean.”

“Well, I don’t save souls,” Gracie Bess admitted. “I just wash feet.”

The wind grew temperamental and blew the blouse over so that it folded on top of itself. Before it could be swept back into the water, Wesley caught it and handed it to Gracie Bess, who folded it and placed it in her lap. Once more, his feet were covered in filth from trying to save her greatest treasure. Instead of scolding him, she made a bowl with her hands once more and doused them in lake water. Wesley would be clean if she could help it, but he could only stay that way if he wanted to. Gracie Bess had forgiven him, and that was all she could do.

Sophia Bucher

Grade 8, Parkway West Middle School

Educator: Tracy Bouslog

Personal Essay and Memoir



The Painter

As I gazed out the car window at the sprawling grass fields in Cape Girardeau, I closed my eyes and pictured the fields next to my grandmother's house; the same fields where my brother, Nolan, and I ran wildly during a photoshoot, our laughter echoed through the wild. We ran through the fields, past trees, tall flowers, and grass. I sprinted holding his hand in mine, my other hand lifting my dress into the air, away from the bright green grass; the color grass would be only in a dream. The bow that held my hair behind me flew through the wind like a fresh summer breeze. The click of the camera captured these moments that would soon become precious keepsakes. Once my family got the finished photos from the photographer, my great-grandmother, Grandma Peggy, decided she loved the images so much that she needed to create her interpretive paintings of the moment. She worked so hard for weeks painting away. Her passion showed with each brushstroke capturing our laughter and happiness. Her paintings soon became treasures that adorn our walls, reminding me of the love and beauty she saw in everything. My great-grandmother had been the best of all painters. She could paint anything. But her specialty was flowers. Her flower paintings were magnificent, from every paint stroke to every bright color, she put love into it all. She could paint peonies, sunflowers, lilies, and every rose. Anything one can think of, she could paint and make it look beautiful.

"Sophie, don't forget today should be about celebrating the great life she lived. Don't be sad," my mom said, sitting in the driver's seat of our car, acting like she wasn't afraid either. I could tell she was just putting on a brave face. How was I meant to be courageous? We were going to lose someone we love today.

Grandma Peggy had been fighting cancer for over a year now, her spirit flickering like a candle running out of wax. Her nurse at the nursing home told my grandma that it was unlikely she would live through the night. Not only had I grown up with Grandma Peggy, but so had my brother, mom, and grandma. I couldn't accept that I was on my way to the place where my Grandma Peggy would experience her last breath. Ever since learning about her diagnosis on my birthday, a day meant for joy had twisted into something dark, and I found myself wrestling with a petrifying truth that I didn't want to confront.

Hesitantly, I pulled open my car door and stepped out with my hands full of empty water bottles, crumbled-up food wrappers, and my tablet. My mom guided my brother and me to the large double door that belonged to a much larger building. It reminded me of a gigantic jail cell, holding my grandmother captive.

When my mom punched in the code to the building, we got a few steps in when a smiley worker welcomed us.

"Hello, welcome, welcome. Who are you here to visit today?" she said warmly, but her smile felt distant.

Once the worker showed us to my Grandma Peggy's room, I could feel the tears welling up in my eyes, almost begging to fall down my face, never-ending. There she was, propped up against a mound of pillows, with oxygen running through her nose making a quiet beeping sound. Her whole body looked as limp as a rag doll, this shocked me and hit me with a tidal wave that stole my breath away making me sway upon impact. Her room was small, yet complyable to her needs. There was a tiny rug underneath my feet and a miniature couch to my right. Though the smell of her room reminded me of her perfume, her perfume was her signature "comforting grandmother" scent that was a perfect balance of powdery floral, and warm amber. That warm scent threw me back into memories I had with her; making hot dogs over my stove on a skewer, and painting a unicorn, sunset, or a rainbow together. I couldn't shake the thought that the person I had made these wonderful memories with might not get a chance to remember them again. Even though she was in a very comfortable situation for her "last day" I couldn't help thinking she shouldn't need all of this; she should be happy and healthy.

Once my mom walked in and saw my grandma sitting next to my great-grandma's bed, she ran over to her and hugged her tight. Making my heart ache in pain for my poor grandmother; Grandma Peggy had been her whole world. My brother set our stuff on the floor next to the couch and sat down,

attempting to get comfortable. He had tried to hide his despair and saddening look, but anyone could see that even he was struggling.

For the next few hours, Grandma Peggy experienced consciousness off and on, she seemed to be exhausted and undergoing immense amounts of pain. Which in turn, made me fall deeper and deeper into my negative emotions; I could feel them taking over my whole body, head to toe. My mother told my brother and me to play the game Jenga to keep us distracted. We quietly played with no enthusiasm whatsoever. No one wanted to admit that we were simply forced to wait for a tragedy.

“I think it might be time,” said the nurse, her head facing the ground in respect.

Time stopped for a moment as everyone turned and looked at the nurse as if we were all begging for more time that she couldn’t give us.

My mom turned to my brother and me with tears welling up in her eyes, they glistened as she mumbled, “Let’s say our goodbyes.”

My older brother walked slowly to the side of her bed and looked up at my mom silently asking if he could hug her. My mom nodded slowly. Once my brother had said his last words, he backed up away from her bed. It was my turn. I walked toward her like I had feathers and not toes. I didn’t know what to say; I wasn’t ready for a goodbye. It was so quiet that I could hear the air circulating through the room. My mom softly nudged me, and I could almost hear her voice, *say something, anything*. I froze up. My lungs felt like they were compressed, and I couldn’t breathe. I wanted nothing more than time to yield, just so that I could capture her spirit and keep it with me. I quickly left my grandma’s room, closed the door behind me, and slid to the floor burying my face in my sweaty hands. I sobbed. I sobbed until my hands were drenched in human sadness. *How was anybody meant to say goodbye? How was I meant to say goodbye?* During those few minutes, I caught myself reminiscing about my favorite paintings of hers. I hadn’t even noticed until then that a few of her most loved creations were in her room. Amongst the many colorful flowers, one singular painting had been my favorite of all: the one of my brother and I running through the grassy fields giggling and smiling ear to ear at each other. I stood up just then and wiped my face with my sleeve, turning it a dark grey. I opened the door once more and saw my family huddled around each other sobbing, just as I was, but they were together. I walked over to them and asked the question that was bound to be asked. “Is she gone?”

“She is no longer with us,” Mom barely managed to get out. I could see her transparent tears, flowing down her face in unison.

I fought myself at that moment. How could I just lose the chance to say a last and final goodbye to Grandma Peggy? I could have told her about how I would miss our stove-made hotdogs and always remember the beautiful flowers in her handmade paintings. I could have promised to keep those paintings safe for her. But the truth is, the coruscating paintings she had left for me couldn't bring back the chance to utter unsaid words.

Sophie Buchowski

Grade 11, John Burroughs School
Educators: Joy Gebhardt and Jeanne
Gillanders
Short Story



A Mother's Dance

"The start is always easy, it's the ending that is the hardest," I whisper to myself. As the heavy velvet curtains part, bright white light shines directly on me, its radiance so intense that it's difficult to keep my eyes from squinting shut. The audience disappears into the abyss of light but the dust particles still swirl in the air accompanied by the subtle pitter patter of the children adjusting themselves in the scratchy seats. The sweet sounds of the A, D, and F chords on the Tchaikovsky Op. 20 piano track awakens the auditorium. With each note, my body responds instinctively, rising onto the very tips of my toes, every muscle coiled while my stomach clenches, cutting off exhalations. As I launch into the air, the old blisters pulse with their own heartbeat, and the thin skin is hot against the hard cedar of the pointe shoe. With each pirouette, the harsh glare of the spotlight melds seamlessly with the obsidian backdrop. The scent of freshly polished wood mingles with the faint aroma of salty sweat, but I am not thinking about the dance itself, only how the rush of air cools the cakey foundation sticking on my face like honey and how when I spin my earrings gently clink together and

I am a child and Mommy is performing on stage. She starts spinning faster and faster, arms twirling in a perfect circle above her head until I can't even see her eyes anymore. A pirouette, she calls it. Her dress reflects a thousand stars under the bright lights, and every time she jumps, it's like she's floating, barely touching the ground. Like a fairy. Magic. Perched on the edge of the seat, I squirm as the scratchy fabric irritates my bare legs, but Daddy rests his hand on my shoulder and whispers to be quiet. His warm breath tickles my ear. Lips sealed, no noise. I play with my dolls, moving their plastic limbs back and forth, but the knees won't budge. I brush their yellow hair,

fingers separating the scratchy bits from the smooth parts with equal care. Drawing them closer, their smooth, buttery, pale skin cools my cheeks and they smell like baby powder and fresh cupcakes. They smile at me! Sometimes they even blink if I position them just right. I make them lean in close so that their little plastic heads meet. I hear nothing but the clink, clink, clink.

I gaze into the glaring stage lights, avoiding the sea of faces that surrounds me, their presence palpable yet distant compared to the looming edge of the stage. With only three minutes remaining, I divert my gaze to the mundane details scattered across the stage—a black smudge of gum stubbornly clinging to the floorboards, the dull and vacant stares of the props behind the side curtains, the solitary glow of the exit sign. Yet, the weight of the frilly pink tutu still threatens to overwhelm me with each cumbersome step. Its coarse texture scrapes uncomfortably against my skin and with every movement, it seems to entangle itself around my limbs. As I spin, the netting flirts with the sparse hairs on my inner thighs, sending tiny electric shocks up my spine and igniting an itch that spreads across my entire body. The air whooshes past me every spin and this stupid, suffocating tutu hits my tired legs and my knees lock in, I can't move, *I am a child and Mommy is watching me. The dance studio buzzes with activity as I twirl and spin in my tutu, feeling the fabric bump against me with each movement. The sheer material brushes against my tights, tickling my skin. Glancing into the mirror, I catch sight of my reflection and spot Mommy sitting quietly in the back of the room. She's there with the other moms, her legs crossed and her camera poised in her hands. As I watch the older, formidable girls dance in front of the room, I try my best to copy their moves, stumbling over my pointe shoes. When they finish, I rush to my favorite spot at the barre, but Ms. Taylor's voice stops me short. "Slow down," she tersely calls out, and I obey, shuffling forward. In my elegant dress adorned with ivory lace and delicate diamond-studded flowers, I feel like a princess. But the tight bun squeezes my scalp so tight it's difficult to smile. As I reach the climax of my performance, I leap into the air with all the grace I can muster. But then, I lose my balance and come crashing down. I try to hold back the tears, clamping down on my bottom lip. Mommy rushes to my side, her arms open wide. Her slobbery lipstick leaves a smudge on my cheek as she pulls me into a tight hug. "The ending is always the hardest," she whispers softly. "But I'm so proud of you, my little ballerina."*

As I steady myself, I clamp down on my bottom lip so fiercely that I taste the metallic tang of blood—a habit I've cultivated. It all began with the dolls, then neat rows of pristine white, and the rigid confines of tutus and corsets—her remnants etching their mark on ardor, obliterating it to ruins. Now, amidst the

cramps and aches from the constant arabesques, pirouettes, and jetés searing through my body, a sensation of weightlessness doggedly persists when my feet barely graze the stage, each leap synchronized effortlessly with the music, a delicate, fairy-like magic. The air whips through my hair as I twirl, adding to the blood coursing through my veins, while the rapt faces of young girls in the audience, their eyes wide with wonder, evoke a glistening tear in the corner of my eye. As the piano notes fade, signaling the culmination of the performance, I prepare for the final grand jeté. The ending is always the hardest. With a sudden burst of energy, I propel myself into the air, one leg soaring skyward while the other pushes off the ground. My fingertips graze the air above, tantalizingly close to brushing against the ceiling, if only for a fleeting second before my foot makes contact with the stage once more. And just like that, the dance ends. As the final notes of the piano stop, a hush falls over the auditorium, only to be shattered by the eruption of applause that follows. Yet all I can hear is the rapid rhythm of my own breathing, the hiss and woosh that reverberate in my ears and drown out the external world. As I stand gasping for air, I gaze into the audience and spot all the little girls with their little dolls looking up in awe to their mothers. From what I remember

I am a child and Mommy is lying still on a hospital bed. The walls are blindingly white, the air smells like cleaning supplies, and the fluorescent lights overhead magnify even the smallest details. Mommy lies in the center of it all, her figure dwarfed under the hospital sheets. I don't even recognize her anymore. Her head is shaved, and her skin looks almost translucent, like glass. Tubes crisscross her body, disappearing under the covers and reappearing with bags of clear liquid hanging from them. Daddy's here too, sitting by Mommy's side. He's wearing his glasses, but they keep slipping down his nose. His hands tremble while he wipes away tears with the sleeve of his shirt, his eyes red-rimmed and weary. I've never seen him cry before. The nurse comes in every so often, wearing her scrubs and a smile that doesn't quite reach her eyes. She checks the machines next to Mommy's bed, tapping on screens and scribbling things on a clipboard. She utters to Daddy but I can't hear anything, only the constant beep-beep of the machine next to Mommy's bed, and the whooshing coming from what Daddy says is a ventilator, like the wind blowing, so much wind. Hiss... whoosh... hiss...whoosh. I reach out to touch Mommy's hand, but it feels cold and lifeless, like touching a statue. I can't help but notice how still she is, how her chest barely rises and falls with each breath. Is she even breathing? I lean in close and whisper in her ear, "Please don't leave me, Mommy." But Mommy doesn't stir. She doesn't even flutter her eyelids. She kept reminding me the ending is always the hardest.

Anabelle Chu

Grade 8, Parkway West Middle School

Educator: Tracy Bouslog

Personal Essay and Memoir



I H8 Ten-Year-Olds

Ten-year-olds, my worst nightmare, and my mortal enemy. I watched them from a distance, but I never attempted to breach the 50-foot proximity that I placed around them. But you know what also scared me, makeup stores. The pictures of flawless models, rows of lip glosses, and the influencers who gave mini makeup hauls which were anything but mini. The aura of beauty standards, perfection, and confidence that I never had, radiated from the white and black striped building which was supposed to be a place for adults, but it turned into a daycare filled with kids with the average age of 10. But one day the two things I hated came together and were branded by the internet with the title “Sephora kid”. Which I never saw, until now.

“We are going to the mall to do some shopping!” My mom announced I sprang up, while a wide smile crept onto my face, and I rushed to get ready. I double-knotted my shoes and prepared for a triathlon, most commonly known as the mall, where you shop, eat, and shop some more, it’s every teenager’s dream. When we arrived, my eyes widened as I struggled to comprehend the sheer size of the building. It felt like I was on an entirely different planet with the sounds of stomping feet, loud chatter, and the smell of Chick-fil-A’s crispy chicken sandwiches throughout the air. I walked around the mall while staring at the mannequins dressed in clean white shoes and crop tops that all of the girls at school wore but me. But the inevitable happened as soon as the dreaded building came into view, its big blocky letters staring back at me. Then my mom stopped suddenly, “Oh I just ran out of my perfume,” she declared, “let’s go to Sephora so I can get a new one!”

Oh no, oh no the name had been mentioned. My feet felt like bricks as I cautiously dragged them closer to the daunting entrance while I searched around

the massive store. *Great no little kids, or at least anyone that I know* I thought, I breathed a sigh of relief. When we stepped inside I muttered complaints under my breath while a lady welcomed us with a smile that seemed fake as she asked us what we were looking for. My mom got some recommendations and then we were off. Left alone in an ocean of shimmery makeup and skincare smoothies that my mom would never let me buy. I curiously asked my mom, "So... what did that lady recommend to you?" Just when the words came out of her lips I froze in horror as she recommended the internet's most famous body spray. Sol de Janaro. The walk to the small display felt like miles as I kept my eye glued to my double-knotted shoes and I felt a river of sweat on the back of my neck, hoping not to make eye contact with a Sephora employee. Eventually, I gained the courage to look up, and my eyes were met with brightly colored bottles filled to the brim with fragrant alcohol, but then came the all too familiar smell; the entire display reeked of the stench of the "popular girls" in my grade. The nauseating fumes radiated from the bottles, it smelled like a mix of flowers left too long in their vase and burnt chocolate chip cookies, which brought back the noises of their muffled laughter and their faces of haughty disgust.

No wonder I hate this place, I thought while waving my hand underneath my nose, thinking that the bad memories would fly away with the stench of the perfume. I gave the bottles of body spray a death stare while I clenched my fists so tight they turned white. My shopping trip was ruined. But suddenly my ears were welcomed with the sound of cascading footsteps of a group of 10-year-old girls fresh out of Lululemon. They wore shorts deemed too short by my mom, and tank tops with straps which were less than three fingers wide. They held their Stanly water bottles that were twice their size and also had applied too many layers of mascara, causing dark clumps of it to cling to their eyelids. They were talking loudly with their shoulders back as they stomped around like they owned the place. My worst fear, my eternal adversary, showed up at the place I hated most. *What do I do, what do I do*, I thought as my eyes darted around the store looking for some sort of answer that was never going to appear.

The pace of my breath quickened, as I quickly chose to run, out of the two options my brain could comprehend; I stuttered my words to my mom as I urged her to make a choice. "Chill out, Stop rushing me, this thing is an investment!" My mom retorted. I mentally rolled my eyes and attempted to help out, but my hands were shaking. No, everything was shaking, it was like an earthquake was below me but I was the only one who could feel it. My social anxiety kicked in as millions of possibilities containing these little girls spawned in my head," *What if*

they start to point and laugh at me, or whisper behind my back? Nervously I asked, “Ummmm Mom can we go look at the lip oils?” I anxiously tugged on her arm, desperate to lower the chances of interacting with them. I dragged her to the other side of the store and partended to be interested in lip oils. But above the isle, I left my eyes glued on them, while taking the first full breath since they walked in. I thought, *what are they going to do? Destroy makeup products? Yell at workers? Conbust into McDonald's french fries? But no.* They act normal, perusing the isles and chatting quietly. My mouth dropped. *Wait this is not what is supposed to happen,* I thought, *popular girls were just created to be annoying self-absorbed, good-for-nothing brats that were rude to everyone.*

I walked out of Sephora with more than just an angry mom, as I sat in the backseat of our car, feeling her waves of frustration. The car’s silence felt suffocating, as I uncomfortably shifted my weight in my seat because it wasn’t the kind of quiet I was used to. I stared out the window, feeling as if I needed to go back and apologize, because, for the first time in a while, I wondered if maybe my gut had been wrong. I found myself twirling my fingers around each other, as my buzzing thoughts fought for dominance in my brain. I shook my head, my thoughts still tangled. But something inside me had shifted. Maybe the mortal enemy was my skewed perception.

Claire Coleman

Grade 8, Basehor-Linwood Middle School

Educator: Erin Tegtmeier

Personal Essay and Memoir



A Lesson From Little Me

Little feet ran through streams and splashed through the mud. Little fingers crafted sandcastles that could barely stand but were just enough to satisfy, and little hearts lived a life stress free and limitless. When we were younger, we were not perfect, but we were enough. Our imagination ran wild through our little bodies, and we had dreams bigger than our eyes could see. However, when we grew up, our big fairytale dreams were replaced by living a perfect and geometrical life.

When we look at ourselves in the mirror and what we have become, we are either disappointed or proud of the outcome through the glass. When I look at my reflection, I see imperfection. I see the parts of me that need to be improved and fixed, rather than see the beauty. I don't see much of a future ahead but rather a road block and constant construction. I wonder why my life isn't together and planned out like that little girl in the past had it. Grow up to be a princess, become so intelligent that you win every gold star in school, and fly through life with an infinite supply of pixie dust. Why can't I get it together? Little me had no issue with the person she was, or the person she was bound to be.

I sometimes believe that I have let that little girl down. Like I have taken her big dreams to become an Olympic gymnast and quit on the spot. I have given everything I have to finish that vision, but God had other plans. I've tried to pick up a ball and play like that little girl dreamed of doing but couldn't seem to set my mind to it and had little faith in myself. That little girl enjoyed learning and growing in her education, and sometimes I can barely pick up a pencil. I feel as if i've failed to be the girl she's always wanted to be.

I started to seek popularity and reassurance from those around me that I fit in with everyone else. I started wearing makeup, dressing to make a good impression, and caring what others perceive of me. I didn't realize that it can take away from how I think of myself. I can see my younger self looking up at me, and wondering why I have gone down the path that everyone else takes. Why couldn't I take my own path and not care who walked with me like I did back then? Little me didn't seek reassurance; instead, she was confident and certainly never cared what anyone else thought about the way dressed. I sometimes dream of being so independent and carefree as I once was.

However, there is one thing I forget to remind myself. I don't have to abide by the rules of society, and I definitely do not need to be perfect. I need to stop wishing to be that independent little girl with big dreams, and I need to find her still within me. She is still here and was never lost, just forgotten. I am still fully capable of finding my own, independent path through life. Sometimes I have to let my mind not be so perfect and planned out, but just go along with what is to come with an open heart. I can still dance in the rain, play with my imagination, and seek happiness. Sometimes, it takes a little practice to find the child within you, but it is never too late to be back in touch with the littler, younger version of you.

Isabelle Cox-Garleanu

Grade 11, Mary Institute & Saint Louis

Country Day School

Poetry



Eulogy for Okasan

i.

Your mouth, a kiss fountain of youth coming
down for me from the sun.

The more you fall, the more you will rise, you always told me
but Okasan I'm not like you. That is to say,
I have no desire to end before becoming endless.
I keep licking the clouds to try and find you,
but Okasan the sky is full of graveyards,
portals to the underground.

Everyday I keep your name between my teeth.
Does it hurt when I bite it? Can you feel it in death?
Do you forgive me for ransacking your skeleton, curled into
the sun or son you always wanted, splitting myself
in half for you to come back?
Look at me, Okasan.
Look down and fall into home.
You will rise.

ii.

Today my dreams close.
adorn the lily pad calves
when I pray for you.
to pray *for* you as in
or pray for *you* as in
But I no longer
You deserve to be

Red lace cuts
that press onto the church floor
I'm unsure whether
I wish you to be better
I want you.
play at praying.
conjugated with every

lively verb but Okasan
to be conjured no matter
I plant. The deceased
in the moon, carve
I'm scared to feel
I'm scared to
for me between silence
I'm scared too,

iii.

To love you is to
die with you even if only
your pulse stops—not mine.

your spirit refuses
how many moonflowers
are said to live
magic in it, birth light in it.
your (f)light.
fly, even if you are waiting
and salvation. Okasan,
you know.

Isabelle Cox-Garleanu

Grade 11, Mary Institute & Saint Louis

Country Day School

Critical Essay



Language “Propriety” in Francophone Nations: Inclusivity and Imposition

Government officials have to make numerous difficult decisions, including what role language plays in their constituents’ lives. They can ensure that a language is spoken “properly,” or in some cases, spoken at all. In the francophone world, this struggle takes center stage as nations grapple with questions surrounding the adoption and usage of French—a language that has not only charted its own course through history but has also left an indelible mark on other nations around the world. As officials ponder the proper application of French in everyday life, a fundamental question emerges: does linguistic propriety maintain societal differences and oppress marginalized groups? In particular, the gendered nature of French grammar raises concerns regarding gender inequality. Pressure on traditional French, though, does not arise only from the desire for equity—French, like many other languages around the world, is subject to influences from other cultures and languages. Should governments, therefore, take defensive measures, as adopted for instance in Quebec?

Finally, “properness” not only refers to the application or specific grammatical stylistic choices within a language, but also the choice of language itself, as it is quite salient in formal francophone colonies. Should governments of former French colonies in Africa, where other languages have been spoken for a long time and are still prevalent in communities, make French the central administrative language? Would such a decision be fair to individuals or beneficial to society? As the world evolves, so too must our understanding of linguistic propriety and its role in shaping societies. In my opinion, the best way of construing a “proper” language would allow for enough flexibility to improve

society over time, yet not undergo such dramatic changes that it alienates previous generations or jeopardizes rich cultural heritages.

The oppression of women in gendered French. *L'Académie Française*, or the French Academy, is the government council in France that has national authority over the usage, vocabulary, and grammar of the French language. Often closely working with high-ranking officials, even the head of state, over the years it has faced pressing debate regarding the nature of gendered nouns and the default masculine gender in plural. In the past, girls in France were often withdrawn from schooling earlier than boys, leading to the absence of feminine forms for many French professional nouns (Hellinger et al.). For instance, according to the French Academy, “professor” only exists in its masculine form, “*un professeur*,” with the institution rejecting the feminine form, “*une professeure*,” despite the fact that it follows the feminization rules. As Mairi McLaughlin from the French Department at UC Berkeley remarks, “the issue is about textual visibility of females and the historical suppression of feminine textual visibility” (Yi et al.). By omitting women from grammatical structures, it is clear that sexism in the French lexicon is still reinforced by the Academy. The Academy attempts to repress femininity beyond France’s borders — in North Africa, Switzerland, Belgium, Canada, and more. However, many Quebecois publishers have adopted “*une professeure*” in dictionaries as a means to express support and advocacy for the inclusion of women (Robinson). While, grammatically, the term is improper, it has been coined to uplift women and challenge traditional gender norms. Another large group of passionate feminists in France have also called for “inclusive writing,” which addresses linguistic gender inequality by incorporating middots to avoid the default masculine form of plural nouns. For instance, in “*les étudiante·s sont intelligente·s*”, both female and male students are acknowledged through the addition of the feminine “e” (Devsure). In 2021, France’s education minister, Jean-Michel Blanquer, banned the style’s use in public schools and such policy has remained intact since (Vivian). Millions of feminists found the decision egregious, claiming that without such inclusivity the gendered nature of the language nurtures sexist outcomes, and that shifting to a gender-neutral version would improve women’s status in society (Timsit). Private companies, private schools, and even Microsoft Word, have incorporated inclusive writing.

Inclusivity versus traditional “properness.” According to The Atlantic, those who strongly dislike inclusive writing and favor the French Academy’s propriety complained that there is not enough evidence that altering a language

can really change social realities (Timsit). Furthermore, they thought it would unnecessarily complicate education. A study in 2023, though, drew on evidence from other gendered languages. Hebrew, as spoken in Israel, is grammatically gendered as well. In December 2009, Israel's National Institute of Testing and Evaluation adjusted the form of address used in the Psychometric Entrance Test from the singular masculine to the plural masculine, which is considered a more masculine gender-neutral form (Cohen, et al.). The test scores before and after the change indicate that the transition to a more gender-neutral language positively impacted women's performance in quantitative sections, where they are expected to usually struggle (Cohen, et al.). The better performances of women allowed them to attend better universities, and consequently earn higher throughout their careers. A decade later, The World Bank confirmed this notion, concluding that gendered languages are associated with worse labor market participation rates for women and more regressive gender norms. This is because there is often a lack of female role model on paper, in books, and in oral communication. To speak and write properly then, means to hinder progression towards a more gender equal and fair society. It is important to recognize that language not only reflects societal attitudes but also influences them. What is considered proper has been marginalizing women for centuries. I believe that linguistic propriety should therefore adapt to reflect what is most sensible in a changing social landscape.

Efforts to prevent anglophonization in Canada. On the other side of the world, the Canadian province of Quebec has begun to grow increasingly hostile towards anglophone arrivals. Over the recent years, English has been increasingly spoken alongside French. A somewhat amusing, but telling, illustration is the adoption of the *Bonjour-hi* method in workplaces and shops, aiming to greet both French and English speakers appropriately. However, Montreal's mayor, Valerie Plante, loathes this method. She is a fierce advocate for the exclusive use of "bonjour" as a greeting: "Although we want to be welcoming to everybody, we should be proud and encourage people to only say Bonjour" (Laframboise). A 2024 study conducted by the Office québécois de la langue française revealed a decline in the use of exclusively French greetings in Montreal, from 84% in 2010 to 71% at present (Feith). *Bonjour-hi* has sparked significant controversy over the years, redefining culture and offending older generations who, like their mayor, wish to only be addressed in French. In June 2022, the city of Quebec passed Bill 96, which requires new immigrants and refugees to communicate with provincial officials exclusively in French six

months after arriving or face a loss of services (Silva and Guzman). Intended to preserve French more strictly than before, it is officially known as “an Act respecting French, the official and common language of Québec.” However, Bill 96 calls for more than simple “respect”: it mandates that businesses, workplaces, schools, and websites use French throughout, effectively marginalizing the anglophone community. Critics even deem it unconstitutional due to a supposed violation of Section 23 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which holds that Canadian citizens have a right to be educated in either English or French (Singer). Furthermore, by risking to drive away groups that may feel excluded, such rigid rules could also negatively impact French speakers themselves as it fails to foster an economically and socially vibrant environment.

Enforcing French in Senegalese and Moroccan schools. While these countries grapple with the form of the French language, former French colonies in Africa face even more fundamental challenges: should they keep French as the official language in their educational systems, administration, and general public life? These choices have given rise to a class divide based on speech patterns and language proficiency. Take Senegal, for example, where Wolof, a traditional language, has gained prominence over French. Etienne Smith, a scholar from Columbia University’s Committee on Global Thought, observes that more and more politicians speak the language of the people, Wolof, which helps them to connect with citizens through slang (Colombant). As a result, young children, most of whom speak Wolof at home, often struggle when introduced to French-dominated schooling systems (Christian). Instead of focusing on subjects like mathematics or advanced reading, they grapple with the unfamiliar language, hindering their educational progress. They are denied the opportunity to learn in the language they know best. An even bigger problem might be that the Senegalese teachers often lack fluency in French themselves. Recognizing this issue, the Senegalese Minister of Education launched a program aimed at training teachers to adequately communicate in French within the classroom (Christoff). However, this seemingly well intentioned effort to uphold the French language has inadvertently only proven to Senegal how large the setback in education and overall language proficiency has really been.

Other African countries, such as Morocco, have had even more complex experiences tied to the official usage of the French language. While the French colonizers imposed their language, several decades after gaining independence in 1954, Morocco began to “import” teachers from Syria and Egypt in order to lead what is called the “Arabization” process (Sourgo). However, in 2016, after

thirty years of Arabicized education, the Council of Moroccan Ministers decided to reintroduce the French language for scientific and technical instruction in school. An anonymous deputy reacted to this decision: “This project shows . . . to what extent our country depends on France” (Brousky).

The Senegalese Minister of Education and the Council of Moroccan Ministers may not be placing sufficient weight on the fact that forcing a language upon people is damaging and perpetuates inequality. In communities where another language is widely spoken already, reliance on French is not needed. The forced imposition of it impedes education and economic opportunities for those who are not proficient in the language, which is over three quarters of citizens. It is also crucial to consider that this language is French, a language forced upon Senegal and Morocco by the French themselves during periods of colonization. In eschewing Wolof and Arabic, these countries are therefore exemplifying an uncomfortable loyalty to the formal colonial power. In his book *Portrait du colonisé, précédé du colonisateur*, Albert Memmi explains where the desire to uphold French even stems from. He writes that when a country (such as Senegal) is colonized, “the maternal language of the colonized loses its dignity [...] in order to get a job, have a home, exist in the city and in the world, one must first bend to the language of others, the colonizers, the masters.” The presence of French in formerly colonized Africa continues to this day to devalorize traditional African languages and cause many to feel like “foreigners in their own country” (Memmi). By heavily enforcing the usage of French in schools and higher education, the government is then establishing a linguistic hierarchy and cultural subservience. This action may not only be inefficient but also unethical, as it raises concerns about the preservation of cultural sovereignty and historical power dynamics. Because of this, many Senegalese writers face uncertainty when deciding whether to write in their native languages or French. While writing in French may enable access to a wider audience, including university scholars and readers globally, 80% of Senegalese citizens would be unable to read or understand the work.

Redefining “proper language.” The concept of linguistic propriety should aim to promote the maximal contribution of language to the quality of life. By necessity, it is a multifaceted concept. First of all, the foremost role of language is communication; language should be easy to use and natural, allowing for effective interhuman relations where private life as well as work, education, and other aspects of public life are concerned. Second, this communication role can, and should be, fulfilled without alienating any group or perpetuating stereotypes

or inequities, no matter how long of a history these have or how deep-seated they are. Having said that, cultural identities and traditions are also important, and contribute to human satisfaction. On balance, it seems to me that there is room to relax parts of the old notion of “propriety.” In particular, in such situations as those of the African former French colonies, a better language choice can likely be made, which would preserve an ability to communicate at the national level but also enhance education and economic life. At the same time, French could continue to be taught as a favored subject, allowing continued relations with the francophone world and natural access to another culture. Where inclusion is concerned, we should remind ourselves that languages are alive, and have changed for centuries. I conclude, therefore, that language propriety should be allowed to evolve in order to accommodate what society needs. But we should not fight change too strenuously, especially if it comes at the detriment of the cultural preservations and older generations. I am thus in favor of a relaxation of some grammatical rules, the adoption of new — inclusive — terms, and even the acceptance of occasional expressions of foreign influence.

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Isabelle Cox-Garleanu

Grade 11, Mary Institute & Saint Louis
Country Day School
Poetry



Metamorphosis of the End

Some are not native to their shadows.
This I learned when an eagle
kissed my backyard tree,
its wings splitting onto the bark,
spilling into red lace.
Mama said it wasn't
unusual, that predators turn into
their own prey every
once in a while. She picked up the
carcass, handcrafted
a graveyard, and grinded its ghost
into the ground. I was six then, still
playing at praying,
questioning what would
happen to the bird now:

Will it—could it—fly wherever it was to go next?

A bird without wings is a
hopeless dreamer.
Or a resilient fighter.
I'm not sure which one. But in death,
there's no dying again.
Hence it becomes a rocket, roaring

towards a target that is not itself but
someone's liver—

a place to rest, to feed, to haunt
(they're all synonyms).

It's fine. Everything finds its purpose
even as it falls apart, a part of life,
because sometimes the
ones who can't reach heaven are the
ones who make it
bloom from

below. That's what I want to do.
Burnish a dreamer's eyes.

Morph myself into that backyard tree.
Rip feathers into faith.

And maybe become a taxidermist, too.

Isabelle Cox-Garleanu

Grade 11, Mary Institute & Saint Louis

Country Day School

Poetry



Romanian Rhapsody

a boy told me once that he couldn't date a romanian girl
said my body maps a country he refuses to go inside
said he likes rebellious girls but not rebellion as if I was an
oppressive law from the 80s with duct tape to dictate &
breasts colder than the war my aunt was killed in yes I remember
interviewing my father for a school project on family history
he taught himself to sew the moon to his face when drowning
in a plethora of dust at age 9 what else was he supposed to do
back then family wasn't given it was earned & beauty emanated
not from money but from love because it is that much rarer
for eyes to be burnished by the sight of another human
sometimes I compare that boy to the apocalypse a collapse of
common sense & recall how his tongue had stupidly
somersaulted as it assaulted a place I hadn't been to since 2
a place my father stitched shut like a wound he couldn't
bear to see bleed again
that boy with his crumbling venom never understood the
way I have learned to love with walls that need climbing just to
keep the past from spilling out of my bones
& someday I will rebel by telling him that
rebellion is not always loud
sometimes it's surviving the smallest moments like
standing straight-backed in a room where stories sit heavier
than furniture or looking in the mirror to see
eyes that resemble your oppressor's

sometimes I still dream of the country sewn into my skin
pale river-like veins that flow from carpathians to the danube
he could never grasp how borders stretch beyond lines
into blood into song into the stubborn pulse of memory
& how love love love becomes a kind of resistance
an act of threading together all the torn places
teaching yourself that your own country is enough
because hate is weightless against it



The Price of Passage

Ash thinks, dully, that it would have been romantic to watch the blurry outline of Earth dwindle farther, and farther away. It would have been nice, perhaps, to reminisce about his life there as he hurdles at a blinding speed towards X-42A1. The janitor's closet he is currently squeezed into however- (he has lost feeling in exactly 2 legs and 1 arm)- not only lacks the windows for this sentimental fantasy to play out, but prevents him from thinking about much else other than the overwhelming odor of mold. He awkwardly shifts his shoulder, checking his watch. *Seven minutes.* He presses his ear to the door. From the hallway to the left, Ash begins to hear faint footsteps growing closer to his hiding spot. The footsteps are heavy, pausing periodically, as if this person is looking for something. *Not supposed to happen,* he notes. Nobody was supposed to be in sector A4 of the ship, as it was purely a space for task droids to conduct maintenance. With his head against the cool metal of the door, Ash waits for the stranger to pass. However, after reaching the closet, they stop. His heartbeat quickens. He racks his brain for every camera he'd marked on the ship's blueprint and disabled, every unusual noise he'd heard. After some consideration, he pulls out his daggers (as well as he can in this position) and prepares himself to deal with who he reasons is probably someone's lost uncle, roaming in search of a restroom. It is imperative, he reminds himself, that no one can know he is on this ship until he reaches the exit. He will do what he has to.

Ash has spent two years arranging to board The Transport, an escape ship for humanity's elite. He's bartered for information, worked odd jobs for credits, all for the end goal of sneaking in through the cargo lot located on the underside of the ship. This was a dangerous operation: to the guards on the ship considered

stowaways a common vermin. And they were treated as such if they were caught. He was aware of the risk, but as for every other unwelcome passenger on The Transport, it was an opportunity to fulfill their most unrealistic dreams. To get a comfortable job. To live a new life on a planet with no war. More than anything, Ash just wanted to get away. He wanted to hurl himself a million lightyears away from the place that had taken everything from him, so that maybe one day he could forget how it had happened.

A man swings the closet door open, his gray hair slicked back. He stares at Ash and blinks, his hand resting on the closet's doorknob. He holds a bath towel in one hand, and wears flip flops. He steps back, startled. "Wh- ?" Before the man can stutter out a word, Ash leaps up, and slams the hilt of his dagger into his head, knocking him out. He catches him as he falls, stumbling slightly under his weight, and stuffs him into the janitor's closet, making sure to place him with some amount of caution, considering the older man's age. *He'll be fine*, Ash consoles himself, hands on his hips. As an afterthought, he presses a nearby help button. He knows the droids on this ship to be fairly old, so it'll be at least 10 minutes until they arrive, at which point Ash will be long gone. He checks his watch. *Five minutes*.

Moving towards sector B, Ash passes through a corridor with a large window. From here, he can see a deep green planet. The bright orange-yellow dots of civilization are just visible, illuminating a city center. It was strange to think that this was his home now.

Realistically, Ash didn't know exactly what he would do when he found himself at their destination, and in fact, all he knew about it was the planet's name: X-42A1. This planet was one of the many that humanity had colonized after the complete destruction of Earth's most populous cities through nuclear bombing. The following "humanitarian efforts" that included the creation of The Transport, were only offered to citizens who were willing to dish out \$50,000,000- an unimaginable sum of money for many who had lost everything in the war. The war had occurred only 11 years ago, when Ash was 8. Earth's most powerful nations had broken their centuries old cold war, and concluded that it was necessary- they believed that the enemy's moral ambiguity, their dangerous, untrustworthy nature had demanded complete destruction. Millions had died in an instant, and the survivors found themselves in an unfamiliar world, one without convenience, instantaneous communication, or any amount of security from the old world's government.

A woman's voice crackles onto the ship's intercom. *"Welcome to X-42A1. Please remain in your suite."* Ash slides a glass door open, strolling into the cabin. As he moves down the aisle, he straightens his posture and slows his pace. The people— neurosurgeons, lawyers, investors— seated in the aisle, glance at him as he passes. A middle aged man with a beard throws away an untouched pastry into a disposal bin. Ash knew they never had to worry about money, or food, or war. They never had to worry, he knew, because for them, there would always be another Transport. Ash nods to them as he passes, his mud-splattered boots thumping against the pristine carpet beneath them.

A chime indicates the ship's arrival. The intercom crackles to life once more. *"Please be mindful of others as you disembark. Checked baggage will be delivered to you shortly."* Lights flicker on along the aisle, illuminating a path to a grand archway that marks the lobby entrance. Ash slides past families waiting for baggage, and the attendants scrambling to help them lug their enormous suitcases from compartments. He passes under the archway, entering the lobby. Sparse tropical plants dot the lobby's interior, doing little to soften its harsh, white sterility. A line of impatient passengers have already begun to gather at the security line, papers in hand. Ash files in, observing the manner in which each of them approaches the stiff looking guard at the front of the line, and hands him their papers. Behind the exit is another white room. It appears similar to the gates of the old world's airports that Ash still bears fuzzy half memories of, adorned with flickering holograms on every empty wall. This gate is filled with anxiously awaiting family members, some holding small projectors, displaying messages in the air such as: *"Welcome Home Robert!!"* Ash realizes that he's almost to the front of the line. The guard barks something to a nearby security officer, who raises an eyebrow, and moves his hand to his holstered gun. Searching for the source of commotion, Ash's eyes settle on a little girl, no older than eight, trembling under the gaze of the guard. "I-I have it....I swear! I had it in my bag a moment ago—" She smiles weakly, frantically digging through a dingy pink backpack with glittering purple seams. Ash feels something resembling anxiety settle in his stomach. The girl has two shiny black braids, tied neatly at the ends with pink ribbon. She's wearing a bright yellow raincoat, and matching rubber boots. It was startling how much she resembled Ash's sister from behind, but he knew that if she turned around, he wouldn't see those same wide, brown eyes. The fact that she resembled his sister, however, wasn't exactly the reason he felt this dread. He had seen this girl, with her sunny attire, when he had entered

the ship in the cargo lot earlier that day. He had thought that she was very young to be doing this on her own.

The little girl pleads with the guard, but he's relentless. He doesn't care that she had gotten on board just fine, that she swears she'd had her ticket until just now. The girl steps out of line, trying to see the crowd of families waiting on the other side of the gate. She searches almost desperately, before her eyes land on a boy who looks about Ash's age. The boy, wearing a dark turtleneck, pushes past the crowd to get closer. He yells something, her name, maybe. The security officer approaches her, and grabs her by the arm. Ash has no desire to watch, he knows what comes next. The guard will check the long list of passenger names. He will conclude that she was not meant to board. He will conclude that she had boarded illegally. The security officer will unholster his gun, and drag this girl away. The boy will watch in horror, as his sister, his cousin- whatever their relationship is- is dragged away to some dark corner of the ship, where she will die. The passengers will all hear the gunshot, but they'll pretend they didn't.

The boy behind the gate yells, begging the guard to let her through. He shoves his papers in the direction of the guard, who shakes his head, moving closer to him, maybe to arrest him too. Ash comes to a realization. The guard's back is turned, and the security officer is distracted with the girl. He averts his eyes, checks his watch. *Two minutes.* The line moves forward without him. The little girl he wishes he could have saved is not alive. This wasn't his problem. Ash sighs. "Fuck."

He shoves his way to the front, weaving through shocked onlookers, and positions himself behind the security guard. He draws his daggers, and holds them at his sides until he's close enough. Ash drives the blade into the man's shoulder. The security officer notices him too late, busy with the stubborn girl attempting to bite off a finger or two. The officer grunts, letting go of the girl, and grabs his gun with his uninjured arm. He lunges, grazing the officer's side with one of his blades. Abruptly, a shot is fired behind Ash. He whips his head around for a moment, to see the boy, releasing the limp body of the guard he has just shot in the head. Screams arise from the crowd around him, people moving away from the body in shocked horror. The boy runs towards the girl, taking her into his arms before turning to run back. The security officer's eyes widen in panic, giving Ash an opening. He knocks the gun to the side, causing it to skitter across the lacquered floor. He's then thrown onto his back, ribs aching with a kick from the man's steel toed boots. Before he can scramble to his feet, the man grabs his gun, and slams the butt into Ash's skull, causing white spots to bloom into his

vision. The boy behind him stops. The girl is saying something too quiet to hear. Ash stumbles to his feet. The little girl runs towards him with a determined expression, a glitter in her eyes. All too quickly, she's wrenching free from the boy's arms. He reaches for her. All too quickly, the security officer realizes that she's in range. A bullet zips through the air, and through the girl's frail body. The boy lets out a strangled scream, running to her. Too quickly, a rippling pool of blood is growing underneath the body. Ash recognizes a look of rage, of desperation, in the boy's eyes, as he kneels in front of her, smoothing over crimson soaked clothes. He fires at the staggering security officer, even after his body is still. He knows that feeling, that realization, that nothing more can be done. The girl had made the wrong choice, to try to save Ash, the same way he had made the wrong choice to try and save her. Ash feels dizzy, his head throbbing. He feels as if he's wading through honey, or swimming through a pool of mud. He feels the cold tile beneath him as he falls.

Dust rains from the sky, intertwined with the sharp fall breeze, creating a suffocating gray smoke that fills his already burning lungs with more hurt. He pulls at the rubble beneath him, despite knowing the concrete slabs to be too heavy for his thin arms. Sirens ring in his ears, creating a rhythm with the irregular pounding of his heart. He searches like this, trembling, until he finds his mother. Her lavender dress is faded by grit and dust, her body pinned underneath an enormous piece of crumbling concrete. There is no face to see, no hand to hold while he says goodbye.

Ash awakes to a small, dimly lit room. He stares up the blades of a wooden ceiling fan, wrapped in a tangle of twinkling yellow lights. Flat-leaved tropical plants fill the room's empty space, swaying slightly, although there is no wind. He blinks away sleep, hearing the sounds of a city he thought he'd forgotten- the soft hum of passing vehicles, the blaring of horns. Pain lingers in Ash's head where the security officer had hit him, leaving his thoughts messy, and half finished. Massaging his injured torso, Ash rises with a wince and carries himself towards the room's corner, where a narrow staircase leads to a higher floor. He quickly realizes that this planet's gravity is not quite the same as earth's, careening forwards on a short trip into the hardwood floor.

Exiting through a rusting metal door, and nursing a new bruise on his forehead, he emerges on a rooftop revealing a mystically exotic view of a city. On the far edge of the rooftop, the boy in the dark turtleneck is smoking a cigarette. His feet, concealed in laced black combat boots, hang over the edge of the building. It was immediately obvious that this city was built with great value in

aesthetics. Slick white buildings expand in every direction, wrapped in strange charcoal roots. The trees these roots grew from shoot so far into the foggy green atmosphere, that Ash wouldn't be able to even see the treetops, if not for the steady pale light of the twin moons, surreal in their shimmering beauty. Hoverbikes and drifters, with their gleaming spearheaded forms, flow in rivers over dunes, headlights sparkling in the night.

Ash waits a moment at the doorway before walking hesitantly to where the boy is sitting. Settling down next to him at a respectful distance, Ash clears his throat. "I appreciate you..uh", he gestures vaguely at himself, then at the city. "It's Ash by the way." He swallows thickly. The sight of the girl's body lingers in his mind. He peers over at the boy next to him, observing the way dark curls float in a messy halo around his head, the way greenish eyes match the planet's emerald haze. His gaze doesn't shift as he moves his cigarette to his lips, taking a long drag before he responds. "Yeah... I know it was an awful lotta work to get here so.. y'can stay for a while if you want. I was preparing for someone else to stay anyway" Ash flinches at the mention of a "someone else" who he knew to be the girl. The boy with dark hair turns to him suddenly, piercing gaze making Ash feel exposed before him. "I ah.." he runs a hand down his face, rubbing eyes Ash notices to be red rimmed. "Thanks for, y'know, tryin' to help us." Ash feels the sick roll of guilt in his stomach. "I'm sorry for your loss", he manages. *I'm sorry she's dead because of me*, he means. The boy fixes his gaze to the concrete beneath them. "S'alright. We knew it coulda happened- especially with how young she was." His voice trembles. He breathes out, smoke lingering in front of them much longer than it would on Earth. Ash knows it isn't alright. The boy clears his throat. "Kai, by the way." Kai turns back towards the steady glow of the city. "She's uh.. my sister. Our folks were killed by raiders, and she was too little to come with when I left. I've been sendin' as many credits back to her as I can but.. I wanted her here. Should've waited." His voice breaks on the last part, and he blinks- as if he didn't know why he was telling Ash all of this. Like he hadn't told anyone this before. Kai sighs shakily, running a hand through his hair. He leans back, shifting his weight to his hands behind him, closing his eyes, and turning his face up to the sky.

Ash flops onto his back next to Kai, gazing at stars he's never seen before. A maglev passes far overhead with a familiar whistle, on a thin rail that reveals the metal underside of the train. They lay like this for a while, Kai settling into a calm silence, Ash, filling it. He asks about job prospects, about the planet, about how Kai doesn't faceplant into the ground every time he dares to go any faster

than walking- this question garners a bemused snort from him, and a small smile that makes something warm and hopeful bloom in Ash's chest. A large dragonfly-looking creature zips over them, its tail glowing a neon green, leaving a trail of iridescent dust in its stead- he asks about this too. Ash had forgotten, through the years after the war, the feeling of just being able to breathe, to take in his surroundings. He had forgotten how to sink into the serene feeling cities gave him, that of being an insignificant speck in a galaxy of brighter ones, swimming in an infinite sea of lights, and voices, and warmth. He had forgotten what it was like to just be able to *trust* someone, the easy way he knew he would be able to trust Kai. Ash was starting to think he might remember how.

Paige Deakin

Grade 11, Eureka High School

Critical Essay



Superheroes Need Saving Too

The living room was quiet with small murmurs radiating from the television. My twin sister was occupied in the basement, my older siblings were away at college, and my mom was back in her bedroom. My dad and I were sitting on the couch watching *SWAT* on the TV. It's almost comical to watch a real-life police officer crack jokes about the people who pretend to be police officers and act out their everyday lives for entertainment. When I inquire about his day, he usually doesn't say much but often shares funny stories about his coworkers. His transition into a school resource officer in 2020 allowed him to make lasting connections with those around him, including his colleagues and the kids he greets daily.

The start of his career in 1996 was the beginning of his long journey to this point. He began his work by patrolling the streets looking for speeding drivers or responding to motor vehicle accidents. The police force has been an important part of my dad's life for as long as I can remember, but I have never seen someone so genuinely excited to change their whole career to protect a group of high school students. I've always been curious about why he wanted the SRO position so badly, so I asked him to share a story about the hardships of his years on patrol or even his five-year stint as a burglary detective from 2012-2017. Because of how passionate he is about putting the needs of the people around him before his own, my dad has always been my biggest role model. He never failed to be the one to kill the bugs when I was scared or listen to my problems without a single complaint. Ever since I was a little girl, I've viewed him as this invincible superhero who made all the issues disappear without a second thought. He

protected my siblings and me from all the bad in the world, but I never thought about how the bad he faced every day affected him. In his first year on the job, twenty-three-year-old Chris Thomas responded to a call about a missing child, unaware that this call would stick with him for the rest of his life. The after-effects of this case have shaped his career as a police officer and as a father.

In 1996, there were few resources available to police officers to help them prepare for or deal with the mental health struggles that coincide with grueling cases. Recently, programs have been developed to help police officers like when “The COPS Office and BJA formed the National Officer Safety and Wellness Group (OSWG) in 2011 to bring attention to the safety and wellness needs of law enforcement officers. Since then, the OSWG has raised awareness, increased knowledge, and encouraged law enforcement agencies to adopt practices recognizing that the most valuable resource a law enforcement agency has is the individuals who put their lives on the line every day in the name of protecting and serving their communities” (“Officer Safety and Wellness Resources”). One of those individuals was sitting alone in his cop car on a normal fall morning. My dad recalls “The day started just like any other. I showed up to work, attended roll call, and left the station in my patrol car.” Solely relying on his physical police training and problem-solving skills, he responded to a call from the dispatcher on his radio and headed towards the apartment complex in South St. Louis County. A missing child was not a matter to be taken lightly, but he had never experienced a life-altering case before. Maybe the baby was asleep in her crib? Why would he have a reason to think of any worse-case scenarios when he’d never witnessed one before? He focused on finding the child *before* anything bad happened. When he got to the apartment building, he was assigned to work the front door that faced the Jefferson Barracks Cemetery to make sure no one got in or out. A whole team of citizens, along with other officers, were dedicated to helping find this child, so there was no need to worry right? Even in the worst possible situation would there be someone there to make sure the officers were taken care of? At this time, the answer was no, but later “The Law Enforcement Mental Health and Wellness Act of 2017 (LEMHWA) was signed into law in January 2018, recognizing that law enforcement agencies need and deserve support in their ongoing efforts to protect the mental health and well-being of their employees” (“Law Enforcement Mental..”). In recent years, resources have become available to officers, but the officers present on the scene that day didn’t have previous mental health training nor the ability to rely on their department for assistance following such calls. While traumatic cases are rare, the mental

drawbacks and struggles of police officers can impede their effectiveness, and the long-term impact can vary in severity based on the person.

The psychological battles that police officers face aren't often disclosed to the public, but that doesn't mean they are uncommon. The general job description of a law enforcement officer is to protect those around them, but who's there to protect them from the mental tolls of that responsibility? Studies have shown that "[Police officers] are exposed to an average of 178 critical incidents throughout their career while the average person encounters two to three traumatic events in their life" (Jaeger). You can't predict your reaction to intensely stressful events until you've truly experienced one. As everyone tirelessly searched for this little girl, my dad stayed rooted at the apartment door. That was until a woman examining the cemetery motioned him towards a place that she found suspicious. It was discovered that "One in every seven police officers worldwide suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or depression, and one in every ten struggled from other mental illnesses" (Santre). But what causes this traumatic stress? The citizen gestured towards a heap of leaves and foliage that rested on the ground of the cemetery. A seemingly harmless build-up of nature turned into a crime scene in just a matter of seconds. Uncovering a small, lifeless body under all of the leaves, my dad immediately radioed for help. Shock and horror overwhelmed him. My dad reflects, "I had never seen anything like that; I was twenty-three years old and came from a small town, so I had never even heard of anything like that." The detectives came rushing down towards the cemetery to conduct their investigation of the scene while my dad stood back surveying and securing it. The police had already taken the parents down to the station for questioning, but after they informed them of the condition of their child, the whole case unraveled.

The detectives on the scene relayed the new information to the rest of the police personnel. The emotional toll on the officers was severe enough upon finding the deceased baby, but learning that the father confessed to killing his daughter made matters worse. According to Saul Jaeger, a police captain in Mountain View, California, "Officers are two to four times more likely to suffer from PTSD compared with the U.S. general population." Police officers handle the toughest situations to protect the average citizen from harm, but these events stay with these officers throughout the rest of their lives. Questions are bound to arise after a case like this. Why would the father do that? Why would *anyone* do that? There are always some questions that can never be answered. Horrible

things happen every day, and sometimes there is nothing that law enforcement or the public can do except wonder why bad people do bad things.

Police officers are aware that their chosen career path entails experiencing both surprisingly calm and profoundly challenging days. Most importantly, they must be properly prepared to handle these difficult circumstances. It is argued that “Good emotional and mental health is just as important as physical health for police officers to be effective in keeping the nation and communities safe from violence and crime. Therefore, it is essential to create and implement appropriate mental management skills and health promotion interventions among police officers” (Santre). Resources must be allocated to law enforcement officers for them to continue making a difference in people’s lives every day. Disastrous cases could be detrimental to a police officer’s mental health, but supporting them with ways to manage these issues can prevent extreme harm. Additionally, “Over time, exposure to terrible things can skew officers’ abilities to gauge what “normal” behavior looks like, and they may start to see the world through an ‘us versus them’ lens” (Jaeger). Traumatic experiences come with mental ramifications that could lead to impulsive and dangerous behavior. The scary parts of the world that law enforcement encounters daily can be mitigated with the availability of training resources. If officers are more prepared for horrendous calls, then they will be better qualified to handle their mental states. Saul Jaeger found that “For police officers, everything from training to street experience can follow the same pattern.” That pattern can shape the way that police officers think and act daily. They must have a positive pattern and rely on training compared to dealing with incidents blindly to prevent potentially harmful outcomes. With this new information, my dad reflected on the incident from 1996.

So there we were, sitting on the couch in our living room watching a TV show about cops. That was the first time that I had ever heard that story, but it must’ve meant something to him because it was the first memory that he deemed fit to share in that situation. Some people say that “Police officers regularly make life-and-death decisions — instantaneously determining when to use force, why, and how much. Formal training plays an important part in making that decision, but an officer’s total life experience may have an even larger impact. Officers are motivated, influenced, and driven by these events” (Jaeger). While that training is important when thrown into horrible situations, an overall optimistic view of the world may be more important. This positivity allows officers to combat the adverse effects of their profession. My dad has

never solely focused on the negatives in life. As a husband, a police officer, and a father, he has failed to succumb to the poor mental drawbacks that his job can induce. Because resources have become available and mandated by the police department, my dad has grown into the amazing father that he is despite witnessing multiple unthinkable crimes. He doesn't forget these life-altering events or move on. He uses these experiences to become a better cop and a better person. Before we were born, he leaned on my mother for support or just bottled up all the negativity, but now he goes to our softball games or watches my brother succeed in his theatrical career. My dad has learned how to rely on his resources and find healthy ways to cope with his stress, but some of those negative consequences have stayed with him to this day. As a twenty-three-year-old who was just learning the complex and horrific aspects of the world, he was a very trusting person, but as his career progressed, he significantly decreased the amount of trust he put in others. Traumatic events like this have always stuck with him because they opened his eyes to the fact that "there are bad people in this world...and to know that there are monsters out there like that is scary especially when I have my own kids to protect." Although he didn't get the opportunity to receive any mental training or psychological help after this case, he is a good example of the resilience that gets police officers through those distressing moments in their careers. That may not be the case for all officers, but it is comforting to know that there have been resources implemented to help protect the people who protect us every day.

My dad doesn't wear a cape or have superhuman strength, but he will always be my hero. Access to mental health resources for police officers is not only important to him and those he works with, but it is also important to me and the families of other officers. It is vital for this training to be provided by all law enforcement agencies to keep the people who put their lives on the line every day safe. The officers in *SWAT* may not have to deal with the mental repercussions of stressful days on the job, but now I realize how strong the man next to me, who has gone through so much since 1996, really is.

Jemma Edelstein

Grade 8, John Burroughs School

Educator: Megan Zmudczynski

Poetry



Lost

Where is it?
What seems so important at the time
Driving you crazy
Can you find it?
Knowing that the location of the thing you want is just beyond your knowledge
No control whatsoever
Have you seen it?
Passion and hope laced in you search for what you wish to discover
Just outside of your reach
Have you touched it?
Love and anger
Fear and drive
Can you feel it?
Ear wide open in case there is a sliver of noise
Pure music to your unexpected ears
Can you hear it?
Mouth partly opened
Breathing heavily in pursuit and frustration
Can you taste it?
Physical or mental
Lost things can be found
Where is it?

But sometimes
 Where is it?
Lost things
 Where is it?
That are lost
 Where is it?
 Are lost
 Where is it?
 forever.

Bruce Elvin

Grade 9, Mary Institute & Saint Louis

Country Day School

Critical Essay



Colonial Shadows: Lasting Impacts on Economy, Education, and Identity

The end of colonial rule was supposed to mark the dawn of a brighter era. Yet, like shadows cast by a setting sun, its influence lingers long after the empires dissolved. Though colonialism primarily ended by the 1970s, its profound impact on economic development and education systems shaped modern society and cultural identities. Many formerly colonized nations remain entangled in inequality and dependency because their economic models were designed to serve the markets of their colonizers rather than foster local independent growth. Western knowledge was passed down through education systems, casting shadows over native histories and changing the past.

Colonial constructs created rigid frameworks for Indigenous and Black Communities with the burden of exclusionary measures like blood quantum and communal belonging. Given the enduring effects of these systems, a structured global movement to decolonize education and advocate for economic justice is necessary. A blazing spotlight must be cast on the enduring and challenging fight for cultural identity and economic independence. This essay will argue that freedom and progress can be achieved only by stepping out of these colonial shadows through awareness, honest dialogue, and unambiguous action.

Colonialism's economic legacy has significantly affected regions like Africa, Latin America, and Asia, where the cycles of dependency and inequality still cast grim, lingering shadows today. Generally centered on resource extraction and labor exploitation, colonial economic policies were designed to create wealth for European powers while stifling local economies.

Although these formerly colonized regions gained political independence in the mid-to-late 20th century, the economic structures persist today. European powers systematically exploited natural resources, prioritizing the extraction of metals, spices, and cash crops that benefited their economies but left indigenous markets stunted and redirected to serve European interests, hindering the development of their local infrastructures. For example, British-controlled India focused heavily on cotton and tea production at the expense of food harvesting, which heightened famine vulnerability. African colonies produced coffee, cocoa, and rubber almost exclusively for export, leaving the populace's needs and productive output materially exposed to fluctuating global prices.

As a result, the African markets were designed to satisfy European needs rather than their own, and once independence was achieved, these nations struggled to diversify their economies (Frankema, 2015). Former colonies often remained trapped in this “neocolonial” subservience, lacking the infrastructure to produce domestically needed goods. This shadow of economic tethering left many newly independent nations vulnerable to global market shifts, reinforcing their reliance on their former colonizers (Rodney, 1972).

Colonial exploitation extended to the labor systems with practices like slavery and indentured servitude, resulting in lasting social and economic damage. Consequently, these colonial practices provided wealth to European nations but devastated African societies. Even when slavery was abolished, other forms of forced labor emerged, like the French *corvée* and British “hut tax.” These practices created inequalities that persisted in the form of limited social mobility and deeply ingrained poverty (Mamdani, 1996).

Colonial policies often aligned local elites to exclude vast Indigenous populations from economic opportunity, which led to enduring structural inequality. Many newly independent countries inherited these culturally entrenched inequitable systems that hindered economic growth and social mobility.

Economic subordination and desires to build out their historically impaired infrastructures often led new nations to rely on loans from institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. These loans came with austerity requirements, which deepened poverty and economic instability, prioritizing debt repayment rather than development. A striking example of the impact of colonial debt is Haiti. After declaring independence from France in 1804, Haiti was forced to pay reparations to former French slaveholders for recognition. This “independence debt” was paid through the 20th Century and

contributed to long-term poverty (Dubois, 2012). Similarly, many African nations faced crippling loans that needed infrastructure to promote financial progress and reduce dependence on their former colonizers.

Colonial trade practices ingrained inequality. Formerly colonized countries exported low-margin resources while importing high-value manufactured goods from wealthier countries. Africa remains a significant source of raw materials such as minerals and oil, which are then processed by former colonial countries and sold at a premium. This “resource curse” casts a shadow over economic growth, making it challenging for Africa to invest in higher-value industries, reinforcing economic stagnation (Acemoglu et al., 2001).

In response to these historically unfair practices, reparations movements for economic justice have gained momentum. Advocates contend that accumulated wealth should be redistributed to support development in affected countries. The Caribbean Community (CARICOM) has formally requested reparations from colonial powers to address the long-term impacts of slavery, like health and poverty disparities (Beckles, 2013). Selection nations formally under colonial rule are beginning to step out of these shadows by reinvesting in industries like manufacturing and technology to support self-reliance.

Colonialism’s impact on education casts a long shadow over societal understanding of history, identity, and values. Colonial powers mandated educational systems that prioritized Western knowledge and language, often eradicating Indigenous cultures and histories. Even today, movements try to “decolonize” education to provide a more inclusive historical understanding. These shadows linger as colonial education systems serve to spread Western values that implicitly reinforce control.

In British-colonized regions like Africa and India, English replaced native languages in education, weakening local identities and traditional knowledge. Often presenting Western civilization as progressive, the curricula emphasized European literature and philosophy. These practices left a legacy where many former colonies prioritized Western histories, marginalizing their heritages (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, 1986).

Colonial education helped craft historical narratives that still influence identity. It often glorified the achievements of imperial powers and made colonization seem like an enlightened assimilation where the goal was the greater good. In India, British curricula promoted the “benefits” of British rule, such as the introduction of railways and English-language education, but naturally downplayed the exploitation inflicted upon Indian communities. These

intentional narratives cast shadows over resistance efforts, reinforcing colonial authority. French curricula frequently omitted the darker aspects of colonial history, leading to widespread ignorance regarding the injustices colonized people faced. This lack of awareness deepened social divides on issues of immigration and reparations (Said, 1978).

As a countermeasure to these enduring legacies, there is a growing movement to decolonize education and illuminate marginalized perspectives. This campaign advocates more accurate perspectives on history by promoting social justice. For instance, the #RhodesMustFall campaign in South Africa in 2015 demanded the removal of colonial figures from public spaces and championed changes in the school curriculum. This effort inspired educators and students worldwide to challenge Eurocentric educational standards (Bhambra et al., 2018).

Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) further illustrates the need for educational reform. TRC supports the integration of Indigenous perspectives into Canadian school curricula to aid in building awareness of the "true history" and spark reconciliation efforts (Regan, 2010). For formerly colonized societies, learning about Indigenous histories can foster a sense of pride, countering the shadows of internalized inferiority reinforced by colonial-era education. Through the reexamination of historical narratives, more inclusive societies can be created with a clearer understanding of all perspectives from the past to foster empathy and build a deeper awareness of multiculturalism and migration.

Despite its momentum, the decolonization of education faces challenges. The shadows of entrenched educational institutions and curricula remain difficult to dispel, and there is some concern that reexamining colonial history might disrupt national unity. To find common ground, some critics argue that rather than opposing Western or Indigenous knowledge, educational reform should embrace a pluralistic curriculum that includes diverse perspectives worldwide that celebrates the contributions of different cultures.

Another complexity, particularly in the USA, is that many "white" Americans are descendants of those who immigrated to America through Ellis Island and faced very harsh, unfair circumstances themselves. Therefore, many nuances of this educational transition warrant consideration (Appiah, 1991).

The history of Black religion in America exemplifies resilience. Spiritual practices provided enslaved Africans and their descendants with a means of cultural survival and resistance. By synthesizing African spiritual traditions and

Christianity, Black Americans cultivated a religious identity that reclaimed their humanity within a social structure that sought to deny them. As Anthony Pinn describes in *Terror and Triumph*, Black religion became not only a source of comfort but also a framework for confronting the shadows of systemic oppression, transforming the journey from forced subjugation to spiritual and social agency (Pinn, 2003).

Colonial ideologies, bolstered by selective religious interpretations, projected Black individuals in a negative light and suggested that they required control, which in turn was used to justify slavery. These dehumanizing views framed Blackness as inherently subhuman, with African spirituality dismissed as primitive. This illogical belief system allowed colonial society to validate slavery and systemic racial violence, often using Christianity as a tool to rationalize oppression.

By replacing African cultural identities with a version of Christianity that emphasized submission, colonial authorities sought to erase African spirituality and reinforce social hierarchies favoring the enslavers. However, Black communities resisted this erasure by adapting and reshaping Christianity to fit their experiences and needs. Enslaved Africans retained aspects of their cultural heritage, such as communal worship, spirit communication, and ancestral reverence, blending these with Christian beliefs to create a uniquely Black religious expression. This process of religious adaptation became a cornerstone of resilience and solidarity.

The African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, founded by Richard Allen in response to racial discrimination in white-led churches, was one of the first instances of Black religious autonomy. The AME Church became a beacon of light in the shadows of racial oppression, offering a spiritual community and a platform for political organization (Wilmore, 1998).

As the Black Church grew in influence, it became essential to Black social life and identity. Religious leaders mobilized congregations to fight for justice against the pervasive shadows of oppression, particularly during the abolitionist period and later in the Civil Rights Movement. The church provided a safe space for members to express their struggles and strategize their defiance.

Pinn's concept of "complex subjectivity" captures this dual role of Black religion, where Black individuals redefined their identities through faith practices that upheld community, liberation, and personal dignity in the face of systemic violence. Black religion's role in social and political organization is exemplified by figures like Nat Turner, who viewed his faith as a divine call to

resist slavery. Turner's rebellion was partly inspired by his interpretation of Christianity as a call to justice, demonstrating how Black religious identity became a powerful force against the shadows of oppression.

Through collective worship, Black communities found emotional refuge and solidarity, allowing them to organize, mobilize, and resist colonial and later American institutions. Black religion's adaptability lay in transforming an imposed faith into a vehicle for liberation, reinterpreting Christian teachings to emphasize values of freedom, self-worth, and communal agency (Pinn, 2003).

After emancipation, Black congregations continued to serve as sanctuaries of community support amid ongoing discrimination and racial violence. The Black Church remained a central institution, addressing economic injustices, promoting educational initiatives, and providing social services.

By blending African spiritual elements with Christian doctrine, Black religious practices challenged colonial narratives of inferiority, allowing Black Americans to construct a spiritual framework that supported individual and collective resilience (Wilmore, 1998). This legacy of Black religion as a spiritual refuge and social resistance highlights the adaptability and strength within Black communities. Even as shadows of colonial and systemic racism persist, Black religious practices allowed for self-affirmation, enabling Black individuals to redefine themselves outside oppressive narratives. Pinn's "complex subjectivity" notion captures this layered identity: Black religious practices fostered resilience to empower Black Americans to navigate and resist systemic oppression and cultivate a distinct spiritual and cultural identity (Pinn, 2003).

In the late 19th century, the U.S. government introduced the concept of blood quantum, casting a long shadow over Native American identity. This shift in ideology profoundly impacted Native American identity by redefining belonging based on a percentage of "Indian blood." Under the 1887 Dawes Act, the intended result was to limit the number of Native people recognized as eligible for land and benefits. This policy, never a part of traditional Indigenous cultures, was designed to "breed out" Indigenous populations over generations by narrowing the pool of those who could legally claim Native identity. Blood quantum continues to cast a shadow in modern times, complicating the relationship between cultural belonging and governmental recognition (Blackhawk, 2023).

Historically, Indigenous communities defined identity and membership through kinship, cultural practices, and communal contributions rather than through biological ancestry alone. For instance, the Iroquois Confederacy—which

included the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca, and Tuscarora nations—practiced inclusive systems of belonging, incorporating natives and outsiders who contributed to community welfare. The Iroquois adapted their social structure over time, responding to colonial pressures and forming alliances with European powers. Acceptance within the Iroquois community depended on participation and willingness to contribute rather than bloodlines (Blackhawk, 2023).

Yet, the shadows of colonial policies coerced a shift toward a definition of “Iroquois” that clashed with their traditional self-identity. The imposition of blood quantum shifted Indigenous identity from a communal model to a Western system rooted in exclusion to limit economic support. The creation of a standard of supposed biological “purity” created divisions within Native American communities (Richter, 2019). Individuals with lower blood quantum percentages may face exclusion from tribal membership even if they maintain strong cultural ties and participate actively in the community.

Blood quantum policies also present practical challenges for tribes, particularly as intermarriage outside the community reduces the blood quantum percentages of younger generations. Some tribes fear that loosening blood quantum requirements could dilute political and economic resources; however, maintaining strict requirements risks reducing the number of individuals eligible for membership over time. This shrinking pool of members threatens cultural continuity and impacts political representation, as fewer individuals qualify for tribal membership with each successive generation.

In response, some tribes have begun exploring alternative criteria for membership, such as lineal descent or residency, to address these challenges while preserving community cohesion. Efforts to shift away from blood quantum are attempts to reclaim Indigenous autonomy and realign identity with traditional values of kinship and inclusion.

This movement also reflects a desire to restore flexibility and communal decision-making that historically characterized Native governance. For example, the Iroquois Confederacy has begun reexamining membership policies in recent years, aiming to return to a kinship-based system that recognizes cultural participation and community ties (Blackhawk, 2023). These efforts mark a step toward dismantling colonial frameworks of identity, offering Native communities an opportunity to redefine belonging on their terms.

Blood quantum remains a complex and often divisive issue within Native American communities, symbolizing the struggle between imposed colonial

definitions and Indigenous efforts to preserve cultural integrity. As tribes reconsider membership criteria, the move away from blood quantum represents a broader effort to reclaim Indigenous values of inclusiveness and self-determination, countering the shadows of colonial policies that have long sought to erode Native identity.

The enduring legacies of colonialism are visible in economic dependency, cultural erasure, and reshaped identities. Having observed how deeply these shadows still linger and the various manifestations of unfairness they have created, these current issues remind us that history's influence stretches far beyond the colonial period and has significantly impacted the modern world. Although the magnitude of colonialism is profoundly devastating, many of these challenges have become culturally entrenched, even for the formerly colonized nations. As the newly freed nations grapple with inherited paradigms of inequality, these shadows continue to obstruct progress, from extraction-based economies to exclusionary definitions of identity.

The quest for autonomy and justice is crucial for all to get a fair opportunity to compete in the global marketplace and build out their societal structures to enhance social mobility progress. Contemporary movements to reclaim cultural heritage, decolonize education, and redefine communal belonging are vital efforts to step out of these shadows. These efforts are not just about correcting historical wrongs; they are essential steps toward creating a more equitable and inclusive global society where communities can define themselves on their terms, free from the shadows of colonialism. Acknowledging and dismantling these shadows of subjugation is imperative to moving society forward and fostering true equality worldwide.

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Elizabeth Elzemeyer

Grade 9, John Burroughs School

Educator: Lydia Smith

Personal Essay & Memoir



Tree Branches

My first house stood tall and square at the end of a long street. We had a cul-de-sac out front that the older girls used to ride their bikes around, their laughter louder than their wheels. It had a big kitchen that Mama painted a yellow that got brighter when the sun came through. It always seemed to smell like pancakes and sound like country music. It had tiles that were fun to dance on and Daddy would spin me around if I asked nicely. The living room had a fancy sound system Daddy had shown us Christmas morning with his chest puffed up big and proud. I secretly thought that Santa got it for him, not us, but I didn't tell him because he was so happy.

Mama got lonelier and we painted the kitchen grey and my pink bedroom white. Teddy's bedroom got to stay blue because Mama says it's a "neutral color" but I don't know what that means. We packed our things in cardboard boxes and sold Daddy's guns in a yard sale. Mama says we are going to the beach. The kids in our neighborhood promise not to like the new kids who live in our house more than us.

Our new neighborhood is filled with houses that all look the same. Ours is a different shade of yellow than the rest because it hasn't been painted in a long time. I think that makes it a little like us. The house is warmer than our old one and smells like the ocean and wet cardboard. It doesn't have tiles in the kitchen, but it doesn't matter because Daddy isn't here to spin me around anyway. The girl down the street and I climb the neighborhood trees every day after school. We give them names and thoughts that sound suspiciously like our own. They are a little too tall like me and a little too quiet like her. Mama smells different now, like smoke and the ocean. Teddy is different too. He has homework now and doesn't

play with me anymore. I finally learned to ride my bike the way the girls used to in the cul de sac but my wheels are a little too loud.

We roll up the big carpet in the hall and get the cardboard boxes out of the closets. I miss my Nana and Mama is scared that Nana misses her. I am excited to see my friends but I am scared they have forgotten not to like the new kids more than me.

We don't move back to the old house, we live with Nana. She has a rusty trampoline Mom got in a raffle in 4th grade and my brother and I spend our summer trying to jump high enough to touch the branches of the oak trees and climb them like I used to. I don't get to have a birthday party this year because we don't have a house yet and I try not to mind.

My new house has a pool because my mom misses the ocean. The sun looks straight at us every day. My room is always too hot or too cold but I can paint it whatever color I want. I get taller each month and my pants never fit anymore. Hopefully, that means soon I'll be tall enough to climb the big oak tree in my backyard.

Henley Ferguson

Grade 8, Home School

Poetry



My Craft is My Calling

My craft is where my calling lies,
My pen is my sword and my paper,
my escape.
There are no endings,
just new beginnings.
I watch as the clean white paper embodies my inky scrawl.
Tales of hope,
determination,
perseverance,
and faith come alive as the pages are filled.
Never again will they be bare and empty of life.
So,
take comfort in this,
my dear writers!
For no door can stay shut forever;
someone always has a key.
Just watch as your words pour out upon the paper that lies before you;
watch as they turn into voices of possibilities.
This is our calling.
This is our craft.

Andrew Foreman

Grade 12, Wentzville Holt High School

Short Story



Detective Noir and the Carrot's Curse

Detective Noir -First name: Detective, Last name: Noir- sat in his office with a lollipop in his mouth. Smoking was bad for you, after all. His office had two windows but both had the blinds down. Outside his office, it was pouring down rain. His walls were lined with bookcases and his desk was bare save for his trusty laptop and totally legal revolver. As usual, he wore his iconic gray trench coat with his red logo emblazoned over the heart. His black fedora with a red stripe across it sat on his head. His curly brown hair stayed mostly tucked under his hat.

He sat next to his desk and pondered the intricacies of life and other topics, such as his arch-nemesis the great phantom thief Robin Lupin the 16th, and how they had just escaped from prison. He was just getting to debating whether he should try to track down his nemesis when he received a call on his landline that he still used for some reason. Without hesitation, he picked up the phone.

"Is this the office of a... Detective Noir?" said the voice on the other end.

"Yes, sir," Noir responded. "Are you here about a case?" Detective Noir had worked as a Private Investigator for years (2) after he resigned from the force as an act of protest. He found working on his own terms much better for him and his clients.

"Indeed. I've heard good things about you from my colleagues. You see, the Warrensville bank was just robbed. I have reason to believe it was an inside job."

"Sounds Interesting." Detective Noir shifted in his seat. "I'll be there within the hour. We can discuss payment afterward."

"Hey, wait-" Said his client before Detective Noir cut him off. The Detective worked on his own schedule after all.

Detective Noir arrived at the bank 15 minutes later. The rain was pouring onto him but his clothing kept him safe. He entered the bank through its front doors and in front of him was a grand sight. The bank's lobby was massive. The ceiling went up three stories and the inside was decorated in a neo-gothic style. Stained glass windows prevented sight into the offices on the third and second floors but looked amazing. It was truly a work of art.

His admiration of the building's architecture was interrupted when someone -presumably his client- got his attention. He was an older man with short gray hair and a Tan suit.

"Ah. You're here." Said the Man. "You know it was awfully rude how you hung up o-"

"I work on my own schedule sir." Interrupted Detective Noir.

"Oh fine. I'm Ed. Ed Ministrator. Let's discuss your payment so you can get to work."

With his payment secured, Ed showed the Detective the way to the crime scene. Vault #2. It was truly an impressive sight. It resembled the vaults you would see in a cliched crime story with the massive pits that once contained the vault's gold. In fact, the vault was responsible for housing a large amount of Gold and Gold Bullion. This was likely why Vault #2 was targeted as the other vaults housed actual cash or security boxes. With a quick forensics test, Detective Noir determined that the thief was no amateur. There were no fingerprints at the scene, and any shoe prints at the scene matched the shoe prints of the security guards. Oddly enough. There was a stray carrot lying in the vault. Naturally, he took the carrot for forensics.

Next, Detective Noir got to interview the guard who was managing the security cameras that day. Her name was Witt Nest.

"So Ms. Nest, can you tell me what happened on the night of the robbery?" Asked the detective to the Guard in a private room.

"Well, I was watching the cameras as usual when I noticed someone moving on one of the vault cameras." She said in response. "When I noticed it was a security guard I calmed down and paid less attention. Then the vault opened and I knew something was wrong. I was about to run to the vault and confront the person myself, but when I tried to leave the camera room I realized that I was barricaded in! I was stuck there until Mr. Ministrator removed the barricade the following morning."

“Alright then. Can you verify this testimony in any way?” Replied Detective Noir as he continued to write in a notebook.

“Yes. We don’t have a lot of security cameras in the building, to save on budget. But we do have one inside the camera room just to make sure there isn’t any foul play. It recorded everything the night of the crime.” Said Ms. Nest.

“Alright then, That’s everything. Thank you very much for your cooperation.” Said the Detective before standing up and leaving the room.

Gathered before the detective in the break room of the bank were the 3 people who could have possibly committed the crime on that fateful night. On the far right was Hiram Baidou the guard who was responsible for patrolling the hallways of the bank. In the middle was William Dalwoman the guard who was responsible for guarding the front entrance. To William’s left was the final potential suspect, Roger Clever. He usually guards the back entrance.

Through extensive interrogation of the 3 suspects, Detective Noir was able to assemble a spreadsheet:

Suspects:

Name: Hiram Baidou

Alibi: Hiram was in the break room during the entirety of the crime, as shown by camera footage.

Notes: He would not shut up about how much he hates birds.

Spouted some conspiracy theory crap as well. Something about Crypto-Aryans? Or was it avians? Whatever, he was a total nutjob.

Conclusions: Probably should put him on a watchlist, since he’s almost certainly a neo-nazi. but he’s innocent here.

Name: Roger Clever

Alibi: Roger was not even in the bank on that day. Rather he was on vacation.

Notes: His alibi is pretty much airtight. But I did notice he tended to rub his teeth whenever I pressed on him. Probably just nervous.

Conclusions: I should consider him innocent but something about his story is bugging me.

Name: William Dalwoman

Alibi: He says he was guarding the lobby for the entire night.

Notes: The camera footage actually shows him leaving the lobby at some point. He claimed he was going to the bathroom during

that time. He spent roughly 1/3 of the interview talking about his guitar which he always has with him.

Conclusions: He's obviously suspicious seeing as he was unaccounted for at least 5 minutes. However as his coworkers can attest to, he brings that guitar everywhere, even the bathroom. He wouldn't leave it behind for the crime.

Detective Noir was pacing around the halls of the bank in deep thought. Hiram was certainly innocent and all bits of evidence point towards Dalwoman being the suspect, but that still doesn't explain why he would abandon his beloved guitar or the presence of a carrot at the scene of the crime. Then, it hit the detective like a Ford F150 hits a deer. Quickly the detective retrieved his flip phone and called one of his contacts who dealt with the more... supernatural side of the world.

In his many (2) years of detective work, Detective Noir has encountered his fair share of absurd cases, but this had to take the cake for one of the weirdest. In front of the crime scene were the 3 suspects and Mr. Ministrator. The other two suspects were here only as a courtesy and for dramatic effect. He had his eyes set on a single man.

Roger Clever was looking awfully smug, the Detective noticed. Perhaps he thought he got away with it?

"Mr Minsitrator?" asked the detective, to get Mr. Ministrator's attention. "I believe I have found your culprit. The police are already on their way. If you don't mind, I'd like to explain my reasoning."

"That was fast. It's been maybe 2 hours?" Said the Bank's administrator, somewhat astonished. "But please, go ahead." Detective Noir then shifted and drew his revolver, just so no one got any funny ideas.

"For a while, I thought it was William." The man in question jumped slightly at this. "The times lined up and everything. Then, I realized something. William would never go anywhere without his guitar. So it had to have been someone else." Hiram was visibly nervous, obviously thinking he was about to get arrested. Roger however was looking a little smug.

"However Hiram has a perfect alibi. So, who does that leave?" Roger's pupils noticeably dilated at that last statement.

"Roger Clever has been responsible for guarding the back door to the bank, if he was on vacation then there would be no one guarding it. Naturally, he lied about

going on vacation in order to break into the bank.” The man in question was heavily sweating. He took a step forward and began to speak.

“HEY! You can’t be accusing people like that! That evidence is circumstantial and you know it! So do you have any actual proof?” Said the now enraged Roger.

“Of course.” responded the detective. “The entire crime took place within a very short amount of time, under 5 minutes if I remember correctly. With such a large amount of gold being stolen, there was no way any mere man could pull it off. So what if the culprit was no mere man?” The detective drew the carrot found at the crime scene with his other hand. “If I remember correctly, transformation into a were-rabbit can be induced by carrots. Mr. Clever, would you care to demonstrate for us?”

“Ahahaha- I’m good-” Roger almost said before he was cut off by noir shoving the carrot in his mouth. In an instant, Roger fell to the ground and hair began to sprout and cover his *skin*. Detective Noir was very careful to keep his revolver aimed at Roger, seeing as he could now kill anyone at the scene with minimal effort. The other people present in the room were pushing themselves up against the wall or running away.

When the police arrived 10 minutes later the Detective handed over his evidence and Roger was taken into custody.

Reflecting on the case, Detective Noir had to admit that he probably broke at least 1 law in forcing Roger to transform into his rabbit form, but he didn’t particularly care. Justice was dead in this part of America after all. He left the police force for that very reason. They weren’t seeing justice done in a way the Detective approved of, so he took matters into his own hands. Perhaps one day he could say that he is no longer needed. But today is not that day.

Calixte Fox

Grade 12, David H. Hickman High School

Poetry



Equi/Distant

i still remember how my hand quivered when i pressed my finger to the trigger,
the way a chill ran through my thumb, freezing me solid in my place
sparks flying into the pit of my soul,
shocking my senses,
quaking my world
so i cast you away,
inside a wooden drawer for later,
there was still fuel left, after all.
and from my chambers i drew out another,
a replacement,
more distance, further reach,
less fear that my finger'd burn off
flying too close to the sun
but spark into something new,
catch the fire from one's eye
spreading to the flammable wood of that drawer
and make the escape
catch orion's belt by the belt loops,
capture the leather of the calloused galaxy in hand,
index finger cusping the stars and pressing them to warm lips,
warmed by damped palms
sitting in the grass dampened by the morning dew
to interject with other systems,

scattered, starry through the pathway
simmering into serenity
transfer the passion into another
and raise the heat, bit by bit
a dash of salt to mild the bitter,
and melt the butter in its dish
but put the cover on again
encapsulate the complicated
universe into plain ceramic
simplify it
no longer question it,
leave it be?

Tommy Fussner

Grade 8, Parkway West Middle School

Educator: Tracy Bouslog

Personal Essay & Memoir



When the Breeze Stopped

“What is taking him so long?” Chase asked about Brennen’s brother while we waited.

We couldn’t launch the fireworks without him because we didn’t know how, but also he had the fireworks. Finally after what seemed like 1,000 hours Brennen’s brother, Connor, came out with the fireworks in their sparkling blue packaging.

We started our walk to the common grounds basketball court to launch the fireworks. It was a cool spring night with a nice breeze that tickled my face and gave everyone a no-care feeling. We were just cracking jokes and having a fun time. That would be the peak of the night for me. Then right when we got to the creek between the road and the common ground basketball courts Brennen shared some important information with me.

“Hey be careful, make sure not to get hit,” Brennen warned.

“No duh,” I said mockingly.

“No like Connor’s shooting the fireworks at us,” he explained. That’s when the nice breeze stopped brushing my skin. The information seemed to have punched me in the stomach and twist it into a whole bunch of knots. *Wish I had known that earlier.*

“And your parents allow this?” I questioned.

“No,” answered Brennen, giving no explanation.

We then crossed through the short creek and reached the basketball court. Right, then the court didn’t seem like a regular basketball court. The court seemed like The Coliseum where I’d be fighting for my life.

Connor then told us to stand on the outskirts of the court and he would say when the fireworks would shoot. I stood on the edge of the court right next to the creek, in case something went awry.

“Three, Two!” Connor shouted out, but before he got to one the fireworks had already been fired. Flashes of red yellow and green spewed from the tiny firework container. It looked as if a portal had been opened to another dimension. I ran on the baseline of the court with my heart racing. Thump Thump Thump. My heart was ready to burst out of my chest. *Please just let me escape this unharmed oh please.* Zing BOOM Zing POP Zing BOOM the fireworks went in harmony right after one another. Finally, the fireworks stopped. Everyone looked around to see no one got hit. It was the expression on everyone’s face, a jaw-dropping look. Some in shock and some in exuberance. I then saw the terrified look on Dylan’s face. *Good, I’m not the one who’s horrified.*

Connor then ran back to the middle rearing with excitement to light another round. He then told us to spread across the left side of the court. *I just did your game and now you want me to be in an even smaller area.*

Connor began counting “Three, Two,” this time when he was interrupted it wasn’t by the fireworks.

Connor was interrupted by sirens, not police sirens but a house alarm. Being young kids, we assumed it was a robbery. We all fled from the basketball court, at least I thought we all did. I bursted from my cowering position to a full-on sprint like I was an Olympic sprinter. I quickly left the court to enter the little creek, slid down the small hill, and swiftly jumped over the tiny moat to run out in the open neighborhood streets. The wind beat my face and my heart pumped blood throughout my body as I cut through neighbors’ yards. I was running blindly in the dark with the light of the half-moon and old street lamps. Racing down the steep hill not wasting a single second or step. Lunging for each step till I reached his house. Finally, I made the twisted turn into his cul-de-sac and came to a screeching halt when I reached Brennen’s house’s driveway. There I finally looked behind me to see I had torched everybody except Dylan, who was right behind me, running step after step with my pace. Then Brennen and Walker followed suit, as they twisted around the corner into Breenen’s cul-de-sac. Us four sat on the curb and waited for the others but no one else came. *Some people were still up at the basketball court.* Nothing remained on my face but a puzzled look.

Then, we walked to the back of Brennen’s house avoiding the doorbell camera because his parents didn’t know of the fireworks. We quietly slid open

the sliding back door on the deck and sat on his couch, we began a discussion on our next move. Those knots in my stomach started to tighten. I found myself gasping for air. I was drowning in exhaustion and anxiety. I started to break out in a cold sweat. After the quick discussion, about if we should try to find them, we decided to just wait for the others to come back and see what they were gonna do next. I then glanced at Snapchat's map and saw that one of my friends, Emmet, had his location on and he was slowly lollygagging his way back to the house, with the others I assumed. That's when I sent a text that I had blind faith in. 11. That's it, just the number 11. It was the text that if my sister or I were ever in danger we would send our sports number. Even though I wasn't in direct danger, that gut-wrenching feeling in my stomach kept getting worse. Emmet finally arrived at the house and my hunch was right the others were with him.

"You scardy cats, why did you guys run!" Emmet remarked

"Come on let's head back," Jonathan said.

"I don't feel so good... my stomach just aches." I struggled to get out.

"Ohhhhhh," Emmett dramatically exclaimed. "I get it, you're just being a wimp, come on let's go," he demanded like a general commanding orders to his troops. "Now!" he yelled after seeing us not move an inch. We were frozen like statues.

My Stomach kept on deteriorating. "I told you I just don't feel good" I said queasy. *Why Emmet was getting so upset at me?*

Chase then said "You'll feel better once we get there," trying to make me feel better.

"Or he's just a chicken," Emmet pronounced.

11, 11, 11, 11, 11, 11, 11. I texted making my final cry for help. *Answer the text, please answer.* No one responded. I was hopeless.

Then Brennen came as a voice of reason to everyone. "We can just launch the fireworks in the backyard, and if you don't want to be shot at by the fireworks just watch from the back deck." Everyone agreed to it.

At the same time while I was arguing with Emmet, Walker and Dylan were also trying to be convinced to join in the fireworks. Walker agreed to it but Dylan sided with me and watched. I watched from the deck as if I were an unpopular ruler watching my citizens fight, while Dylan watched on a hammock nearby. The colors of bright red, green, and yellow shot right past my friend's face. Illuminating their twisted smiles of fear and excitement. One bright yellow firework shot past Jonathan's face missing by a whisker. The fireworks glid in the air above the damp grass. It looked like a flock of angry birds were attacking my

friends. Connor was behind the fireworks looking like a ringmaster at a circus watching my friends dance to evade the fireworks as if they were circus animals.

After the second round of fireworks had been finished Walker, Dylan, Brennen and I went inside. While the rest stayed outside chatting about their dangerous experience, Chase then pursued Brennen to launch more at the basketball court and Walker to come with them. Although Walker agreed to be shot the second time he didn't want to go back to the basketball court. Brennen however gave in.

Walker, Dylan, and I then sat in an awkward eerie silence. They were gazing into their phones while I was frantically checking my phone to see if anyone had responded to my texts. Nothing. I then rushed to the app Life 360 to see if anyone was coming in my direction, and there I saw my sister and dad's phones in Brennen's neighborhood heading my way. My cry for help was answered. I then got up from the couch hastily but quietly and gathered my drawstring bag and sleeping bag. I slily slid out of the front door like a burglar not making a peep. I then went to the car waiting for me, telling no one I had left or why I had left. Reaching for the car door my stomach started to settle. I laid my head on the frigid leather seat while the air conditioning felt like the cool breeze on my skin. I just lay there and rested from the long gut-turning day. A boulder had been lifted off my chest. The person who had been twisting my stomach for what seemed like a year finally started to untie those knots.



The State of Minds

“A Grave for Nikita Vasilyev”

She tears the sickly redhead down from the dull concrete wall, crumpling the poster into a ball and stuffing it into her bag, glancing both ways to ensure no one notices. Brett knows that Nikita Vasilyev is dead, and she only hopes that the rest of the world will realize it soon.

But Nikita isn't truly dead, not really. She's merely hiding. The nervous glances Brett shoots around the marketplace make this clear. The way she ducks her head and scurries out of sight are all the signs she needs to know that Nikita is never truly gone.

She ducks into a damp alleyway, before another coughing fit can overcome her. Brett grimaces at the thick, black substance left on her hand, and gingerly wipes it away with one of the torn missing persons posters balled up in her bag. More compassion than she ever shows herself otherwise. The marred pads of her fingertips glare up at her, betrayed at the gentility she gives herself now, even when pale lines criss-cross their way through her fingerprints.

More coughing plagues her as she passes the windows of a small trinket shop at the end of the alley. As she puts a hand on the cool bricks, she watches small black veins creep into her eye, and a glob of the same tar-like substance drips from her nose. She swipes the cursed nosebleed away in horror, the dark smearing her pale skin. She stumbles farther back into the alley, sinking to her knees beside a dingy puddle that reflects her face in rippling, distorted waves. The black tendrils in her eye recede, and all evidence left of her nosebleed is a dark streak across her cheek. She shakily wipes it away and stands back up, ripping the smeared poster to shreds and tossing it into the puddle to rot.

...

A third coughing fit strikes Brett as she latches the door of her flat behind her. She sits on the thin carpet, leans against the door, and coughs until her chest and throat ache. She stands unsteadily and washes more black liquid from her skin. The water barely warms her freezing hands, and she tosses a damp dish towel onto the weathered countertop of her tiny kitchenette after drying them. She steps out to the small balcony – no bigger than a coat closet – and grimaces at the sharp scent of cigarettes from below, as she begins to light one of her own. A flash of orange hair within the crowd on the street catches her attention, and she nearly drops her cigarette in her rush to get away from the edge of the balcony. An unfamiliar face appears from behind the fluffy head of ginger. Not Alina. Not a Vasilyev.

Brett scowls, shoving her cigarette into the empty ashtray and retreating back inside. The apartment smells slightly musty, permeated with the faint scent of mold from years ago. She revels in a home that doesn't smell like the ashtray outside. It's too much for what's left of Nikita to handle. Instead, Brett pulls a glass from the rickety kitchen cupboards and pours herself a drink. That's what will really quiet the buzzing in her brain.

As she lifts the glass of amber whiskey to her lips, she notices blackness beginning to creep along under her fingernails. She sets her drink down and looks closer at her hands, before descending into another coughing fit. Her heart beats in her ears as she uses the counter to hold her upright. When she regains her breath, the tendrils beneath her fingers are gone. Nothing seems permanent. Not yet.

She has to get rid of this. Has to kill it. She takes her whiskey and downs the glass in a single swig. She grabs her jacket from the sofa, and pulls the hood over her head, her reflectively white bob hidden away beneath the dark gray fabric. She finds her gloves, slips them on, and rushes out the door, her bag hanging loosely over her shoulder.

...

The dead trees in the park reach toward Brett with scraggly fingers, and the leaves they've shed crunch under her boots. She holds her arms tightly around herself, periodically having to stop and brace herself against more coughing. Her frame shakes as she wheezes, fighting to fill her lungs with the cold autumn air. She slips through a small gap in the brush at the back of the park, making her way down a long-forgotten, overgrown gravel path. An equally neglected church sits at the end, its floorboards rotting in tandem with Brett's soul. They creak

beneath her boots as she passes through the dilapidated building – past paint the color of old bones, peeling off the molding wooden walls – and out the squealing back door. She crosses the small graveyard behind the church, coming to a stop at the edge of a thicket of trees. The leaves quake and rustle in the wind, falling around Brett like snowflakes.

She kneels in the damp soil and digs a small hole at the base of a large oak tree, gritting her teeth as the earth collects under her fingernails. She swipes her hands across the grass, ridding herself of the worst of the dirt, before tearing her necklace off of her neck. The pendant catches the fading sunlight, glowing like deep red amber and casting pink-ish reflections across Brett's knees. She drops it into the hole she dug, and shoves the piles of dirt on top of it. She says a small prayer and stands, feeling a weight lift off of her shoulders.

She hurries back into the church, turning her back on the wretched illness plaguing her mind. The building squeaks and groans, and Brett picks up her pace, glancing around the church's one small room with a deep-seeded paranoia. The shattered stained-glass mosaics stare after her, as if pushing her from the church, ready to expel her and be condemned to their fates alone.

As she passes in front of the altar, a bright flash of red light erupts from behind the church, and Brett whirls around. She covers her eyes as she watches the spot she'd just buried her pendant burst with flashes of ruby red light. Pain seizes her heart and forces every trace of oxygen from her lungs, before her muscles begin to contract and scream in burning agony.

She collapses to her knees, as black tendrils race up her fingers, and she coughs up more and more of that same dark substance. Her ears and nose begin to bleed black, and inky liquid pours from her eyes like tears. Her throat tightens around her panicked gasps for air, and she takes one last look at the setting sun before falling into an eternal black void. Nikita Vasilyev is dead, and so, too, is Brett Blanc.

“Nikita Vasilyev Must Die”

The nameless girl keeps her head down and her guard up, swiping everything she thinks she'll need off a shelf and into a shopping basket. Bottles of hair product, a new and inconspicuous wardrobe. In her mind, she crafts a new person to take her place. One that can never be tied back to Nikita Vasilyev. She picks up a pair of scissors, before stopping next to packages of colored contacts. The numbers displayed below the boxes are far too high for her price

range. She decides that one small thing can be skipped over. Nikita will be dead all the same.

She checks out without saying a word to the cashier, without looking at him at all. She hands him cash, quickly snatched from Nikita's bedside table. The cashier gives a half-hearted goodbye as she rushes from the store. She slips through crowds and zig-zags among alleys, a route impossible to follow. She bolts the small apartment's door behind her, waiting a second with her ear pressed against the splintering wood.

Today, Nikita Vasilyev will die.

She turns to her hair first, taking her products and staring into the dingy bathroom mirror. She takes the scissors and chops off the worst of the knots and the matting, watching the pale ginger nests hit the floor, like Nikita's blood creeping across the tiles. The rest of the hair is too tangled and infested to style, so she picks up the bottles of bleach and slathers the goo across her head. The burn of bleach soothes the constant itch of her scalp, killing the devils living atop it.

Once the color is gone from her hair – and the parasites caged within are dead – she pulls a comb through, tearing the knots of the past apart, letting the shriveled up pests fall to the floor, like the insects that would be first to find Nikita's body. She neatens the jagged ends into a straight, shoulder-length bob. She changes from her light blue sundress – spattered with the bleach the Vasilyev's would use to clean the crime scene – into the grays that she pulls from the next plastic bag. She takes the small metal trash bin from the corner of her balcony and moves it to the middle. She drops the dress inside, with the scraps of hair, then follows with a lit cigarette. The evidence of her crime goes up in flames, the way Nikita's body would as her family made funeral arrangements. The final blow comes as she pulls a small kitchen knife from a drawer. Nikita will never be identified. The knife draws across her fingertips, obscuring the last removable piece of Nikita. The final knife to Nikita's heart.

All that remains are the girl's eyes, one green and the other blue, a haunting reminder of this girl's crime. The girl in the mirror is a stranger. This is Brett Blanc, murderer of Nikita Vasilyev.

“Fallen From Grace”

My name is Ophelia. I'm nineteen, and before I died, I was a prophet of Dalia. When I decided that was my path, I thought I had support. I thought my family was proud of me. This was, evidently, not the case.

I think I'm a bad person. I *know* I'm a selfish person.

I renounced my worship of Thesan when I was thirteen. I had started having visions, and that night, I'd been visited by Dalia in a dream. Of course it was a sign, that much was obvious. So I started spending my days in Dalia's temple, learning how to be a real priestess. I knew from the moment I started that that was what I was meant to do. I'd never felt like anything was more natural. And the visions weren't grossly disturbing anymore, they were a part of my job. They're a lot more disturbing, nowadays.

My family still followed Thesan like he was the only god in the world. They consistently failed to do anything for the other gods, and I was always *shocked* that they never faced any retribution. Though now that I've met the guy, I'd imagine the other gods just didn't want to pick a fight with him. He might as well be the patron god of pricks, given how horribly he and his devotees treat literally everyone around them.

Then, about a year ago, Thesan just disappeared. At the time, nobody had any idea what was going on. Most people still don't, actually. But when it was *only* Thesan, we thought he'd just abandoned us. That's where the mess really begins.

When I woke up that morning, the house was flooded with chaos. The twins - who were only nine - were crying, my mother was praying like a madwoman, and my father physically dragged me from my bed and downstairs.

“What's going on?” I rubbed at my eyes, barely catching the railing before I fell down the stairs.

My father pushed me toward the door, hard enough to bruise when my back hit the handle. “You've doomed us all, and you need to get out.”

None of my other family members responded at all. They just kept with whatever they were doing, as if they didn't even notice.

“What are you talking about? What's going on?”

“Thesan has abandoned us!” My mother shrieked from her disastrous shrine at the other end of the room. “He's left us all!”

“You're the only one in this house who has denied our god.” My father looked at me in disgust. Nobody has ever looked at me with such hatred any other time in my life. “You are the only reason he could have to be angry with us.”

It sounded utterly ridiculous. So much so that I almost laughed. I accused them of pranking me, of it being some weird, convoluted birthday joke. I'd been sworn to Dalia for *five years*. Why in the world would Thesan decide that it was disrespectful *now*?

And I said all of that. Among other, more colorful thoughts that I had at the time. Alas, none of it worked, clearly. The cursing might have made it worse, actually. Either way, I don't think I could've said anything to change their minds. There's something about the followers of Thesan; they're all batshit crazy. He drives them insane. He whispers in their ears and puts all these psychotic beliefs in their heads. That's why he was the first to go. He's the entire reason the gods are in danger now. Because Thesan is incapable of being a good one. My father tossed me from the Aether entirely. I didn't think that was possible. I thought it was just a tragic action in myths, where a baby gets tossed from the heavens and lands in the mortal plane, to be raised as a common criminal. I never thought it could have *actually happened*. Even if I'd thought you could just fall through the clouds below your feet, I figured the impact with the ground below would kill anyone who tested it. And I guess I *technically* don't know that it wouldn't.

The descent to the ground was possibly the most terrifying thing I've ever experienced. I think the extended period of thinking I was going to die was worse than when I actually *did* die. The wind tore at my thin pajamas - thanks to my father literally throwing me out of not just the house, but the entire plane of existence, at seven in the morning.

The air feels different in the Feywild than it does in Aethra. The same can be said about the Mortal Plane, and the Infernal Realm. They all feel staunchly different, and I could spend a long time explaining why I like some and *very much* dislike others. But the most noticeable change has always been the fall into the Feywild. It feels like breathing in liquid wine; it goes straight to your head and makes you dizzy. It's also sickeningly sweet. It smells like a cotton candy machine. You get used to it, eventually, but it's always a bit jarring when I've been away for a few days.

The other part of the fall that sticks in my head the most is how warm it was. The wind is usually freezing, but the Aether is also perpetually cold. So when I fell into the Feywild, it was like plunging into a sauna.

I remember watching the ground race toward me, and I just apologized. I'm not sure who it was meant for, but there was only one person who heard it.

And in hindsight, it was the worst person who could have possibly intervened. Except maybe Thesan himself.

I never hit the ground that day. There was a sorcerer there, and they caught me. One second, all that I saw below me was the ground, and the next, it was a sparkling, lavender hand made of magic. They caught me, lowered me to the ground, and stuck out their real hand.

“Ophelia.”

I looked at them dumbly for an embarrassing amount of time. They had dark hair that was knotted and tangled, and their clothes were ripped in places. Their eyes were entirely white. But they had this shining crown of stars resting on their head, between two small black horns. Thesan’s crown.

“Who are you?”

They smiled, before putting their hand back down. Their teeth were razor sharp, and I edged back just a little bit.

“I think I could be a great friend to you, Ophelia. You see, the gods cast me from my home, too.”

“How do you know me?”

They shrugged. “I have my ways. The important thing, though, is that I can give you the chance for revenge.”

I blinked. “Revenge against who, exactly? What’s your *name*?”

They paused for a moment, and this is when I *should* have seen the flaws in their proposal. I don’t even want revenge, and I didn’t really want it then, either. But I had nothing, and I’d had like, three minutes to process that. They caught me at the perfect time to get me to do whatever they wanted. That’s what they’re best at, after all.

“I don’t have a name. I don’t *need* a name. I’m going to make one for myself, and I can help you do the same.”

“How?”

That shark grin returned. “I’m evening the score. We don’t *need* anyone, do we Ophelia? Hell, you just got abandoned by those who were supposed to love you the most.”

I should’ve slapped them right then and there. Instead, I nodded.

“I’m going to prove that we don’t need anyone. I’ve got a master plan, and I want you to help me.”

I thought I considered it good and well. I really thought I did everything I could have, at the time. I really, really didn’t, though.

“How do I do that?”

“First, we need to get you some upgrades. Your little sylph powers are *not* gonna be enough.” They reached out in front of them and opened a rip in the air before them. The world beyond was gray, and filled with fog. A small breeze came through the tear, making me shiver.

“What do you mean?” I looked down at my hands. At the time, I was so full of confusion and betrayal that I didn’t even question why someone would say something like that. I just saw the mess I’d somehow created.

“I’m gonna give you a pretty piece of jewelry, and this jewelry will give you more magic. Then, you can help me properly.” They stepped through the rip, then turned around and beckoned me forward. I inched towards it, but something about the world beyond made me nervous. I should’ve listened to my instincts.

“What’s in there?” I pointed past them.

They looked almost bored as they glanced behind them, then back to me. “It’s Limbo. Duh.”

I recoiled from the tear as if programmed to avoid it. “You want to go into Limbo? Do you wish to die?”

They rolled their eyes. “You won’t die if you go in *yourself*. I’m here right now, do I look dead to you?” They had a point, and for some reason it was enough for me to buy it. “It won’t even hurt, I promise.”

Reluctantly, I followed them into Limbo. It definitely did hurt. The minute my feet landed on the cold, gray ground, my knees gave out. An immense pain rocked through my head, and burned like a fire in the pit of my chest. There is no air for a living being to breathe in Limbo. They are not meant to be there, after all. Before they were the God Killer, they killed mortals. Before they were doing the world this big favor by freeing mortals, they were using those same mortals to get where they are now. I suffocated to death within minutes of following them through that portal.

But then I woke up. On a hard, uncomfortable mattress in a dim, dark gray room. They were sitting across the room, with a small lantern in their hand. It was a six-sided, dark iron cage, with glass panes on each side. Inside, a small ball of light flitted around nervously. I crawled back against the wall, as they gave me that shark-tooth grin again.

“Morning. I need a favor, my dear Ophelia.”

I laughed nervously. “Why the *hell* would I do a favor for you?”

“Because *I* saved your life.” They tapped on the glass of their lantern with a clawed finger. “You owe me. Wouldn’t want to lose it again, would you?”

They flicked their hand, and a glowing shackle appeared around my wrist, and the other end of the chain was wrapped around their fist.

"I told you you'd get some pretty jewelry. You like it?" Their laugh was dark and gravelly. It made me want to run and hide.

I ground my teeth as they tugged me forward. "What do you want?"

"You're gonna help me give those stupid little gods what's coming to them."

Now, if they are to be believed – which they most certainly are *not* – I can have my freedom back when they've destroyed all the gods. And the more I do for them, the faster that day comes. They say that once they have every single god in that creepy dungeon of theirs, I can have my lantern and with it, another chance at life.

I'm sure there will be a catch. With every god I bring them, they gain more and more power. But with how much they hate patron-devotee relationships, maybe they truly will let me go. I've just got to do whatever it takes, whatever needs to be done to get my hands on that lantern. I just need my life back.

"Call 17: Rhea Ardino"

Last time the Creed of the Sinless tried to kidnap me, they were under the guise of police officers arresting me and my father.

This time, the idiots aren't dressed like cops. They're in gray suits and these weird shaped, dumbass hats that nearly cover their eyes. They both take one of my elbows and drag me down the corridor, away from my father and my friends. Cassidi shouts obscenities at the guards surrounding them, and one guard steps in front of Leo to keep him from running after us. I shout and claw at the hands digging into my arms, calling them every name I can think of. I lock eyes with my father, and he just stands there, fists clenched. It shouldn't hurt nearly as much as it does. When the guards pull him backwards, he turns without fighting.

I don't stop yelling as they drag me through hall after ugly hall, and more than once I get so close to freeing myself. But no, I can't get that right, either. Eventually, I can't hear Cass and Leo anymore. By the time the idiots open the door to a cell, my throat feels as if I put it through a cheese grater. Even the sight of the room makes me want to throw up. My body seizes, and I scramble backwards as best I can, but they toss me in like I don't weigh anything. The door slams shut and I smack into it, shouting once more.

I can't breathe. This room is too small, too small, too small. The walls are closing in and pushing on my chest. I wonder how long until my heart simply bursts. Before I know it, my knuckles are black, and blue, and a different black. Like ink, but from my veins. It's smeared on the heavy metal door, within the faintest of dents left in the shape of fists. My throat burns with the remnants of screaming that lasted for I don't even know how long.

My throat hurts. My knuckles hurt. My chest and arms hurt. Am I on fire? Maybe I'm already dead. Maybe this is what the after is like for people like me. For liars, for thieves, for heartless monsters that abandon the ones they love every time they get scared. It's small, and it's gray, and it's so, so small, and the walls are constantly closing in on you, and you sit on your hard, stained mattress for the rest of eternity.

It's loud. The pipes drip from behind the walls, and the guards are talking amongst themselves outside, and I *can't stop thinking*. Thoughts and images and all too many feelings just keep coming and coming and assaulting every sense I have. I think I might be going crazy. Maybe that's why they put me here. Maybe someday, someone will take these jackasses out, and storm the place. They'll get to this room, and all they'll find will be the skeleton of a poor, dumb girl who never did anything right and could never save anyone that she loved. And the shitty, haphazard grave they'll dig for her will read: Rhea Ardino - loved by no one, failed by the gods, disappointment to all.

How long has it been? I have no idea how much time has passed. It feels like it could have been years, but at the same time it feels like it's only been minutes. My limbs are buzzing, and my face is wet, and I feel like I might throw up. I can't stay here. I need to leave. I'll die if I have to be here a second more, I know it.

I stand, take my knife, and throw it at the door with a shout. Black erupts from the ground below my hand and rushes toward the door with my knife, bursting through its hinges. I curse and scramble back onto the mattress. When no guards come running, I gently step down onto the concrete and walk to the door. I don't know how I did that.

The minute I step outside, it's like a breath of fresh air. There's space, and exits, and something that's at least a little bit closer to freedom. It's the best I can do for now. The two guards who brought me here lay crumpled beneath the door, crushed between it and the wall. I'm sure I should be concerned about that, but I kind of have a lot going on right now. The strange mystery magic is *not* at the top of the list.

I take my knife and turn back the way I'd come from when I was brought here. After a few minutes of slowly walking down the hall, my legs feel like legs again, rather than the jelly they had turned into. I cast a small illusion over myself, ensuring I won't be noticed. Then I began to run. I won't run away this time. This time I'm going to fight, and I'm going to win.

"Hephaestus"

You remind me of the great
Hephaestus,
my love.

I see the crafted metal
on your wrists,
your fingers,
around our necks.

And yet,
I also see the
net of your suspicions.

I feel the metal
as it cinches around
me.

And my imaginary
Ares.

I had always seen us as
good.
Akin to Orpheus
and Eurydice.

But clearly,
in your eyes,
I am nothing short
of shallow Aphrodite.

Sneaking off with
Ares.
Caught in the net
of your eyes.

But, there is
no Ares.
And this net is not
big enough for me.

I will die here,
trying to break through.
And you'll do nothing,
as I thrash, and rot.

"Icarus Bound"

I am Icarus bound.
Falling forever,
yet never able to let go.
I am hopelessly bound to
that glorious dream,
the warmth that filled me
when you touched my skin.
The beautiful, perfect burn
left imprinted into my heart,
my mind,
my soul.
The pain is nothing,
when compared to that beautiful,
wonderful feeling
when you look at me.
And now, even as I
Fall through this cold,
dark abyss that
threatens to tear me
apart,

I still look to you,
my sun, whom my whole
world revolves around,
to save me from the
fate you gave me.
And burn my soul
again.

Sophia Hagemann

Grade 11, John Burroughs School

Shannon Koropchak

Flash Fiction



Letting Go of the Past

“Ouch!”, she exclaims as she stubs her toe on the harsh corner of a cardboard box.

She winces slightly as she stumbles over the boxes and random objects piled on top of each other in the dim garage. The scents of gasoline and mildew float through the air, giving her a warm, familiar feeling. The brown Home Depot boxes are stacked so high that the room no longer resembles the organized garage she once knew so well. Their dull and depressing color did not fit into their home; a home that she had filled with thoughtfully painted canvases and colorful libraries of books. As she scans the daunting wall of boxes before her, one box in particular catches her eye; “William and Eric toys” reads in big, bold sharpie letters across the front. She knows she shouldn’t be going through their donations, but maybe one last glimpse will calm her unease about them going away to college in just a few days. She has been crying almost constantly for the past week thinking about how empty the house will feel without them. Her cheeks are dry from having to wipe away so many tears.

The flood of memories that washes over her as she opens the box and sees so many familiar objects takes her back to when her boys were just up to her hips. Even the smell that wafts from the box reminds her of when she would sit on their beds and read stories before they fell asleep. As she frantically rummages through the box, hurried but careful not to break anything, she finds things she hadn’t even remembered existed. The stuffed penguin that William used to wrap his little arms around when he slept. The remote control car that Eric used to drive around the house when he was supposed to be in bed. One object in particular suddenly catches her eye. Its bright and childish colors pop against the

other toys whose shade has slightly faded or been rubbed off over the years. Her once sulky and sorrowful mood immediately disappears. She smiles as she brings it out of the box, careful not to damage it as if its past would be disturbed. She slowly lowers her body to rest on a box below her, examining the plastic cup filled with pom poms in her hands. She always thought that their round and colorful appearance resembled candy gumballs. She sighs as she pops the cup's lid off, remembering how long ago it was last held. Rolling the pom poms around in her palm and feeling their soft texture takes her back to one of her favorite memories with her family.

They are all gathered around the kitchen table, bellies full after eating spaghetti and meatballs: one of their favorite recipes of hers. The fireplace is lit and the warmth from the living room travels into the dining room. William and Eric are so small and young, and their seriousness has disappeared. The pom poms were stacked on top of each other, creating one tall colorful tower. Eric carefully removed an orange pom pom from the middle of the tower, eyes squinting in focus. After he placed it on top of the tower, she picked out a blue one that seemed easy to take off. "Oh, William, you're up! Let's see it!", she said. William reached for a pink one next to where she had grabbed hers, but his shaky hands bumped into the tower. The pom poms came tumbling down, creating a colorful explosion all across the table. Eric's arms go up as he shouts "Yes!" and William disappointedly sinks into his chair. The room fills with laughter as they all pick up the tiny pom poms one by one to play another round.

Looking back on that day, she is filled with such genuine joy and wishes she could go back to when everyone wasn't so overwhelmed by life. She can't remember the last time she awoke to the echoed thumping of feet down the hall, but the memory of it still felt so familiar. She can't remember the last time they were their old, carefree selves, but she understands that they have a lot to focus on with college coming up. Now, as she holds the soft pom poms in her palm, a warm tear falls down her cheek. For a brief second, she is comforted by the idea to keep the plastic cup out of the box and safe from donation, as if to preserve the evening she remembers so fondly. However, as she carefully folds the flaps of cardboard over each other, she hesitates. An image of another family, just like hers, appears before her. Two little boys with bright, cheeky smiles sit with their mom around a table, giggling as they watch the tower before them fall. Her lips turn to a smile as she imagines another family creating their own happy memories. She carefully places it back in the box amongst all the other toys whose colors had faded from love. Her heart aches as she gives them all one last

goodbye, yet the fears that once weighed her down now seem to float away. Suddenly her thumping heartbeat slows and her staggered breathing calms. Acceptance.

Standing back now, the boxes that were once a daunting wall towering over her give her a new and surprising comfort. Their dull shade of brown still makes her slightly unsatisfied, yet it doesn't intimidate her anymore. As she gently closes the door behind her and hears the soft click of the lock, she allows herself to take a long, deep breath, confidently leaving behind the fears that overwhelm the garage, and walking forward into the day before her.

Elliot Hall

Grade 10, Timberland High School

Educator: Andrea Dubitsky

Flash Fiction



The Parade

The music pounds in my ears. I can feel the bass in my chest. My hips are swaying to the beat of the drums. I'm tapping my foot and clapping my hands. Flashes of red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and purple cloud my vision. I feel as if I can see more colors than a mantis shrimp. The people around me are dancing with the music. We are one homogeneous creature with infinite arms and legs. We advance along the streets, spreading our love and joy to the people that surround us. I reach out to hold hands with the two people closest to me. They grasp my hands and the hands of the people next to them. We have formed a chain. We are like otters holding hands so we don't drift away in our sleep. We sing to the song blaring out of every speaker in the world. The biggest parade in the biggest city. I see some people joining in. They take the hands of the people next to them. We dance and skip and run through the streets like dogs in a dog park. We feel the same things, we think the same things, we are the same things. We dance and skip and run until we reach the ocean. We stop at the place the sea kisses the sand. The sun is warm on our skin. We stand frozen for a moment. Then we burst the bubble that has separated us from the water. We all rush into the hug of the ocean, shouting and singing and laughing. We are happy. We are at peace.

At night we rejoin on the beach for more song, more dance, more joy. We know there is nothing that can ruin this perfect day. We are calm. The sea is calm. The sun is calm.

At the end we hug and dance and skip back to the street. Holding hands once more. The music deafens me. The lights blind me. But I am happy. I am happy.

Thomas Henson

Grade 10, Timberland High School

Educator: Andrea Dubitsky

Flash Fiction



Kindness of Others

Dark gray clouds roll across the sky. One drop, then another, cold rain starts to fall from the cloudy sky. Then a crack of bright light comes crashing down followed by a great boom. The dark waves in the ocean become violent, roaring against the shore line, causing boats to be taken by the sea.

This harsh rain had not once stopped in several long harsh days. Not far from the sea lies a town, once full of joy and happiness. People would go outside and enjoy the hint of pine in the fresh air, but now the streets are empty. Half hung, faded banners blow in the harsh wind, holding on for dear life. Streets start to become flooded with water, and with one strike the power in the town goes out, causing everything to go dark. Screams are heard throughout the town. Fear is struck into the hearts of everyone, not knowing when this brutal storm will end.

What could one town do to deserve this? Maybe they aren't really happy, maybe they tell lies about others causing people to hide behind a mask.

But there is one small rundown house in the middle of town home to a husband and wife that work tirelessly to provide and take care of their son. This house was always hated, looked down upon, and ignored because the people of the town thought it brought the value of the town down. The interesting part about this rundown house is that it was the only house with light, joy, and true happiness.

There's a knock on the old door; the husband gets up from the small table in their living room to get the door. When he opens the door he sees a family drenched in water, cuts along their body from the debris that flows through the water on the streets.

Do you think that the family should be cast out just like the husband, wife, and their son had been from the town? Does the family deserve the kindness that they have never shown?

The husband does not see them for all the wrong they have caused them;
all he sees is a family in need and welcomes them in with open arms.

Theodore Hollander-Bodie

Grade 11, John Burroughs School

Educator: Jeanne Gillanders

Poetry



Cracks in the Wood

Torn, I was, between my honor and conscience, split as wood in two.
But for instinct, I would still be stiff within that horse of oak, as stone.
Stone stacked so high, Sisyphus would shrink at the sight.
Such stone possessed us Achaeans to connive, like cunning cats catching mice.
So came we Greeks to conceive such contraptions as confined me.
Quiet! The stealers of wives murmured, soft like singing sparrows, speaking.
Could such men, hearty and haughty, be sly enough to snatch a Spartan?
Hark! The play begins, a prelude to murderous acts, but quiet!
A great quiver rocks the belly of me and my men,
We who now stare in terror at surrounding planks.
Yet the spear slices shallow, the shake subsides, the game afoot again.
Gentle rocking brings us to the gates of Troy, we few of feigned favor, false
friendship,
Bound to the destruction of this magnificent city, its immortal collapse.
The moon breaks over the horizon as the boisterous gloating of Troy subsides.
We break from our lair, our swords breaking on backs like waves on our bow.
Blood is not a beauty, yet then it tasted the sweetest wine of all.
How is a man of Greece to reckon his morals with the vile which is the truth?
This truth I recount to you, if you can comprehend it.
Yet you who care to show concerned countenance at me,
Cursed by this calamity wrought by my own hands –
What punishment befits me, the executor of other men's judgments?
Those hardy folk, handsome folk, honorable folk of Troy,

And when I say honorable, I mean not the likes of Paris, but those men and women,
Those who cast no stone, spoke no sin, said no sacrilege,
Those who suffered and were sacked for other men's follies;
They whose babes were dashed upon the rocks, whose babes *I* dashed upon the rocks –

They did not deserve destruction for the idiocy of their rulers,
Yet that is what my king deemed fit for them.
Who am I to doubt his judgment?

Camden Hosler

Grade 12, John Burroughs School

Educator: Eleanor DesPrez

Personal Essay & Memoir



Whence I Came

I.

Japan will win on the sea, say experts, either by defeat of the Russian fleet or its blockade. As to Japan's fighting show on land military authorities disagree. In the long run, it would seem, Russia must win. Japanese velocity cannot overcome Russia's momentum. The Japanese soldiers are superior in bravery, discipline, initiative and enthusiasm, but they will go against a stone wall.

The cost in human lives, years, ruin, suffering –the experts do not figure these.

—"Japan and Russia," *Los Angeles Times*, January 24, 1904

He was a stout Jewish man. As my father explained to me, all my grandmother remembered of her father was the constant smell of smoke and the ash which stubbled his belly. Even his name was forgotten. He had immigrated from Latvia to escape the Russo-Japanese War. Before his journey, while scanning a magazine in a language he could not speak, read, or write he saw the words: World's Trade Fair in Saint Louis. He left for the first American city name he saw: St. Louis. In a new country, poor and alone, he worked odd jobs to stay afloat. The only job my grandmother remembered was his work on a milk truck.

His lover was a Christian woman with a fourth grade education who had married young. Early in her marriage, her first husband was placed in a mental hospital for schizophrenics. Soon after, she took on a series of lovers to support herself and had nine children by nearly as many fathers to each. When my grandmother turned four years old, her mother abandoned her and her sister to be with one of her more recent lovers. The stout Latvian man, my grandmother's father, found his two daughters alone living on the second floor of an abandoned, burnt out motel with holes torn through the floor—alone with a colony of rats and no food or water.

He placed my paternal grandmother and her sister in a Jewish orphanage in University City in St. Louis, not wanting the kids as they were, born of a gentile woman. And no one on her mother's side claimed the two sisters either as they were the daughters of a Jewish man.

II.

Tá mo chroí-se réabtha ina míle céad cuid
's gan balsam féin ann a d'fhóirfeadh dom phian,
nuair a chluinim an Ghaeilge uilig á tréigbheáil,
is caismirt Bhéarla i mbeol gach aoin,

My heart is torn in a hundred thousand pieces,
And no remedy will soothe my pain,
When I hear Irish being abandoned
And the din of English in everyone's mouth.

—Art Mac Cubhthaigh, Armagh, 1715-1773

All the while, on a farm in the middle of rural Ireland, my maternal grandmother, Nana, was born one of nine girls and seven boys. She studied the hardest out of all her sisters and was the only of the nine to go to school. Her parents and sisters worked and saved to send her to a boarding school on the other side of Ireland. There she studied in a language she could not speak, English. After a few years she had learned English and earned a degree in nursing. She practiced to become a nurse day in and out, and once she turned 18, she left immediately for America.

In America, she would meet her husband, my Papá. Papá had grown up in Peru, a sickly child. Stuck indoors he found his love of books and movies. During that time, the only movies he could watch were made in the United States and it fostered in him a need to visit. Fueled by his love of reading, he became an excellent student. He earned a spot at the top of his class and left for the United States to pursue a specialty in ophthalmology.

III.

The praises of a man are that he did not follow the counsel of the wicked, neither did he stand in the way of sinners nor sit in the company of scorners. But his desire is in the law of the Lord, and in His law he meditates day and night. He shall be as a tree planted beside rivulets of water, which brings forth its fruit in its season, and its leaves do not wilt; and whatever he does prospers. Not so the wicked, but [they are] like chaff that the wind drives away.

Therefore, the wicked shall not stand up in judgment, nor shall the sinners in the congregation of the righteous.

For the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked shall perish.

—Tehillim (Psalms) (1:1-6)

My paternal grandmother's life was not any easier after she was placed in the orphanage. The orphanage had been created to care for Jewish children. The principles of Orthodox Judaism were a fundamental component to the identity of the orphanage and the lives of the children and the house mothers who lived there. Among Orthodox Jews, it is believed that in order to be Jewish, your mother must be Jewish. Because my grandmother and her sister were the illegitimate daughters of a gentile woman, the house mothers would point out that they were not "really Jewish." Even among orphans, she said she felt she had no home. Her two friends were her sister and a volunteer janitor boy, Herb, who worked at the orphanage as service to the St. Louis Jewish community since his father was a prominent rabbi. Herb had started dating another girl in the orphanage, a few years older than my grandmother, and began visiting more and more. Intrigued by my grandmother's intellectual curiosity, he soon became a mentor to her and would bring her challenging literary works to read. She was the only girl in the orphanage who was eager to read the books he handed out, and, over time, their connection only grew stronger.

Throughout this time at the orphanage, my grandmother was placed in and out of foster homes. But these homes weren't welcoming either. In her first foster home, she was physically abused, and in all the others she felt like an outsider, the foster parents never viewing her as "really Jewish" either. After years in the system, she was involuntarily admitted to a state mental hospital indefinitely. Herb, visited week in and week out, sending in forms and begging the hospital to give her weekend leave. Eventually after two months, she was given the leave. The two never went back. And Herb's older brother, who was studying law at the time, sent a letter to the ward that threatened legal action if they ever tried to take my grandmother again. Free from the orphanage, the foster homes, and the ward, she went on to attend the University of Missouri and meet my grandfather.

IV.

The only one who could ever reach me
Was the son of a preacher man
The only boy who could ever teach me

Was the son of a preacher man
Yes he was (was), he was (was)
(Ooh) Lord knows he was (yes he was)

—Dusty Springfield, "Son of a Preacher Man," 1968

My paternal grandfather grew up the son of a strict evangelical preacher, travelling from town to town throughout rural Missouri. He did well in school due in part to his parents' strict rules. He wasn't allowed to go to prom, as dancing was forbidden; he couldn't listen to rock music; and he couldn't hang out with certain friends since they swore. He earned a full ride to the University of Missouri due to his good grades and was the second in his family to attend college. He graduated top of his class and became a doctor.

Coda

Years later, my Papá lived out his American dream and made it in America. My Nana raised her four kids and ensured they all were well educated and had good careers. My grandfather returned to his evangelical roots and became a member of the Pentecostal church. My grandmother gave others the home she never had, letting refugees, addicts, and people down on their luck stay in her home.

In the words of James Baldwin, "If you know whence you came, there is really no limit to where you can go." Over the course of writing this essay and discovering more about my roots and ancestry I've developed a newfound appreciation for my parents and their stories and an understanding of myself and who I am. I first started my project by asking my dad about the parents of my grandmother since I knew absolutely nothing about them, only to find out that they abandoned her and that was why I knew almost nothing. The more I heard of my grandmother's and grandfather's stories, the more appreciation I had for the life I live and the struggle they had to live through. And the more I talked to my two parents, especially my mother, the more I realized how much of my history is forgotten. My mother couldn't recall much about her grandparents since her parents were immigrants and didn't maintain contact with their families.

As I wrote, I realized that I was unaware of so many little pieces of history from rock bands to entire wars which were brought up. I also never fully grasped how different each of my grandparents' stories were from each other. Some of my grandparents were more open to my parents than others which

made some stories much shorter than others. But as different as each and story was, just as Milkman in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* is proud that his great-grandfather could fly, I'm proud of each and every one of my grandparents. I'm proud that after all she went through my grandmother still opened her door to those in need and made her life a positive one. I'm proud of my grandfather's dedication and hard work which paved the way for me to have the life I live now. I'm proud that Papá and Nana made a life for themselves after they each immigrated to America young and alone.

Lakin Jaeger

Grade 8, Parkway West Middle School

Short Story



Alone

VIDEO LOG, MAY 21, 2056

[click]

“Okay. Um. Hello. I’m Vivian. Vivian Snyder. And I’m—I think I’m the last person on Earth.”

END OF RECORDING

VIDEO LOG, MAY 22, 2056

“Hi again. Sorry to be so abrupt last time. I wanted to add some dramatic effect. They taught me how to do that in school. Before... y’know. Everything. Anyways. I’m Vivian, and forty-six days ago the world ended. I marked the day on a calendar I made with chalk on the concrete walls.

It’s dark down here. And cold, too. There are all these shelves in the back, filled with dusty cans and board games and books. A lot of old detective novels, Sherlock Holmes and Agatha Christie. I’ve already read half of them, and it’s only been forty-six days. I’m going to get bored soon, I fear.

But there’s food and water to last five years. I want to survive. I need to, if I’m all that’s left. And I should be fine. I just need to fight off the loneliness.

It’s already getting hard to fight it.”

END OF RECORDING

VIDEO LOG, MAY 24, 2056

“I’m back. Did you miss me?

Of course not, because I’m talking to myself. I’m all I have, and I hate it.

I’m afraid I’m going to lose it down here. I’ve seen movies and read books about people going insane in solitary confinement. Well, this is confinement of the

worst kind. I can't leave because I don't know what's out there. The air is bad and the world is bad, and it's all bad. And I'm never going to have the option to see another person again.

It's been forty-eight days. Forty-eight days since I went down here, and I'm already talking to myself like I'm someone else.

I wish I were someone else.

I wish I were somewhere else."

END OF RECORDING

VIDEO LOG, MAY 29, 2056

"Vivi again. I don't know why I introduce myself every time. Nobody's ever going to see this but me. I'm all that's left.

Never mind. I wanted to tell the story of what happened. I still don't quite have it straight in my head, so I thought I'd say it out loud. I don't know if that will help. Anyway, I was in school one day. It was almost the end of the year, and nobody was paying attention. Nothing struck me as off about that day. Maybe if I had paid attention, I wouldn't be down here. Or maybe not down here alone.

We were sitting in class watching the news report to "stay updated on current events," like we did every Thursday. We were sitting and watching when, all of a sudden, there was a flash of light. It blinded me for a moment, and inside that moment the world exploded.

I don't remember much after that. There was a lot of noise, so much that it hurt to listen, hurt to exist in that moment. The ground shook, a blinding light everywhere, all around. My eyes hurt, and my ears hurt, and everything hurt so much I could hardly breathe. Buildings collapsed around the school. The windows shattered and glass rained on the classroom. I was tossed to the ground like a ragdoll. The TV had fallen, and the news anchor was lying on the floor, under her desk, pixelated on the cracked screen. She wasn't moving, but I couldn't tell if that was the TV or if she was dead. I didn't want to know.

People were lying around me—my classmates, my friends. The teacher was crumpled at the front of the room. The ceiling had collapsed, and I couldn't breathe right because the air was full of ash. I couldn't breathe right because none of them were breathing.

I climbed out of the rubble, scraped and bleeding and hurt. The only thing I could think was that they were all gone except for me. It was just me.

I didn't know why, but I crawled out the window and ran.

I ran past the Target on the corner. The bullseye was cracked in half on the parking lot. I didn't know what was happening. I remember being scared, so scared, and then almost nothing. Flashes of memory.

Broken buildings, broken bones

A gray, ashen sky

Hollow eyes, gazing at nothing at all.

People were everywhere, but none of them were alive, none of them. None at all.

I breathed in and breathed out, and it tasted like poison. Everything was poisoned—the whole world and the air, and my lungs were heavy with it, thick and dusty. I knew I should get to safety, but my legs kept going into the subdivision I lived in.

I ran past my house. It had crumbled, and the sky was hot-plate red behind the rubble.

There were two bodies. I don't want to talk about them.

There was dust and debris and silence. And I almost stopped running because they were dead, all of them, and it was all over except for me. I was alone, all alone, and I stopped, and I screamed into the nothing, into the red, red sky and the quiet and the giant empty nothingness around me and inside me and everywhere. I screamed and I screamed and I screamed, and I still felt so empty. When I stopped, the world was silent, more so than it had been because there had been noise, and now there was nothing again.

The nothing ran together, a blurry mess of blank stares and emptiness.

It was so quiet. I felt like the quiet would kill me more than the catastrophe I didn't understand.

I kept running. My friend Rebecca's dad was a doomsday prepper. He had a bunker in the woods near our school. She'd brought me there once before, with a few other girls. She'd shown off how she would live in luxury in case of the apocalypse. Now it had happened, and she was just a body in the broken school I'd run from. My breath quickened.

I don't know how long I ran for, but it felt infinite. Sometimes I want to rewind and pause in that scene, make the running forever and ever and never get here, just so it would never get worse.

I ran to the bunker, pulled open the hidden door, and slipped inside, stepping down the ladder. I closed the door, locked it, and stood in the concrete room. It was dank and lifeless, a dark gray, man-made cave beneath ruined ground. It was my prison, for as long as this tragedy, this apocalypse, lasted.

I walked to the sink and stood over it, seeing my dusty face in the industrial stainless steel. Nausea rolled over me again and again. I thought I was going to throw up, but instead, I found my hand turning on the faucet. I washed my hands, scrubbed them clean. Then I turned the water as hot as it would go and scrubbed and scrubbed. I rubbed them raw, trying to wash away the images of the broken world I'd run from. I couldn't do it.

And then, fifty-three days into this, I'm here. A broken girl, talking to herself and still full of the guilt I couldn't scrub away. I'm the only girl left now.

I'm all alone.

I hate it. I hate it all."

END OF RECORDING

VIDEO LOG, JUNE 3, 2056

"Me again. Today was hard. Really hard. I miss my family. My mom, my dad. My sisters, all three of them. I miss them every day, but somehow today everything reminded me of them. The brand of rice on the food shelves was the same one my mom used to buy. My handwriting in chalk on the concrete wall looks just like my dad's. All my sister's favorite games are down here in the back on a dusty shelf.

I miss them so much. I thought I locked all the heartbreak away. I thought it would be easier than this.

Tonight, I'm going to make my mother's rice and write my father's words on the concrete wall and play Monopoly and CandyLand and Clue all alone and cry, probably. I don't know what else to do."

END OF RECORDING

VIDEO LOG, JUNE 13, 2056

"There are ghosts in here with me. I didn't see them at first. They were hiding, but now they are out in the open.

Rebecca is standing by the shelves full of food, showing it off to a translucent group of my old friends. My sisters play Clue in the back corner. I can see Helen cheating, like she always used to. She moves her piece an extra space, and Rosie notices. A fight is brewing.

My parents are standing by the hot plate. My mom pours rice into an invisible pot. My father writes nonexistent words on the wall. He writes the word *remember*, over and over, and I do. I remember.

I can't tell if I'm crazy yet or not.

The ghosts won't go away."

END OF RECORDING

VIDEO LOG, JUNE 22, 2056

"The ghosts are here to stay. I locked myself in the tiny bathroom so I don't have to look at them. I sit on the floor because if I stand up, I'll see them standing behind me in the mirror. I always had my mother's eyes, my father's nose, my sister's pale blonde hair. So much of me is theirs.

I don't know how much longer I can do this. At first, I thought five years would be the end, after I ran out of food and water. I don't eat very much now because of the ghosts. It's all their fault.

Now, I don't know what will happen. I know I can't live like this for five years. I can't survive ghosts drifting in and out of my bunker, flashes of memory. It hurts me. I feel like I'm going to die from the pain of it all.

I don't even know which is worse, living with the ghosts,
Or dying."

END OF RECORDING

VIDEO LOG, JUNE 27, 2056

"I'm losing my mind. Losing it.

I am the only real one here. It's just me, me and the ghosts. They aren't real, I tell myself, but they feel so alive, like they used to be. I say they aren't real so many times, but they don't listen to me.

I hate the ghosts. I hate them and I love them because of who they are. I hate it all. I miss my family. I miss my friends. I miss the world from forever ago, before the bunker and the apocalypse and my life collapsing. Sometimes I see it in my sleep, the red sky and the smoke and the bodies. Sometimes I see it when I'm awake too.

I'm alone, and I hate it, and I wish I were somewhere else. I want to be someone else, but they're all dead. I don't know how much longer I can go on alone, like thi-

Knock. Knock. Knock.

"There's someone at the door."

END OF RECORDING



Endings

The city is dark, and it feels unfamiliar, even though she's lived there for years now. She had run away the week she turned eighteen. She had claimed her life, owned it, taken it from her sad, hurting mother and angry father, and run with it. She didn't go to college, and she rented a small studio apartment in the city. Now she drives through the city that never really felt like home.

There is a mother, in a kitchen, miles from the city her daughter left her for. The girl had been destined for great things once. She'd had so much potential. Now, the mother regrets the pressure she put on her. If she hadn't, the girl might not have left.

Her husband died. Her daughter left. Her friends said she was too sad, and they faded away into acquaintances. Why does everyone she loves leave her?

Her daughter lives in the city now. She never calls home. Some days, the mother can pretend she doesn't even have a daughter. Most days, she hates herself for it.

The girl drives through the city. It's dark, but the streetlights illuminate enough. They shine, casting a warm yellow glow on everything, including the Polaroid tucked in the driver's mirror. A young girl with asymmetrical brown pigtails. Her mother, behind her, smiling as the girl blows out candles on a birthday cake. She's not that little girl anymore. She looks at the photo for a long while, feeling distant and separate from the woman driving through the city. That's why she's coming home. To feel happy again. The city never really made her happy, but she liked it enough to pretend it did.

The mother in the kitchen sits at the counter and gently lowers her face into her hands. A large cake sits on the counter before her. It is covered in pink and purple frosting and bears a strong resemblance to a cake in a picture on a

shelf above the sink. Her daughter, a young girl with asymmetrical brown pigtails. Herself, behind her, smiling as the girl blows out candles on a birthday cake. The mother misses that little girl. She wonders where she went. Is it her fault that she's not there anymore? If so, is it her fault that she's coming home?

The young girl, all grown up, drives home. She winds her way down dark country roads and feels like crying because what if her old house doesn't feel like home anymore? She hasn't talked to her mother in a few years, until yesterday, when she called to ask if she could come to visit. Her mother agreed, but her voice was strained, and now the girl wonders if she made the right choice.

The mother waits in the kitchen for her daughter to come home. The girl is late, and for a moment the woman wonders if she made a different choice. What if she isn't coming after all? What if the mother has lost her chance to make it up to her daughter? What if all this worrying is all for nothing?

The icing is melting off of the cake on the counter.

The girl is driving in the dark and quiet when she sees two specks of light, coming closer. Headlights. She drives on until the headlights suddenly blind her. She twists the wheel, panicking, and the car collides with a truck.

In the aftermath, a police officer identifies her by her ID in the glove compartment and makes a call to her mother. A Polaroid picture lies in the wreckage. It is swept away along with the glass and crumpled metal.

The mother picks up the phone. "There's been an accident," the man says. She hears nothing after that, just a dead, empty buzzing that lingers in her head. It ricochets around her skull. She falls to the ground in agony, and she breaks. She shatters on the cold tile floor.

She never said goodbye. She never said she was so, so sorry.

The house is cold and empty. The photo on the shelf hurts to look at. One day, she is so angry with the world that she pulls it from the shelf and tosses it across the room. Regret splinters through her, and it only takes an hour for the photo to be back on the shelf, cracked glass and all.

The cake sits on the counter for weeks until she finally throws its rotten carcass out. It feels so final that she almost breaks again. Home is not home, not anymore. And maybe, maybe it never will be again.

Rhea Jha

Grade 10, Rock Bridge Senior High School

Critical Essay



I Am An Alien

Looking out into the night sky, I sometimes wonder if there's intelligent life or aliens out there while my eyes sweat - I mean, while I tear up. Maybe you don't feel the same way, but you've probably ingested a sci-fi film or novella. Looking at that regurgitation of stars and nebulae called the Milky Way, I feel like I just need to reach out to make contact. Sometimes I think about that name... Milky Way... makes me think of when the mini marshmallows in your hot chocolate melt slightly, and then you swirl the small cubic portions around like a little toddler mixing around their mud pie. Perhaps my way of lingualizing is alien to you, but there are so many. More. Alien things about me. And not just me, but maybe everyone around you is an alien.

Now, I'm not trying to make you overly self-conscious, but think about it: in a country like America, the hotpot of melting cultures in the world, not everyone is from the same cuisine. And sometimes, sticking a fork or chopsticks or your hand into that pot (ouch!) can make the bite moderately disgusting. I mean, pesto with strawberry ice cream? Foul. Now that's the one exception to me yucking someone else's yum.

According to Cornell's Law School, the term "alien" means anyone not a citizen or national of the United States. So guess what? I am an alien. Take that, my fourth-grade teacher! Ring up the Pentagon! When I was in the fourth grade, some of my favorite shows were "Little Einsteins," "Dora the Explorer," and "The Octonauts." So much better than all of that Cocomelon crap. But more importantly, the Little Einsteins had this cute little red spaceship that they would use to travel the world. So today, I'm inviting all of you to an exclusive trip around

the world on my “borrowed” ship – and don’t worry, it won’t take 70 days like the book – just a couple minutes of your time.

5, 4, 3, 2, 1! Let’s go on a trip in our favorite rocket ship, zooming through the sky and traveling the world to explore what different cultures define as ‘alien’. Climb aboard and get ready to explore the Western perspective first, then fly out of our makeshift spaceship hanger to Europe to investigate French films, and zoom East to see the Buddhist Worldview. And at this point, the engine sputters out – we don’t know where to go next! Well, who do we ask for help when we don’t know where to go? The Map! Say it with me. The Map! Okay, tough crowd. El mapa dice que tenemos que mirar dentro de nosotros mismas. We have to look inside ourselves as the final destination. Octonauts, at ease! Let’s head on our adventure!

So, let’s climb aboard our rocket ship and explore the Western perspective first.

While conspiracies like Area 51 experimenting on aliens and UFO sightings are thrown away as ridiculous, the arguably more important component of this is our fascination with aliens or things that are unlike us. Curiosity is something that sets humans apart from other animals and has advanced us far enough to want to feel a connection to intelligent life that isn’t readily available.

For this very reason, NASA does a fair amount of extraterrestrial life research. When Voyager 1 and 2 were sent out in 1977, NASA placed golden records aboard them. They’re information for aliens! The Golden Record contains 115 images and a variety of natural sounds, musical selections, and spoken greetings.

Flying out of our makeshift spaceship hanger, we head to Europe! Let’s investigate.

The first movie ever to feature aliens was “Le Voyage dans la Lune,” or A Trip to the Moon, made in France in 1902. The main plot is about a group of astronauts that shoot off into space onto the eye of the Man in the Moon. These astronauts exit the capsule without needing space suits, cuz they built like that, and then go to sleep. A Selenite, an insectoid alien inhabitant of the Moon, appears but is easily killed by an astronomer cuz, again, they built like that. Anyways, after a bit of an action sequence, the Selenite King is thrown off his throne – oh wait, that rhymed – and the astronomers get back to their capsule along with a captive Selenite. They return home and have a celebratory parade to honor their return, displaying the incarcerated alien.

Thought bubble! Doing what my fourth-grade teacher says is analyzation, I can basically draw a parallel between this and the events after 1492. I mean, Selenite is to Native Americans as are astronauts to colonizers. They even featured that one scene in which they show off the princess, or the captive Selenite, by a buff blonde guy! Oh wait... that's the movie Pocahontas... forget I said that. But couldn't that easily have been done the other way around? I mean, colonizers are to immigrants as Selenites are to white people? Wait - aren't Caucasians immigrants too? Hmm... let's put that in the next thought bubble for right now.

It feels like the second anything unlike us even makes the mistake of showing themselves - we have to crush it. I mean, Columbus saw "Indians" and the astronauts saw the Selenites. It's kind of like seeing a roach. We don't even take the time to greet it before we attempt to smash it to smithereens. Finally, we open nuestro mapa and realize the final destination is here; inside ourselves and within our own country. The legislation of our country and the foundation it's been built upon discriminates against immigrants, even now. Not just by legislation, but by context and alienation against the minority. I was sitting at the dinner table one day, simply watching what my mum was doing like the clingy child I am. She was filling out a form of some sort. As I peered down the sheet and saw her check a box, I jumped up as a springy exclamation point.

"Mom! Why did you sign that?"

"What do you mean, beta?"

"That...that...! It says 'Are you an alien?!'"

"Yes beta, we are aliens."

What?!? I mean, it's dehumanizing! Literally! I'm being... alienated.

Yup. It's in the Constitution - if you're not a United States citizen, you're an alien.

Just last year, Halloween and Diwali were on the same day. When my friends asked me if I could go trick or treating with them, I said that I had Diwali - and I thought that my friends would be supportive and understanding that I would place my religious celebration and pooja, or prayers, above a holiday that pushes one's boundaries to obtain the diabetic plaque by stuffing processed sugars into your intestines. But instead, they frowned and looked like they were in discomfort when I brought it up.

And this wasn't the first time it's happened. Seeing social media alienate Indians from being a "different" kind of Asian and making memes about how we

supposedly smell bad weren't hurtful at first. I mean, it's simply untrue! My mouth smells delicious - cardamom-infused. And my hair? Jasmines. I mean, as an Indian, I thought that some of the memes were funny - but there was a point to where there was no relatability. And that means no humor.

I would hear people who weren't Indian call us curry-munchers. What was more shocking was that I saw this on a friend's phone as they were showing me a message. I mean, I don't mean to snoop, but 'curry-muncher' is an ethnic slur. And my friend was totally slurring that slur! Now, I understand that you're not my therapist - but hold on a moment while I therapy this bit. When I saw that there was no backlash against this lash, I realized: alienation of certain groups? In all respects, normal. And in almost all cases, it's immigrants. But surprisingly, the people who partake in this lashing are also immigrants. Talk about masochistic. Not once have I heard a Native American ever say something against us. And for the record, one does not munch the hundreds of different kinds of curries that India has to offer - one slurps it.



Where Are You From?

“Where are you from?” It’s followed by a look. There’s a range of how graphic it can get. The younger or brattier or more privileged they get, the more... *expressive* the expression becomes. A slight narrowing of their eyes. The eyebrows stitch together like a tight crochet. The lips press together. And finally: the eyes look you up and down. But let’s get this clear: the younger ones will clearly look disgusted with a vocal embellishment adding to that moral hate of the thing they’re looking at. They’re looking at me. 7-year-old me who didn’t know it but felt repulsed by their behavior. I said, “I’m from... um... I was born in Britain.”

“No, I mean, where are you *really* from?”

Like I don’t know what you’re referring to. I mean, look at my skin! See my mom, wearing a shalwar kameez or a kurta from pooja? A bright smile on her face and a short dash of sindoor on her middle-hair part?

“I mean, my parents are from India,” I say, being asked this same question so many times that I’m ashamed of the answer. Ashamed of my background.

“...” They never say it, but I can see it in that smug smile that looks victorious. “*I knew it! I knew it! I knew it!*”

After this embarrassment, I learned that people would look at me differently if I said I wasn’t from South or Southeast Asia. East Asians were cool. Arabs were cool. I couldn’t pass off as East Asian, so I hid my identity as an Arab. And yes, while there is most likely arab blood somewhere in my family, that’s not where my culture or heritage lies. Even the more attentive people who are not Indian or Hindu simplify Indian Hindus to overachievers, the festival of colors, the festival of lights, butter chicken, curry, and lack of deodorant. Ew... they’re so weird.

Yet people view Arabs as rich off oil, foreign, (terrorist), posh, and with a language that sounds oh-so-difficult and is read backward. So unique! And so, I hid my true self and my heritage. It was some time before I learned to accept, then appreciate, and finally embrace my culture and religion with my whole heart.

Hinduism isn't just caste systems – unlike what AP World would teach the average American high schooler. The classes, material, and activities ostracize religions, having us do comparisons and contrasts on different beliefs and rituals. Take the first religions my teachers taught us: Hinduism and Buddhism. We had a class activity for writing a story – it was called “A Day in the Life of a Hindu.” I was initially confused; was I supposed to write an autobiography? Ah, yes. I wake up at 7 am, pray, stretch, shower, pack my school bag, eat breakfast, and get on my bus. Not too different from other people, I supposed. Oh, but there was a specification based on *Ancient Hindus*. Ohhh. Makes so much more sense. I wake up early, shower, pray, stretch, eat breakfast, and go to school. But that's not how I was *supposed* to do it. There were a wide variety of scenes and interactions I could cherry-pick from to showcase the disrespect during this activity, but here are my ‘favorites’:

What my English teacher was looking for, in his words, was: “...maybe a forbidden romance of two different castes!” or “think of how you long that you were buddhist so that you could escape the caste system” or “the cruelty and difficulty you may face as a Dalit.”

So, even though it was my own religion and I knew it very well, when I showed it to my instructor to let him know if I was on the right track, he scrunched his nose and said, “C'mon, think outside the box!”

Or, when I was writing it and all my caucasian friends looked scared and apprehensive about chatting with me in their presence. Almost in disgust? that I was in a religion that sorted people based on their families? It's not like castes are common practice in India anymore. And what's with this conversion to Buddhism because you hate Hinduism? And I know that hate is a strong word – my mother always reminds me whenever I talk about an unfair circumstance – but if morally disgusting is hatred, then what else can you call the feeling that is associated with actions and speaking of a dislike of someone else's beliefs? Hinduism is syncretized, the word I learned in AP World, with Buddhism. Yes, I pray to Hindu gods but I also have a Buddha statue in my room. Yes, I put on red and yellow pastes on my forehead but I also like to hug trees. The very nature of teaching material is to have the next generation know about different things

with no biases and with a familiarity of the material. America cannot be called a decent or good educational system if discrimination is built into curriculum. This issue – hatred of Hindu-Indians – is stemming from 2 main problems. The education system and social system. Namely, the education system's purpose is to properly, without biases, teach the younger generation history; math's history, science's history, world history, and literature history; then show them what to do in the future; whether that be solving problems such as plastic pollution, and more importantly, not repeating mistakes. Einstein himself said that repeating things again and again while expecting different results is insanity. The social system is to facilitate a place where ideas and opinions are shared. Where corrections need to be made, they are taught. And when a difference in opinion is made, such as following different religions, respect for all is taught.

The problems in the education system have a multitude of factors, such as underfunded and understaffed schools, underpaid teachers, and a wrecked social system. The social system has problems that seep into every corner of our lives from extreme polarization to discrimination and is brought upon by past history and an extremely problematic education system. See how the two depend on each other? It feels like the question of who came first. The chicken, or the egg?

The solution lies in reforming the education system – not simply mandating it – but making it enjoyable with actual skills that young Americans can take to any place and respect the area. The times for dominance of an area; colonization through thought; that time is over. It's time to appreciate and respect. Then only can we properly fix, change, and grow.

Anjali Krishnakumar

Grade 10, Olathe North High School

Educator: Deirdre Zongker

Science Fiction & Fantasy



To Be Remembered

The girl sits on the ground. Her hands press against the bumpy tile floor of the abandoned hallway. The light flickers- it's the only one still lit, and if she were to look to her left or right, or right in front of her, she would see the light fade into an ominous void. It's strange, how different school feels after dark. The girl doesn't notice, though. Her eyes are closed, and her back curves in on herself, her dark wavy hair concealing her face. Her shoulders slightly shake. I feel sorry for her, although I don't know why she's crying. I assume she was here for a club meeting, although I don't know what club. It's late now, and the meeting finished a quarter-hour ago. Everyone had gone home, but the girl stayed behind. I watched as she was entrusted to lock up and put things away. After she finished, she sat up against the wall in an intersection, and I noticed her a little while later. I hovered around her, watching, maybe because she was alone, or maybe because silent tears began to run down her cheeks,

Don't cry, I want to say. If I could do anything, I would comfort her. I know I can't touch her, but, other than that, I'm still not sure what I can and cannot do. I've only been dead for just over five years. Before my calling, I was in my home library in the house I got after I grew old. It had been blocked off and abandoned, left almost entirely intact. No people came, so I could do as I liked. I had never been called away until now. I just sat in my library, usually with some tea, and read my books. I still haven't finished all of them. I've never been more grateful for my living self's slight hoarding tendencies. It's the dream, I remind myself, even if sometimes it feels a little lonely.

That dream ended with my first calling. I was being remembered! I didn't know what it was at first. I had forgotten what was supposed to happen- in all my five years of death, I hadn't been called, so I had forgotten all of the information they gave us at orientation. Nevertheless, I was more than a little excited about the change of pace. But I wasn't prepared for being brought all the way back to high school, to my earlier memories. I was alone, again. Although the exhibit remembered countless people, I was the only one called. I suppose all the others had more important places to be. I've only been here for a few days and I've already remembered so many things I had forgotten over the years, both good and bad. I remembered people I hadn't talked to in decades, even in my waking life. I remember how good it feels to talk to some people that I lost touch with. I don't really talk to people anymore.

As I watch the crying girl, I am struck by a memory. I close and open my eyes. The girl appears as a projection, hazy, on a different, truer image. Another girl, sitting in the same spot, curled into the same ball, crying. Me. I don't know what I'm crying about. It could be so many things-- a lot happened in high school. I don't want to think about that. But still, I draw closer to the remembrance. Details flood my brain. I remember the taste of tears in my mouth, my eyes squeezing shut. Before I realize it I'm kneeling next to the girl-- the real one, the one in this timeline-- and I press a hand to her shoulder. Her skin warms under my touch. I'm not supposed to be able to do this. At orientation, they had told me it was impossible. It's surprisingly simple. It's surprisingly real.

She looks up in shock. Her brown eyes peer out of her warm brown skin. She looks around to observe the hallway. I think she sensed my touch. She stands and stares into the dark hallway to her left. I stand behind her, peering over her shoulder into the darkness. It's eerie, the darkness. I haven't gotten used to it. She turns and she's face to face with me. She freezes, and I think, for a second, that she sees me. I smile, shyly, so she knows I'm not here to harm her. She makes no reaction- she can't see me. But she stops, all the same, and I study her. I can feel her ties to the school. I didn't know I could do that, either, but somehow, I just know. They're fresh, fledgling. It's interesting, isn't it? How different we are? All my family is tied to this town or this school somehow. Maybe in a couple of generations, this girl's children and grandchildren will be tied to this place as strongly as I am. Or maybe not.

She steps forward until she's standing right in front of me, nose to nose. The girl is looking through me, to the tarp at the end of the hall. Her shiny eyes take a curious tint. She wants to see what's back there- what called me here,

though she doesn't know that part. Before I realize it, the girl takes another step, right through me. Her heat passes through my core, dissolving me into nothing but wisps of cold air. My eyesight blurs into psychedelic swirls of color and my senses go haywire, and then just go blank. It's kind of comforting, the blankness, but then I coalesce and remember what it's like, to exist. I stand in shock, frozen. For a second, I forgot I wasn't real. But I'm not.

I turn to watch the girl shudder and keel over to catch her breath. I wonder what she felt. I wonder what she's thinking now. She straightens and looks at the tarp again. No one knows what's back there except for the school historical society (really, a very pretentious name) that organized it. I wonder why she's so curious- what does she think it is? She walks further towards it, away from the light. My breath catches in my throat as she draws closer. I follow gingerly in her footsteps until I'm just behind her, right before the curtain. She takes a deep breath and pulls back the tarp.

She steps inside with a gasp and I follow her warmth. I try to imagine it as if I'm someone seeing it for the first time. It's not done- far from it- but it's clear why she gasped. The pictures and documents hang down at different levels. They're lit in the darkness by fairy lights I forgot to turn off. The girl wanders through the cramped space, rifling through the stacks of letters and documents that the volunteers have yet to organize. She scrutinizes them, reading the accounts of old pep rallies and clubs and school dynamics. The stack of yearbooks in the corner draws her attention. It climbs almost to the ceiling. She extricates a few and flips through them. I settle at her shoulder. I recognize some people- my grandpa's brother as a teacher, my sister's ex-boyfriend, and my good-for-nothing nephew.

We're on a newer one, the sports pages, when she glances at her phone and yelps at the time. She stands up hurriedly. I know it's probably something she could get in trouble for, but I wish she wouldn't go home now. It's been nice, sitting next to someone, even if she can't see me. In such a short time, I've already gotten used to the soft cadence of her breath and the undercurrent of her heartbeat- the things I no longer have. The lack of her warmth makes me shudder. Nevertheless, she gathers up her things and makes her way out of the exhibit. She peeks out into the cold darkness of the hallway. All the lights have long been switched off now. She looks around once more before she leaves and her eyes land on a photo, dangling from the ceiling. She draws closer to it like a moth to a flame until she's so close that I swear her face is touching it. I edge around to try to see what she's looking at. When I see it, I freeze.

It's *me*. I haven't seen this picture before. Ruby, an old friend I had lost track of, was so excited to get her new camera (which she really didn't know how to use) that she spent days walking around and taking pictures of everyone, and then getting yelled at by her father for wasting all the film. The picture is underdeveloped and framed terribly, but it's clearly me, sitting in the school halls, reading my book. I didn't know she was taking the picture. As I stand there, awash in memory, the girl turns. She stands facing me. Her eyes stare into mine, and I swear, *I swear*, she sees me. If I told this story to the officials, they wouldn't believe me, they'd say it's impossible. But who says what's possible? Maybe it's magic, or maybe it's fake, but I swear that this girl sees me.

Shauna Kruger

Grade 10, Parkway Central High School

Educator: Jason Lovera

Personal Essay and Memoir



The Bite or The Bark

The day I lost my innocence was a bright and sunny one, filled with excitement. My mom woke me up with pancakes and a smile on her face. She was headed to a psychology conference while my dad was on his way to drop my brother off at a friend's place before heading to work. That day I was headed to my next door neighbor's house until my parents returned home. Little did any of us know that we would not return home that night, instead we would be waiting in the hospital while a needle sewed up the wound that would scar me forever.

I was only eight years old. Young with a pure soul. No marks visible on my smooth skin but the small cut I got from playing in the woods with my brother. How could the day begin so wholesome and end so damaged? This question has lingered in my thoughts for years after my incomplete revenge occurred, filling my mind with hatred for not finishing my sickening goal.

At my neighbor's house that day we played on the trampoline for hours, trying to see who could jump higher or do the best trick. Eventually exhausted from the exercise and heat, she demanded we go inside to watch a movie. I obliged her command. I always looked up to my neighbor, seeing her as someone older and more experienced. In return, she enjoyed my admiration and ordered me around like she did her dog. This dog, Elly, was only a year old but large enough to bite my sister on the nose when standing on her hind legs. She terrified me to the point where I would take the long way around the house to avoid being near her cage. My fears had been dismissed by everyone but I felt something deep in my gut that told me this fear was justified.

I was proven right just a few minutes later. Standing quietly behind my neighbor as she put some bagels into the toaster as a snack, Elly brushed against

my torso. She almost knocked me over with her huge body. She looked up at me with her big black eyes begging me to pet her. Tentatively, I reached my hand down to her back and began softly stroking her silky fur. While my hand was resting on her back she turned to face her food bowl. Mindlessly, I raised my hand to continue petting her and time slowed. As my finger brushed her back, her large head snapped up snarling with malice. I felt teeth clench around my cheek and I smelled the horrible stench of dog food. Time resumed, and I became aware of the sickly sound of blood dripping down my skin and hitting the cold tile floor. I watched as the red began to stain the pristine white flooring, just as it began to contaminate my innocent soul.

In a state of shock I was rushed out to the car by my friend as her mother came barreling down the stairs looking annoyed.

“You should have known better, why did you touch the dog while she was eating?” As she drove to the urgent care she chastised me, these words swirling around my mind imprinting themselves into my soul. Within my state of frozen fear I felt something else... humiliation. It was as if I did not know this woman speaking these cruel words to me in my time of need. Yet they remained etched in my brain.

In *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens, he writes of how a person will never truly know someone, even those with whom they are closest. “When I enter a great city by night, that every one of those darkly clustered houses encloses its own secret; that every room in every one of them encloses its own secret; that every beating heart in the hundreds of thousand of breasts there, is, in some of its imaginings, a secret to the heart nearest it!” (Dickens 16). When my neighbor said those words, putting blame on me for her dog’s actions, Dickens’ words made sense to me. Even though I had spent hundreds of hours, dozens of sleepovers at her house, her words shocked me. Never had I imagined that this trusted family friend would ever make me, a child, feel so small, so helpless, so stupid. Still, even as we arrived at urgent care her words continued to haunt my mind.

I waited at the urgent care with the sharp tongued neighbors, as the nurse called my mother but she did not respond.

I was told it was my fault, is it my fault? This is my fault.

Eventually, my dad answered the call and he rushed out of work and sped over to urgent care. He found me in a bed with doctors hovering around me unable to proceed without parental permission. My neighbor’s mom was telling

them to “just stitch her face up so we can go home,” and seemed to be getting annoyed at their refusal.

Stop yelling. I know this was my fault, just stop yelling.

Seconds seemed like hours. In my haze I overheard my mom on the phone telling my dad that she was headed to the urgent care but was an hour away. I remember hearing her frantic voice over the phone telling him to not let them put a single stitch in my face, repeating it until his calm voice reassured her.

Many terrifying moments later I was on the way to the hospital with my mom while my dad went home to watch after my brother and sister. As I held a bloody pack of gauze to my face, I could see that my mom was alternating between shock and on the verge of crying.

Stop crying. Why aren't you punishing me? This is my fault, all my fault.

I was unable to comprehend the severity of the events of the past few hours; the red stain beginning to infuse my soul with anger, a sense of unfairness that this happened to me, and anger at myself for letting it happen. My neighbor's mom had told me it was my fault, I already knew I was to blame. The feeling was truly realized when I watched the IV go into my arm. As self-protection set in, my arms and legs began flailing around before they could make the first stitch in my face because I was not given enough anesthesia.

Is this my punishment? Is this God's way of telling me I'm to blame? Am I suffering because of myself?

Eventually they gave me more anesthetics but the damage had already been done. The scars on my face from Elly are a permanent reminder of my actions, the wrongdoings of my body and the unjust thoughts in my mind. The scars on my face and in my heart represented a mistake and a pain that I caused myself. They are a reminder of my destruction of a long friendship between two families, and a court case looming between them.

My thoughts repeatedly turned to a grotesque desire for the dog to be punished and for my neighbors to watch as their beloved pet was ruined, just as my parents watched their child's face be scarred and soul altered forever.

Stop, it's not their fault. It's your fault. You should have known better.

A study in 2004 published in the journal *Science* describes how when a person was placed in a situation in which they desire revenge, there was a dramatic increase of activity in the dorsal striatum. This part of the brain is responsible for evaluating the cost and the benefit of our actions, making vengeance a natural occurrence, (Thornton 3).

My experience led to thoughts of revenge against myself... myself for causing everyone around me all this pain. Eventually with much therapy, these thoughts slowly subsided. I was constantly reminded that no one had ever informed me about food aggression in dogs, and that I could not have known better. We have never owned a dog. Many months passed and these feelings dimmed and were replaced with thoughts of revenge against the true antagonists, Elly and the neighbors.

My neighbors never had to feel the pitying gaze of strangers staring directly at the red marks on my face, or the looks of horror from my classmates as I walked into school a week later with a large bandage over my face. They also do not experience the terror I feel when I get annual vaccinations, and am unable to explain my violent outbursts whenever I see a needle edging closer to my arm. For so long, I did not understand why I was suffering for their wrongdoings, why I was being punished even more while they had clearly moved on.

In *The Place for Vengeance* by Shannon Brownlee and Dan McGraw, Linda Kelly was interviewed about the murder of her two children. "All I could think of was that he stood there and looked at my precious children and shot them in the head. I kept thinking, 'I hate you for what you did. I hate you for taking the father of my two grandbabies,'" (Brownlee & McGraw 4).

While I did not have my children taken from me, my childlike sense of safety in the world was forcibly stripped from my body years too soon. Just like Linda Kelly hated the man who murdered her son, I detested both Elly and my neighbors for claiming my innocence. I had to adapt to living around these confusing thoughts and feelings and my young mind could not grasp why I had to be the one to do it.

Years have now passed now, yet this same feeling remains. It has faded over time, yet the need for revenge has not been extinguished. In a New York Times article called *Ever Wanted to Get Revenge? Try This Instead* the author Caroline Cox wrote, "We can't control when toxic emotions flood our minds, but we can control what we do in response to them," (Cox 3).

The phrase '*the bark is worse than the bite*' brings a sense of irony to my situation. In my case, my neighbor's words had a more severe, and long-lasting effect on me than her dog's bite. Even though the bite scarred me forever, it was nothing in comparison to the blame I placed on myself, or the rage I eventually felt towards them. I had to learn to accept both the bark and the bite as mine, not as a punishment or as a reason for revenge. Instead of them haunting my thoughts, I began to use them as motivation, as a reason to replace the pitying

stare with one of awe for my accomplishments. I had the power to change my perspective from revenge to motivation. The bite might have been worse than the bark, but in the end, I was stronger than both.

Riley Kummer

Grade 11, Lafayette High School

Novel Writing



Where the Moon Dies

Everyone knows the story of Romulus and Remus: the twins who founded Rome. Or rather, the twins who fought each other for the city, leaving one victorious and the other six feet under. However, what a select few know is the same victorious twin was blessed with a curse. Or cursed with a blessing. Depends who is perceiving it. Throughout the long tale, a mother's love is what it comes down to.

Blood or connection.

Kiss or bite.

This story is not about the twins who founded Rome. No, this story is about another set of twins; the first twins in over 2,747 years to be cursed with the names Romulus and Remus. Or blessed. Depends who is perceiving it. There are a few differences here and there from their predecessors, but what stays the same is love. Love is always the issue, isn't it?

A mother's love.

Blood and connection.

Kiss and bite.

What do they all have in common?

Two souls attached.

REMUS

April, 1977

Ever since birth, Remus has always felt different. Strange, even. Like if he reached deep down into his soul, snapping the bones that protected the deep pit, he'd find the answer. The answer to what, exactly, Remus didn't know. All he knew was that it would be light. Pure, white light—akin to an angel's teardrop.

Something so sinless and beautiful that it would make the universe shift from the amount of power he held between his calloused fingertips. Of course, Remus now knows that it isn't true. His childhood fantasy—that magical feeling—it was all a lie.

"It's in your head," his father had told him once, never looking up from his newspaper. "Now, go get me a cup of coffee."

"Chase it," his mother countered, her voice warm and soft. "Chase it and never let it go."

Remus didn't chase it, but he never quite let go either. Not that he doesn't try to—of course he has. However, it always seems to come back when the world is dark and there's nothing but a splatter of dots in the sky, blinking down at Remus while he sleeps fretfully. In his dreams, he's running. Always running. He's not even a good runner when he's awake, and yet in his dreams he never seems to stop. A lush forest surrounds him, just as viridescent as his mother's eyes were. Though he can never seem to inspect his location since it's blurring past him—he's *that* fast. It feels good, Remus thinks every time as his lungs burn with exhaustion. In his dream, he lets his eyes close and breathes in the odd light that spirals down from the sky, entering his body. It's at that moment, when he feels most at peace, that something tugs in his chest. It pulls, down, down, down, until Remus ultimately falls through the ground, descending into a pit covered by darkness. He never gets to land before he awakes, and never remembers the dream once he does, anyway. Remus finds it annoying; each time he regains his consciousness and reaches for the freeing feeling, he sits up in his bed with a single blanket that is bunched down at his feet, half of the worn fabric draping off the mattress.

He'll squeeze his eyes shut, trying to picture the memory, but his head will start to pound and shoot daggers behind his retina like he's being punished for wanting to grab hold of something forbidden. Sometimes it disorients him so much that he'll get nauseous and run to the bathroom, clinging to the cold porcelain as he empties his stomach. Other times, the pounding will last the whole day, followed by mood swings, tummy aches, and muscle pain.

His father calls it *his time of the month*, much to Remus' displeasure. Though he's not wrong. It happens at least once a month—the dream and symptoms, that is. And that's why, to fix this little problem, Remus doesn't sleep. At least, not at night when the stars are out. During the day, though..yeah, that's his nap time. He particularly likes to bunk off physical education, which he has every other day, and instead go to the library in his corner. It's not technically *his*

corner, but the librarian likes him enough (God knows why) to pretend he isn't there until the bell rings and she 'scolds' him for skipping class.

Unfortunately for him, today he didn't get to sleep during school. It has been raining all week—which Remus doesn't mind, really. He finds it calming, other than when he has to stand out in the rain and wait for his bus to come exactly at 7:37am. It's rather irritating, getting to school damp, but what can he do? Buy an umbrella, probably, but he finds it much easier to grumble about being wet than to go out of his way and pop into a local drugstore and spend his money, which he has very little of.

However, the rain has only caused wet clothes, but pure dread; PE has been moved to the indoor gym. It may not seem like an issue, but with less of a range to hide, then sneak off after attendance...well, Remus has a new hatred for *Chuck*, who snatched him out, catching the attention of his teacher.

"Hey! You!" she barked, snapping at Remus who had one foot out the door, *so close* to escaping the hell that is gym class. "Come back!"

So with having to play *dodgeball* when the sun had just rose an hour ago, getting targeted by Chuck and his little fucks, being hit with the cotton covered balls that might've well been bowling balls at the speed they flew across the gym, and only making Remus' body hurt more...yeah, he wasn't in the greatest mood. Not that he was in a good mood before, either. Seems like he never is these days, but it's probably just a symptom of being 17 years old with a sad life.

It's fine,

Remus tells himself as he walks down the hallway, avoiding the stares because of the black eye he'd accumulated from gym class.

You're fine, Remus repeats inside his head while he clenches his jaw, looking at his locker that was now back-locked.

One more hour, Remus hears himself whisper under his breath, his eyes half open as he gazes at the clock that ticks so, so slowly.

Just let it go, Remus exhales the rage that he feels boiling inside his chest after a spitball splattered on his cheek.

You're almost there, Remus looks down at his sneakers that are soaked down to the socks.

Just sit down, Remus sighs in relief when he feels the ripped fabric of the bus seat beneath him, probably infested with some sort of disease. STDs, most likely; Remus wouldn't put it past the students. Or the bus driver.

With a long exhale, Remus allows his temple to rest against the warm window and closes his eyes. The bus is loud and rowdy, filled with students to the

brim. Thankfully, nobody wants to sit next to him—not if they want to get made fun. Eventually, the bus starts to move and Remus focuses on the tires grinding against pavement, the pouring rain banging atop of the bus, creating a deep echo. He listens to the thunder that rumbles in the distance, the wild, howling wind, and the cars swishing by with their brights on. As if it created some sort of white noise, Remus drifts off despite how his head vibrates and bounces off the glass, thudding against the window at every churn of the wheel. Darkness surrounds him, not only from the deep storm clouds that are almost black, but from his consciousness that’s whispering for him to follow the siren song and into the forest of green with the strange circular glow from atop which makes Remus feel like his entire world has shifted by the graceful kiss of light upon his skin.

He’s running again, but this time it’s different. Something feels off...like he isn’t supposed to be here right now. Actually, no, he is. The trees say so. They talk to him; they tickle his neck as they growl into his ear; *it’s time*, the voice states. It’s deep yet feminine—something Remus finds soothing. He keeps running. It’s never felt this good. Remus takes a deep breath and lets the red swirling gleam enter his lungs.

He chokes.

His hands fly up to his throat. He’s still running. Gasping, he heaves a cough. *It’s okay*, the voice grumbles as Remus tears up from the lack of oxygen. *You’re almost there*. Remus keeps running, and this time he doesn’t fall before he awakes.

With a bang to the head, Remus’ eyes fly open. He can hear his pulse drumming inside his ears as he gasps for air. He can finally breathe. Remus doesn’t even try to latch onto the memory, instead letting it fade away as his gaze darts around, alert. There’s nobody on the bus but him.

Shit, he thinks. *I’ve missed my stop*.

The cloud-ridden sky had only gotten darker from when Remus had left school. A few of the overhead lights were on, making the bus seem...eerie. It would be quite peaceful, Remus thought offhanded, if it wasn’t for the fact that he did not know where he was. When the strike of lightning comes down, it flashes and allows Remus to take a glance at the shadowed surroundings outside.

This is not his route, let alone town. Remus knows every in and out of his home—he’s lived here for 17 years. And this? Remus doesn’t recognize this.

He tugs on his backpack strap and looks out of the window as his thoughts are racing, contemplating on what he should do. On one hand, he could wait and

see where the bus takes him and explore the area. Better than going home, Remus thinks. But he doesn't know how to even *get* home if need be.

God damnit.

Remus stands up as the vehicle drives over a deep pot-hole and forces him to trip into the aisle. He reflexively grabs on either seat beside him, digging his fingernails into the vinyl.

"Excuse me," Remus calls out, taking a wobbly step.

He squints at the front of the bus, trying to see the oversized driver whose body always spilled outside the rickety seat.

Lightning strikes again, illuminating the inside of the bus, and it's at that moment Remus realizes there *is* no driver.

"What the hell?" Remus whispers under his breath, his heart racing. Surely it's just a trick of the light—there's no way a bus could drive itself.

Just as Remus strides to the front of the bus, still squinting, the hairs on his neck stand up and seize over him, allowing a full mind and body shutter. In a language Remus doesn't know and yet perfectly understands, a husky voice whispered in his ear: *now*. Before Remus could process anything, not even the familiarity of the voice, his body flies to the front of the bus and goes limp with impact.

He's finally asleep.

Abby Lanter

Grade 12, St. Teresa's Academy

Educator: Sarah Taber

Personal Essay & Memoir



The Last Mile

The torture device sat, patiently awaiting my body's return. I may seem dramatic but this hour of my life was going to be sweaty, difficult, and frankly disgusting. Going to my local gym had become somewhat of a routine. The crisp air would bite my nose as I stepped out of the car to begin my sprint to the glass doors. Before entering, I would say a little prayer that no one, I mean not a single soul, I knew was here. I stepped through the doors, scanned the jungle of metal machines, and heavy weights, to see all of the boys I once knew staring directly at me. "Perfect, just perfect!" I thought to myself. I practically ran to the most secluded treadmill on the planet: my new home. Over the next hour, I would force all the life out of me and into a three mile progression run (Slowly increasing running speed over three miles until you end in a sprint. I know, impressive). I place both my headphones in (Travis Scott awakens my winner mindset) and levitate into a suddenly motivated version of myself. Me, myself, and I vs. this mile. As I begin the run, I blissfully disappear into my thoughts, to every moment that has placed me here, on this treadmill, in this gym, on this day.

My thoughts guide me back to the most humiliating moment of my high school experience, volleyball tryouts 2 years ago. I was quickly, publicly, cut from the volleyball team. Tears streamed down my face as I drove away in my mom's car. My confidence quickly diminished as I fell into a deep sadness and confusion. The one and only thing I thought I was decently good at, I was cut from. My self-consciousness shadowed behind my every move, as I desperately tried to compensate for my lack of athleticism. I joined every club and extracurricular possible. Watching my level of school involvement go through the roof. I tried to find and explore different opportunities, including track and field, a sport I most

definitely was not made for (I threw discus and was called a “hazard to spectators”!

My search for purpose then led me straight to running. To be completely honest, I saw a pair of cute running shoes, and thought, “Maybe if I started running, I would have an excuse to get these!” Though the shoes were cute, I definitely wasn’t while I ran. Wheezing, coughing, sweating, and borderline fainting were the token looks of my runs. Running was and still is very difficult for me, but I have found love in the discipline it takes, release of endorphins, and escape from reality. Though I was extremely self-conscious when I began to run, the push to be better drove me to continue. Eventually I even worked up to running a half-marathon, and killing it, may I add.

As my thoughts drifted to the wheezing noise of my heavy (emphasis on heavy) breathing, I noticed as the speed and mileage climbed up the screen, and that my legs had turned to jello. With every step I took, I breathed harder, and sweat stopped my sweat. Every inch of my body began to feel weak and tired, but in this moment I have to dig deep and find the motivation. “You are strong. You are capable. You can do this.” I repeated to myself. Without the hard, confusing moments of my life, I wouldn’t be who I am today. I wouldn’t be choking on my breath and tripping over my own feet as I fight through the last 400 meters of this sprint. Stepping off the treadmill, a sense of accomplishment, relief, and pride fills me replacing the embarrassment I first felt. I strut to the locker room, ignoring the judgment of the boys, and feeling sweaty but happy.

Valery Liang

Grade 11, Rolla Senior High School

Personal Essay & Memoir



A Soliloquy of Kites

We are like kites, my cousins and I.

Not the gorgeous, silk-kissed things our ancestors unspooled into the skies, of course. We do not touch the heavens and embrace pools of heartbreak-shaded blue. Our underbellies are marred with plastic scraps and filthy lacerations instead of fine bamboo and golden, dancing dragons.

We are a mimicry. A pale and unworthwhile imitation of empire.

I no longer remember my youngest cousin's true name, but when we were smaller, we called him Xiao Bao—little treasure, little precious. Today, Xiao Bao's kite has been long lost inside an unlit bedroom, inside the deep blue screen of an online game, inside all the times he held his breath and screamed up a storm when his parents tried to drag him off to cram school.

My aunt and uncle have chosen to let his kite stay broken, to tiptoe over its tattered nylon ruins and never speak of its carcass again.

Qing'er is a second cousin and only a year younger than me. Though her kite still soars on, persistent and dignified, her mother thinks that that is precisely the problem. Qing'er will not focus on lessons. She will not read polite literature. She thinks too much, spends too much, and laughs too loudly; when someone thinks to strike her in fury, she raises steady fists and takes their blows in pace.

Her kite is somewhere too mad and too wild for the rest of us to reach, and I am proud to see it.

Shen-shen is nearing twenty and has taken his college entrance exam three times over. His kite hangs limply in a forgotten gust of wind, weary ribbons trapped in one unending dance. It is buoyed only by his father's wealth, curiously tugged along only by some hopeless, sheepish sense of apathetic filial piety.

Usually, I find his kite quite relatable, drifting steadily away into nothingness. Sometimes, though, it makes me mourn the boy who once chased his laughing sisters through hallways, armed with a mad grin and plastic knives.

My own kite strays seven thousand miles away from its ragtag flock. It resides in Nowhere, USA, bobbing along to roving club lights and heartless electropop waves. As the years pass, I lose my Shanghai sheen to a whirlwind American Dream; trade out my mother tongue for an imperialist's lines; and scramble my yellow girl soul into Second-Amendment red, model-minority white, and cultural-asphyxiation blue.

Somehow, wretchedly, my kite's string remains anchored to its dreaming oriental spool. Blood does not forget blood so easily. My ancestors may abhor the thing the West has made me, a ragged creature of alien glory, but forever will I be one of their own.

American god. Chinese ghost. A kite stuck to a crumbling jade altar with Jell-O shots and star-spangled ignorance, bowed in worship of a family and history no longer remembered.

At family gatherings that happen once every year or three, we kites sit on our phones or sit in silence. Small talk, everyone has agreed, is fruitless—we have flown too distant, grown too strange. We will never again fit together like puzzle pieces and candied haws, arms entwined and laughter bubbling in that hapless childrens' way.

Our mothers and uncles and great-grandfathers stare at us, I know. Painstakingly, I attempt to recall their names, the whorls and hooks of half-forgotten hànzì; in surrender, I meet their gazes, and flash a smile I hope is more sickly pleasant than sincerely heartbreaking.

Dear ancestors, dear zǔxiān. Do you see a flicker of your charcoal eyes when I blink? Do you find your son or brother or grandmother reflected in my guilty smile, in the crinkle of my lashes? There are dozens of us, kites I did not or could not name. Do you trace a million ancestral lines into our undeserving bodies?

Famine, disaster, occupation. What have you survived just so we can sit here, so isolated and forlorn?

Poverty, opium, revolution. How much desperation and how much hurt can a kite carry before its silk shreds into plastic and its bamboo snaps into dust?

I recognize that I am a disaster. I understand that I am every inch an amalgamation, haughty beacon of the eternal West. But what can I do? Every sip of curdled restaurant yogurt tastes ten times more like home than the grandest

American feast. Though it is woven from apple pie and Hallmark dreams, my kite's string will always tie me back to the same pulsing, bleeding motherland.

Oh, zǔxiān. I yearn to belong. I yearn to fly away home.

As the night settles, I take one last look around the great, glittering dining hall—at the spinning tables of braised pork and sweet gāo; at my cousins, inside their phones or inside their heads; at the rest, keepers and caretakers, ancestors and descendants who tend to the scene.

When did I see you last? Did you hug me? Did you gift me hóngbāo? Did you coo and wonder over this tanned, prim little American thing, admonishing my parents for letting me grow so skinny? My questions are too odd and too numerous to utter. I keep them bottled, let each pound against my skull to the beat of a dying war-drum.

Tonight, do we all seek the same thing? Do we feel the same regrets? Is this forever scent of sharp spice and generational guilt universally suffocating?

My cousins and I are not graceful enough to be paper cranes. Cranes symbolize longevity, whereas we may burn out any moment; cranes symbolize purity, whereas we are rotten, broken to our sordid twenty-first-century cores. And folding paper requires patience and love that none of us possess.

Besides, birds and their likenesses are living creatures. Organic vessels of sharp sinew and feathered flesh, they breathe, they fear, they grow. They beat their wings with steadfast resolve and do not waver from primeval migration paths, no matter how many millennia pass.

And so we are kites.

Kites in the way our stiff bodies always succumb to the wind, yet never stop fighting it, incessant, stalwart, choked with a primal need to stay afloat. In the way our wings bend, artificial and hesitant, screaming out mad protest against fate and all reality. In the way we are, undeniably, a product of our ancestry, but have been rendered unrecognizable in a modern age.

Commercialized. Commodified. Scattered across every corner of the wilting globe.

Yet our strings and spools have never stopped offering a path home. We tangle, slice, flee, running away a hundred times and crashing together a thousand more. Jagged kite tails lord over every collapsing and tumultuous lifetime. Our colors are unconventional and our hearts seem lost, but our every technicolor shard is hand-picked and placed with utmost, deepest care.

Flying free against a cloudy sky, locked within a cold room, wandering an empty Midwestern field—are our colors not brilliant? Do our plastic and nylon

and plexiglass pieces, so intertwined with scraps of errant silk and lacquered bamboo, not offer an undeniable charm? When the sun shines right, through darkness, through oceans, we are dazzling.

This power of unfettered creation is much more beautiful than any bird, than any delicate piece of art. Ancestral, undulating, we are rooted in the world our forebears built, but breathlessly free to kaleidoscope anywhere or nowhere at all.

We are like kites, my cousins and I.

Valery Liang

Grade 11, Rolla Senior High School

Novel Writing



Birchwood Empress

Synopsis:

Lady Elise Henniker is a university darling and rising musical prodigy, a young and wealthy talent of unparalleled compositional ability. Though her relationship with her dying, weary mother is strained, Elise finds blissful solace in her violin and in the quiet social justice movements that she champions with a circle of influential and brilliant friends.

She soon learns, however, that such passion is hubris—at a rainy morning student protest, soldiers arrive and open fire, killing her best friend and traumatizing her fighting spirit into silence. Soon after, Elise's mother dies and her father flees in grief, leaving her stranded and horrifically alone.

A few years later, Elise has become a renowned composer and recognized genius, her success closely tied with her dearest friend Sylvia. And when Sylvia disappears overnight, her distant husband the clear perpetrator but untouchable due to his fame and wealth, Elise takes matters into her own hands and murders him silently.

Though she escapes from the crime scene unscathed, Elise cannot clean her hands of her sins. Over the years that follow, she collapses into a cycle of murder and illicit dealings, bringing about wretched justice until she becomes the villain of the story, put to a stop only when confronted and ended by former friends and allies who have witnessed her go mad.

Excerpt:

Today was for grave-visiting.

It was Monday again, the third Monday of the month, the last Monday of the dying summer.

Elise awoke in her little house by the great river to damp morning chill. Outside, the bustling sounds of waking city jostled about, vendors crying out and factories spitting smoke and overflowing pubs just beginning to close.

Her routine was mechanical: she dressed herself in a blouse and purple skirt, answered calls and signed off papers, played a bit of violin, and had egg toast and coffee for breakfast.

Thomas would hate for anyone to wear mourning black in his name. And Imogen—pillar of latent propriety as she was, she had always said that Elise looked awful in the darker palettes.

So: hair bound back by a periwinkle ribbon, and fluttering lavender skirt. The rising sun and early bite of oncoming autumn against a lightly painted face.

Elise slung her purse over cold shoulders and headed for Birchwood Manor.

As far as Elise knew, she was the last surviving member of the main Henniker lineage. The long wars in decades past had taken their toll on the family of knights and generals, and the rise of the stock markets' new money had driven landed gentry out of the limelight.

Distant relatives and so-and-so illegitimate cousins sprung up now and then, but what could they gain by claiming the family name? A daring chance to feed upon the withered bones of a long-dead god? A strong connection to Elise for the papers, if they were particularly musically inclined?

They were animals Elise could feed with a fraction of her musician's salary. There was no reason to mind them.

Therefore: Birchwood Manor, in all its centuries-old glory, stood bare and dreadfully empty.

Elise employed a staff of three to ensure that the manor did not, as a basis, fall to flames in her absence. A foreign technician to check the framework every few months, and fix any major breaks; a disgraced imperial lady-in-waiting to keep the last functioning bedroom clean, and prepare meals as requested; the son of the old dead gardener, who kept the weeds trimmed and gardens fresh best he could once per season.

As a rule, none were present today. Upon the cusp of storm-hot summer and brittle-cold autumn, the three servants found no meaningful work within the great halls of Birchwood. In this moment, the land was tended to by only dour graves and generations of ghosts in hiding.

The orchard grass was still green, for the most part, and reached Elise's hips in rough patches. She bunched her skirt tightly around her knees and stepped over haphazard windfalls, early apples already beginning to rot against

rich earth. Left only a few years unkempt, the cherries and sweet honeycrisps had grown wild, roots and great branches entwining until one could not see the facade of Birchwood Manor from within their depths at all.

Likewise, the silver estate gates lay mere metres behind her, but they were completely out of sight. Distant. Entrapped. Imaginary.

Elise shut weary eyes and breathed in shaking leaves, deep-carved trunk and the tart pits of fruit. Her feet led her along an ancient path through the trees to the back of the manor, to the garden of Henniker tombs.

The graves lay at the foot of the same rocky hill upon which Elise had once shattered her arm. Over the decades, that proud maple atop the twisted mound had shrunk, wilted into a bitter knobbly mess of a creature. Once in a while, its thin and papery leaves would snap off feeble branches, and flutter to land upon an ageing headstone.

Elise knelt. Dirt and wild land stretched all around her, consumed only by the horizon, broken only by the rise of dark Birchwood Manor. Weedlike tiny flowers brushed against her ankles, their jagged leaves as sharp as any thorn; sad, cold sky hung handsome and blue.

With a well-practised hand, she brushed leaves and an errant cobweb off her mother's grave.

Her beautiful skirt was long since stained. A hundred graves of unknown ancestors marched around her in resolute rows.

Three years was both all too long and not long enough at all.

Elise no longer cried. No longer felt, sometimes, when the day had grown too long and her being had been stretched too short.

But it could have been yesterday when she sat there: a darling university girl, fresh-faced and shell-shocked, being told against all decent logic that her dear hated mother was dead.

"I'm sorry," Elise said. Cold dirt crept beneath her polished nails. "You always hated flowers."

IMOGEN N. HENNIKER

XX03—XX48

BELOVED MOTHER, WIFE, SISTER

Bouquets were the only gift Imogen's first husband ever bestowed upon her, pink roses and fresh daisies and expensive, dreaming petunias. Anniversaries, holidays, birthdays—flowers upon flowers, their pollen gracing the stale corridors of that empty castle across the sea.

What else was to be expected? The Earl Beaufort had been in his forties, and little Lady Imogen Henniker was barely fifteen when they wed. Her first husband; his seventh and final wife. A wartime union between a child and an archbishop who could have been her grandfather.

Ten years in a foreign land might as well have been forever. Enough, anyhow, for the old Lord Henniker back home to die in the same war that took Imogen's beloved brother; enough for her sisters to perish in the riots and homemade politics that tore the city apart afterward. Enough for the Earl to beat the love of song and opera out of her, enough for six miscarriages and near-death at the end of a clotheshanger.

Did her story have a happy ending? After a decade of marriage, the old Earl died or was killed. That forlorn little bride of war, now in her early twenties, fled back across the cold strait and lived in flickers between parties and drinks and men. She had a child, eventually, which she decided to keep. Nine years into motherhood, she had the grand misfortune of attracting the eye of a fabulously rich foreigner, whom she married. And, at the end of it all, Imogen Henniker died or was killed.

Happiness was so relative. But what did it matter, if Imogen's life was a fairytale or a tragedy? It ended like this: her only daughter kneeling before her forgotten grave in white and lilac cloth, unable to mourn, unable to leave.

That old dying oak creaked and shuddered in the autumn winds. That heartbreak-blue sky shimmered and shone, whispered and darkened.

Oh, dear cruel world.

A thousand stories tumbled against Elise's lips. *Mother, I'm worried about Sylvia. Mother, they're calling me a genius. Mother, I miss you.*

She had not thought of Imogen as *mother* in over a decade.

Cold grey stone. Gorgeously wretched day. Elise traced the three lines upon her mother's headstone over and over.

She shuffled her fashionable blue purse onto her lap, slipped off its loose strings and white pearl finishings. "No flowers, right. Sorry, Mother. But I have something today that I should have given you long ago."

Beside Imogen's grave was that of Lucas Henniker, the only sibling she had ever spoken of with any fondness or particular detail. XX00—XX17; Elise had been older than him on the day Imogen and Thomas died.

Morose. Those little numbers.

Perhaps she was simply cursed to have unknown and unknowable uncles.

Elise laughed, naturally, awkwardly, freely, in a way she had never done when Imogen was still alive. “I played this song at your funeral. It’s grown quite famous since. Maybe—” No, better not to sully this moment with talk of the God she so detested. “Anyhow. It belongs to you, Mother. Wholly and completely. Every last note.”

Did she lay the papers down in the grassy bit of land before the grave? Fold them and bury them into the dirt? Burn them, even?

Desperately, questioningly, Elise glanced down a few graves over to the imposing marble which read *JOHNATHAN HENNIKER*. Imogen’s father, Imogen’s bane of existence. His portraits in the manor halls were the largest and most garishly loud.

Dear grandfather. What would he say to her now, final scion of his lineage, yet another daughter held up by grand columns of pride and terror?

In the end, the phantoms of her blood held no answer to her pleas. Elise settled the creamy white sheaf in front of the grave, weighed down with a nearby rock. Sure, the birds and autumn squirrels would soon trample it to shreds, and winds might blow away Elise’s oldest, dearest work. But what of it? That was the fate of humans, and their human affairs: to inevitably rot to nothingness, and return at once to dust.

“It’s called *Sorrow XI*, Mother. I didn’t spend much time on the name. Sometimes I think I should have called it something more craftful, but I suppose it’s no use now—so forgive me. I was in a hurry.”

Emptiness, and sounds of the abandoned morning fading by.

Ah ...

“I love you, Mother. I really do. We ought to have talked more often.”

Truly talked. With no bitterness or fury or catapulted decades of misplaced resentment. Just mother and daughter, before all; two women inexorably tied.

One last cautious pat to the composition. Elise traced over the first few measures and hummed their familiar melody. Halting, broken music filled the ghostly air.

In a shock of exhaustion, the song died. She sighed, aching and soul-deep. “Thank you, Mother. Goodbye.”

Valery Liang

Grade 11, Rolla Senior High School

Poetry



Dear Persephone

By morning, across the foam-kissed sea,
A young canary will have taken flight from
Some sleeping sky-sheathed spire. Later,
A girl smashes against the asphalt,
Plum, apple, pomegranate.
Oh, Persephone.
For whom do you bleed?
Hunger strikes, skin cracks, scarlet weeps;
That old beast in your mind is sated at last,
And the Underworld crowns its Queen.
Quietly, so not to disturb your peace,
The ambulance arrives.
By noon, a thousand years have passed. Just next door,
Two universes away, the same girl will have driven
Old rusting scissor-blades into starry wrists.
She hums a song about midnight streets
And growing old.
Oh, Persephone.
For whom do you bleed?
Your legs cross, uncross, chained by the
Weight of living. Organs, tendons, pomegranate
Seeds; In pale blueness, in cold grass, in hand-made

Swings, you stick band-aids onto open wounds
And watch the cloudy evening billow forth, forth, forth.
By dusk, an empty silence will have enveloped the world.
Hands flutter above carnival lights and whispering crowds,
Trying to catch the sun before it flees. Persephone bleeds,
But no one believes her. They just think the
Blood is dazzling.
Red fruit bears yellow birds who leave to meet the moon;
You stare at an infinity of lost souls, head down,
Wrists free, night crisp, wind warm. You are unheard.
You are unseen. Will you be loved
In the land of the dead?
By evening, a million autumns have slipped past.
Chattering doves escape through bare branches,
And fading photos forget the lovers they capture.
Persephone.
You have nothing but yourself, so you are alone.
But you are not lonely, and that is enough
At least tonight, skimming sunrise,
To stay your hand. Because Persephone bleeds
For no one but herself.

Valery Liang

Grade 11, Rolla Senior High School

Short Story



Durum Field Dreams

They stand together at the end of the world.

Autumn falls sweetly over acres of half-wild durum. Low winds carry the scent of broken wheat and dusk-kissed sky, silhouetted softly by sunset's golden haze. Beneath their feet, a sprawl of dusty brick and crumbling concrete fades into whispering fields.

The rooftop André perches upon crowns a wilting, three-storey warehouse, mangled giant of red stone and sputtering old fans. Loose pebbles rattle every time he shifts his weight, ricocheting into the narrow alleyway below.

"We could die," Lucas says, assessing the drop. He runs a hand through wild yellow hair, bright as the ripe durum rustling beyond their village.

André flashes a dazzling smile, flutters shut his broad blue eyes. "I think we've lived long enough."

"We've *eleven*!" Lucas shrieks, dodging the flurry of disgruntled blows that André rains his way. "Who taught you to speak like that? Let's go back. Your mum's cooked dinner by now."

His friend continues to grin, arms splayed, rising gently and gracefully on restless feet. "Here to here." A scratched index finger swings from the warehouse roof to the squat cement complex that lies a stone's throw away. "We just need to jump."

"Or die," Lucas adds petulantly. "Dinner—"

Skinny arms cross in front of a stained blue T-shirt. "Luc, you know there won't be anything to eat."

"I ... " The boy's silver eyes glimmer helplessly. "Fine."

“Do you trust me?” André asks, fingertips outstretched to brush the sun.

“Not at all.”

“Wise choice!”

And together, they jump.

In the impossible, thrilling heartbeat before two bodies crash against worn wire and ancient terracotta, the setting sun lights them both on fire. For a moment, twin shadows burn bravely, engraved and stained into the dusty durum sky.

For a moment, they are immortal.

They fight blindly at an old crossroads.

Lucas clutches a rifle in swollen adolescent hands, all glittering iron and lacquered wood, and smashes its grip over and over into the bloody body of a screaming girl.

Tears pool freely out of his raincloud eyes. He pins the girl onto ice-slick road, lips parted in one silent, unending shriek.

“Stop,” André chokes out, wrapping numb arms around Luc and shoving him away. They tussle madly for a bit, elbows and fists swinging, frost biting their faces. “Stop! Luc, you’re killing her—”

The gun clatters out of Lucas’ grasp, and his arms beat senselessly onto the ground, eyes going blank. “She stole everything, André. Everything. Every last scrap of money we had.”

André kneels, nudges the girl with his threadbare winter boot. “Where’s it? The stuff you took.”

Her face is swollen and washed in scarlet, eyes so puffy she can barely crack them open. “Noth ... I have nothing ...”

“And neither do the rest of us,” André returns plainly. He picks up the soiled rifle and balances it in shaking hands, watches how the other flinches weakly at the sight.

“No,” the girl gasps. “Pl—please. No. It’s. It’s all been taken already.”

He assesses her curled, ragged form, the blood that clumps against filthy black hair and purple-blue fingers. She seems young, young enough to be jumping across alleys and burning against the skies.

“Leave,” André says.

The girl does not need to be told twice. She scrambles onto broken knees and disappears into a snowy alleyway, leaving the faintest trail of red in her wake.

"Sorry," Lucas whispers once the girl is gone, and wordlessly accepts his rifle from André's hands.

"It's alright," André says. "It happens."

He allows Luc to bury a frozen, weeping face into his shoulder, to cry and shiver until weariness settles in like a shroud.

Luc tugs against his jacket sleeve. "I'm gonna die. My dad and I are gonna die."

"You and dying," André laughs. Tentatively, he wraps aching arms around his friend, notices how Luc's durum-golden hair is faintly speckled with blood. "It's almost spring. The world will be beautiful again. Live until then, Lucas, and you'll see."

"André. I have nothing now."

"We all have nothing, Luc. But we live on."

They sit languidly beneath a dying schoolyard tree.

A cigarette hangs limply between André's fingers, and twisting willow branches cast strange shadows across his skin. Smoke rises in a lazy stream to meet the relentless midday sun, turning this way and that over the tangle of friendly limbs scattered about him. Every so often, the distant whistle of a fighter jet or howl of a soldier's hound breaks the stifling suffocation.

He takes a long drag from the cig and watches sunrays dapple Luc's golden hair, letting idle classmate chatter wash over him like rainfall.

"Do you have nothing better to do than stare and smoke all day?" Lucas snaps after a while, reaching past him for a stray textbook.

André collects the volume for him and deposits it delicately, face-up and balanced, onto the stack of weathered books that Luc has already gathered. "I don't, actually. Should I?"

Luc flips idly through the textbook and does not look up. "It'll kill you, André."

André laughs and ruffles a hand through Luc's hair. Lucas slaps it away, harsh and quick, which only inspires him to chortle harder. "I'm just trash, Luc. It doesn't matter to me."

"You're not trash." Lucas slams his textbook shut and raises his head with sharp ferocity, and André realizes with a jolt that the other is actually angry.

"Luc—"

"Trash? André, your grades are third-best in the school." He swivels to glare at the dozen sprawled bodies around them, whittling away the hour until classes begin again. "And even in this nothingness, everyone here loves you."

"I'm only third because you're first, Lucas. And what does knowing anyone in this wasteland even mean?"

"You—" His tone sharpens, turning into something bitter and accusatory. "You told me that we have to live on."

André's sigh is fond and softly forlorn. "We were kids, Luc. It didn't mean anything."

"So now you're not a child anymore? Decided that sixteen and a half is the perfect age to die?" Luc sneers, opens his textbook again. "Lived long enough now, have we?"

"Yeah, actually." André breathes out another wistful puff of smoke. "About time I joined my mum down there."

Flip, flip, swish. Luc keeps adamant eyes trained on the text before him. "Do you want us to die so badly?"

"No!" André gasps, and reaches out instinctively to clutch Luc's shoulder. "Ah—no, Luc. Not you. Never you. You're the best of us all."

Luc shakes him off with a hiss that sounds something like *that's not true*.

André smiles a little, because it is the only thing he knows how to do, and smokes and thinks of nothing until an alarm heralds them back to class.

When they stand, André finds Luc's silver eyes trained on him.

"What?" he asks.

Luc looks away. "Just ... Don't die, André."

After a beat, André earnestly lies, "I'll try my best."

They lounge aimlessly on a rusting iron bench.

Spring is late to bloom this year, and the approaching night is unforgiving. Frost and wild winds claw at them through heavy winter clothing, and a fine layer of ice has settled over the low-cut stumps of durum spread out to infinity before them.

Still, the dark is not as calamitous as it could be. Here, there is silence, and here, there is peace.

Luc says that this old bench and its metal walls are the remnants of an ancient bus stop, and André believes anything Luc says. There is something quietly tranquil about the thought, something liminal and warm that comes with the idea of forgotten and abandoned places.

André slips a pack of cigarettes from his pocket, bows his head to lean into the match that Luc strikes immediately in response.

Sparks flare, and embers smolder tenderly. André takes a long drag, exhales an unfurling tangle of smoke into the frigid dark.

“Lost your lighter?” André asks, curiously watching Luc extinguish the match and toss it onto damp, barren earth.

Shame. He had liked the little gilded thing, its brittle shell the same pale, burnished gold as Luc’s hair.

“My dad died last week,” Luc says, by way of explanation.

“Ah.”

“Pneumonia. The soldiers practically stripped our house bare after the funeral.” Luc flashes a tired, sheepish smile that glints through the dark, taps the curl of ink that peeks out beyond his right-hand sleeve. “Suppose it couldn’t be avoided, though.”

Gun, blood, girl, snow. She stole everything. We live on. André shakes off the rough outlines of memory, lets his gaze wander to the twin tattoo that graces his own right forearm. A knife and a mourning dove, curling in awful black and grey around blemished flesh.

By high school graduation, the long war had at last crept upon their dusty doorstep. With the final durum harvests collectivized by soldiers and taxes hanging heavy, there had been only one way to ensure survival: join the local gangs with vows of brotherhood, and pay their way out of enlistment with blood money every year.

Of course the soldiers hate them. André and Lucas should be out drowning on the killing field, yet they elect to flee with heads above water, marching away on a road of mangled bones.

“Bastards,” André spits out nonetheless. He rests his head against the crook of Luc’s shoulder, brushes dark hair against snowy skin. “I’m sorry.”

Luc laughs, hollow and deep, and leans away from André’s touch. “What can we do?”

André reaches into the leather satchel by his side, withdraws three thick books with stained pages and smooth, beautiful covers. Shifts them slowly into Luc’s arms, lets his touch linger for a heartbeat too long before letting go. “You should have gone to university.”

“With what money?” Lucas inspects the books and adds, quieter, “Thank you.”

Dreams are futile. The world is cruel. No matter how brilliant Luc proved himself to be, he would never escape their destitute little village, the sprawl of trails and smuggling paths that encased it.

“We’ll get more money,” André says anyway. “And you’ll go once the war is over. Become the world’s best—what was it? Astronomer?”

“Astrophysicist.” The ghost of a smile graces Luc’s lips. “Who would pay someone to stare at dead stars when there are bombs and bullets to build? The war will never end.”

The truth lies inevitable and unspoken: they live on stolen time. No matter how cleverly they hide, the army will eventually find them; no matter how quickly they run, the beasts of war will soon enough devour them whole.

They lapse into silence, breaths clouding beneath the murky midnight sky.

“Who’re you staying with now?” André asks.

“Sienna,” Luc says. “The innkeep’s daughter. They had an empty storage room on the third floor.”

“Oh! That reminds me.” André searches through his bag again, a grin sparking along his face. “I just stopped by the motel today. The innkeep gave me this.” He triumphantly wields a stout amber bottle.

Luc raises an eyebrow. “Low-quality gin?”

“For you and the other one,” the innkeep said. Suppose he was welcoming me home.” A laugh dances in André’s eyes now, incandescent and unburdened. It feels right, the recognition of Luc and himself as a singular entity—one thought, one breath, one end. Twin silhouettes burned against a dying autumn sky.

What solace was to be found in a world as cold as theirs? André uncaps the gin bottle and takes a slow, lazy swig, letting the liquor set him aflame from the inside out.

When André passes the bottle along, Luc accepts without protest, drinking silently in the dark.

“Stay at my place,” André says. “I’m in town for the week.”

Luc hands the gin back. “The motel is fine.”

“I’m lonely, though.”

Lucas gives him a heavy, measured look, taps a foot against the shorn stalks of frozen durum below them.

“Alright,” he relents.

Softly and wholeheartedly, André smiles.

They stand together at the end of the world.

If the barracks were cold, then the battlefield is even colder, unbearably vast and infinitely unknowable. Luc says that the empty, impossible land before them was once a forest, arching gentle and green beneath the quiet sun. And André believes anything Luc says.

A thousand blank-faced soldiers stand in a haphazard row. Their rifles are raised to face the enemy, fatigues and helmets utterly indistinguishable from one another.

They are numbers, not humans. Objects and shields, not living beings.

To André, the change is almost refreshing. For once, they are not judged for their tattoos and their desolation, for a choice that was never any choice at all.

For once, they are immortal. For once, they are free.

When the order is given, André charges forth and pulls the trigger, again and again and again.

Blood stings his eyes, and mud sticks to his skin. The killing field reeks of fear and death and dirt and piss. He cannot hear anything over the crunch of bodies under tanks and the incessant rattle of gunfire.

Die, die, die. Kill, kill, kill.

When Lucas is shot, André's world flickers red.

He collapses onto the battlefield, swings at trampling feet and shattered fists that come his way. Scarlet blooms across the front of his uniform.

Luc lies in his lap, eyelids beating like a broken butterfly's wings, hands clenching and unclenching limply, weakly, madly. His breaths come in ragged and shallow gasps.

The abdomen? The leg? So much blood—*so much blood*—André could never find where it was coming from. Perhaps it never existed at all. Perhaps it had always been a dream.

When Luc smiles, André cannot help but find it beautiful.

"I'm so glad it's you," Luc rasps, and clasps his hand. Blood trickles slowly from his mouth, nose, eyes.

Glad? Glad to be dying in his dearest friend's arms?

"Lucas," André whispers. "I—"

"Bury me ... " Luc's smile never wavers. "Bury me in the durum fields."

"Lucas."

"Please?"

"You're not dying."

"Please."

"I ... Yes. I will."

"Promise?"

"Promise, Luc. Promise."

Lucas laughs, then, buries his bloody face into André's arm. And, like that, he dies.

André screams for so long that his throat bleeds, for so long that he can no longer hear anything at all.

André returns alone to their village.

“Where’s the other one?” the innkeep asks, bottle of gin ready in his weathered hands.

“Dead,” André says.

The innkeep smiles sadly, offers the alcohol forward without meeting his eyes. “My condolences.”

André takes the gin and leaves the run-down motel without responding.

It is autumn again, and the village durum fields grow wild and high, a soft yellow that marks them ready for harvest.

André stumbles across the golden sea, dragging his limp right leg behind him. His cane sinks deep into crumbling earth and stirs up clouds of dust.

Eventually, he finds a patch of untouched land where the durum grows in jagged clumps, fighting for survival with wild grass and creeping bracken. It is too weak and reedy to be reaped, and will be left alone once the harvest comes.

His worn satchel contains a tiny tin box. Its edges are battered and rusted, shining dully beneath the cold daylight. Inside, Luc’s ashes rest, dark and cool and pitiful.

Without particular pomp or circumstance, André unlocks and unlatches the box. Shakes the dust and the ashes across broken stalks of durum, watches clumps and flecks settle into dry, ragged dirt.

He uncaps the bottle of gin and pours amber liquor onto the ground until there is nothing but a mess of mud and matted grass. Luc’s ashes have disappeared, swollen and buried beneath the rush of alcohol.

André sits, letting gin and ash and bleeding ryegrass stain his jeans.

“Goodbye,” he whispers, and begins to cry.

His tears melt into the gin-soaked earth, fading until they become a dying haze of durum field dreams.

Valery Liang

Grade 11, Rolla Senior High School

Flash Fiction



Falconry

Rain caresses a weeping city, kissing overgrown lanes and blood-splattered streets. Between wilting skyscrapers and rusting railroads, dusty droplets somersault with a starving dancer's grace.

The man wears an army-issue raincoat and whistles as he walks, sidestepping stray bones and little mangled hands on the asphalt. He likes the smell of petrichor, the way a storm can mask the stench of hatred and other festering things.

When he rounds a chain-link bend, a gun presses against his face. The man raises scarred hands into the air and smiles. "At ease, Captain Delta."

The soldier lowers her weapon and widens her eyes. "Captain Foxtrot?"

They stand beneath the remnants of a parking garage, rain sloshing through layers of twisted iron and crumbling concrete. The man nods and says, "War's over. Here, at least. You can call me Cain."

The soldier assesses him, irises sharp with something broken, something blue. At last, she replies: "Then I'm Pandora."

The pair shake hands, wound against wound, blood against blood.

"Look here," Pandora gestures, slipping her rifle away.

On the ground at her feet lie three dead birds: a falcon and two loons.

"They're quite far from the wilderness," Cain remarks, crouching down to peer at the trio. He keeps his back to the concrete and left hand near his pistol.

"The waters by the forest are poisoned. Even the beasts know that much," Pandora says. "Urban tracts provide rainwater and corpses for feed, so they migrate here."

Cain hums and stares at the falcon's outstretched wings, its lovely and bloodstained breast. Inside the bird's curled talons lies one tiny loon chick.

His gaze wanders to the adult loon beside them. Its beak is snapped and glistens dull scarlet. In death, the creature is limp, poised, red eyes unforgiving.

"Who killed who first, you think?" Pandora whispers.

Cain frowns, and his hand drops slack next to his gun. "Does it matter?"

Rain pours. Silence falls. Wind whistles through the hollow city, makes friends with each of its aching, anguished ghosts.

"What do you mean?" the soldier asks.

The man smiles. "Well, in the end, they all died anyway."

Sun scorches a half-buried prison, scraping blind hands along jagged steel and filthy plaster. Heat hangs like a shroud, burning limbs and rotting scars.

The woman sits cross-legged in her ragged clothes, making shadows on the cell wall with shattered, shriveled hands. She is missing a thumb and a ring finger, and the falcons she creates lack bits of their charcoal feathers and inky beaks.

Across from her, the boy watches curiously. He reaches gaunt limbs to the sky, trying to catch the shadows as they swoop and dive against the ancient wall.

"Catch it!" the woman cries, clawing the weariness out of her voice. "Catch the bird!"

The boy pauses. "What's a bird?"

For a moment, the woman is at a loss for words.

Lifetimes ago, before the war, she was a professor—had been dragged away at gunpoint in the middle of a lecture, and thrown into shadows and cages until she forgot the taste of the wind. Now, she cannot bring herself to continue the lesson, to mold cracked lips around the sudden horror of realization.

Eventually, the woman drops her aching hands. "Come here," she says, and pulls the boy onto her lap, though it is far too hot for touch.

He seems upset at the change, but only repeats, "Mama, what's a bird?"

"An animal," she explains slowly. "Like a dog or a rat. But they have beaks and wings, great beautiful feathery wings, and can fly and sing."

"Oh," the boy says. "Like a bomber!"

After a beat, the woman replies, "Good. Like a bomber plane, given flesh and given life."

"Were you making a bomber bird for me to catch?"

“Of sorts,” the woman whispers. Her eyes drift to the hazy square of glass far above their heads, sifting in coarse sand and merciless sun. “It was a falcon—a very big bird, with sharp feet that can catch prey.”

“Are falcons strong?”

“Very.”

“Then I want to be a falcon, strong enough to fly!”

The boy’s tangled hair captures his mother’s tears as they fall. “You will be a falcon in the next life, my love.” She smiles. “I am sure of it.”

The child likes hearing that. He likes hearing it very much.

Gales whistle and crash far above a world of forgotten soldiers and dying professors and broken children of war. Through the wind, a lone falcon soars, eyes sharp for teeming prey and freshwater.

The land has changed. This much, it understands. Somewhere within its lifetime, the mountains have been eaten by the fires and the sea, and green fields have given over to an endless, sickly grey.

But the creature does not know why these changes occurred. Warfare, vengeance, justice, annihilation? What do these mean to a bird? The falcon hunts, the falcon kills, and the falcon flies away.

In the end, all will die anyway.

Valery Liang

Grade 11, Rolla Senior High School

Humor



FBI Agent P186496, Disgruntledly Reporting for Duty

LOG: WEEK 1.

Listen, superiors, President, that rather attractive blonde Russian spy I *know* is on my tail—I'm not here out of my own free will. (Does free will exist? For the sake of my sanity, I will temporarily affirm “yes.”) Until last week, I was addressed by my proper legal name. Until last week, I was swinging guns and cracking codes on the field, sweet wind whistling past my ears, world ripe, soul bright. The world was my oyster!

Now, I sit in a boxy cubicle in a boxy office with fifty fellow agents, my immobile form accumulating dust bunnies and scoliosis from sheer corporate inactivity. My new name? *P186496*.

And it's all. Because. Of. Carl.

I don't know what Carl has against me. I don't know how many kittens I drowned and infants I kidnapped in my past life to deserve this fate. But, today, Carl is a rung higher than me in the meaningless rat race of life. And Lord be willing, for reasons beyond human comprehension, one day he woke up and chose to use that power to reassign me from the Counterintelligence Division to his jurisdiction within Intrapersonal Affairs.

Yeah. *That* division. The one where, conspiracy has it, one individual FBI agent is assigned to monitor the happenings of every living American citizen. The department of glorified stalking. The backrooms. The works.

And now I track the daily happenings of a twenty-something college graduate named Charlotte.

Charlotte lives out of her parents' house and does not do very much. She owns one tabby cat named Sir Wellington the Second. I watch her search history through a company desktop that has to be at least ten years outdated.

Dreary. Insurmountable. Nigh on tortuous. Every day is the same. Apologies, superiors, but I've nothing more to report.

Overall, an incredibly 3.4/10 week. I do not recommend the experience.
LOG: WEEK 2.

Good news! I have purchased a string of multicolor LED lights and successfully attached it around my cubicle. (Superiors, I know many of you do not understand the occult concept of "human happiness," so allow me to break it down: I bought this delightful addition to my workspace out of hope that the pitiful, materialistic joy its illumination brings might add some pathetic substance to our empty illusion of existence.)

Bad news! Within exactly three minutes and thirty-five seconds of submitting my weekly report, Carl—you monster, do you not have a family?—replied with a prompt email berating my work as "most preposterously unprofessional" and "unbefitting of division standards." I am not allowed to perform a select amount of very fun, efficient tasks anymore, such as:

Using grammatical contractions (evil, according to Carl).

Rating my weeks (boring!).

Referring to my Subject by her given name (fair, I guess).

Calling state enemies attractive in a non-critical context (even if it is the truth. It is not my fault you lack functioning eyes, Carl).

Addressing the President? (Now that we are here, I think I am *sure* Carl has a wife. Maybe two daughters? Perhaps you should be showing them proper fatherly love instead of refreshing your work email every millisecond, Carl).

So into professional mode we go.

Monday. Subject purchased three extra-large cups of Thai tea boba today. Come evening, in lieu of dinner, she enjoyed the fine presence of a tall iced mocha.

Girl, I thought you were unemployed?

Tuesday. Subject binged three very long sitcoms from the comfort of her couch. She watched them on 2X speed and managed to ignite several lengthy

Twitter debates about each, showcasing her incredibly nuanced understanding of each show's complexity.

I am quite proud of her. Depending on how the week goes, I may attempt to recruit her uncanny talent for Counterintelligence.

Wednesday. Subject hit the gym! And hit Wendy's for three hours afterward (aw, no). But exercise is all about feeling good about yourself, right? And so is bingeing fast food. Subject did nothing wrong.

Nothing else of note.

Thursday. Potentially concerning Google searches conducted by subject:

"i know ur watching me <3"

"dont be shy, misery loves company"

"come on man"

"Sri Lankan Civil War Late Period Eelam War IV specific strategies for civilian targeting effectiveness"

What prompted that last one? Is Subject okay?

Friday. Subject is back on Twitter. She has approached hapless former foes with the newfound guise of "randomuser_574014832." She is RAZING every escape route they attempt to scramble across. She burns their bridges mercilessly and fearlessly. Yes. Yes, dear Subject. All shall soon fear your almighty name.

Saturday. Subject slept and played with her cat. Made some extremely valiant attempts to keep off social media, but, alas, the substanceless allure of dominating strangers through the veneer of a screen was too much. I understand.

Subject made no concerning searches today.

Sunday. Why has Subject looked up the lyrics to the same song 27 times in a row? What is she doing? She has been up since 4 AM! Subject! Subject, please!

Nothing else of note.

LOG: WEEK 3.

Carl cracked down even harder on my professionalism this time.

Just a bit, though, and only as much as I deserved.

Actually, he should have been harsher.

Carl, I think you are a really good guy.

Kicking myself just thinking about my past behavior.

All in all, I will put in significant effort to improve my output.

So thank you, Carl.

Sincerely, thank you.

Poor Subject was sick the entire week and scrolled aimlessly on her phone. Nothing else of note. Perhaps she does not have the physical disposition to join the FBI after all. Shucks. I was looking forward to being her coworker.

LOG: WEEK 4.

Unfortunately, Carl detected my very cleverly-hidden, heavily-encrypted message slipped within Week 3's report. I wonder how that happened. Perhaps he called the codebreaking team in.

Did any other reviewer notice? My code was so singularly brilliant that I assume not.

Huh. Is Carl the only one reviewing these? That is mildly depressing to think about.

Extremely depressing, actually. Forget what I said last week. I have undergone character development and become an entirely new being. Carl and I will never reconcile. We are warring ideologies, forever at odds, always fated to destroy the other. There is no point to this dog-eat-dog world. Different as we are, at our cores, the two of us are only mere men, eternally trudging through the murkiness of existence with no end in sight. My neck aches from my fruitless attempts to hold myself above the roaring, drowning waters of life. How simple would it be to let my head drop into the icy haze?

Man, do I crave some good garlic shrimp right now!

Subject slept, Tweeted, and snacked through the majority of the week.

Nothing else of note.

LOG: WEEK 5

I AM FREE!!! AFTER THE LONGEST MONTH IN THE WORLD IN THIS AWFUL CORPORATE PRISON, I AM FREE TO RETURN TO FIELD DUTY!

Bye, Carl! Bye, cheap LED lights! Bye, Subject! It was awful being here!

Was my reassignment a punishment for my chronic unprofessionalism? Who cares! They released me once again. I have set my sights on becoming ten times more terrible and uncontrollable once I stand on the field again. *Bang, bang!* Oh, I cannot begin to imagine the fun I will have.

I am too good of an agent. They cannot be rid of me. I shall be a scourge upon this earth!

Good day, world! You are so bright once again!

Ashton Liang

Grade 9, Ladue Horton Watkins High School

Personal Essay & Memoir



The Qing Dynasty Dresser

In a corner of our living room is an antique rosewood dresser. It has four dark red legs, three drawers, and an ornamental carved dragon design underneath. I walk by it many times a day and I recall the tale of how it made the arduous journey from Hebei Province to our home in St. Louis. Over sixty years ago, my Great-grandfather Liang Lao Guang purchased the dresser to celebrate his wedding to Liang Shi. The antique remained with him until he lay on his deathbed at the age of 82. After the final incense went out at the gravesite, my father moved out my great-grandfather's possessions as they needed to board up the property, according to local customs. The family all lived too far away and could not take care of the house, leaving it abandoned. My Great-aunt kept the dresser while the house remained vacant for nearly fifty years.

I followed the dresser's journey back to its home country. In 2018 when I was eight years old, I visited China for the first time with my parents and older brother to visit relatives and learn about my family history. Waking up in a high-speed bullet train as it pulled into the Baoding Railway Station, I noticed my surroundings: a sleek interior cabin and a huge window with a view of a foggy gray sky. The train ground to a halt and I stepped out into the open air. The station was huge and unlike anything I had ever seen. Concrete pillars towered high, with an industrial feel.

We first arrived in the nearby city of Baoding and were picked up by distant relatives I had never met. They welcomed our family with open arms and kindly let us stay in their apartment. After sharing dinner with about fifteen other family members, I spent time with my new cousins, playing computer

games together before going to sleep in preparation for the long day ahead. I woke up early due to jetlag and sat in the living room taking in my surroundings, waiting for the family to stir. As I waited, the sun peeked over the horizon and the city jolted to life. The sounds of car horns and street vendors filled the air.

The city of Baoding's landscape was bustling. The sky was a gloomy shade of grey for most of my time visiting, with occasional rainfall. It reminded me of Ray Bradbury's "All Summer in a Day," set in a world where the sun only came out every seven years. The city seemed to be polluted. I did not notice many trees around the area, and there were an abundant number of cars and trucks. Right outside of the city, I noticed billowing clouds of smoke, going high into the clouds. My father told me "Baoding is one of the largest cities for commerce in China." I could tell from the amount of shops and malls. He informed me that in ancient times, this city was a huge center for trading. Everywhere I went, I saw people selling carrots, gemstones, and kids' toys.

On the other hand, the countryside surrounding Baoding was peaceful and quiet. The roads were made of dirt and there were no cars at all. While walking around, I noticed closed doors to walled-off houses and barren streets. The only people I saw were a group of men playing Mahjong sitting on tiny plastic stools. I felt a sense of familiarity yet also disconnected from the rest of the world.

When we left the apartment, we all piled into a small white sedan, and for the next hour, I watched the city landscape shift into rolling farmlands. As we drove out of range of the smokestacks, the sky turned more blue and clear. Upon arriving at our destination, we stepped out of the car onto a dirt path in the middle of a small village. The village was called Ershi Lipu. The roads were lined with men smoking and playing cards, sitting on tiny plastic stools. Women carrying woven baskets full of bok choy and cabbages called out for customers. I followed my dad and we walked for about ten minutes down a dirt road to his father's home. As we turned the corner, my eyes rested on a pile of debris, about four feet high. There were bricks scattered around the area and when my father pointed it out, I noticed they outlined a square. He explained, "seventy years ago my grandparents settled here and built this house. We had to leave it behind half a century ago when nobody had the time to maintain it, and since then so much has changed. The entire house has now crumbled down, see?" He then took a few steps forward and grabbed a brick and a shingle to bring back home, as a reminder of his grandfather's home.

During my time in the village of Ershi Lipu, I had time alone to explore while the older family members met with contractors to plan out a new property

on the site. I walked along the dirt roads in a light rain and it felt surreal to see the village empty and nobody else wandering around. While exploring, I imagined my great-grandfather Liang Lao Guang walking around the village just like me, on these very same paths, sixty years ago when he first came. I felt like he and I were the only people in the world. I had never been in an environment that felt simultaneously so strangely new and so familiar.

My father was only seven years old when his grandfather died. That day, the family members from the nearby cities of Tianjin and Baoding gathered together around his deathbed, spending his final moments with him. When he died, his body was wrapped up and put on a cart. My dad rode on the back of a horse-drawn carriage while the adults walked with the body of his grandfather to the burial site. In Chinese tradition, people were supposed to dig their own graves. Before Liang Lao Guang died, he had prepared his burial ground. My dad remembers the family gathering around in white funeral gowns, mourning the loss.

My great-grandfather Liang Lao Guang kept the dresser right next to his bed and stored his tobacco pipe, balls of string, sewing needles, money, and ID card in the top drawers. There was also a secret compartment under the bottom drawer where he kept treasured possessions such as jade carvings. Now in our living room, the dresser's polished top surface proudly displays the single clay brick and red roof shingle that my father brought back from our ancestral home. Also laid across the top in a place of honor is my older brother's kungfu sword with which he won several competitions. In the future, my older brother Bryson as the eldest child of the family will likely gain ownership of the dresser and it will have pride of place in his home. It will hold some of the same objects: the sword, the brick, and the roof tile.

While my great-grandfather may have passed away over fifty years ago, he is still remembered through the dresser. It was one of his most cherished possessions, and to this day we still treasure it, half a century later and in a land over 6000 miles away. I can only imagine how he would feel, knowing that generations later, he is still remembered and celebrated through the dresser being passed down.



E-Waste Crisis: A Global Challenge Requiring Collective Action

The Growing Problem of E-Waste

The last century of technological progress has allowed us to witness turnover in real time. From the first iPhone to the new iPhone 15, humanity has been capable of producing sleeker products with more utility and efficacy. Yet at the underbelly of this marvelous phenomenon is the reality of e-waste, the fact that the obsolete products that no longer serve purpose in comparison to their upgraded counterparts are abandoned. The United Nations global e-waste monitor finds that in the year 2022 alone, there were 62 million tons of e-waste produced. The sheer volume of this waste serves as both a testament to the era of human technological progress, as well as a harbinger of a new problem. The amount of e-waste produced in 2022 is 82% higher than that of 2010, underscoring a marked increase in the amount of waste we are producing as we try to keep up with technological progress. Perhaps even more alarming is that only 22.3% of the e-waste produced in 2022 was documented as having been properly recycled, suggesting that the remaining 77.7% are likely contributing to large landfills of waste and are sources of unutilized materials. Of course, these waste products have to go somewhere; large portions of this e-waste are illegally exported to developing countries like Ghana, Kenya, and Pakistan, offloaded by other countries that see no use for these products. There, e-waste can be used to

refine precious metals like gold and silver, or repurposed for various digital means, but this is not always the case. Improper equipment and infrastructure make it such that e-waste causes severe pollution to communities taking in these products. Heavy metals like lead and cadmium as well as organic compounds like dioxin and furan that are poisonous leach into the environment, posing serious public health risks for afflicted communities. In an era when e-waste is only going to keep exponentially growing, a global framework needs to be developed to properly recycle and manage waste and adapt to the new technological era, for the benefit of the global community.

The Environmental and Health Impacts of Informal E-Waste Processing

The inefficient, and sometimes lack of, processing of e-waste is a significant contributor to environmental harm and pollution. To take a case study, aqua regia is an acidic solution used to dissolve metals and later process them, invaluable to the recycling process. However, aqua regia poses many chemical risks, especially because it can form toxic chemicals like nitrosyl chloride as a byproduct. These byproducts are corrosive, harming many living species including the natural environment and humans directly. Other e-waste can be improperly disposed of, such as the burning of metals that generate poisonous gases like dioxin or precipitate dangerous explosions. Especially when combined with plastic that then becomes microplastics leaching into various life cycles and systems, they can harm entire ecosystems; in various organisms, these poisonous gases have been found to decrease reproductive capacity and weaken immune systems.

In Agbogbloshie, Ghana, there exists one of the world's largest e-waste dumps. Informal recyclers take advantage of the materials found in these dumps, extracting copper by burning cables, and releasing toxic fumes in the process. In addition to significantly impacting the air quality in the region, these toxic gases have been found to cause respiratory issues among local populations, underscoring the harmful tolls the e-waste process directly has on humans. Similarly, in Guiyu, China, the colloquial “e-waste capital” of the world, e-waste processing has caused many toxic chemicals to leach into the regional soil and water supply. This has been linked to pediatric developmental issues and other public health concerns, due to elevated lead levels. In certain parts of India, where e-waste processing also occurs on a large scale, local water bodies often contain dangerously high levels of heavy metals. In addition to many of the public health crises seen in other e-waste processing regions, these heavy metals have

disrupted aquatic ecosystems, causing numerous downstream consequences for the local food supply and environmental concerns.

Economic Drivers Behind Informal E-Waste Recycling

One of the most pervasive consequences of e-waste recycling is that despite their proven harm, many people still choose to continue recycling e-waste improperly for their easily lucrative benefits. As one person puts it, “There’s 100 times more gold in a ton of smartphones than in a ton of gold ore.” This underscores the complex issue of e-waste recycling, as it directly impacts disadvantaged communities willing to take the risks associated with the toxic processes because of the immediate economic benefit. Thus, such pervasively problematic phenomena are especially effective and toxic to socioeconomically disadvantaged families, perpetuating a vicious cycle.

Alternatively, proper channels for e-waste recycling come with much higher costs and not nearly as many benefits. The cost of dismantling smartphones properly requires a formal recycling factory, with an average price tag of US\$50,000 to US\$500,000. Moreover, structures built for e-waste factories require land set aside for industrial purposes, presenting an initial investment that is undesirable for many, given the high costs. Economically speaking, the marginal private cost associated with setting up a proper e-waste factory is much lower than the marginal cost associated with informal e-waste dismantling, in addition to the immediate rewards one can reap. To reverse this negative externality, the government has an onus to step in and promote safe e-waste recycling practices while preserving the associated economic benefits. Some consumers and manufacturers have made strides to improve recycling practices. For example, nearly 20 percent of all material used in Apple products in 2021 was recycled, the highest-ever use of recycled content. However, this number underscores that while progress is being made, much more is needed to transition to a recycling state for digital materials. E-waste is an issue that cannot be solely addressed through companies or consumers. It must be necessitated through broad policy action.

Success in Guiyu: Government Intervention and Collective Action

In understanding the role of the public in addressing the e-waste crisis, let us return to the example of Guiyu. Guiyu was once informally known as the e-waste capital but has since transformed through substantial government intervention and the implementation of stringent regulation. The Chinese government invested in formal recycling infrastructure, providing financial

support to build state-of-the-art recycling facilities and enforcing strict environmental regulations. Guiyu's model proved to be a success; health outcomes for the public and e-waste recyclers have dramatically improved, and environmental pollution has been significantly curbed.

The Need for Global Cooperation

In advancing the positive outcomes of the example of Guiyu, I propose a global framework. Developed countries can handle similar burdens as the Chinese government in transforming cities like Guiyu into safer and greener spaces. Furthermore, various countries can chart a way forward for effective and green e-waste recycling through international collaboratives, pooling resources for increasingly effective measures. Through this interconnected system, we can manage waste in an environmentally sound manner.

Conclusion

E-waste exemplifies a broader theme of global and environmental challenges that require collective action. E-waste recycling is a public health crisis as well as an environmental disaster that many different countries have the potential to address and rectify in an internationally cooperative way, for a cleaner and healthier world.

Shelby Lombardo

Grade 10, John Burroughs School

Educator: Joy Gebhardt

Flash Fiction



Designated

"At a time when there was chaos and disorder in the world, the designation system arose, bringing peace and an end to these dark times."

--From The Origin of New World Society; On the Designation System (Ernest Hemingway)

Karen walked down the street in a rush, trying to make her ten o'clock appointment with her Order Officer. Anyone in her path was sent a cutting glare and quickly scurried out of the way. To any person who offended her eyes, Karen turned up her nose. While her entitlement and disgust may seem rude, it is understood that this is her personality, as is that of all other Karens in the world.

When she walked past the newsstand, she read the headline on the first page of the day's paper.

Major Breakthrough in the Evolution of the Human Brain! Young Scientist Charles Darwin talks about....

A typical Charles, she thought to herself, with an exaggerated roll of her eyes. When Karen was younger, she once dreamed of being a scientist. Her childhood self wanted to discover new things and push beyond the limits of what is known to man— but all of that was crushed the day she was named a Karen. She had no choice, after all, the designation system was random. You are what you are assigned. Those are the rules. No one questions the New World Order.

Yet there was still a small part of her that deep, deep, down longed for a life in the lab. But any time those treacherous thoughts snuck into her mind, she

would push them away just as quickly as they came. After all, she wasn't assigned the name Marie Curie.

Finally her Order Officer's building came into view. Karen walked hastily down the last block, paying no attention to the people whom she shoved out of her way. She didn't even spare a glance at the woman whose coffee she knocked to the ground. Entitled through and through, a true Karen.

When she arrived at the building, it towered over her, seemingly stretching miles into the sky. Gathering herself with a deep breath, Karen pushed through the glass doors.

...

Three hours later, Karen walked out of the monstrous building, feeling heavier than when she went in. Her annual evaluation was not sitting well with her. Throughout the year, she had managed to get two strikes. The first one was for helping an older man cross the street, the other for the time she profusely apologized after knocking a little kid over. That is NOT Karen behavior. And, everyone knows what happens when you get a third strike. Simply put, it means you're out.

The sun was setting as Karen made her way home. Street lights turned on, marking the transition into the night, and soon the moon cast its pale light onto the street. Karen walked up to the crosswalk, waiting for the light to signal that she could cross. As she stood there waiting, out of the corner of her eye, she saw a small silhouette. Fully turning to see who this mysterious figure was, she discovered a small child walking in the middle of the street. Alarms went off in her brain, but, being a Karen, she forced her feet to stay grounded. She wouldn't help the child, she couldn't. Another out-of-character incident meant another strike, which Karen could not afford. Standing there for what felt like an eternity, waiting for the light to turn, Karen heard a low rumble in the distance. Dread pooled in her stomach. *Look straight, stand still*, Karen repeated to herself, over and over. *Look straight, stand still, look straight, stand still...* No matter what, she would not help the child.

She could now see a car's headlights shining down the street, growing brighter with every passing second. *Look straight, stand still, look straight, stand still...*

The car continued at its racing speed, showing no sign of slowing down. It was headed straight for the small child, who still wandered about in the middle of the road, oblivious to the imminent danger.

Look straight, stand still, look straight, stand still... Karen squeezed her eyes shut, bracing for the horrific sound of the thud that was inevitably coming. *Look straight, stand still, look straight, stand still...*

The rumbling sound had grown into a roar. The car was drawing nearer...

"Nooooo!" Karen screeched at the last minute, diving towards the road. She felt the wind from the car brush across her face.

Before she even knew what was happening, Karen found herself lying on the other side of the road, breathing heavily. Below her was a small girl, no older than five, looking up at her with wide eyes. Slowly, Karen rose to her feet. There was now a new line repeating in her head...

What have I done, what have I done...

...

A couple of months later, a little girl was walking down the street with her mother, hand in hand. As they walked, something on the newsstand caught her eye. At the bottom of the front page was a picture of a very familiar woman. Below the photograph in bold, red lettering was the word "DENAMED". The little girl tried to remember how she knew the woman, it was on the tip of her tongue. Just as the memory was starting to come back, her mother tugged her hand and yanked her out of her thoughts. *Oh well*, the little girl thought to herself. It was probably just one of her crazy, childish dreams.

Shelby Lombardo

Grade 10, John Burroughs School

Educator: Joy Gebhardt

Short Story



Hair of Gold: A Rapunzel Retelling

Pretty, rich, popular. What more is there to say about Renzelle Towers? If you aren't familiar with her name, then you know her by the luminous shine of her sleek blonde hair. Since age 10, she has been the star of every commercial and advertisement for her mother's successful hair salon, Towers Locks. The recognition she gained for her impossibly beautiful hair set her on a path to fame. So it seems that Renzelle Towers is the picture-perfect girl, with a loving mother and perfect life. No one could ask for more, right?

In order to truly understand Renzelle's life, however, we must start at the very beginning. When she was just a girl, her loving father passed away suddenly and quite tragically from a heart attack, leaving just Renzelle and her mother, Medea. Unfortunately, Renzelle's mother has never been the warm and loving type, and she most likely wouldn't have had kids if not for the wishes of her late husband.

When Renzelle's father died, not only did the girl lose her only caring parent, but also a crucial source of income for the family. Medea's hair salon had been struggling for years and was on the verge of bankruptcy. With no other money, Medea had to scramble to keep her business afloat. It seemed that there was simply nothing unique about the salon that attracted customers. It wasn't until one day when Medea overheard some people talking about the beauty of her daughter's hair that she had an idea...

"Have you seen that little Renzelle's hair? My, what I'd pay for mine to look like that!" said one townspeople to her friend.

"I bet her mother pays thousands for that shine!" said the other.

Medea was walking past when she overheard their conversation. Always one to see an opportunity, she interjected, "I am Renzelle's mother, and I can tell you that her luscious locks are a result of time at my hair salon, Towers Locks. If you ladies are interested, come by to experience firsthand how the magic happens."

The two women exchanged a glance and shrugged, each taking the business card Renzelle's mother offered.

Days later, the ladies stopped by the salon, curious to see if little Renzelle was there. Medea, excited with the idea of possible clients, dragged Renzelle away from the back room where she was doing homework to show her off to the customers.

Shyly, the little girl looked up at the ladies, who 'oohed' and 'aahed' at the almost unreal glow of her hair. Immediately, the women decided they couldn't leave the salon without having their hair done. Medea set to work, cutting, dying, and styling their locks. When she was finally finished, she brought the ladies to a mirror.

Though the final product was not all that different from how their hair began, and certainly nowhere near as dazzling as Renzelle's, a seed had already been planted in the ladies' heads.

"It doesn't even look like my hair anymore! Amazing!" one exclaimed.

"I feel like a whole new person!" the other said.

Medea smirked to herself at her obvious success. With smug satisfaction, she took them to the front counter and shamelessly rang up the bill.

"One thousand dollars?!?" one woman shouted out in surprise.

"Why so much?" the other demanded.

"Miracles take money," Medea responded to the ladies, with a sly smile.

There was a moment of tense silence in which the seconds dragged on, but the situation was quickly diffused when one of the ladies laughed light-heartedly and said, "Well, we can't argue with that!"

After the ladies paid and left, Renzelle walked over to her mother, who was organizing the cashier box. With a curious voice, the little girl asked, "But mom, how can you make their hair like mine? You've never even done my hair."

Medea's cheeks colored in anger as she shushed the child.

"I never want to hear anything like that come out of your mouth ever again. When we have clients, all you need to do is stand there and look pretty. Understood?"

The small girl nodded, and Medea shooed her into the back room to finish her homework.

Every day after that, Towers Locks was filled with women all wanting to get a glance at the gorgeous locks of Renzelle, eager to have their hair done just like hers. With the surge of clients, money rolled in. Soon, Medea wanted to expand her business beyond her tiny salon. She began a widespread advertisement campaign and opened multiple locations of Towers Locks. In the span of just a couple of years, a hair salon empire had been built.

As the business grew, Renzelle was not only dragged to the front of the store to be shown off, but now was also taken to film commercials and be in other advertisements for the salon. Her mother took every opportunity to show everyone her luscious locks, even though all Renzelle wanted was to enjoy sleepovers and playdates with her friends.

More and more, Medea was consumed by her work, and with each passing day, she became increasingly obsessive about Renzelle's hair and its maintenance. She scolded the girl if her hair was even slightly out of place. Renzelle wasn't even allowed to participate in sports for fear that something might happen to her hair.

Over the years, Renzelle grew tired of being the face of the salon. Despite the popularity and friends that her fame brought her, deep down she was very unhappy. But even with her discontent, she plastered on a smile and persevered through every commercial and group of people that gawked at her.

This brings us to the present. Do you understand now that Renzelle's "picture-perfect" life is not as perfect as it may seem?

Good. Now that you are all caught up, you can join me and thousands of other people as we tune in right now to witness yet another live unveiling of a Towers Locks location. On the TV., the tell-tale golden glow of Renzelle's hair comes into view of the camera. In her hand, she carries the salon's best pair of scissors for cutting the gold ribbon. Just as with every other unveiling, she waves to the people in the audience. But, right away, one can tell that something is off. Normally, Renzelle never lets a smile leave her face. This time, however, her signature grin is nowhere to be seen. In its place is a look of cold determination.

We see Renzelle approach the golden ribbon with scissors in hand. Taking her place at her mother's side, she prepares to make the ceremonial cut. Renzelle raises the scissors to the ribbon but suddenly stops short. Turning her head to the side, she locks eyes with her mother. As Medea holds her gaze, she seems to

sense a shift within her daughter, and viewers watch as worry furrows her brow. The audience grows silent in anticipation, and seconds drag on.

Finally, so quickly that one can barely register that it happened, Renzelle brings the scissors down. A gold streak falls to the ground...

As soon as the scissors' blades meet, Medea lets out a shrill screech that can be heard through the camera, vibrating the whole TV.

"What have you done?!?" She screams at Renzelle.

The audience stays silent, confused as to what they are witnessing. But slowly, as Renzelle turns around to face them, realization sets in.

The golden ribbon remains uncut.

For the first time in her whole career, Renzelle lets a real smile spread across her face.

Christopher Long

Grade 10, Shawnee Mission East High
School

Educator: Joy Gebhardt

Journalism



A Sound Community

Sitting in Booklist Club one evening, East Parent Tony Sheets began to notice how everyone seemed to enjoy it when the conversation turned to music: Discussions of artists' use of acoustic instruments. The story behind each song. The emotions the song releases.

From this observation and after six months of intermittent planning from East parents Adam Reese, Casey Barrett and Tony Sheets, Playlist Club was born.

"We had thought of the idea for probably a year," East parent Adam Reese said. "Mr. Sheets kind of pulled it over the finish line and said, 'I'm gonna do this at my office, this is the group of people we're going to invite and this is our first theme for what playlist we're going to work on.'"

Now, with 17 members on a group chat, Playlist Club consists of monthly 3-5 hour meetings at Sheets' office. Members talk about the songs they've recently added, why they were added, and what the next playlist category should be.

Despite still being part of book clubs, East parents name Playlist Club as their favorite, because it creates community around discussing music with friends.

The purpose of the club is to broaden everyone's music interest past what the "algorithm" on their Spotify For You Page has dished out to them.

“Companies have figured out an algorithm for all of us,” Barrett said. “We usually lie within the boundaries of an algorithm, and it’s really hard to explore [new genres]. It was really memorable to talk with a group that all had different algorithms and it brought the music that is now recommendations on my streaming platform.”

And the club doesn’t limit itself to just Spotify. They’re always discussing new ways to immerse themselves in music. Watching the Trampled By Turtles at the Uptown Theater is just one example of a group chat conversation that turned into a Playlist Club group outing.

“We’re nerds and we’re on alerts and we follow these bands, so we tend to know when they’re coming through town,” Barrett said. “If one just lines up with the Playlist Club, or we’re at Playlist Club, part of the conversation is who have you just seen, recently seen, and who are you going to see. So that might spark a whole group of us going to a show.”

Diving deep into the emotions of the artist, why the song was written and the instruments used in the music is why the members of the Playlist Club have proclaimed themselves to be “music nerds.”

With playlist genres from Stadium Bangers to Adult Sing-Alongs and Bluegrass Covers, the club has cycled through various types of music with six new playlists over the course of six months.

Specific playlist genres help members discover new, niche artists, causing playlists to become compilations of non-mainstream music.

But the club doesn’t always like all music. The one genre they’ve agreed to stay away from: pop country.

“Pop country is so fake and manufactured,” Barrett said. “You can cut through the BS and know whether something’s real or not and I think that’s what makes artists popular within our group.”

Genuine music, which is thought provoking music from singer-songwriters, is a common thread in each playlist, no matter the category, thanks to the club's shared hatred of generated music.

Members' appreciation for authentic music sparks friendly debates on playlists where they argue about whether or not a certain song fits in that specific category.

"[Friendly debates] certainly help me to understand the person who has selected that song, and helps me to understand some of their background and some of their relationship to music which I think is what's fun as well," Reese said. Friendly arguments arise partially from the sheer length of each playlist, which can range from five to 10 hours long. Members have become eager to limit the number of songs an individual can add, giving them more time to discuss each song in meetings.

Discovering new songs and pushing the boundaries of a member's music taste is only one part of what members gain through Playlist Club. Deep discussion of music causes members to connect with one another and form relationships.

"I enjoy [Playlist Club] so much that I try to encourage my kids to start a playlist club at school," Reese said. "It's an incredible way for people to connect and share ideas and share passions and get to know each other in a way that's not related to what car you drive or how much money you make. It's a very easy, common way for people to connect and make a community."

Olivia Lu

Grade 11, John Burroughs School

Educator: Shannon Koropchak

Personal Essay & Memoir



A Seat at the Table

A breeze tickles my face, playing with my hair and whispering in my ear. Gently, my eyes flutter open to meet its beckoning, squinting at the low glow of sunset, falling below the horizon. The ocean breathes, a crescendo of waves, and I find myself coming alive with it. As I sit up, the towel covering my body as a makeshift blanket shifts down my stomach, caressing the skin with its gentle white stubble. The rough texture stands in contrast to the soft, picturesque scene before me, palm trees stirring against a backdrop of vibrant orange, red, and pink splotches. So beautiful, it seems, that there is no question that it is where I should belong to at this moment. Each time I see a new day's sunset, I never hesitate to believe that it is the most beautiful I have ever seen.

Rubbing my eyes, my feet hit the stone poolside floor and support my weight as I stretch my limbs, reaching up to the sky, hands insignificant against the backdrop of endless blues. For the first time, my ears register the soft sound of laughter rising from within the attached villa, the clanging of pots and the smell of grilling burgers filling my senses. I tilt my head towards the sound and abandon my short-lived haven in favor of my curiosity. A bustling scene comes into view through the large glass sliding doors: my mom slicing potatoes at the counter, handling the large knife with ease; I'd always thought she could be a professional chef. My sister, Maris, arranges the condiments with a precision and effort that I've always known her for: the stacked tomatoes, separate from the fanned lettuce, separate from the pickles. At the same time, my dad and my brother, Lucian, poke and prod at grilling burgers to give them the perfect char.

Lucian periodically speaks, his sparkling eyes, filled with hope of the next grand adventure, reminiscent of the sun's glistening reflection on the ocean. Each in their own interconnected world, they contribute to a magnetic dynamic that I'm inexplicably drawn towards.

But in the spaces of their words and their work, my eyes search and fail to find a place for me to belong to. The step towards the scene I was planning to take freezes in midair, and as I make eye contact with my own reflection on the frosted glass doors, the soft, upwards curl of my lips fall with gravity back to a resting position. My eyes scan over my own body: my hair is sticking up on one side after drying in a weird position, and there's a visible pink splotch, as if painted by a toddler, where my towel-covered skin was exposed to the sun's rays. In their perfect harmony, where can I play a part? In the time I was taking a nap, they had formed their own world that had no necessity for a new member. In fact, my addition might only break the balance, intruding on something that I had no right to enter. Whether or not I was there, would it have mattered? Would I have a purpose? Did they care? A completed puzzle needs no extra pieces, just as an insect on a web will never hope to become a permanent part of it. I stand, frozen, a cold freezing over my bones.

I'm still unsure why or how, but I eventually began to move, to try to escape the vision before me. My steps felt inconsequential—drowned in the more important actions of a million others—as I began to make my way towards the stairs, past the bustling kitchen and the table set for dinner. Just as I turn the corner towards solitude, my mom's voice echoes down the hall:

"Elina? Is that you?" I hesitate. If I didn't answer, if I walked up the stairs, I could avoid any conversation and the gnawing feeling inside me that knows I wouldn't belong. Yet my voice finds itself, and my feet quickly pad around the corner.

"Oh... Yeah. Sorry, I think I fell asleep." She laughs.

"Yeah, we know. Go sit at your spot, dinner's ready." I pause. No extra criticism, no asking for help, no consequence for invading their perfect picture? I pause, then awkwardly stumble towards the table, slightly disoriented from her response. I pull out a chair and take a seat in front of one of the set placemats. Then, slowly, each individual begins to trickle in. Mom, carrying a steaming pot of mashed potatoes, Maris, proudly carrying the recently-organized condiments, and Dad and Lucian displaying their perfectly cooked burgers. As Maris passes by my seat, she gives me a small pat on the head, a gentle smile gracing her face. I return a quirk of my lips that probably looks more like a grimace. Lucian grabs

his phone and quickly shows me a funny Instagram reel he found about cats. I laugh at the absurdity, the sound bubbling up towards the high ceiling. I watch them all with awe as they take their places; to be honest, I wish I could be mad at them. I wish I could yell at them for forgetting to wake me up, for not letting me join in; for not caring enough. But one last sentence from my dad:

“We’ve been waiting for you. Eat up!” And all the confusing feelings bubbling inside me melt away. They meld into the comfortable silence settling around us that tells me it’s okay that I’m here. That I never invaded nor belonged; none of us ever did. We each belong to our own worlds, and each of us experiences the day differently. There will be moments in which I wish I was present, and moments in which I wish I could just disappear. Whichever appears to be the case at the moment, time will continue moving on, stringing together each experience in one confusing line (or circle, or triangle) of my life. Even if you find yourself napping on the poolside, getting sunburns you’ll complain about days later, life will move for others as they work to organize the condiments or cook the perfect burger. Time doesn’t stop just because I am not in it. Connection and interaction do not stop occurring just because I am not facilitating it. At best, I can only go along with its whims and remember that I still have the power to decide my own path.

I often ask myself: “If I wasn’t here, would anything be different? Do I have a purpose?” I find that the answer is, more often than not, no. As much as I want to avoid it, I am not constantly on the minds of other people, just as everyone else is not constantly on my mind. People can care and love and worry about you, but they also have an infinite amount of other thoughts to worry about maintaining. The simple truth is that I am still here. And since I am, I will contribute to the lives around me and help make their stories at least partially filled with memories of me. In exchange, I will take meticulous care of my own archive of special moments and people, and places, and things that I see something special in.

Returning back to the scene; my family and I are sitting at the dinner table, silently enjoying our meals. I didn’t realize it at the time, but while everyone else was busy with dinner, I was the only one with the opportunity to admire the sun falling below the horizon. The image was seared into my brain, the vibrant hues etched into the backs of my eyelids. I will fulfill my purpose of that moment and ensure the beautiful sunset I witnessed that day does not go forgotten.

And, as I sit down at that table, watching as my world converges with my family's—even if it's only for a moment—I know I am definitely going to make sure that I help to eat those delicious burgers.

Macy Lubak

Grade 12, Mary Institute & St. Louis
Country Day School
Poetry



Together

In your deep and raspy voice
You sing to me melodies
And even though I'm old
You still love to dance with me
We stumble together
Our youth far behind
But we laugh with each other
And share the joy we find
My joints are tight and stiff
And wrinkles cover your face
But I've been with you for sixty years
You're my person, you're my place
You and I
Are birds of a feather
Forever bonded
We grew old together

At age twenty-two
I walked down the aisle
You had tears in your eyes
And the widest smile
We built our dream home
To welcome our bundles of joy

One blonde curled girl
And two brown haired boys
Our home was chaotic
But filled with love and laughter
Knowing I got everything
My heart sought after
We'd watch from the porch
As the children played in the heather
Always smiling
We raised children together

Running around our backyards
Meeting where the fences connected
We made mud pies and potions
Stacking rocks that we collected
When I would fall down and scrape my knee
You would give it a gentle kiss
We would chase fireflies
And laugh together in bliss
I would chase you to the creek
And you would braid my golden curls
I would give you flowers
And you would gift me rocks like pearls
We were young and juvenile
Playing in every weather
You were my best friend
We were children together

Madeline Male

Grade 10, Home School

Poetry



Moved Out

Empty house
echo cave
where the couch always was,
should've stayed.
Memories etched into the walls
remind us of that time
 we played soccer in the house,
 our puppy escaped the bathtub,
 and we finger-painted on your birthday.
Back then, we never thought
this would ever become an
empty house,
echo cave.

Madeline Male

Grade 10, Home School

Flash Fiction



The Death Diamond

Even though I was in a strange city, I simply didn't feel any homesickness. Maybe when "home" is just a place where you live alone, you can't hope to feel much. *Hope* . . . yeah, right. The Galaxy Curse had taken that away too, along with Mom, Dad, Tom, and sweet little Gina. That sure was a hard fact to accept — the kind of fact that feels like a bunch of bricks getting thrown at you. These days, all I wanted was to know how much longer I'd have to wait on Earth before I'd get to see them again. The Death Diamond was the only thing to satisfy this nagging question that kept me up at night. There was no way I could afford the outrageous fee to see it, but since I worked at CyberSecure, I managed to convince my boss to assign me the museum's system check. That also included visiting the actual Death Diamond.

A nearby robot must've noticed I was lost in thought, so it gently nudged me. "Don't be late," it chided. Still partially staring into space, I let it lead me towards the museum. The facade looked like stalagmites rising out of the ground, which was probably a nod to the cave where the Death Diamond was discovered.

On the highest floor, I joined a small group gathering around a closed curtain. "Hello, everyone," a woman with a badge said, "I'm Cara, the head curator. Ready to see the Death Diamond?" We clapped in anticipation. "You'll each lean in near it, and it'll tell you exactly when you'll die." Finally, after months of ruminating and getting tortured by the unknown, I was so close to getting the information I needed to help me get through the rest of life. Cara

pulled the curtain open, and . . . we all gasped in shock. The display case was empty!

~ ~ ~

As the cybersecurity advisor on the Death Diamond investigation team, I was dismayed that over a month of analyzing, interviewing, and discussing ensued, still without any major leads. It would've been miserable, if it wasn't for Cara. On the long flights to the headquarters and back, we easily filled the time talking. I told her why seeing the Death Diamond was so important to me in the first place, and she shared her experiences too, which were surprisingly similar. Many of her relatives had also succumbed to the Galaxy Curse. Most times, though, we talked about lighthearted things, like how I used to try, but hilariously fail, at gardening, and that she'd like to take up knitting one day. I actually caught myself off guard by laughing at a few of her jokes.

~ ~ ~

At last, our team got a good lead: I had found a snippet of surveillance footage that revealed where the thief lived. As soon as he opened his front door and saw us, he dissolved into tears. "I only stole the Death Diamond because my sister was too sick to visit it!" he cried.

His words struck me. I'd never commit a crime, but he did remind me of how desperate I was for the Death Diamond. "*And look where that got him,*" I thought. No matter his motive, he still had to be arrested. I imagined how much trouble he had gone through, trying to get information he couldn't change anyway.

As officers led the thief away, Cara and I approached the the Death Diamond almost timidly. "I can't believe we finally found it. I haven't seen it in so long," Cara whispered.

"Did you miss it?" I asked.

"Not really," she admitted after a few moments of silence, "But when you go home, I will miss you. Well," she sighed, "This is your chance to get a minute with it. Be quick." I stepped towards the Death Diamond, but stopped. Sure, I started out yearning for it to tell me how long I had to wait until I could die, but now, after the past couple months . . .

"Actually," I turned back to face Cara, "I don't need the Death Diamond anymore. I know all I need to know."

Kate Markovich

Grade 11, John Burroughs School

Educator: Shannon Koropchak

Flash Fiction



The Nesting Dolls of Past and Present

The tape balls had been sticking to everything—his shoes, his hand, the floor. He pulled them off, but the balls kept returning to him every time. As he moves, an ache in his thigh shoots electric sparks down his leg as he leans to remove the sticky nuisance and grasps more bubble wrap to cover Troy’s belongings before placing them into boxes. He is still unsure why he is packing for Troy, considering he is healthy now, but he continues to help Troy as he has since he was seven days old.

The dents on the fireplace mantle reflect the marks on his thigh. Not freckles or moles, though he has plenty of those on his legs, scattered across the uneven skin of his arms and stomach. Not freckles but scars, surgery scars. As twins, they were the perfect genetic match. Although only six minutes kept them separate, the scars that danced along his face and legs, scars he had for Troy, left them divided as if they were magnets, pulled too far apart to rejoin despite the feeling of only being whole when together.

His hand reaches behind a picture frame and brushes something smooth and curved. He pulls it off the mantle, and a soft rattling sound comes from the object. The rattle brings back years of memories, and his eyes widen. He pulls a tape ball off the object’s side, shaking his hand to fling the tape somewhere outside of his vision.

Oh. He was seven the first time he saw it, days after his third surgery for Troy, this time in his thigh. The doctors went through the muscle to the bone, leaving a ubiquitous deep ache that never leaves. His parents told him to expect some pain, but the two previous surgeries had not afflicted him this much. He

remembers standing on the store shelf, feeling the object brush his fingers but always remaining out of his grasp. His neck had ached from how fast he turned around, hoping to spot a worker to grab it for him. The vibrations of his movements must have rattled the shelf. The next second, the object was falling, sliding past his eyes, right into the shopping basket on the floor. He held it up in the store's light, marveling at its glory—nesting dolls.

Stopping only by the clearance section, he carefully peeled one of the pricetag stickers off a book. He placed the sticker on the bottom of the dolls, carefully avoiding covering the painted eyelashes and the black-and-white price tag on the bottom. He hoped that the lowered price would help his parents let him keep the toy. He continued, racing to his parents. This time, the dolls would not be worth enough to give to Troy.

He was utterly wrong. The gorgeous dolls were gifted to Troy. The dolls were a post-surgery gift to Troy from his parents, not from him. His parents had thanked him for finding the perfect gift for Troy. He didn't need the nesting dolls as much as Troy did; Troy was sick. He still remembers the sting of not receiving any and how dully his leg throbbed as Troy pulled the dolls out of the box. His weight balanced on his left to give the right one a break as he gathered tape from the gift boxes into a ball to throw away.

Years later than when he first saw them, he refocuses on the nesting dolls. The bright color is slightly outside the thick black lines, and the eyelashes on the outermost doll are long and skillfully created. He remembers how the details disappeared as he moved closer to the center. He hears the small click before he realizes his actions. He pulls the top one off, and the wood and paint scent flows from inside the shell. He moves on, continuing to open each nesting doll. Each part of a whole is separated to create a meaningful inside. He finds a small old ball of tape, no longer sticky, on the side of the fifth doll, which he sets aside. His hands cupping the smooth wood, seconds away from opening the last layer, when rhythmic thumping of the old floorboards interrupts him.

The timing of the steps is different from walking, almost like a metronome knocking on the wood. On a shaky exhale, a freckled face identical to his own comes around the couch as metal crutches help him sit down, the movements revealing the identical scar on his thigh. Troy glances at him, eyes widening by a fraction when he notices the nesting dolls in his hands, the action so small no one else would have noticed. A small smile comes to Troy's face as he uses his crutches to pull the tape balls scattered around the room to him. Troy nods once to him, barely moving his head. With shaky hands, he opens the last nesting doll,

the color still as gorgeous as the first day years ago. Wrapped around the doll, the only one not separated into two, a note in white with a small piece of tape attaching it to the bottom of the doll reads:

I See You.

I Saw You,

Theo, Thank You,

-Troy

And for the first time in years, Theo's leg doesn't ache.

Stella Martin

Grade 8, Parkway West Middle School

Educator: Annemarie Schloeman

Personal Essay & Memoir



Nine Letters

In 6th grade, my main goal was to become invisible. I felt like a lone antelope trying to blend into the vast savannah, hoping not to attract the attention of any predators. However, it seemed like I was constantly being hunted by the boys and girls in my class who made me feel like I was their easy target. I sought refuge under the choir stands, hoping to avoid the ridicule and mockery that seemed to follow me everywhere. It was a constant struggle, and I felt deeply ashamed of who I was. Whenever I mustered the courage to confide in someone about my experiences, I was labeled a snitch. I didn't want to be seen as the kid who snitched on everyone, so I endured the mistreatment in silence. I felt like the discarded piece of paper that no one bothered to pick up when it fell on the floor, waiting to be noticed and valued. Unfortunately, no one ever picked me up.

As the year dragged on, I found peace in my own company, repeatedly reassuring myself with the mantra "It's almost summer," which provided a glimmer of hope during those difficult times. Later, I attempted to assimilate with the "popular" girls, only to discover they were secretly conversing about me. Despite the sting of their betrayal, I refused to let their words define my worth. Even in moments when my teachers seemed to overlook my presence, I made a conscious effort to assert myself in the classroom. Despite my deep affection for literature, some individuals took pleasure in belittling my interests and asserting that "no one liked me." Their words stung, but I held onto my unwavering belief in my value. While my parents always had my best interests at heart, their relentless emphasis on academic achievement occasionally felt burdensome.

One particularly vivid memory is of a bone-chilling November day when I had choir class 8th hour at 2:15. The sense of suffocation and dread that enveloped me was unbearable, but I resolved to stand firm in the face of adversity. I come into class before the tardy bell, take my seat, and lower my head, hiding in my hoodie as I watch the clock. The piercing sound of the bell cuts through the room, silencing the chatter of the students and commanding my full attention. The door creaks open, and in stride Peter and Gram, their confident steps echoing on the hard carpet floor. As they enter, their eyes immediately lock onto me, an unsettling intensity that sends a chill down my spine. I brace myself as they approach, and the comment that rings in my ears slices through the tense atmosphere like a knife.

“What’s up, big tooth?” they sneer, their voices dripping with mockery, and the laughter of their friends follows like a dark shadow. The sudden silence in the classroom adds weight to their cruel words, amplifying the humiliation that floods over me. A wave of heat rushes to my cheeks, igniting an embarrassing flush that feels all too conspicuous.

I muster a quiet plea, barely above a whisper, “Please, just leave me alone.” Turning my head away, I try to shield myself from their scrutinizing glares, a futile attempt to find refuge in the classroom’s corners. But the sting of their taunts lingers, and as I feel the warm, salty tears welling up in my eyes, I can’t help but let one escape, trailing down my cheek. The salty bitterness meets my lips, a stark reminder of the insecurity that gnaws at me. I long for the ground to swallow me whole, wishing for an escape from this moment of deep-seated hurt.

“How about no,” Peter retorts, a smirk dancing on his face. I bite my lip, willing myself to hold back the flood of emotions, determined not to reveal just how much their taunts sting.

“Okay, class, please sit down in your seats. Quickly, we have a lot to rehearse today,” Ms. B announces, her eyes narrowing as she directs a warning glance toward Peter, Gram, and their unruly crew in the back row. “Did I show you your new assigned seating?”

“WHAT?” I half-shouted, my heart racing as I spoke. The loudness of my voice surprised even me. I hadn’t meant to draw everyone’s attention, but the mere thought of switching seats sends a shiver down my spine. The horror of possibly landing in the back among my detractors feels like a dark cloud looming above me. The back of the room is a frigid wasteland resembling a harsh Siberian winter. The air conditioning blasts directly above, sending icy gusts that steal warmth from anyone brave enough to sit there. The cold metal bars of the seats

feel like ice against my skin, making me shudder involuntarily. Meanwhile, I can sense my classmates' judgmental glances, each piercing through me like arrows. Ms. B continues with her instructions, her voice unwavering as the class exchanges skeptical "side-eyes", creating tension hanging in the air.

"I'm going to put the chart at the front of the class, and you guys can find your seats."

The dread coiling in my stomach intensifies as she prepares to unveil the seating arrangement that could change everything for the better or worse. As I approach the chart, my stomach plummets like the Titanic sinking into the icy depths. I fix my gaze on my photo, noting the name of the person I'm sitting next to.

"Oh great, this will be a real treat," I mutter under my breath. With determination, I stride to my seat in the front row, finding myself next to the absolute worst companion imaginable. But at least I don't sit in the back, right?

"Hello, Stella," Gram comments, a hint of teasing in his voice. "Um, hi?" I respond, feeling my cheeks redden as I try to maintain my composure. I almost wish I could dash under the stands again, where I could be invisible. Gram tilts his head and continues, "I've noticed you wear quite a bit of makeup. It reminds me of a cake I baked recently." He chuckles, his eyes gleaming with mischief. "And I can't help but wonder why your neck seems a couple of shades lighter than your face?" he adds with a playful tone.

I can't take this right now. Hot tears spill down my cheeks before I can stop them. *He wants to know why I wear makeup. It's because I get judged for not wearing any. Then, when I do wear it, I'm judged for that too. Do they not understand how deeply words can cut? Do they not realize the battles I face outside this classroom? I've had enough.* Ignoring Gram's laughter, I turn and make my way to Ms. B.

"Can I go to the bathroom?" I ask, my voice trembling.

"Of course. Are you alright? Why are you crying?" she inquires, her brow furrowed with concern. This is my moment; my chance to finally reveal what I've been struggling with.

"Oh, it's just allergies," I blurt out, shocked at my response. *What was I thinking? Allergies?*

I walk with a purposeful stride toward the bathroom, the heavy fabric of my hoodie pulled tightly over my face, creating a makeshift barrier between myself and the world outside. The makeup I had applied this morning now smudges across the soft fabric of my white sweatshirt, marring its pristine color with an unsightly stain that seems like a testament to my unraveling. As I reach

the bathroom door, the fluorescent lights hum softly above me, casting a stark glow on the cold tiles. I glance at my reflection in the mirror, a fleeting wave of dread washing over me. My dark green eyes, typically vibrant and full of life, now appear dull, glistening with remnants of mascara that have begun to run. The redness that bloomed around my eyes whispers of sleepless nights and a suffocating mix of exhaustion and frustration. With shaky hands, I reach for a paper towel. Its rough texture contrasts sharply with the softness of my skin as I press it against my face, determined to wipe away the chaos that lingers there. *You're okay, Stella. Just breathe, I mutter softly*, trying to focus myself in the moment. Just as I'm concentrating on scrubbing away the remains of my makeup, I hear the bathroom door swing open with a soft creak, and in walks a girl. Panic arises through me, I quickly snuffle, and dart into a nearby stall, hoping she didn't notice the turmoil I was trying to erase.

"Hey, are you okay?" a small, sweet voice calls out, breaking the silence and instantly intensifying my anxiety. She saw me; I wasn't quick enough to hide.

"Oh, yeah. I'll be okay, thanks," I reply, trying to sound composed and hoping she'll take the hint and leave.

"If you need to talk, I'm here," she continues, her voice warm and inviting as it seeps through the thin barrier of the stall. *I don't trust her.* "My name is Amanda. What's yours?"

"Stella," I say, my voice trembling, barely above a whisper. The stall walls suddenly feel like they are closing in on me. Preparing myself, wiping off my tears, I finally step out of the stall, the hood of my sweatshirt slipping back to reveal a tousled mess of my hideous dirty blonde hair, or as some girls would call it, a "rats nest."

"That's a pretty name," Amanda says, her voice warm and genuine. The sincerity in her tone surprises me, momentarily dissolving the swirling anxieties that have tightened their grip on my mind. I hadn't expected kindness at this moment. *Maybe I do trust her?* "If you don't mind me asking, what upsets you?" As I glance at her, I realize I feel an unexpected comfort in talking to Amanda, even though she's not someone from my grade; her presence is unfamiliar yet reassuring. With a deep breath, I begin to share the details of what happened, the words tumbling out as Amanda listens attentively, her expression encouraging and understanding. It feels good to have someone there for me, who seems to care genuinely. *Did I make a friend?*

"Wait, what time is it?" I ask as a wave of panic rises back in my chest.

"2:42. Why?" Amanda replies with a hint of concern in her voice.

“I need to get back to class before Ms. B sends someone to check on me again,” I said, tugging my hood back over my head, hoping it would provide a sense of safety.

“Aw, okay,” Amanda responds, her expression softening as she approaches for a hug. As her arms envelop me, I feel unexpected relief. “Remember, you’re not alone in this.” Her soft and soothing voice floated to me like a gentle breeze, her words stuck with me. “Sixth grade was a real struggle for me too, but there’s always a glimmer of hope waiting at the end of even the darkest tunnels. Be that radiant light, Stella.” As her words lingered in the air, I could sense the warmth of her sincerity shielding me. Suddenly I feel tears begin to slide down my cheeks—again. But these weren’t tears born from sadness; they were tears of relief, a release of emotions I had bottled up. In that moment, I felt as if someone had delicately turned the pages of my life, truly seeing me for who I am, and not who I wanted to be.

Claire Masterson

Grade 8, Parkway West Middle School

Educator: Annemarie Schloeman

Personal Essay & Memoir



Slip-up

Time seemed to slow as my left foot slid across the slippery wood of the stage. My arms flailed frantically to try and cushion my fall, but it proved to be useless. I was falling forward, my feet were slipping out from under me in my ballet shoes, and the ground was growing dangerously close. Despite this, the fall felt interminable: my heart raced at a thousand beats per minute, while my throat went bone-dry and my brain spiraled. *I'm actually falling*, I thought. *I'm falling onstage, in front of an audience, during a professional ballet production. This can't be real.* Panic, disappointment, embarrassment: a wave of emotions crashed onto me. "You're not supposed to fall onstage," I heard one of the other girls snootily whisper to me, which only angered me more. You're not supposed to talk onstage, either. And did she think I was falling on purpose? But my thoughts were abruptly halted by my violent crash to the ground.

I felt the cold metal of the stage door handle through my gray-gloved hand as I gently pulled it open and entered the dark, stuffy wings. The soundtrack of *The Saint Louis Ballet Nutcracker* blared through an abundance of speakers in pursuance of projecting to the audience of hundreds, maybe a thousand people. I entered my wing, where I was supposed to stand. It was harebrained of me to be nervous. It was my third year playing the role of a mouse, my second year as a soloist mouse. I was a pretty good ballet dancer and definitely one of the older,

more experienced mice, and I was also pretty emotionally mature for my tender age of nine. So naturally, I was a huge people-pleaser with sky-high standards for myself and felt the need to be a role model to my younger castmates and stand out to the director in the vast sea of other girls. I tried to convince myself that I wouldn't mess up; nevertheless, I was still fidgety, tugging at and constantly readjusting my mouse costume. Beads of sweat sprouted on my temple out of anticipation and heat, for my costume had two sets of leotards and tights, a pillow, and of course, the infamous worn-out mouse fur danced in by decades of girls before me.

I shook my head and tried to focus on the music and the show unfolding on the stage before me, waiting for my cue. It was the point in the ballet where Clara, the main character, had fallen asleep under the Christmas tree, and I was one of the mice who was about to attack her in her sleep. After we attacked her, her nutcracker would magically come to life to save her, and the battle would commence between the nutcracker and his toy soldiers and us, the mice.

I took a deep breath in, trying to clear my conscience and focus solely on the counts. *5,6,7,8. This is it*, I thought as I darted onstage and circled around Clara. A plethora of eyes bore into me and my friend Jane, the other soloist mouse, as we were the only two mice onstage, and I felt my heart rate jack up just thinking about the pressure. I ran to point to the clock striking midnight, attempting to drown out the faces of the intimidating older girls (playing the role of the toy soldiers) watching us from the wings. We jumped up, and Jane and I scurried to our separate sides of the stage to call the other mice, who entered by running down the aisles. I let out a deep breath that I wasn't aware I was holding in, and began to relax a little bit, almost even cracking a smile. This was the moment I had been rehearsing for since October, and it was paying off. Everything was running smoothly. The other mice flooded the aisles, tossing the occasional piece of cheese (sliced-up foam), startling the audience members. They scampered up the stairs onto the stage and formed a circle around Clara, the main character, who was still obviously dozing away under the Christmas tree. I joined the circle and bent down to grab the tail of the mouse in front of me. Everybody grabbed each other's mouse tails and we skipped around Clara, trying to wake her up. She bolted upright, alarmed, and another mouse snatched the blanket off of her as we all promptly scurried offstage.

Panting heavily, I reentered the nearly pitch-black wings, My costume felt like a furry gray oven. Why did it have to be four layers thick? I made a lame attempt to fan myself with my gray gloved hands, but it proved to be useless. I

immediately progressed to my next spot in the wings, beckoning for Jane to follow. We couldn't afford to be late and miss our cue. Everything needed to go perfectly, just as it had during rehearsals. My heart began to pound like a jackhammer once more as I anxiously anticipated my entrance. I tried to drown out the hushed murmurs of my castmates and the backstage crew, wishing they would stop. What if we distracted the performers onstage and caused them to mess up? What if the audience could hear us? There was no way they would cast us again after that. I bit my lip, trying to halt the never-ending feed of negative what-if thoughts in my brain, but they still buzzed around in the back of my mind like a tiny mosquito. I shook my head once more and tried to recompose myself. The show would go perfectly, as it always did. After all, it was a professional production with a professional ballet company. I stepped farther into the wings and waited for my cue. 1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8, GO! It was time for me and Jane's second mini-solo. We scurried in a circle around the nutcracker, who trained his menacing (cardboard) sword on us. We summoned the other mice and the mouse king onto the stage. *It's time for the battle to begin*, I thought, attempting to stay in character and calm my buzzing brain.

Soon enough, after what seemed like hours of scurrying in place on the sidelines, it came the time for the circle where we ran around the toy soldiers and pushed them over. The timing and spacing had to fall right into place, and we only had a few measly counts to pull it off. I had almost reached my spot in the front of the circle when it happened. My left foot slid on the front of the stage. (The slippery orchestra pit cover). It happened so slowly, but so quickly. I was splayed on my stomach, my arms outstretched from their failed attempt to stop my fall. To make matters worse, I had fallen in the smack-dab front of the stage, where everyone could see. It felt like all the air had been forced from my lungs. The fall didn't hurt, as my costume was so big and bulky. The only thing that hurt was my pride. The hot tears pricked my eyes, blurring my vision and overflowing onto my cheeks. I felt utterly hopeless. Then, the words of every ballet teacher I'd ever had echoed through my head.

"We've all fallen onstage. When you do, get back up."

With every last ounce of strength I had somehow managed to dig up, I peeled myself and my heavy costume up off the floor. I was too ashamed to look at the audiences' faces, but I could safely assume that they sported shocked and disappointed expressions. I hastily ran over to a soldier and pushed her down. I was supposed to push a different toy soldier, but the audience didn't know that.

However, they definitely knew that I wasn't supposed to fall.

I ran sheepishly back to my spot in line with the mice, my legs like jell-o, my arms like spaghetti noodles, my breaths shallow and jagged like shattered glass. I was still shaking from the shock of my fall. At least I didn't need to worry about messing up now: it wasn't like they would cast me next year anyway. I tried to make my eyes swallow the tears, put them back, but like my mistake, I couldn't reverse them. They made their statement on my chubby cheeks.

The next part of the scene involved plenty of running around and falling down (on purpose this time) and I huffed and puffed in my obnoxiously bulky costume, my body soaked with sweat and my cheeks soaked with tears. Which was fitting, because after the nutcracker and Clara defeated the mouse king and won the battle, we all cried and walked offstage. I exited the stage that evening with a heavy heart, and with disappointment and anger completely overwhelming me, diminishing any thoughts of hope, consolation, or pride in my hard work.

Looking back, I shouldn't have been so tough on myself. Over five years have passed, and I can almost guarantee that nobody who was in the audience that day still remembers my fall. It wasn't really a big deal at all: the show carried on, my life carried on, and I was cast in the show the following year. The director didn't think any less of me, nor did my castmates or my parents, and I only wish I could've said the same of myself.

Katie

Mastrosimone

Grade 11, Bishop Seabury Academy

Short Story



Press Play

“Action!”

The lens of the camcorder turns to capture a young girl with blonde hair pulled back into two braids held with a blue ribbon for each. She is holding the camera in one hand above her head.

“Hi, future me, I am capturing this momentous occasion of my brother’s room being cleaned for the first time in a century! He’s going off to college, so now the hidden dungeon is finally being revealed!”

The world spins around while the girl makes zooming noises to show a room covered in boxes, some labeled in black sharpie: “DONATE ” or “STORAGE ”. There are clothes folded in piles and posters in the process of being packaged. There is a pile of cassette tapes with various mixtape numbers scrawled on top. Next to the door of the room, there is a square television at least a foot deep sitting on a table. The camera resumes focus on the girl.

“Over here are his action figures,” the girl sets the camera down while she rummages around in a little box. She is wearing shorts and has a Band-Aid barely covering a large scrape on her knee. The Band-Aid is bright green. Finally, she pulls out two plastic toys from the cardboard box. She flies the little plastic superheroes around, making sound effects with her voice as Spider-Man fights Superman in a heated battle. After a few seconds of superpowers and near-misses, Spider-Man is eventually felled and the girl pretend dies with the red and blue action figure held tight to her chest. She pops up and something must have caught her eye because she crawls across the carpet in her blue

overalls and out of the frame. There are a few seconds of stillness, a bed stripped down to the mattress, trash bags littering the floor.

The girl scoots back into the frame on her knees pushing a brown box in front of her. "Look what I found! My brother's magazines."

She reaches one hand inside the box, digging around for a second before pulling out an old magazine that is wrinkled and flattened from disuse. She flips through the pages before declaring, "Booooooring" and throwing it to the side. She reaches her hand inside again and pulls out a different magazine.

She takes one look at the cover and shouts, "Ewww! Gross, there's gonna be naked ladies in here." She opens to the first page and hurls the magazine at a wall out of frame.

"Mooooom," she calls, "Aaron has dirty magazines."

There are voices, soft murmurs from the other room. Perhaps an adult woman's voice? But it is difficult to tell. She makes a vomiting motion and reaches back into the box, pulling out an old VHS tape. She turns it around in her hands a bit before presenting it to the camera. The tape has a label on it that reads "JUNK" in capital letters, but the edges of the tape are starting to peel, and it looks like there was another label underneath that someone tried to cover up.

"Found another creepy tape, bet it has like conspiracy theories or—" she whispers this, "*drugs*." She grabs the camera, and the world shakes as she moves. The frame stills, and the girl sits cross legged in front of a television screen, her back to the camera. She puts the tape in and then sits back. The light of the screen shines around her frame, haloing her in a brilliant glow as the machine hums to life. The grainy screen flickers to show an old driveway, blue skies, and a man. The man straightens the camera and steps back, a large grin spreading over his face. He is standing in front of a car. The girl lets out a little gasp and spreads her thin fingers over the screen.

"What?" The girl's voice cracks and the man smiles through her fingers. She shakes her small head back and forth, like she is remembering something not quite there, trying to solve a puzzle with too many missing pieces.

"Hey Aaron," The man in the video's voice is gruff and grainy. "And Lucy too, but you're only a baby now. I'm going to teach you how to change a tire." He puts his hands on his hips. He wears light blue jeans and a collared shirt. His eyes are green.

In an instant, the screen flashes and switches to a different video, the girl withdraws her hands as though burned. A family in a living room takes over the

screen, a laugh track thundering in the background. The girl pauses the video and shakes the television.

“Wait, what?” She rewinds the tape, the people moving quickly in reverse until she sees the image of the man again.

He is once again standing in front of a car.

“Hey Aaron,” His voice is once again rough and grainy. “And Lucy too, but you’re only a baby now. I’m going to teach you how to change a tire.” He puts his hands on his hips and the screen once again flashes to that same living room, with the same laugh track playing. The family in the television smile and laugh and cling tightly to one another. They are perfect.

“No, come back,” The girl says, Her small back curved in on itself, concave, like a shell.

The tape rewinds again.

“I’m going to teach you how to change a tire.”

He puts his hands on his hips. The screen flashes. She rewinds.

“teach you how to change a tire” He puts his hands on his—

“how to change a tire.”

This time, the girl lets it play. The screen flashes and shows a family in a living room while a laugh track plays. The girl doesn’t move. She sits there, watching, in silence. Her shoulders shudder briefly and when the laugh track plays again, the girl yells and throws the remote out of frame. She gets up with a simmering anger and slowly walks out the door next to the television, leaving it open only a crack behind her.

The blue walls are adorned with scratches and bits of tape. Small voices come from the television and a laugh follows. On the screen, a door opens and a man in an army uniform stands with his arms outstretched. The laugh track is silent. No one is laughing anymore. A little boy, no older than ten runs into his arms. The man picks him up and spins him around. The audience says, “awww” and all is well on the television screen. The show cuts to a commercial for half-priced ham. In the room, the fan whirs and the pull chain to turn the lights on dings methodically against the blades. Shadows move in the crack of the door.

“Aaron, are you kidding me!? What the hell!” A girl’s voice is heard off-screen.

“Language!” another woman’s voice responds.

“You recorded over a video of dad with a *sitcom*!?” A jingle for car insurance starts from the television. “How *could* you?”

The house is still except for the bright colors and enthusiastic voice from the television advertising a kids toy involving a neon blue ball and racket. The camera doesn't move. Around the TV, the desk is clean and empty, and a pile of boxes sits in frame. Shadows clinging to the walls are interrupted only by the loud, consistent glow of the television screen. Then, a hushed lower voice.

"Where did you even find that?"

"In your junk box."

"What were you doing looking through my stuff?"

"You were gonna throw it away!" A girl sobs. There is a silence, faintly and barely audible through the camera's audio, the girl whispers, "This could have been all I had of him and now there's nothing. You were gonna throw it away." A children's hula-hoop commercial. "And what about mom?" The girl's voice is louder now.

"She doesn't give a shit!" Silence.

"*Language*," A woman again, quieter this time.

The logo for the sitcom flashes on the screen in bright red and white colors and the show resumes. The frame zooms in on a house. A perfect white house with a perfect blue sky.

"Lucy, you don't understand—" The lower voice starts.

"No! I don't care what you have to say!" There are footsteps, loud ones, and the girl stomps back into the room, slamming the door behind her. The handle turns but the girl leans back against the door, stopping whoever was trying to come in from entering. There is a light thud on the door and a muffled voice from the other side.

"Lucy, please, I'm sorry. I didn't understand what I was doing."

"But you did it anyway!" the girl sobs and slides to the floor, pulling her knees to her chest and hiding her face behind her elbows. She shakes lightly and absently picks at the Band-Aid on her knee. The father in the comedy show on the television has picked up his son and is spinning him around.

"Lucy, please come out. It's my room and I don't want you in there." The muffled voice says again.

"Shut up" The girl says, her voice caught by the skin of her elbow. The family in the television hugs, one mom, one dad, one son, and one daughter.

"I'm serious, Lucy. Come out. I don't want you in my room."

The girl chokes and leans her head back against the door, trying to stop the next onslaught of tears. She looks to both sides and then gets up with a huff, throwing open the door. A figure tumbles through the door frame as if they had

been sitting against the door as well when it was opened. The girl brushes past him, almost sprinting out of frame. The figure on the floor gets up. It is a boy, a man, a man-boy. His eyes are green. He rubs the back of his head and closes the door before he sits on the edge of the bed and puts his face in his hands.

“Hahaha!” says the television.

He sighs and looks up, eyes catching on the television. He pushes himself off the bed and walks over to it. He stands in front of the screen, his silhouette outlined in a fluorescent glow. He stares at the man in uniform on the television and brushes his thumb over his small glowing face and bright smile. He reaches down to the buttons beneath the screen, presses one and watches as the voices from the television fade and distort before the screen goes black. The VHS tape pops out and he grabs it. He holds it in his hands, reverently, and gently leans down and places it in the box marked “STORAGE”. His eyes fall to the floor and catch on the camcorder. The world spins as he picks it up.

“Where did she even find this old thing?” The man-boy says. He fumbles around for a second and everything moves in a beautiful blur, boxes, televisions, desks, and blue walls, before he finds the STOP button. The frame freezes on the man-boy’s face, on his green eyes. There is stillness and the world shudders and goes dark with a “click!”

Azin Mofidi

Grade 11, John Burroughs School

Educator: Shannon Koropchak

Flash Fiction



Shaking the Past

The bustle of maids vacuuming and cleaning the house shocked Stevie as she trudged up the steps and through the large, double-arched doors of her mansion. Her pupils began to dilate and her brows lowered as she thought,

“Why were they all here cleaning? I told them not to come anymore. This is the last thing I need right now.”

She ripped her coat off, hurled it on the floor, and stormed toward the spiral staircase. Snapping her head up, she heard the sound of the vacuums fade as her own shrieks flooded her ears and echoed throughout the house.

“GET OUT! WHY WOULD YOU COME BACK? NO ONE HERE NEEDS YOU ANYMORE!”

She watched them all realize the mistake they had made as they struggled to wrap everything up and get out as quickly as possible. Her screams elicited an utterly red face and convulsing body. Her fingers crumpled the papers in her hands and then released them, leaving a mess of her work in a heap around her. Stevie practically chased the cleaners out the door and slammed it hard behind them.

Her fists slowly unclenched as her shoulders lowered. She turned around and observed the state of her house. The cleaners were not supposed to be here, and there was now an unfinished mess. Feeling completely overwhelmed and overcome by a fervent urge to fix it all, Stevie walked up the stairs and stormed down the hallway, her arms clutching the overflowing basket of clutter she had snatched up along the way. The cleaners’ half-finished mess was everywhere: dirty laundry shoved under furniture, a forgotten rag tossed over a chair. Each

misplaced item fueled the already burning fire in her chest. She continued down the hall, passing many doors, muttering under her breath, until she noticed that door.

Stevie's steps faltered, and she became frozen in a single, breathless moment. The basket slipped slightly from her white-knuckled grip. Not only was it open, but it was open in an intentional way, as if someone had initially intended to enter, but then realized that they shouldn't. As she gulped and her pulse quickened, her gaze fixed on the narrow sliver of space, which only allowed faint light to flow through.

She set her basket down roughly, its contents spilling out. She didn't care anymore. Her fingers brushed against the door and reached for the handle. She noticed that dust had already started to accumulate. The door creaked open. As her eyes frantically scanned the room, she saw the unbearable sight of the crib that stood against the wall. Her eyes then caught the dresser, and her breath stilled. The 8 ball.

It sat tilted, by itself in the otherwise uninhabited room. A rush of memories collided with her anger. She crossed the room hurriedly and snatched it up. She clenched the ball, her mind racing with questions, each one more painful than the last.

"Should I have spent less time at work? Was she scared? Did she know how much I loved her? Could I have saved her if I had been with her more?"

She squeezed her eyes shut and shook it violently, her hands trembling. She opened her eyes, squinting through her tears, and peered at the message: "concentrate and ask again". Her jaw flexed and her eyebrows furrowed together. She shook her head, closed her eyes, and shook again: Outlook not so good. Stevie squeezed the 8 ball tighter, growing impatient with its answers. She flung it across the room, hearing the ball rattle and the liquid sloshing around as it landed at the crib's base. The familiar noise devastated Stevie.

"Will I get ice cream today? When will Mommy get me a dog? Who does mommy love most? Does Mommy love me? Why is Mommy always gone?"

Stevie felt her chest ache at those memories, stifled sobs escaping her slightly parted lips. Her knees buckled under her as she collapsed against the crib, the wood creaking beneath her weight. She looked hopelessly towards the spot where she had kicked it. She fell to her hands and knees. She reached desperately for the ball, holding it close to her heart, gripping it as hard as she could as if somehow she would channel the warmth of her daughter's hands and

the life that had once filled the room. She pulled herself up and climbed into her daughter's crib.

"I should've been better," she managed to whisper through her quavering voice. "I should've been there more. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorr--"

Her voice cracked and her tears soaked the crib's bedding. The nursery seemed to close in on her, the playful animals on the walls staring her down, their bright complexions now mocking in the absence of the child they were supposed to delight.

Stevie rocked back and forth in the crib as she felt exhaustion take over her body. Her body tried to drift off into sleep. Her tears began to crust around her eyelids, forcing them closed. Stevie's fingers twitched against the blanket, clutching and releasing as one wave of thought crashed into the next without a pause.

Katherine Nguyen

Grade 11, Clayton High School

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Critical Essay



Chang-rae Lee and The Critical Philosophy of Race

Chang-rae Lee is a Korean American author and the current Ward W. and Priscilla B. Woods professor of English at Stanford University. His novels are known for challenging the normative conception of race and bringing to light the often unheard voices of Asian Americans. He uses strong themes of speech, language, and communication, helping him dive into the cognitive processes of characters and provide insights into racial perception. In this essay, I will argue that Lee's focus on speech and communication significantly contributes to the discussion within "The Critical Philosophy of Race" (CPR). As described by the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, CPR is a divergence from previous racial studies, unique for extending beyond simply legitimizing race to addressing the effects race has on society (Alcoff). It gains this attribute from its relation to the "Critical Theory" philosophical family. Pioneered by Immanuel Kant, a Critical Theory "aims not merely to describe social reality, but to generate insights into the forces of domination operating within society in a way that can inform practical action and stimulate change" (Celikates). Lee contributes to this analysis by discussing the historical and social constructions of identity, societal structures that perpetuate racism, institutionalized power divides, and ethical issues surrounding race, all through the lens of language. In order to examine his viewpoint, I will utilize three of Lee's novels: *Native Speaker*, *On Such a Full Sea*, and *My Year Abroad*. *Native Speaker*, Lee's first novel, follows Henry Park, a Korean American espionage who is ordered to spy on an influential Korean American

politician, John Kwang. Between his professional and personal life, he navigates the difficulties of relationships, identity, and morality. *On Such a Full Sea* is a story of the dystopian world B-mor, a future America plagued by environmental disaster and rigid class structures. It centers around Fan, a fish-tank diver, who attempts to find her lover Reg after his unexpected disappearance. Lastly, *My Year Abroad* is a decadent and humorous tale of a young college student named Tiller. He meets an eccentric Chinese entrepreneur who takes him on a trip to Asia. Their wild adventures aid Tiller's self-exploration of culture, love, and community.

A central study of CPR attempts to understand the "historical construction of races" (Alcoff). For Lee, an ethnic group's history and present-day can be examined and perceived by understanding language. This perspective offers a new tool, helping us dive into the deeper effects that events have on individuals and communities. John Kwang, in *Native Speaker*, is known as a model figure in the Asian-American community. He is especially noted for his perfect English, as Park describes as, "strong and clear, unafraid to speak the language" (Lee, *Native Speaker* 304). However, as his corruption is exposed, it marks a turning point for his speech and for Asian Americans as a whole. Park now "can hear the old laments of my mother and my father, and mine as a confused schoolboy" in Kwang's tone (Lee, *Native Speaker* 304). Through speech, Henry Park outlines Kwang's downfall. The correlation between his reversion to Korean and his political downfall gives insight into American racial systems, one that values American voices more than others. While this example focuses on an individual level, we can also study significant events that impact a larger community. Analyzing rumors surrounding an event reveals raw truths about a group that would be otherwise hidden. In *On Such a Full Sea*, after Fan and Reg escape B-Mor, the citizens react merely with superficial gossip. The narrator explains this by saying, "For it's much easier to subscribe to various outlandish theories than confront the reality of her departure and what that might say about B-mor and its ways" (Lee, *On Such a Full Sea* 56). The citizens of B-mor are too cowardly to admit that their disappearances are related to unjust racial hierarchies. The community avoids confronting foundational issues in their society by using gossip instead. Through a focus on their patterns of speech, we better understand B-mor's history of complacency and fear. All in all, Lee's tie between speech and historical events expands our understanding of race and society. Using this analysis on the individual and societal level significantly adds to CPR.

Lee also proves how institutionalized power divides and racism, major topics of CPR, can be attributed to the level of a speech. While Henry, in *Native Speaker*, raises Mitt, he is hesitant to pass down Korean to his son. Lelia believes it is important for Mitt to read Korean stories and learn their heritage, but Henry thinks, “I feared I might handicap him, stunt the speech blooming in his brain, and that Lelia would provide the best example of how to speak” (Lee, *Native Speaker* 239). Park is afraid to pass down the same struggle of speech that he received from his family. The personal trauma motivates him as a father to keep Mitt away from the culture and into a safer American identity. He obeys the institutionalized power divides rather than pushing to break them. This act of feeding into the traditional only widens power divides. In *On Such a Full Sea*, Fan and her community attend the funeral of a recently deceased teenager. Most conversations surround his wasted potential of a future—how he would have climbed the ranks to Charter status. Fan describes the conversations, saying, “Usually this sort of chatter is merely just that, the idle blather of pipe dreams, but it was agreed Joseph really could have been one of those few who end up making a life as a Charter” (Lee, *On Such a Full Sea* 31). The people of B-mor are tied to the belief that only the most athletic, smart, or gifted people can break the threshold into Charter living. Their conversations extend the power divide simply because they abide by it. Instead, if they were to use their speech to stand up for themselves, and advocate for equality in B-mor and Charter society, they would be able to gain more opportunities. America’s power divides maintain a system where minorities are pressured to obey unjust rules in exchange for opportunity. In doing so, it further entrenches inequalities.

Government policies and practices surrounding language can also prevent people from rising in these systems. In America, the politicians that usually have the strongest voices follow a traditional identity: white and male. To gain political status and power, one usually follows this identity as closely as possible. Accordingly, Kwang in *Native Speaker* loses political status by letting his Korean side leak out. He is quickly criticized and Park recounts, “Perhaps for the first time in his public life he mumbles, his voice cracks and even an accent sneaks through” (Lee, *Native Speaker* 293). The accent reveals a flaw that contradicts the long-withstanding convention of government identity. From this, Kwang is shunned and criticized. People see his Asian identity as a flaw and he is brought down from power. This is Lee’s criticism of the institutionalized racial prejudices in government. Moreover, policies that prevent underrepresented individuals from voicing their opinions widen racial power divides. After Reg’s

disappearance in *On Such a Full Sea*, Fan attempts to find answers to his disappearance. She questions her workplace, however, was met with little help. The narrator states, "...for a more definitive word from above, she would have to question a Charter person, who (for us) is as rare a sight as honeybees" (Lee, *On Such a Full Sea* 10). The ineffective communication systems within B-mor are designed so that citizens would be unable to voice their concerns. For Fan, this hides the government's role in Reg's disappearance and rather than being transparent with citizens, allows the government to continue their wrongdoings. Eventually, the system continues until B-mor citizens hold almost no power. In all, Lee criticizes the systematic racial divides through the basis of language. Socially, educationally, and in government, discrimination in language can lead to underrepresentation, fewer opportunities, and an inability to rise.

Adding to racist linguistic practices, Lee studies how stigmas concerning certain dialects can undermine the reality behind racial groups. Many times, a language or accent is associated with negative connotations. For example, in America, tonations associated with African Americans may be connected to lower-educated individuals and Asian accents can suggest being foreign. In *My Year Abroad*, when Pong is talking to one of his employees at the Fro-Yo store, he puts on a facade of being a stereotypical Asian immigrant. This tricks Gabby, the employee, and Tiller into feeding into the stigma linked to his accent. Tiller thinks to himself, "Why the hell would a tight young hottie like Gabby show such naturally unabashed fondness for a sort of funny-looking fiftysomething Chinese guy who spoke English like he'd stuffed bread clods in his mouth..." (Lee, *My Year Abroad* 34). Tiller is manipulated by Pong's deliberate Asian accent. The maneuver displays how a simple aspect of speech can bring a plethora of connotations. The Chinese accent makes Pong seem foreign, unattractive, and devoid of value. These subconscious stereotypes ingrained in Tiller's subconscious become revealed. While in this case, Pong was affected indirectly by Tiller's inner stigmatization of him, individuals may suffer direct attacks from stigmas around dialect. Tiller's adventures in Asia reveal a language divide between him and his new friends. During a massage, Tiller's masseuse asks for payment, however, Tiller is confused and accidentally insults him instead. Referring to the masseuse, Tiller says, "He was calling me, I'm pretty sure, a cheapskate and a sissy and a pasty ghost-white fool" (Lee, *My Year Abroad* 199). The masseuse is unable to realize the problem is rooted in Tiller's low-level Chinese and not in a verbal offense. His inability to speak Chinese is then attacked alongside his skin tone and thus race. By grouping Tiller's race with

negativity, the masseuse uses verbal racism that reveals his close-mindedness about Tiller's dialect. Both direct and indirect effects of stigmas can undermine the reality behind individuals and transform into racism.

Having said that, it is also important to note that racism is intertwined with other systems of oppression whether it be founded on sexuality, gender, socioeconomic background, or more. This intersectionality is crucial to CPR. Women in Lee's novels are often inspired by the real women in Lee's life. He notices how Korean women play seemingly small roles in the community yet have much stronger impacts that aren't recognized. This is replicated in his female character archetypes. Fan, in *On Such a Full Sea*, is often underestimated due to her unredeemed attributes: the low B-mor race, a girl, and physically of small stature. When she is taken captive by Master Leo, he talks to her as if she is lesser. He asks her, "Will you be a good, sweet girl and do that?" (Lee, *On Such a Full Sea* 210). The interconnected aspects of Fan's identity all play into the power dynamics between Fan and Master Leo. Because she is B-mor and female, he believes he holds the upper hand. This underestimation of Fan bites him back in the future as she eventually escapes his captivity. His misjudged image of Fan can be attributed to both his racism and sexism. A similar pairing can be seen with race and economic status within society. While Kwang, in *Native Speaker*, visits a Korean-owned pawn shop, the owner of the store is arguing with a black customer over a watch. The customer demands a refund for the faulty watch, which the shop owner denies due to store policy. In the discussion, the owner whispers to Kwang in Korean "You know how these blacks are, always expecting special treatment" (Lee, *Native Speaker* 184). The side conversation with Kwang reveals how the Korean shop owner believes black people to be needy or less capable economically. It exacerbates the customer's situation as his opinions become overlooked and uncared for. Fan and the black customer live in the harsh reality that their multifaceted identities face attacks from all angles. Whether race, gender, or economic status, people misjudge their character from multiple systems of oppression. Ultimately, Lee explores the many nuances of racist linguistic practices. He showcases name-calling, stigmas, and verbal attacks as methods that deeply harm an individual's diverse identity. These factors create an expectation to conform and undermine the larger ethnic community.

Finally, Lee offers ethical solutions to combat racism. These strategies are also often connected to language—the root of the issues within his novels. Lee supports that to break generational systematic issues, large-scale dialogues are necessary. This builds solidarity that pushes activists to break ingrained belief

systems. In *On Such a Full Sea*, B-mor has a long history of encouraging obedience and silence. They are considered a lower race than the Charters and must appease them to survive. Yet after Fan and Reg's disappearance and the worsening economy, the B-mor citizens enter a new era of self-advocacy. The narrator affirms, "But if we resolve not to quell ourselves, to keep up the talk, to preserve the good picture of the pair in our minds no matter how contrary to the designs of the directorate it might be, this practice alone invigorates us, raises us up, even if there is nowhere else we wish to go" (Lee, *On Such a Full Sea* 120). Speech is crucial in B-mor's revolution to expose the corrupt system and achieve equality. It is the vehicle to which the Charters can voice their discontent—an originally disregarded opinion. Furthermore, it unites B-mor in camaraderie and motivates them to maintain their fight. Another factor of verbal protest is raising awareness. This is imperative to shine a light on true stories and bring them justice. At the end of Fan's story, the citizens back in B-mor are shown ramping up their protests. They hold large strikes, complain to the Charters, and most importantly, keep talking about the victims of disappearance. The narrator asks, "...for what happens when there are no more songs and postings about Reg or Fan when all that remains are weather-faded portraits and scribbles on the walls?" (Lee, *On Such a Full Sea* 342). The question represents the stark reality: if there are no discussions of the stories, they die and become lost forever. But the B-mor people realize this and use it as an incentive to amplify their voices. They become so impactful that the Charters are forced to recognize them and make a change for equality. Overall, speech for protesting is significant in both inspiring group morale and raising awareness for plights, a significant tool against racism.

Another ethical responsibility is to acknowledge and welcome differences within language. By doing so, we break down barriers of discrimination and confront dominating narratives of prejudice. A strategy to complete this is offering kindness and acceptance of mistakes in one's speech. If we remove the negative connotation of verbal flaws, we create an approachable environment for all people to enter the conversation. Lelia, in *Native Speaker*, is an ample example of this. At her speech therapy job, she works with children of varying ethnicities. To make them feel comfortable, she puts in effort to speak their languages even though it's nowhere near perfect. The narrator says, "She wants them to know that there is nothing to fear, she wants to offer up a pale white woman horsing with the language to show that it's fine to mess it all up" (Lee, *Native Speaker* 349). Lee uses Lelia as a model figure for creating the inclusion of voices. For the children to see a white woman, both powerful and comforting, be confident in

her flaws, completely changes racial expectations. The children can now learn English devoid of worry they will mess up, and thus, their voices will be more heard in America for years to come. In addition to acceptance of flaws, it is also essential to tolerate the unknown of our differences and still be accommodating to others. Throughout Lee's novels, protagonists constantly struggle with identity and social groups. This is exacerbated by racial discrimination in America that mitigates the expression of identity. To combat this, Lee suggests that knowing others' complete identity is unnecessary for tolerance. Lou Freitas Caton, Assistant Professor of English at Westfield State College, applauds Lee on this, saying, "...It is precisely the ability of these uncertainties to underpin how we are different, how we cannot be sure of what constitutes our differences, that obliges us to maintain an acceptance and/or tolerance of our inability to know the other" (Caton 241). Fan, Park, and Tiller all eventually come to the conclusion that there are parts of themselves and others that they don't and won't fully understand. This helps them release societal pressures of normative identities and take new perspectives on who people can be. They better embrace others and themselves. Lee recognizes the importance of accepting all speech, flaws or not, and being comfortable with our inability to completely understand identity.

Conclusively, Lee's focus on language showcases a previously unseen perspective of identity. Rather than simply repeating the stereotypes and images that society often portrays, his analysis of language pinpoints the multifaceted identities of individuals. This is crucial to understanding America's racial issues and paves the way for change. Elda Tsou, in an essay about Lee's work, writes, "...in the telling of these stories we are also able to acknowledge the truth of our lives, providing an opportunity for change and transformation if we are brave enough to 'take the current when it serves'" (Tsou 108). Chang-rae Lee trailblazes a new era for understanding the intricacies of language and the Critical Philosophy of Race. Through discussion of the historical and social constructions of identity, societal structures that perpetuate racism, institutionalized power divides, and the ethical issues of race, he progresses toward the rectification of America's classist and racist systems. It's a step towards constructing a more racially equitable world.

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Personal Essay & Memoir



The Curtain to Life

My dad held my brand new iPad out to me with one hand. It looked as if it was shimmering pulchritudiously, like it had a bright yellow aura around it. My eyes glimmered like diamonds, and I felt electricity surge through my body as I took my brand new iPad from him and held it in my hands... I ran around the table in my living room holding my iPad in my arms,

“Thank you! Thank you! Thank you! Thank you! Thank You!” were the only words I could utter out as I ran around the table in my living room, beaming.

I felt the smooth edges of the iPad case in my hands. I looked right at it, seeing my reflection on the black screen. I tipped my body over and crashed onto my couch. *I can finally play games with my siblings!* That’s when my brother scurried over to me. Seeing I was done having a moment straight out of a movie scene, he cleared his throat,

“Roblox is an online game platform and game creation system made by Roblox Corporation that lets people program and play games created by themselves or other people,” my brother said putting two of his front teeth out and holding up his pointer finger like a nerd as he held his iPad up to his face, reading off of the Wikipedia. *As if that would convince me to play Roblox with him...* It did, considering how gullible I was. But, curiosity got the best of me and I created an account with the username of “Ponys_ROCK870.”

I was submerged playing a variety of games on Roblox, the games flashing bright colors in my face, as I practically dug my face in the screen of my brand new iPad. It was like nothing around me mattered. I was immersed in the music that played in the game, alongside the sound effects; *pew! Click! Pew! Clack! Ding!*

and the sound of my character jumping. I played parkour games, tycoons, survival games, and teamwork games. I didn't mind how basic my avatar looked; all I knew was that I was having fun. That's when something popped up on my screen. *purchase for robux. Whats Robux?* That's when my brother looked over at my screen and told me,

"Robux? you need money for that." *Well obviously I don't have money for that, I'm six.* I felt the smile vanish from my face as I shut off the screen to my iPad. The colors that were flashing in my face disappeared.

The next day, I only played Roblox for a few minutes with one thing on my mind; *how could I get Robux?* I exited the Roblox app, swiped my iPad screen to the right, opened Google then searched,

"How to get free robux?" *which one should I click on first? The generator? The forum page? The survey website?* My eyes darted back and forth at the different websites. I chose the Robux generator.

After it loaded in, I typed in my username and the generator sprang into action. *That was easier than I thought!* The same smile that I had when I first got my iPad crept onto my face like a robber in the dead of night. Something suddenly popped up on my screen where it stated in bold letters,

"answer this quick survey to get your Robux!" I clicked the exit button, ignoring it. I figured it was optional. When the generator was done, I left the site thinking that I'd receive my Robux tomorrow.

The next day came around and I was thinking about getting my Robux all day, going around telling all of my friends,

"I am getting Robux today after school, did you know?!"

"Oh cool! How much?"

"10,000" I would reply with a smirk on my face as I watched their smile shift into an O-shaped mouth, their eyebrows go up and eyes widen. I then skipped away to my bus knowing their jaws were still on the floor. When I got home from the bus, I practically ran like a horse in a rodeo to my iPad, the anticipation building.

To my utter disappointment the number of Robux I had sitting in my account was 0. The sparkle in my eyes faded. I had been deceived. I didn't stop there though, I was determined to get Robux. I kept thinking of ways I could get Robux, even asking my mom hoping she would sympathize with me and buy me Robux,

"Do you think you can buy me Robux? It's only 5 dollars."

As she looked at me and said, “No, it’ll corrupt your brain.” I strolled off. It was like a dark rainy cloud was over my head. Finally, the day came around when finally *the* idea struck my mind. it hit hard, like lightning. I was going to steal my mom’s credit card.

It wouldn’t be me who was going to steal it though, I was going to send my brother to do it so if she found out, he would get in trouble for it, not me. I looked over at my brother, moving my eyebrows up and down like a worm,

“Will you buy me Robux?”

“No, I don’t have any money”, he mumbled as he side-eyed my eyebrow movement.

I mentioned abruptly, as he started to get up to leave,

“Wait! You will be able to get some Robux too if you steal mom’s credit card.”

He turned around in a slow 180 motion. *I’ll do it* was written all over his face as he walked back over to hear my plan.

The plan took action later in the night as I watched my brother sneakily tip-toe into the master bedroom where my mom was asleep. My heart was beating and I was drifting to sleep on the couch watching TV that was too quiet for me to hear. I saw him come out and he was next to the iPads, reading off of what looked like a... *credit card!* I was excited but too tired to get up. My eyes blinked shut on their own.

I woke up the next morning and it was the weekend. After getting ready for the day, I suddenly epiphanized, *I might have Robux in my account!* I bolted to my iPad and to my surprise, after 3 months of playing Roblox, I had 400 Robux! The feeling I had when I first got my iPad came back to me and immediately I clicked on the shop icon, spending all of my Robux until I was down to 74. I joined a Roblox game and looked at my brand new character all giddy because I finally had a good avatar. I also bought gamepasses to go with it! I played and played and played, until I was becoming less and less and less entertained. I yawned.

Eventually, I stopped playing and checked my Robux. It said 0. *Where did my Robux go?!* I heard the front door open. My heart dropped. My mom came home from work and she looked me dead in the eye, put her hands on her hips and said,

“Why was there 15 dollars charged on my credit card?” My brother looked at me, fear swimming in his eyes. I didn’t say anything hoping that she would move on, but she walked over and snatched my iPad from my hands, and repeated,

“Why was there 15 dollars charged on my credit card?” more sternly this time. I didn’t say anything for a few seconds, but I reached my boiling point and it all spilled out,

“Fine! I stole your credit card and I sent him to get it so I could get Robux in Roblox because I was sad and I didn’t have any Robux in the game but I wanted a pretty avatar and I saw everyone else with a nice-looking avatar and I didn’t!” Tears welled up in my eyes as I finished my rant. She shook her head,

“I knew we shouldn’t have given you this iPad..” she muttered under her breath before erupting,

“This is what I mean, the game is corrupting your brain! There’s more to life than video games and there is always a consequence to a bad action, and yours is that I’m taking your iPad away.” My other brother who was playing outside with the neighbors were peering into the house as I screamed trying to get my iPad back but I couldn’t. I gave up. I then simply curled up on the brown sofa, as I tasted the salty tears cascading out of my eyes. The mumbling on the TV flooded my ears. I drifted to sleep the next hours and when I woke up, it was night time.

I saw both my brothers giggling playing Roblox together and I walked past them, my head hung low in a gloomy manner. I went up the staircase into my room. I laid in bed staring at the ceiling as I listened to my brothers laugh and play Roblox together. *That should be me.* I felt the waterworks start back up again as I continuously thought over and over again; *There is more to life than video games. There’s always a consequence to a bad action. She knew she shouldn’t have gotten me that iPad.* My mom’s words resonating and echoing in my head. I drifted to sleep.

I woke up the next morning with a purpose. I was going to do something else than play Roblox all day. I rolled out of my bed with hitting the ground with a *thud!* I walked over to my bathroom looking myself in the mirror. I rolled my shoulders back and puffed out my chest, like a soldier in the army. *I am going to do something new today!* I picked up my toothbrush and toothpaste.

Squelch! The toothpaste oozed out of the tube. I felt the bristles of my tooth brush glide across my pearly whites. After I finished brushing my teeth, I hopped in my shower, moving the shower handle valve over to hot. I felt the hot droplets of water *thunk!* onto me. For the first time in a while, I didn’t think about what game I was going to play on Roblox. I thought about what I was going to eat for breakfast.

I shuffled down the stairs and walked over to the kitchen to make my breakfast which consisted of yogurt, french toast, and water. For the first time in a while, I didn't hurry through my breakfast to play Roblox, I enjoyed my food while looking out the window, watching the birds fly by and sun shine through. It was like getting a new iPad and playing Roblox shielded me from the beauty of nature. It corrupted me and it made me think that I needed to play games on my iPad to live. Like a curtain to life.

While I was eating deep in thought I was interrupted by a *ding dong!* It came from the door, and I craned my head over my shoulder to see who it was. My brother opened the door and it was the neighbors coming to ask if he wanted to play. I sprang up and ran over to join them.

Our feet thumped on the concrete and green grass as we yelled,
"Tag! Your it!" While our neighbors were hiding from us, they found a bird nest with babies in it.

We crashed down in the grass simultaneously, worn out from the adventurous hour we had. I felt the breeze on my face as the wind moved the grass which made it tickle my arms and legs. My brother and the neighbors blabbered away, but it was drowned out by the breeze and birds chirping.

I looked up at the unnaturally big blue sky painted with splotches of clouds. I never thought anything could be more breathtaking than the black screen to my iPad and the smooth ends of the case. It was as if the sky was the diamond and the clouds were like the scintillation that reflects off of a diamond. The birds that flew by acted as an additional shine to an already stunning diamond. *My mom was right.*

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Short Story



The Innkeeper

I rolled out of bed, the day awaiting me. I splashed water on my face as I listened to the birds sing. While walking down the stairs, I planned out my day. First, make coffee, then finish the laundry and waste away at the check-in desk for the rest of my life, awaiting eager customers that never seem to come.

I was surprised as the bell rang beside the door, and a figure cloaked in gray walked in. He seemed in need of a hug—with his eyes narrowed on the floors and , but I refrained from this childish behavior. He introduced himself as Dread and tightened the knit scarf around his neck, nervous for my response.

“Hello Dread. What can I help you with?”

“Hi,” he said, hushed. “I would like a room for the night, please.”

After he paid, I handed him the keys and let him go on his way to his secluded room. He requested a room of gray, death, and sorrow, but instead found a haven of light. The floor was covered with blankets and pillows. Hot chocolate was already on its way. I knew this would be exactly what he needed.

Next came Contentment. She was kitted out in a bright sweater and jeans. As she walked into the room, she smelled coffee as she looked around the entryway. It was nothing much—the walls were light blue with a white trim. She smiled at the color and asked, “May I have a room and a cup of coffee? It just smells delicious.” I handed Contentment her coffee and sent her to her room. The walls were covered in windows so she could be seen by the world. Her radiance was something to be admired.

The soft sounds of footsteps accompanied me all day. I looked around the room and noticed the flowers drooping. Walking over, I picked them up and

walked into the kitchen. Turning on the light, I saw a batch of freshly made cookies, left by the gracious cook. I filled up the vase and walked back to the front room, passing by our community room filled with couches and chairs where our guests often shared a meal. It was painted in the same cheerful shade of light blue.

I didn't wait long for my next job. In walked Anger—I knew her very well, as she visited often. This time, she was wearing a black beanie that seemed to cover her entire face, and most notably her hair. She shuffled in with her luggage, stopping right in front of the front desk where I stood. I felt my smile fade away by simply being in her presence.

“Room for one, please.” Her voice made me flinch.

“Perfect! Any special requests?”

“Good wifi,” she said abrasively.

I giggled as she said that, earning a nasty glare. As an Innkeeper, it is my job to fulfill my customer's wishes, but I often know what's better for them. I sent Anger to her own room, around the corner from Contentment, where the shower ran cold and the wifi was in a perpetual freeze. I knew I would later hear her complaints, but not without the little smile that would come to accompany that.

The next morning was the same slow start with only one appearance, Dread. He walked down the stairs, his luggage in one hand and his room key in the other. I knew that this meant he was leaving, and I knew that this would be a happy farewell. Though Dread's voice was not chipper and he still wore his gray outfit, he seemed better. His presence was no longer overwhelming, just calm. He walked up to the desk, handed me his key, and said goodbye. I waved him out the door, knowing that he would come back in his all-encompassing presence, but my heart was happy for him.

Soon after breakfast I made my rounds, delivering freshly washed towels and helping room service with their cleaning. The cook sent up some cookies, which I happily delivered to Anger's room. I knocked on her door, hearing a hair dryer turn off. She opened the door and poked her hand out, accepting the cookies. I could smell a faint scent of hairspray and lotion in her room. After my rounds, I went back to my desk and responded to emails.

Soon, my old friend Pride walked in. They were dressed in a simple sweater and trousers. They waved as they walked in with a shiny new toy in their hand. Every time they visited, it always seemed to be after a victory. Whether that was intentional was not for me to ask.

“Why hello, my favorite Innkeeper!”

“Hello, Pride,” I responded in turn.

“I have come here to take a little rest. Could I have a room for two nights? I just finished some real big stuff at work and have taken some vacation days to celebrate.”

“Why, of course!” I sent them on their way to their room. It was covered with inspirational quotes and shelves that they would inevitably fill with trophies, Contentment helped me decorate it long ago. To be completely honest, I didn’t know anything about Pride except for their success, and it saddens me more and more each time I see them, as my curiosity grows.

Throughout the rest of the day, I answered phone calls. Most were simple requests to book their rooms in advance. Anxiety and Surprise would be joining me next week. The other calls were just confirming the shipping address for an upcoming delivery. One call stuck with me through the rest of my day. It was from a past customer, Nostalgia: she was a lovely old woman who seemed to bring a sense of warmth into any room she was in. She left me a voicemail saying that she wouldn’t be visiting often, but when she came into town she would make sure to stay here. She went on to compliment the service and most importantly our staff. She called them gentle and kind.

Later that evening Anger walked down the stairs. The first thing I noticed was the long dark curls cascading down her back. Not a single strand out of place. She smelled of the same lotion and hairspray. Her eyes still narrowed at me when she saw my smile, but I knew she meant well. I let her go, wishing she would find some peace.

I stayed up that night, wandering around completing random tasks. Mopping the floors, dusting the shelves. Right as I was about to lock the doors and go to bed I saw a couple instead walking in. They introduced themselves as Misery and Regret.

“Hello, are you still open?”

“Yes, you caught me right before closing.”

“Sorry for the inconvenience, but could we have a room for the night?”

“Of course.” I replied. I sent them off to their room. I got up once more, heading to lock the door as another person came in. They were followed by another, and soon in the dead of night, the inn was at capacity. Anxiety came a week early and kept following me around as I made makeshift beds out of towels. Doubt soon joined me as I examined the remaining supplies. Panic surprised me

as I was handing out the last room key. I didn't know what to do anymore. I was surrounded on all sides by people who needed me and the resources I had already provided and quickly ran out of. I began to hyperventilate as my last towel was laid out on the floor. I ran to the bathroom. People were chasing after me with questions and concerns, but I shut them out with the slam of the door.

At this point it was three in the morning. I couldn't take it anymore—I was overwhelmed. It took me a while before I began to breathe, and I felt my thoughts slowly melt away. I sat down on the floor and relaxed. I gave myself space.

Once I was calmed down I stood up and walked out of the bathroom. I made one last announcement before I went to bed.

"I am so sorry for the inconvenience to all of you tonight. The inn is full. I have done all that I can to ensure everyone's comfort. If anyone is unsatisfied, there are extra towels and blankets over there on the table." I pointed. "I will be leaving everyone here for the night. If anyone needs me, I will be down the hall." I exhaled.

The next morning I woke at six a.m., only getting three hours of sleep. I began to fix breakfast swiftly, using the month-long supply of eggs and bacon in one day. One hour later, breakfast was served. Anxiety still followed me around; it seemed as soon as I woke he was looming over me. I saw Contentment out of the corner of my eye, I was glad she was there.

Everyone else stayed for the entire day, until nightfall. Suddenly they all left. The inn was eerily quiet. The sound of footsteps overhead still comforted me, and I saw Anxiety finally leave. Tears began to fill my eyes as relief flooded through me.

The next few hours were spent cleaning various places— I didn't want to bother room service with the huge mess that I helped make. I vacuumed the carpets and wiped down all the surfaces, working extra hard at the spots on the table covered in egg, left over from breakfast.

I sat at the desk, exhausted and there I met Contentment. She helped herself to a cup of coffee and handed me her room key.

"Thank you for such a wonderful stay, but I do believe it is time to go."

"Thank you for being a wonderful guest." I smiled. My tears had just seemed to subside, but as I watched her leave, I felt a single tear fall down my cheek. I knew I would miss her. I sat there for a while, crying. My eyes soon drifted close, and I fell asleep.

Bohan Pan

Grade 12, Ladue Horton Watkins High
School

Educator: Jon Frank

Personal Essay & Memoir



Replay

The studio lamp light seared down on my hands, glancing across the keys. Ms. Schindler slammed her cane against the ground with each distinctive beat, louder with each count I missed.

One and two and three and four and—

“Bohan, I do not have the patience for this,” Ms. Schindler yelled, “again.”

We were on the second hour of what should have been a one-hour lesson. I told her I wanted to go home, knowing the answer would be no. So, through a thick sheet of tears, I practiced, again and again, until she was somewhat satisfied with my playing.

That was the final time Ms. Schindler saw me play. Sloppy and shameful, sobbing in her studio.

I cried on the car ride home, resenting Ms. Schindler, and even more, the instrument I could not play—the instrument I had begun to hate.

I had been studying piano with Ms. Schindler for four years. Her harsh teaching style dictated every lesson. And in that time, victorious grins were replaced by a tightness in my chest, a panicked shaking in my foot against the pedal, after any performance. My closet was filled with floor-length performance dresses, anything long enough to hide my panic, which eventually choked away at my playing.

The exhilarating freedom of playing was constrained by technique, execution, and a penchant for perfection.

When I think of Ms. Schindler, I remember our trial lesson. I don't even remember the piece but I can still smell the musky scent of her basement piano studio, the faded gold lettering of her Steinway, the shelves overflowing with sheet music.

And I hear her words.

She told me I played horribly—but she could see how much I *loved* playing. Against my lack of skill and maybe her better judgment, she took me in as her student, because she thought she could foster my passion into something more.

Yet, I never became Ms. Schindler's star student, far from it.

Still, she cared, continuing lessons till almost midnight, reprimanding me for the same mistake I had made weeks ago, lecturing me for hours every time I wanted to quit piano. Every recital, audition, performance, I saw her face in the crowd, walking cane in hand, standing on glass knees.

When she passed, I was adrift. In the months after, flitting from teacher to teacher, her pedagogical habits I hated became traits I looked for. I lost the person who believed in me the most, despite all my failures.

My grief washes away any resentful memories, replacing them with regret. Piano lessons with Ms. Schindler were an integrated part of my schedule, a routine I assumed would stay constant until I graduated. I took her as a given, immutable and permanent.

In April, I won the debate state tournament—an activity Ms. Schindler always told me to quit because it often traded off with precious piano practice time. She thought it was funny how I could speak on a stage unpracticed, extemporaneously in front of hundreds but couldn't muster the courage to perform for a few parents. After I championed the tournament, the first person I wanted to tell was not my parents, not my friends, but her.

Ms. Schindler, even if it isn't for piano, I want you to be proud of me.

But I couldn't because Ms. Schindler is not with me anymore. There is an empty space on my calendar for Tuesday nights, a face missing from every audience, and a type of confidence lacking that only she gave me.

It grips me at the most mundane moments: when I am in a Panera booth writing a debate case, when I listen to any Chopin piece, when I realize there are so many things—piano-related or not—that I want to share with her.

We are told so often that "life is fleeting" and "things don't last" that it almost becomes cliché. Like the scales I was asked to practice and drills I was forced to repeat, I didn't internalize them until now, when it's far too late. Every bit of gratitude that I planned on espousing at my senior graduation recital will

never reach Ms. Schindler. Instead, I had to speak them silently, guiltily, next to her casket at her funeral.

At her funeral, her former students spoke in her memory. Each shared different stories about being Ms. Schindler's students but they all ended on the same message—don't quit piano, it's the last thing Ms. Schindler would want.

Now, I'm performing in the cafeteria before school, in practice rooms, and in my own home. I am slowly rediscovering my passion for music. Ms. Schindler never gave up on me, so I cannot give up on the gift she left me: the ability to play. Not for competition or trophies but to share the art with anyone willing to listen, hoping it will reach her.

I practice until my arms shudder with the strain of repentance, as if playing to compensate for the hours I used to shrug off, as if I could play so beautifully that she would be by my piano bench again, with a cracked smile—all I need to know she is proud of how I performed.

A few months after her death, I'm on stage again. Not a recital hall or surrounded by an accompanying orchestra. Instead, in the rec room of a retirement home. As I take a seat at the bench, I feel the tightness in my chest and the tremble of my foot against the pedal. It's my first time performing without Ms. Schindler. I am suddenly back, the sadness like stage lights so blinding I rip my eyes away and stare at my uncomposed reflection in the keys. This time, I don't panic. I close my eyes and trust my fingers to *just play*.

Breathe.

One and, two and, three and, four and...

She is not there but I hear the tap of her cane, a pseudo metronome. I strike the opening C octave to Chopin's Ballade No.1, and this time it feels like I am playing again. Unafraid of wrong notes, my fingers stretch and string together a melody. Nowhere near perfect but that's not what music is about.

I'm not a virtuoso pianist. I think we both knew I would never become one. But Ms. Schindler, I wish you could hear me now.

Benjamin Patterson

Grade 11, Bishop Seabury Academy

Poetry



Bardo

I am in a field
of muted-blue & carmine—
shades of winter.

Liminal, vague
form. I can't grab you,
force myself to the center.

Ice spreads in sheets.
In dashes.

It licks the grassblade-
edges & takes the light
like a frozen prism.

Makes something once
hot settled as brisk
streaks illuminate & sit.

Great crown, fire a lisp
on grasses' boundary,
the flame of a winter
dawn.

Almost as if the dead

world provokes the sky
in rageful repose & burns
out charcoal grins
for the last earthbound
to see & forever revolve
about—

a desolate orbit, save for
a final searing & hypoxia
beyond

the airless wood, the
final twirl—twig rotating
above embers. Cooling
coal. Blue smoke, a
wisp. Branches creek
on metallic hinges &
no one is there to hear.

Benjamin Patterson

Grade 11, Bishop Seabury Academy

Poetry



It's Getting Dark

I was born into the house
Of broken rain.
I was born into whatever
You want me to be born into.

The writer feeds off of you.
They love to be your expectations
& To devour them.
Most of all, they love themselves.

To love, they say, is to be born
Again. Running away in a cloak
Of imagery—speckled stories
Colors on their sleeve.

It's getting dark—
What is the sound of darkness?
What is its cadence, its hue one
Shade amongst a collage of shadow?

The writer was at war with the
Ocean long ago. They have been
Always unsure. Their scenes are
Darkened glass shafts, ripped from
The old pages instead—their light

The blast of horns or the roar of
Swans instead.

The writer does not draw on
Experience. None of them write
About themselves, no matter
What they tell you.

Their desires are as good as your
Phantoms.
Their lies are the sum of your truths.

They are the glass shaft & you,
You are the light spilling rainbow
Spines in the crux of their body—
A system of refractions as hollow
& beautiful as either of you could be.

Call it interpretation, call it what
You want.
I hope this does something for
You

or
Maybe I write it for myself.
After all, I was born into the
House of it's getting dark.

I was born into the house of
Whatever I could be & what
You will never know.

Benjamin Patterson

Grade 11, Bishop Seabury Academy

Poetry



Why The World is Confused

I

Stalking through the slow-moving wind reeds,
 night.
Alive in the saber-mouthed creatures—simple &
Dumb. They have flat orange eyes, wet noses.
To the enchanting thump of gunfire they populate.

Oil & moss, I saw the image glisten. A tiger was
Speaking the tongue of night. Its fur is shining.
Its mouth is slurred & heavy. Wear farmer's
Clothes tonight & lay in wait to cross the snow-
 blank peaks
& die a death by an animal's fangs in luminous
 ice-shafts.
See the oil slide across the moss's green mazes
& fill the bower with light so the matter cracks
& weaves,
 playing with future fire.

Who is the tiger? Is he man or allegory?
Perhaps he is snow that is brittle. He sticks to
Windows before fanning out in
 tree-like patterns.

The other day I saw ice-flakes rustle past a dead
Magnolia branch. Both old & skeletal.
The flowerless stumps crossing. Reminiscent of
Antlers, they swayed—interlocked in position.
& night fell, obscure in quantity. A thousand
Dark grains tumble from burning space to empty
Space—that is night.

It multiplies unknown.

Like you are in a field walking, gray mud at
Your shoes & then there are two fields.
Nothing known of the intense certainty of daylight.
Only blue gates & star-speckled skin.
The cemetery filled with rocks & war lost, long
ago it lost.

II

Why is the world confused? Why don't we see
In infrared? If I could make a map to condense
All directions into one route (birth, collision,
Antithesis, the tiger, getting lost, etc...) up &
Around the highway, lost roadways crumpled
At my sides, then I could solve the mystery.

I glimpsed the world I made in my mind.
It was a crush of conversing energy, blues &
Greens. Spiky moss & blubber oil. Slow amber
Drizzled down but nothing was trapped—shapes
Conversed & spilled out of each other & the
Body was sleek bone. White, ossified & of the
Moon's fluid glow.

I should not think again. It only is embarrassment.
I am only suffering in the mind, not the body—
Moss & oil.

It pains you to set a forest on fire but all that I

Grow I can never see for it is trapped behind my
Eyelids, for when I reach back to grab the picture
Immaculate, it runs within forever.

Yuktha Rayani

Grade 11, John Burroughs School

Educator: Shannon Koropchak

Flash Fiction



Funeral March

I brushed my finger over the doll's regal coat, its smooth velvet texture soothing my nerves before the performance. She was too beautiful, fitting perfectly in my flexed hands. I finally broke my gaze with her and looked out at the sea of black, plasticky chairs in front of me. Ugh. Boring. An assortment of people from town had come to watch, but it wasn't a different crowd than the one who had attended the children's musical last week or the ribbon-cutting ceremony of *Barlowe and Son Grocers* the month before. A large gray stage sat before the crowd, bare except for flimsy curtains tucked neatly to the side and a wooden grand piano at the center. My chest tightened as I remembered I would join them up there in mere moments. I continued to watch the gradual flow of people into the amphitheater, and while I did, the sweet scent of roses wafted by. Oh my god. Anne?! Anne! I watched in awe as she walked past; I had hoped that she would be performing here but I hadn't been sure. She had on the same taffy-colored dress as my doll today, and I was glad I had pleated the doll's hair because Anne was in pleats as well. I frowned, realizing that her part was not centered but rather slightly to the left. I would have to adjust that later. Still, it warmed my heart when I matched them; really, it was too dear. I traced over the scarlet lipstick she always wore on my doll's mouth, the familiar gesture leaving a smile on my own.

"Up first, Ms. Laurel Quade, age 17, performing 'Piano Sonata No. 2' by Chopin," boomed Reverend Taylor's voice over the speakerphone. I kept my

posture tall and walked slowly (properly, the way I knew Anne would soon enough) to the stage, making sure to inhale the rose perfume when I got to row G.

I took my seat at the crimson velvet bench. This piano was decadent, inviting. It carried rich memories of a lifetime of performances and finally here I was at the zenith, one precise moment that I would return to as the juncture dividing my life between a subpar existence and one like Anne's. I placed my fingers on one of the ivory keys and closed my eyes as the notes poured out—fluid, pure, certain, and in what felt like an instant, the piece had concluded.

My initial anxiety quickly faded, affirmed by the performances that followed mine. I winced as clumsy hands flailed over the keys in front of them, playing A-sharp instead of A-flat or placing too much weight on their wrists. Even perfect Anne's performance was just mediocre. Maybe I could actually talk to her after I won, perhaps provide pointers for her.

I could taste the honeyed victory— golden, intoxicatingly sweet. Reverend Taylor would bellow— *The winner of the Berkshire Piano Competition and the recipient of the Taylor scholarship to the Berkshire Music Academy for Young Boys and Girls ..., please put your hands together for Laurel Quade!...*

"The winner of the Berkshire Piano Competition and the recipient of the Taylor scholarship to the Berkshire Music Academy for Young Boys and Girls ..., please put your hands together for Anne Sutton! I thank all of you young talents for participating this year!"

A light ringing noise danced around my head. My vision narrowed, but in my periphery, I saw Anne make her way back to the stage with her tall posture and slow pace. The sour taste of metal crept into my mouth as I clutched my doll tightly.

"I'm overwhelmed with shock as well as gratitude. Thank you committee and Dear Reverend Taylor who has been such a good fr..."

Anne's eyebrows raised, and her face went taut. Reverend Taylor turned to her, and they locked eyes with equal confusion. She began to gasp for the air around her, her hands pulling at something around her dress collar.

Instinctively looking away, my attention turned to my doll, and I quietly gasped, surprised to see my hands gripping its neck. I glanced between the two Annes, noticing faint red imprints of hands around the person's neck.

The crowd watched in horror as she writhed. Screams tried and failed to escape her mouth.

Huh? Was I doing this? Yes. I was hurting her. But how?

Reverend Taylor started to shake her, only causing greater strain.

What was I doing? I couldn't hurt my Anne. My precious Anne. My precious, beautiful Anne? The one who so gracefully accepted a prize that she knew was mine? She had held my future in her hand and discarded it without a second thought. She could go to the Academy without a scholarship. Even before this competition, she had already won everything I had sought to gain from today. She forced my loss at no gain of hers. Perfect Anne. No. No more. Her life would not be perfect. She would not get to live longer than I, better than I. Why should I feel sorry? Anne had everything. I desired one thing and she pried it from my hands. How dare she? Her fate was decided, and I was a mere executioner. I squeezed the fabric harder. Her eyes pleaded for help one last time as her face began to go blue. Her lips slightly puffed before a pale red color clouded her eyes and her body gave way, striking Middle C on its way down.

I fought to keep my grin from betraying the mask of worry painted on my face: "Someone! Please! HELPPP!"

Ira Rodrigues

Grade 11, Ladue Horton Watkins High
School
Short Story



A Journey to Nowhere

It's an unforgiving night today, the sky a flat black void wiped of stars. The kind of night that your mother used to say was a night for spirits. You walk down an abandoned street, face braced against the howling wind. Curling your hands into your coat, you choose a bench at random. Might as well get used to this.

In the silence, memories flurry past like the snowflakes that coat your hair. How your mother screamed as she shoved you out the door, and how it still echoes in your ears now. How quickly the bills piled up, burying you alive. Despair had never felt so heavy as it did then, taking shape in empty, glinting bottles that lay abandoned in your room. The constant search for money, needing more, needing more, and once it was gone, how fear rose up and swallowed you whole.

You're pulled out of your reverie by a soft rumble and the hiss of brakes, growing louder in the quiet, and the creak of opening doors. When you finally look up, there's a white, unmarked bus in front of you, idling on the curb. The driver looks to be a man, but that's all you can tell about him— a mask obscures his face and he wears a heavy winter coat. He waves a gloved hand, beckoning you in.

You've never heard of a bus that takes this route— that's part of the reason you chose this street. Being around people sickens you now. You hate the disdain on their faces as they walk past, the inevitable pity. It hurts, only made worse because you used to be one of them.

“I don’t have any money,” you say, your face heating with shame. But the bus driver doesn’t seem to care. The doors stay open, and warm air rushes out from inside, enveloping you. It’s almost like a physical tug, drawing you inside. And suddenly, the prospect of staying out here to freeze is so unbearable that before you quite know what you’re doing, you’re standing up and climbing the stairs. As the doors clank shut behind you, the sound of the city fades away.

Inside, people lie slumped across seats, some sleeping, some awake; you can barely make out their faces in the dim light of the bus. The only one who reacts at all to your arrival is an elderly woman, strangely familiar, who sits holding a purse, her eyes wide. As you take a seat next to her, the bus jerks into motion again.

“Where does this bus go?” you ask, glancing around. The windows only reflect shadowy darkness, and there’s no identifying signs, no signals.

For a long time, the woman doesn’t speak. “Nowhere,” she says finally, her hands clutching her purse.

And indeed, that seems to be where it’s going. You sway with the bus’ movement as it rolls onward, never stopping for a red light, never pausing to pick up another passenger, just speeding down a road with no end. Time seems to stretch, distorting until you’re no longer sure if you’ve been sitting for two minutes or two hours. It lulls you into a trance.

As you think this, a memory flickers from back when you were in college, swapping ghost stories with roommates, and a girl whispered the urban legend of the bus to nowhere. *It only appears at night, and it never stops. You’ll only board it once, and you’ll never be the same.*

And suddenly, you snap awake.

Why is it that the elderly woman looks so familiar to you? She is wrinkled and small and silver-haired, but you imagine her younger, and now you notice her dark eyes, the beauty spot on her chin, the shape of her nose. They’re your features. She is you.

You jerk back, realization settling heavy in your stomach. As if following your thoughts, the bus seems to brighten, and you see all the other passengers more clearly. And they’re you— or at least, versions. Who you could have been, who you chose not to be. The little girl across from you with bright eyes, kicking her legs excitedly. The college-aged you with precious dreams, and sitting next to her, the person she turned into: a lank-haired, lonely woman who wears loss like a blanket, who drinks to mute the pain because it’s never, ever left. They’re all you.

And who have you become now? Homeless, jobless, on a path that's dead-ended, life just passing you by. Your emotions spiral— the bus picks up speed. It roars through a tunnel, and darkness reigns, but that doesn't stop your thoughts from turning, spinning you onwards.

Because it's clear that the elderly woman sitting next to you is still a path that is open to you. There is light at the end of this tunnel, you think, and then blink as the bus emerges from the darkness and moonlight pierces through.

For a second, everything seems to slow down. You turn to the elderly woman, and she smiles. There's happiness, fulfillment, in her eyes. *Remember this*, you think, and you will— years later, you'll think of this moment, seeing the woman you could become.

And then she fades away, like a snowflake in the sunlight. They all do, every one of the passengers, your past and future selves disappearing. You stand, and the bus slows, then stops, brakes hissing. The driver nods as you walk down the steps, back at that same old bench. It's still freezing, but it doesn't quite bother you as much. You've got a warmth inside you now, burning from the inside out. What a strange feeling, hope, one you thought you'd forever lost.

When you turn, you know the bus will be gone, in search of a new passenger to transform. But you look anyway, imagining you can hear it bumping over the road, see a flash of white as it follows a new path, yet another spirit in the city gloom.

Ira Rodrigues

Grade 11, Ladue Horton Watkins High
School
Flash Fiction



A Love Worn Soft

You're on a white shelf, collecting dust with the other toys, when someone picks you up and brings you home. For years, you've watched as your identical friends were brought to other families, wondering if it would ever be your turn. But as you're lifted by this bearded man, with his kind, lined eyes and tired face, you can't help but feel scared. This store, with its bright lights and loud music, has been your only home.

On the way home, the man rips off your price tag and wraps you in gift paper. You catch a glimpse of your reflection in the car mirror— green ribbon, soft brown fur, black marbles for eyes, and a sewn-on smile. You look exactly as you did the day you rolled off the factory production line. The man sighs and grips the steering wheel. You wonder why he looks so sad.

Your very first owner is a girl with a dimpled smile and black eyes that hold tiny stars in their depths. In her presence, the man's quiet weariness disappears; he even laughs when he presents her with you. She hugs you, squashing your perfectly ruffled fur, and promises in a childish lisp to be friends forever.

~

In the dark of her room, she whispers all her secrets. There are monsters under her bed and in the closet at night, and sometimes they're at school and hidden in her parents' faces, too. She wants to be a princess when she grows up, but maybe not have a prince. She likes hot pink, but she loves blue. She hates

tomatoes. Her favorite toy is you. She spends precious hours combing your fur, polishing your eyes, and straightening the green ribbon; her love is tangible.

When she falls asleep, a small hand curled over your paw, you watch over her, moonlight casting everything silver. You are faithful to your promise. You don't ever let her go.

She grows up fast, too fast, like a weed sprouting from grass. Her smiles start to fade, the stars in her eyes winking out. In the night, instead of curling up with you, she watches a screen, its light casting a ghostly glow on her face. And lately, when she holds you, it's because she's crying.

Is it because you're getting older? You've lost most of the stuffing in your left paw, and the little green ribbon has begun to tear. You tell yourself, pretending, really, that they are marks from years of her loving you, and you're sure that she wouldn't stop now.

~

Toys can't move, can't speak, but you do your best to be a comfort. You listen: to her singing in the morning, to angry shouts in the kitchen that don't quiet until the middle of the night, to the sound of the door swinging open and shut as she leaves for school. You watch: as she calls her friends and laughs, but then sinks into despair when they're gone, as she sobs over failing grades and hard tests, as she stops looking in the mirror because she hates what she sees. You wait: for her to remember you, but as years pass and you grow ever older, you realize that toys can't live, no matter how hard they want to.

Time passes, and you stay hidden under her bed, waiting.

~

She stands with her hands on her hips, watching as the last of the moving boxes are carried out the door. Her old room looks bare without all her things, a shrine to a childhood long past.

And that's when she sees it: a teddy bear, lying abandoned on the floor. She picks it up, brushing off the white dust caking its brown fur, tracing the black-thread smile. Strange, how she hasn't looked at this toy in years and yet memories flood her at the first touch; she can still remember the day her father brought it home, nearly a decade ago.

The bear's marble eyes flash. For a second, she feels an almost-warmth in its paw. But when she checks again, it's just a sagging toy.

She can't explain why, but she takes it with her, tucking it into her purse. It seems wrong to leave it here, collecting dust in a forgotten room.

~

When you emerge from the purse, you come face to face with a tiny boy no older than eight. His hair is red, not black, and he has a lopsided smile instead of dimples, but you still see that little girl, your first owner, in the sparkle in his eyes. He holds you tight and promises to be your friend forever.

You are weary, and lonely, and heartbroken, but you've got hope. It fills you up. One more child to love.

Ira Rodrigues

Grade 11, Ladue Horton Watkins High
School
Science Fiction & Fantasy



Justice is Here

She's sitting across from a murderer, but Dr. Arden Venn feels perfectly safe.

A layer of one-way glass separates her from the man, who looks to be in his thirties, brown-haired and scruffy, a certain cruelty in the twist of his mouth. He is dressed in the standard black jumpsuit of the Rehabilitation Center, his identification, Prisoner #2045, stitched in white. Cuffs glint on his hands, cameras track his every move, and guards wait outside the cell with orders to kill. But the real reason Arden feels so comfortable is the glowing blue pods fastened to his skull. Today, he's a patient to be Rehabilitated, and he won't ever be dangerous again.

With a tap on the shimmering holographic screen in front of her, Arden queues up the Program, checking his file as she does so. Her eyes, hidden behind thin black frames, scan down his list of crimes dispassionately: he'd snapped and strangled his wife, convicted of second-degree murder with intent to kill. It should disgust her, but he's the fifth murderer she's seen this week, and she only feels a cool, clinical disinterest. This is nothing new.

"You are charged with the following crimes," Arden begins, her tongue rolling easily over words she's said a hundred times. She reads his list of charges without betraying a flicker of emotion.

"The procedure will now begin. Are you ready, 2045?" she asks, glancing up. It's standard protocol to always refer to the prisoners by their numbers.

Undergoing Mind Rehabilitation often puts the patients in a trance, and 2045 is no exception: his eyes are half-closed and voice monotone when he answers, “Yes.”

Arden presses START on the computer. It hums, and a voice says, “Beginning Memory Extraction.”

The glowing blue pods start to pulsate with energy, and Arden monitors it all on the screen, ensuring the procedure completes smoothly. She’ll never get tired of seeing this. It’s fascinating to watch a threat to society being reformed. The prisoner’s face twists in agony, his mood levels spiking as he relives his crime— and then relaxes into docility as the memory is wiped from his brain.

“Memory Extraction complete,” the computer announces with a chime. “Personality change confirmed.”

The glowing pods disengage, wires wilting to the ground. Arden peers through the glass as the prisoner slowly opens his eyes. He smiles unconsciously, and it transforms his face— he almost looks friendly. On the computer, his mood levels have stabilized.

This is confirmation enough for Arden, but she still fills out her paperwork, noting his condition and mood change. After years of working as a therapist and rehabilitation guide, it’s almost second-nature. He’ll need to be monitored carefully to ensure all hints of his criminal nature have been erased, that he has truly become a blank slate. Perhaps a three-month period of supervision, Arden decides, nibbling pensively on her pen.

Finished, she taps into the screen, and guards enter the cell to take the prisoner away. Justice has been served.

Her heels click on the clean white tiles of the Rehabilitation Center, so polished Arden can see her own reflection: clothed in a white lab coat, blonde hair smoothed into a bun, gunmetal gray eyes. Unfeeling. Professional. This is who she has to be, everything tucked away, so she can return and do this job day after day.

She is dealing with the most dangerous, hardened criminals: the murderers, the thieves, the thugs and gangsters. In the past, they used to serve time in prison for their crimes, were even executed— imagine that! Arden smiles humorlessly.

The government’s plan for Rehabilitation was only implemented ten years ago, but it’s been a wonderful success. The process is quite simple: use neural technology to remove the memories of the crime, the criminal tendencies. A

rearrangement of the brain. Alter the personality, and the once-criminals could be transformed into useful members of society.

She picks up her pace, rounding the corner, and bumps into Tallis, her one friend in this place. "Watch where you're going," he says, fixing the badge on his lab coat.

"Sorry," Arden says. "I'm just in a rush to get to my next patient."

"So devoted," Tallis teases, brown eyes mischievous. "Could there be a therapist more dedicated to her godforsaken criminals?"

"Don't say it like that. We're helping them."

"Ever the idealist, Dr. Venn." But when she tries to brush past him, he catches her shoulder, and his voice is suddenly serious. "Arden, you didn't hear about that prisoner you treated, did you? The one accused of the jewel robbery?"

"I remember." Prisoner 2376, a small, mousy woman who'd become a skilled jewel thief, stealing upwards of millions of dollars before she was caught. She'd had a very long list of charges. "What happened to her?"

"She was under supervision. They say she used to love to paint and couldn't do it anymore, that she told people she didn't feel human. She killed herself two days ago."

"What?" Arden stops and stares at him. "But the personality change isn't meant to be that drastic—"

Tallis taps her shoulder in warning. Arden closes her mouth and glances around. She knows what she'll see— the white-haired Arbiter watching them, his eyes cold. The head of the institution is infamous in and out of the Center. Under his management, the crime rate in the country has dropped tremendously.

"Farlow, Venn, don't you have work to do?" he says softly.

"Sorry, sir," Tallis says. Arden steps past him and picks up her pace. There is something about the Arbiter that makes her nervous— something in his eyes that she can't quite place, but sends chills down her spine. Still, even the uncomfortable presence of the Arbiter isn't enough to dispel her worries.

She killed herself. Arden halts at the last cell, her brain on autopilot. New patient. Same routine. But as she moves past the guards, one of them holds out an arm to stop her. "Dr. Venn, there's something you should know about the prisoner here."

"What?"

"This one's convinced she's *innocent*." The guard laughs as he opens the door.

Arden smiles, too. The new Justice System doesn't make mistakes. She's never treated an innocent patient before— nobody has. It's unheard of. Likely just a pathological liar, but could also be insane, Arden muses as she steps into the cell.

And stops dead. The prisoner, a long-limbed girl barely past twenty, is restrained as usual, clothed in that black jumpsuit with blue wires plastered to her face. Prisoner #2053. She looks like every other criminal, lulled into a trance from the pods, her face unguarded. But Arden doesn't even need to glance at the hologram to know who she is, though she hasn't laid eyes on this girl in years. Everything about her, from the gray eyes to the birthmark on her left hand to the thick curls of her hair, is achingly familiar. *Soren Venn*. Her little sister.

On shaky legs, Arden crosses to the chair and sits down. She reads the file projected on the hologram, her crimes listed in bold at the top. Soren's been convicted of *arson*, setting fire to a building that killed dozens. Arden has to read it twice to understand. Her little sister, a mass murderer.

Memories blur her vision, of her life before this career, before her training. How long has it been now? Five years? Ten? The constant hunger, constant fear, constant scraping to make ends meet. She'd clawed her way out of that life, crushed and hidden the girl she'd been. But she'd had to leave Soren behind. For a second, the cell's smooth, unmarked walls morph into the peeling, stained wallpaper of their old home; dim, flickering lights illuminating her sister's shaking hands and tear-stained cheeks. *If you leave me, I'll never forgive you*.

Focus. Arden blinks and the memory dissolves. She orders herself to remain calm. There is no room for mistakes when your line of work is reforming criminals. She's heard the rumors about the therapists who failed to do their job, who failed to exact justice. It's treason. She will not be one of them, and after all, the Justice System doesn't make mistakes.

Still, her hand trembles as she queues up the Program. "You are charged with the following crimes..."

At the sound of her voice, Soren's eyes flutter open. "Arden?" she mumbles, her voice fading in and out. Then she seems to wake up fully, eyes frantically scanning the room. "Where am I? What happened? This isn't— I'm innocent! I didn't do it!"

Arden forces herself to finish, although every word hurts like a knife twisting. "The procedure will now begin. A-are you ready, 2053?"

"No! I know what you're going to do to me." Soren struggles violently against her bonds. "I won't let you take my memories! No!"

On her holographic screen, Arden watches as her sister's mood levels go haywire. The induced trance isn't relaxing her like it should. *Increased levels of distress*, the computer system notes. *Consistent with a guilty conviction. Begin Program.*

She sweats under her lab coat, feeling eyes on her from everywhere. Is she just imagining it? She presses START, but it's never felt this way before, like she's sentencing her own sister to death.

Soren's screams intermingle with the computer's calm voice.

"Beginning Memory Extraction."

"I'm innocent! Please, I'm innocent!"

Her body convulses as the blue pods begin to glow.

The Database wasn't easy to get to. The building is organized in concentric circles, with the core hub at its center, and even at night, it's crawling with security, cameras and guards galore. Arden had to force herself to walk calmly, authoritatively, her chin lifted, gaze frigid. *Play the role, keep your head held high.* She'd done it so effectively that nobody had questioned her. Lessons she's carried with her since childhood, since she and Soren—

God, Soren. Arden steadies herself against the Database walls, trying to get a grip. But she can't escape the image of how Soren had looked after the Program was over. Deadened. Hollow. There was no reformation, no victory. She'd looked like a broken doll, everything that made her Soren just sucked away. Arden closes her eyes briefly, feeling the press of tears. What has she done to her sister?

It's time to find out. She presses her fingers to the holographic screen before her, watching as it expands and becomes three-dimensional. The Database is a community record of every prisoner that has ever been Rehabilitated, their information, their crimes, their lives all monitored and stored. But most importantly, it holds recollections of crimes committed. Even now, Arden can see memories being added, little movies that float in the darkness.

She breathes in deeply and types in Soren's name. The system rearranges instantly, a file and memory appearing. Arden braces herself to watch it. She'll see her little sister murdering people, but at least it'll mean the Justice System isn't wrong. At least it'll mean she hasn't been erasing the memories of *innocent* people.

But when she plays the memory, all she feels is dread. The memory is fuzzy and blurry, and it splits often, but Arden can make out hands as they set fire to a building, orange flames licking up the walls, and the sound of screams. And those

hands are decidedly not her sister's— the left one is missing her birthmark. Soren was framed. And she helped do it.

Arden stumbles back, her stomach heaving. She thinks of Prisoner 2045, the dispassionate way she'd erased his memories, his life, and all the prisoners who came before. How many of them were innocent? How many has she doomed?

"So you've found it," a voice says from behind her. "I always thought you were clever, Dr. Venn."

Arden whips around. It's the Arbiter, his meticulously combed white hair reflecting the glow of the hologram behind her. "How many?" Fear coils like a snake, constricting her chest, but she manages to choke out, "How many have you framed?"

"My dear." His smile sharpens. "Any good Center needs money to keep it running. We cover up a few crimes for the elite, we get our reward. It's very lucrative. What are a few sacrifices compared to that?"

Arden presses shaky fingers to her mouth. "How? How did this happen? The Justice System is supposed to help—"

"A few false memories, implanted here and there. The Rehabilitation process is really quite advanced. It was easy to do it, to reshape their personalities. Who would believe a guilty criminal?" He laughs. "*You* didn't."

Corruption, Arden realizes with the clarity of desperation. That's what lurks in his eyes, dark and oily. It makes her stomach turn.

"My sister was one of those 'criminals,'" she says, her voice rising. "My sister!"

"Not just her," the Arbiter says with a look she doesn't understand. "It seems wicked tendencies run in the family."

What? Arden's mind is too slow, too shell-shocked to realize the danger. When it finally registers that she should run, it's too late.

"You are charged with the following crimes..."

Consciousness. Her head throbs as if someone smashed her on the pavement. Images flit into her mind, terrifying ones: a knife in her hand, blood on the floor. Screams— her own? *Did I do that? I didn't do that. I don't remember...*

Arden snaps back into herself. It all feels so horribly familiar: the scratchy black jumpsuit, the soft humming of wires, the opaque glass where she knows someone sits watching her, waiting to extract false memories of false crimes from her head. Making her mindless. It feels poetic, almost. A cycle repeating.

"What am I accused of?" she says, her voice shaking.

There is a pause. Then a low male voice speaks, a familiar one. *Tallis*, she recognizes faintly. A cruel twist, but she should have expected it from someone like the Arbiter. “Treason, and first-degree murder.”

Arden starts to laugh, and keeps laughing as the voice drones on. “The procedure will now begin. Are you ready, Prisoner 2060?”

Soren, are you watching? Arden’s thoughts are nonsensical. *Justice is here for me.*

When the wires pulsate, sending energy down her spine, she lets it take her. Lets it wipe everything away.

Isabel Sapp

Grade 12, Smithville High School

Educator: Amanda Collier

Poetry p



little platte trail, smithville, mo

I went running today
on the old trail that's older now
the one that winds through the woods near my neighborhood
in the vague shape of a hand

it has been paved since the last time I jogged on it, or even, well, saw it
the dusty gravel
coated and covered in Nyx and tar

I went running today
only to miss the cross-stitch of children's footprints
embroidering stories in the thick reeds and weeds and grasses
the evidence of our horseplay lost to the wind and thistles

our little treehouse, the one we neighborhood kids hid amongst the leaves
so the park rangers couldn't find it
the one so high our parents clutched their chests as we swung our little
eight-year-old bodies through the branches to reach it
is dilapidated, crumbling, rotting

ivy and oak have overtaken the footholes and our poles
marking out the path to the waterfall that we discovered
one Virgo afternoon
I'd say nature is healing

but then I'd have to call my existence a wound

I went running today
only to realize I'm losing a race I never knew I was in
a race against life, against the not-yet-dead-and-buried, against the things I can't
quite carry
a race against time, one I'll never win because
haven't you heard? time can fly
and my feet can only pitter-patter against the pavement like rain
and slosh in the mud of memories I almost forgot I made

I went running today
and finally understood why places we used to frequent are called our old haunts
I was more ghost than girl, more skeleton than child, more antiquated than
acquaintance
I'd ask the trees if they remember me
but I'm scared they'll say no

I went running today
and I ran with the sands of time pressing on my back
against all the once todays that have become yesterdays
all the once tomorrows that have become moments I've swallowed

I went running today
wondering if Sisyphus ever knows that the boulder he pushes is one he made
His escape from death was merely a delay
I think I opened my eyes today

I went running today
on the older trail that's older now
the ones that winds through the woods near my neighborhood
In the vague shape of a hand

I ran
I ran
I ran
Will you?

Isabel Sapp

Grade 12, Smithville High School

Eductor: Amanda Collier

Dramatic Script



Stars Rise at Noon

(AT RISE: an apartment kitchenette. A young woman, 23, sits at the counter listening to the radio. This is NORA CAMBREY. She slowly sips coffee. On the other side of the stage, another woman emerges, holding a microphone. She is in her mid-30s. This is RADIO HOST.)

RADIO HOST. Good morning, Magnolia Heights! Welcome back to Morning Minutes in Magnolia! As always, I am your host, Bridget Thorpe. The time is 6:30 am, September 17th, 2024, and, my god, is the sunrise beautiful. As much as I love my job, this is my favorite moment of the day, watching that sun come over the horizon, wrapping me in a warm embrace. I think it's meant to remind us of God's love. It grounds me every time. Anyway, I'm excited to announce that the weather today will stay beautiful, with a high of 83 degrees and a low of 61 this evening. There aren't supposed to be any clouds, so remember to drink water and wear your sunscreen! And for those wishing fall would already hit, it's coming, I promise! Later this week, temperatures will drop down into the low 50s.

(Another person enters. He is in his early 20s and wears a T-shirt and sweats. He stumbles over to NORA, kisses her on the forehead. This is NOAH LEVI, Nora's boyfriend.)

NOAH. Can you turn that off?

NORA. No, I like it.

(Another person enters, carrying a backpack. She's 16 years old. She wears a T-shirt and jeans with headphones around her neck. She grabs a piece of bread and pours

some orange juice, throwing her jacket onto a chair. This is ESTELLE. She slides a piece of paper towards NORA.)

ESTELLE. Can you sign this?

NORA. Yeah. *(looks at it)* This was due yesterday. Estelle!

ESTELLE. I'm running late, okay? No time for yelling.

NORA. Why didn't I get this earlier?

NOAH. Here we go.

ESTELLE. I didn't have time!

NORA. But you had time for everything else! School is important, Estelle. They are barely considering me one of your guardians, and you're making me look negligent.

ESTELLE. I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Listen, I've got to go, but I promise I'll make it up to you!

NORA. You better, kid. *(hands over the slip)* Now, go. Don't be late! And don't be stupid!

ESTELLE. I won't! *(exits)*

NORA. My God, she's going to be the death of me.

NOAH. Nah, it'll be fine. I gotta get to work. Love you. *(exits, opposite the direction of ESTELLE)*

.

(NORA gets up and starts to clean the counters.)

RADIO HOST. We are getting reports of an accident just off Second Street. So far one injury has been reported, though we don't know the seriousness. If Second Street is in your daily plan—

NORA. Hey, Noah, there was an accident off Second! Be careful!

NOAH *(offstage)*. Always.

(NORA's phone rings)

NORA. *(answering)* Hello. Yes, this is Nora Cambrey. What? Yeah, I'm on my way.

(NORA exits. The stage darkens. After a beat, NOAH and NORA re-enter, wearing all black. NORA walks into the kitchen and grips the counter. NOAH stares at her warily. After a moment, NORA sinks to her knees. NOAH rushes over and holds her as she stares into the distance.)

NORA. I can't do this.

NOAH. You can.

NORA. It's...she's...

NOAH. Yeah. I know.

(It stays like this for a moment before there is a knock at the door.)

MRS. CAMBREY. *(offstage)* Hello? Nora? It's Mom and Dad. Are you home? Well, I know you're home, I saw your car. Can you answer?

NOAH. I'll tell them to leave.

NORA. No, they're here because of—

NOAH. I don't care.

NORA. I do.

NOAH. They didn't come to the funeral. They don't deserve—

NORA. They're my parents. I decide what they deserve. *(standing)* And we need to talk.

(NORA readies herself. NOAH remains on the floor. There is history here, between NORA and THE CAMBREYS. Rough history. NOAH knows it. He wonders if NORA has forgotten. NORA goes to the door and opens it.

Two adults, one man, one woman, in their 40s, emerge. The woman, MRS. CAMBREY wears a dark blue sweater and gold jewelry. The man, MR. CAMBREY, is in a black and white suit.)

NORA. Mom. Dad.

MRS. CAMBREY. Nora. You...your hair...it's different.

NORA. Estelle dyed it last month. Said I look more chic with highlights.

MR. CAMBREY. Yes. I can see it.

(beat)

NORA. Come in, come in.

(All enter the apartment. NOAH scrambles to his feet and quickly extends his hand.)

NORA *(con't)*. This is Noah.

NOAH. Hi, I'm Noah Levi. *(shakes the CAMBREYS' hands)* I'm so sorry for your loss. *(looks pleadingly at NORA)*

MRS. CAMBREY. Thank you.

(beat. NORA meets NOAH's eyes and mouths, "Leave." NOAH nods)

NOAH. I'm going to get groceries. Do you need anything, Nora?

NORA. I'm okay, babe. *(to her parents)* Do you want something to drink? We have juice, lemonade. I can make some coffee, too.

MRS. CAMBREY. That's not necessary. We have water.

MR. CAMBREY. Yes, we've been trying to drink three bottles of water a day. Doc says it'll keep us spry and, it's the new trend, you know. Hydration.

NORA. That's great. Staying healthy. Good for you.

MRS. CAMBREY. It's very nice. Are you drinking enough water?

NORA. *(bewildered and a little angry)* Really? Yeah, sure, Mom. I drink enough water.

MR. CAMBREY. I..I left my hat in the car. I'll be right back.

(beat. As soon as MR. CAMBREY leaves, NORA's entire demeanor changes. She is on edge. She is a soldier, preparing for war.)

NORA. Mom. Is there something I can do for you?

MRS. CAMBREY. *Nora.*

NORA. Sorry. It's just, I haven't spoken to you since, when? A year ago? A year and a half? What changed?

MRS. CAMBREY. What changed? *Elliot is dead.*

NORA. Elliot has been dead. Estelle died three days ago. Have enough maternal love left to get that right.

MRS. CAMBREY. I'm sorry. This has just been so hard for me.

NORA. Of course, here we go. It's all about you.

MRS. CAMBREY. You have never given me any sympathy. I tried my best with him, I did. Neither one of you ever understood where I was coming from. No one was like him when I grew up. I gave birth to a boy and then...I've made mistakes.

NORA. Like throwing my sister out.

MRS. CAMBREY. *It wasn't like that.* Elliot left of his own accord.

NORA. You tried to *disown* her.

MRS. CAMBREY. And you've never overreacted?

NORA. Not like that. Never like that.

MRS. CAMBREY. It was just so sudden. One day, I have this beautiful boy, and he's everything I ever wanted, and the next he's saying that he's a girl and accuses me of not loving him—

NORA. So you what? Call your pastor to pray over her? Like she wasn't scared enough?

MRS. CAMBREY. *(starting to cry)* I thought it would help. He was just, I'd never seen him like that before, splayed out on his knees and just sobbing, sobbing like he did when he was a baby, and I got scared. I didn't think he was broken, I just thought he needed help.

NORA. The pastor told her she was going to hell. And who did you defend?

MRS. CAMBREY. I didn't know what to do—

NORA. *(talking over her)* Not her—all you had to do was hug her. Tell her it would be fine. That you loved her. Instead, Estelle died thinking her parents hated her. She's in the ground, and you never told her you loved her. That's on you. *That's on you.*

MRS. CAMBREY. I know! *(MRS. CAMBREY grabs NORA by the arms)* Please, you have to forgive me. Elliot's gone, and I can't live with myself—

NORA. No. I'm not, I'm not—you can't force forgiveness from me. What if I hate you too?

MRS. CAMBREY. (*recoils*) Of course. I should've known. We haven't always seen eye to eye, but phones go both ways. I tried to reach out. You never did. I should've known.

NORA. Why would I call, Mom? Love is supposed to be unconditional. Yours never was.

MRS. CAMBREY. You're so angry.

NORA. Wow. Who would've guessed?

(*MR. CAMBREY enters, now with a hat*)

MR. CAMBREY. Nora.

NORA. Dad.

MR. CAMBREY. Martha. (*glances around*) I missed something.

NORA. You always do.

MR. CAMBREY. Ah. (*beat. He understands, suddenly, what has happened. His face darkens.*) Nora, I understand you're upset, but we did not come here to be berated.

NORA. Of course. And that brings me back to my first question. Why. Are. You. Here?

MR. CAMBREY. Why do you think?

NORA. (*voice breaking*) Estelle is dead, and you need someone to tell you that it's okay that it's okay you fucked up. You don't get it. You weren't with her, you didn't see what she was like that night, when you threw her out. And you didn't see her at the accident. It was a hit-and-run, you know? She died all alone.

MRS. CAMBREY. Not alone. You were there.

NORA. I got there too late. Paramedics said she was probably dead within a few minutes of the crash. Dead by the time someone saw her.

(*beat*)

NORA (con't). (*fighting back tears*) And you didn't answer my question. Am I right? Are you just here because you want me to tell you it's fine, so you can go back to living your guilt-free, child-free life? Because I won't, I won't say that. I won't lie.

MR. CAMBREY. No, it's not. We...We are here because we missed you. And her. And I'm sorry it took the death of our child to realize that waiting for you to call wasn't going to work. We want to be a part of your life. We want—we wanted to be a part of hers.

NORA. But you're not.

MR. CAMBREY. But we could be.

NORA. But you're not.

MR. CAMBREY. No, we are not. And that's our fault.

(There is silence. No one quite knows what to say. This is the first time her father has ever agreed with her. This is uncharted territory. This is an olive branch. A chance at reconciliation, or at least understanding. No one wants to say the wrong thing. No one wants to speak. Everyone has something to say. Precarious.)

NORA. Why didn't you come to the funeral?

MRS. CAMBREY. We didn't think we would be welcome. No one answered our calls. I would've asked you if we could, but I tried to come here before and you were never home. Where were you?

NORA. The Super 8. Off Richard Street.

MRS. CAMBREY. Why?

NORA. Honestly?

MR. CAMBREY. Honestly.

NORA. The orange juice. In the fridge. I bought it for her. I hate orange juice.

MR. CAMBREY. I know.

NORA. But Estelle drinks it every morning. And so I buy it and I don't know, the one in the fridge door, it expires in four days, but there's no one here to drink it, and I can't just pour it down the sink. It's so stupid. But I won't let Noah throw it out because it's hers. And so that's jacket. *(points to the jacket on the chair)* And her bed is still unmade. And her chores aren't done. She's still here but she's not coming back. *(starts to lose herself)* But I keep forgetting, and then I see the orange juice, and I think to buy some more at the store, but then it all comes back, and I remember I don't need to anymore. I won't ever need to again. And I—I can't do it. I can't. She's my baby sister, you know? And she can't be gone, I don't know what to do if she's gone, who am I if I'm not her sister? And you don't get it, because you haven't been here. You were gone! You cut us out! You don't get to waltz back in here like nothing happened, like I want you to—you don't, you don't—

(NORA finally breaks down again, her words fading into nothing. MRS. CAMBREY reaches across the space and hugs her. NORA falls into it. MRS. CAMBREY begins to cry as well. MR. CAMBREY puts his hand on her shoulder and she grabs his wrist.)

MRS. CAMBREY. I'm so sorry. We're here now. We're here now.

(Blackout. After a beat, the lights go up. NORA, NOAH, and THE CAMBREYs sit around the kitchen counter. The radio sits precariously on the edge. NORA is wearing an engagement ring.)

RADIO HOST. Good morning, Magnolia Heights! Welcome back to Morning Minutes in Magnolia. As always, I am your host, Bridget Thorpe. The time is 6:30 am, September 17th, 2025.

NORA. I can't believe we agreed to this.

RADIO HOST. Today is a day of remembrance as our community mourns the death of Estelle Cambrey, who died in a car accident on this day last year. Estelle was a sophomore at Magnolia High School and was on her way to class when a car ran a stop sign and struck her head on. She was an active member of the band, playing the alto saxophone, and the co-editor-in-chief of the school newspaper. Her sister describes her as a light in the dark. Her classmates say she was a great friend and made everyone laugh. She is deeply missed. If anyone has any information about the crash, please contact our local police. Estelle is survived by her sister, Nora; her parents, Martha and Eric; and soon-to-be brother-in-law, Noah Levi. Thank you for listening and let's take a moment of silence in honor of Estelle.

(beat)

NORA. Is it just me, or was that less gratifying than I thought it would be?

MR. CAMBREY. Let's just hope it brings in some information.

MRS. CAMBREY. Thank you, for letting us be mentioned.

NORA. Estelle is your daughter.

MRS. CAMBREY. She is. But us saying that now does change—

NORA. No. No self-pity or need for validation or whatever this is today. Today we remember Estelle. Nothing gets in the way of that. Got it?

NOAH, MRS. CAMBREY, and MR. CAMBREY. Got it.

NORA. Okay, good.

RADIO HOST. Our high today is 79 degrees and our low 67. Not quite sweater weather, but we're getting close!

NOAH. Let's get going if we want to catch the sunrise.

MR. CAMBREY. Couldn't agree more.

(NOAH, MR. CAMBREY, and MRS. CAMBREY all stand. NORA remains seated.)

NORA. You guys go ahead. I'll be right out. I just need a moment.

NOAH. Of course. That gives me time to get advice about my tux from your father.

NORA. Oh, don't ask him. His style is awful. You've seen his suit, right? There are ruffles, Noah. *Ruffles*. I want a black-tie wedding, not one from the American Revolution.

MR. CAMBREY. Excuse me for wanting to be classy. And there are no *ruffles*. I am wearing a formal neckerchief.

NORA. That's almost worse.

NOAH. *(laughs)* We'll see you in the car.

(NOAH, MRS. CAMBREY, and MR. CAMBREY exit. NORA's shoulders fall. She puts her face in her hands and takes a deep breath.)

NORA. Hey, Estelle. I know I'm supposed to pray to God, or whatever, but I don't have much I want to say to Him. I want to talk to you. I guess if this ends up with Him, I hope he can send along the message. Thanks, Big G. I appreciate it.

(Nora becomes serious again.)

Estelle. I'm getting married! Noah proposed a few months ago and I said yes! I know you were always nagging me about it, and I promised you that if I did get married, you would be my maid of honor. You cried when I said that, and then told me to find someone else. I can't. You're not here, but you're who I want. I know it's traditional, but I don't know if I'll have a maid of honor. Noah doesn't really know who to pick for best man, so maybe it's for the best. I promise I'll still leave you a seat though. Front row. Empty. Waiting. Stop by, if you can.

(NORA stands and gets a candle from the cabinet. She pulls a lighter from a drawer.)

And also, I'm so sorry for talking to our parents again. I know I told you we didn't need them, that we were better off without them, and that still stands. We probably were. And I don't need them. But I want them. They've fucked up and I don't think I can ever forgive them, fully. But they are sorry. It doesn't fix it, but it helps. I wish they'd been like this before you died. I wish your death wasn't the reason I got them back. I wish...all I want to say is, forgive me, please. I hope I'm not betraying you by still loving them.

(NORA lights the candle and leans into it, her face close to the flame)

And Estelle, I miss you. I miss you so much I can't get out of bed sometimes. I miss you so much I can't breathe. I don't know how to live without you, and that will never change.

(NORA stands again. She goes to leave the apartment. Before she exits, she takes one last look at the candle.)

See you soon, kid. Don't be stupid. And don't be late.

(NORA exits. The stage quiets. All that is left is the candle, burning and burning. Then it flickers. Once. Twice. After a moment, ESTELLE walks on stage. She wears all white. She looks around, accessing. She sneaks to the counter and, in a slight huff, blows out the candle, leaving the stage entirely in black.)

Moira Schirk

Grade 11, Park Hill South High School

Eductor: Amanda Collier

Poetry



The Subway

The subway is an insomniac, embarking on the same repeated journeys day and night

In a labyrinth of fatigue

Starting and then stopping

Dragging itself through the tunnels

Its industrious wheels numb across the tracks

The subway makes cries for help through the stuttering of its engine

Sharing its dissonant echos

Becoming a composer

Desperate for an audience

Its passengers shuffle across its platform

Sharing nothing but the dirt on their shoes

Oblivious to the weight they apply by exiting and entering

The subway continues to trek and trek

Traversing across long distances

Not isolated, but completely alone



The Dangers of Selective Empathy

When I last walked into McDonald's, excited for undeniably the best Coke any fast food chain has to offer, I was surprised to see that when I was handed my drink, the plastic straw I was used to had been replaced with its less shiny stunt double. When I asked the cashier what was up, she replied "We don't use plastic straws anymore, it's for the turtles." Sure, the paper straw did make my drink taste weird, but I wasn't about to get mad at McDonald's new VSCO girl ideology. If it's for the environment, I guess I can deal with it. But while I was sipping on my "paper with a side of Coke," I noticed that my cup was 100% made of plastic. However, it was when I poked at my apple slices with a plastic fork, that reality hit. Why would McDonald's, a self-proclaimed environmentalist, only care about changing their plastic straws for the turtles, especially when it is quantified that 1 million birds and 100,000 marine mammals die every year from all single-use plastics (Ocean Blue Project)?

This plastic straw ban is a perfect example of how we, as a society, practice a concept called selective empathy. Selective empathy, as defined by *The Medium*, refers to the tendency to empathize only with those whom we feel deserve it, or those we perceive as being similar to ourselves. It's a natural but flawed human instinct—we feel compassion for some while turning a blind eye to others (Vinayak). This tendency affects not only how we approach environmental issues but also how we treat animals and even people. Selective empathy distorts our priorities, leading us to focus on narrow, emotionally driven causes while ignoring larger societal problems that need our attention.

But why exactly do we feel empathy for a few turtles we've seen on YouTube choking on plastic straws but remain indifferent to the other 99% of ocean pollution and wildlife casualties?

The root of the issue is how we, as humans, inherently process empathy. We tend to focus our compassion on individuals or issues that feel personally or emotionally compelling, often at the expense of larger, systemic concerns (Lesley). This phenomenon distorts our priorities and blinds us to the bigger picture. Author Marta Brzosko continues, that when a tragedy is about one specific person going hungry, empathy is sparked. You want to help. But when it's about thousands or even millions starving? This is when our brains become overwhelmed and switch off. As Hungarian scientist Albert Gyorgyi said, "I am unable to multiply one man's suffering by 100 million. (Brzosko)" While individuals may feel immense empathy for a single person undergoing hardship, empathy tends to decrease as the number of victims rises, leading to a disconnect from larger issues.

Another significant factor that leads to selective empathy is our inability to relate to those in dramatically different circumstances. For instance, someone living in comfort may struggle to empathize with individuals facing poverty because their experiences are so remote. Biases can also complicate empathy. We may find it hard to connect with those we perceive as different, viewing them through a lens shaped by stereotypes. For example, we often dismiss the humanity of a TV villain and overlook their struggles. Ultimately, selective empathy is influenced not just by emotional connection but also by our biases and comfort zones. Recognizing these barriers can help us foster a more inclusive form of empathy.

The problem of selective empathy extends into every sphere of our lives. For instance, during the 2024 Presidential debate, Former President Donald Trump famously exclaimed, 'They're eating the dogs, they're eating the cats (The Guardian)!' He said it with shock and disgust, as though even the thought of eating these animals was absurd. But why was it seen as so absurd? The very people who were horrified at the idea of eating dogs, go home and enjoy a nice steak dinner every night. This empathetic dilemma is explored in books like Hal Herzog's *Some We Love, Some We Hate, Some We Eat* and Melanie Joy's *Why We Love Dogs, Eat Pigs, and Wear Cows*. These works explain how our selective empathy for animals is largely shaped by how similar or appealing the animal is to humans. Dogs are companions in many cultures or "A man's best friend" so to speak, while pigs and cows are viewed as food (Livingston). It all comes down to

proximity and perspective. For example, in Eastern countries like India, the idea of eating a cow or pig is seen as horrifying. Instead, these animals are free to roam in the streets. When I last visited India, all I had to do to spot a cow was look out the car window. They are part of the everyday environment, unlike in the U.S., where cows are often out of sight in farms and slaughterhouses. This shows how cultural norms and familiarity shape our selective empathy, making us care about some animals while ignoring others.

But this issue goes beyond just animals—we apply selective empathy to humans as well. As I said previously, we often care deeply about the suffering of individuals we can relate to but become numb to larger, systemic issues. Unfortunately, This mindset is largely perpetrated through the media.

For instance, Wral News explained that the death of one journalist, Jamal Khashoggi sparked tons of uproar, while thousands dead in Yemen hardly made the headlines. Similarly, When Notre Dame caught fire, billions were raised overnight, yet the Sudanese Revolution, where again, thousands died, received far less coverage (Fisher). In 2023, the disappearance of a submersible carrying five wealthy passengers and simultaneously, a ship carrying 800 migrants sank off the coast of Greece, yet only one caught the attention of the public (Pérez-Peña). You'll never guess which one. These are just 3 of the numerous instances of the media showing selective empathy. The media has influenced us to care more about isolated, relatable events, than about large-scale humanitarian crises. This is why Youtubers like Nas Daily explains that the problem with selective empathy is that it poses the question: Do we really care about plastic, about animals, about people? Or do we only care about some plastic, some animals, and some people (Nas Daily)?

Although selective empathy is ingrained in our society, we can take steps to mitigate the control it has on how we function. The first step in combating selective empathy is education. We need to learn about the larger context behind the issues we care about. Caring about turtles is important, but we must also understand the impact of all single-use plastics. The second step is to pay attention to issues that don't directly affect us but are critical to others, like systemic poverty, racial injustice, or global climate change. The final step is to reduce the amount the media influences us and try to make changes in the media instead. Support and engage primarily with news outlets that highlight systemic problems alongside individual tragedies, providing a fuller picture of the world's challenges.

While I might have accepted my paper straw in the name of saving the turtles, it's clear that McDonald's—and many of us—are guilty of a much larger hypocrisy. Swapping out straws for paper doesn't mean we've saved the ocean or even made a dent in the plastics crisis; it's like putting a band-aid on a shark bite. So the next time I find myself at a McDonald's, I'll also be sure to ask for a side of awareness with my Coke. After all, saving the turtles is great, but let's not forget about the whales, the fish, and yes, even the humans drowning in a sea of indifference. So let's raise our cups—plastic or otherwise—to a more inclusive kind of empathy, one that tackles the whole ocean of problems, not just the ones that are easy to swallow.

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Short Story



Bloom and Betrayal

Stars lit up the Parisian night sky. The Eiffel Tower loomed like a shadowy sentinel, its silhouette cloaked an ominous glow. Cobblestone streets, bathed in the cold, muted glow of streetlights, exuded a mysterious aura. The city's nocturnal whispers echoed through the air, creating a haunting dreamscape where shadows dance and secrets linger beneath the sense of a peaceful Parisian night. Past the diverted city and bustling streets lies a quaint little part of town that sits right on the outskirts and often goes unnoticed by tourists. Yet it has a grand story to tell.

The sun began to set over the little town Lourmarin. The flowers radiated the sunset's warmth and glow. Linnette leaned over to the cash register, securely locked it, and placed the key into the bottom of the drawer, so that the owner could open it if he came the following morning. She made her way outside of the shop once again, took out a set of keys from her pocket and tightly locked the door. Making her way into the street, the smell of freshly made croissants from Ms. Martineau's bakery filled the air.

Made it another day. She thought to herself.

~***~

With a warm croissant in one arm and a bag of groceries in the other wearily she climbed up the steps to her apartment. With her hands full, climbing onto the third floor was often a challenge, as the staircase was narrow and steep. Once she reached the second floor a neighbor, Hugo, saw her struggle and rushed over.

“Looks like you could use a hand?” he chuckled

“That would be wonderful,” she remarked as she handed him a bag of groceries.

Hugo Marchand was a cheerful fellow. He was married and had two darling children. He was the expert horologist in the area. He owned the local watch boutique.

Hugo helped her carry the bags up to her apartment; she thanked him and walked into her tiny apartment. Though it was small, she made it work. Without Sabine chipping in to rent, neither of them could afford living alone. Upon entering, she placed the bags on the counter of her kitchenette and began to make dinner for Sabine and her.

~***~

Just as the sun was rising, Linette and Sabine set off to the floral boutique. The owner, Mr. Beauford urged them to be there at six sharp every morning to open up. Linette reached into her pocket, pulled out the keys, and opened up the shop.

“ I’ll have a dozen pink tulips please,” asked Pierre, the local old mechanic, who just entered the shop..

“ And for who might they be?” smirked Linette.

“ A certain baker by the name of Ms. Martineau?” chimed in Sabine. Pierre blushed, and left them with nothing but a smile and a soft smirk

“ Don’t worry, we won’t tell,” joked Linette as she walked over to a pot and pulled out the tulips. She gently placed them on the counter and wrapped them in paper and ribbon.

“ Do you think she’ll like them?” asked Pierre.

“ Very much, tulips are very delicate and beautiful flowers. If you think about it, Ms. Martineau has very similar qualities,” responded Linette with a smile.

“ How much for them?”

“ That’ll be fifteen euros.”

“ Lovely, keep the change,” smiled Pierre as he gave her a twenty.

Every day was practically the same. Linette and Sabine worked from six to six, Monday through Saturday. By working at the floral boutique, they were let in on little secrets here and there. They would learn of townspeople’s secret admirers, interests, or special occasions. Often customers, upon request, would ask for flowers to be delivered to a doorstep with a note. Linette and Sabine would take turns in delivering the flowers or plants.

Linnete and Sabine thought of Mr. Beaufort to be a reserved man. He didn't show his face around town much. According to Julien, their close friend and the bell boy at the La petit Havre (the local hotel), Mr. Beufort stays there often when he's not out of town. Rumor has it he owns multiple shops in France and that he is quite wealthy. Lately, he's been in Lourmarin a record five times in the past two weeks, which, according to Juilien, is rare, as he usually visits about once a month, which they are both aware of. It's strange because they haven't seen him. Apparently, he is scheduled to do his annual visit to check in on the shop tomorrow because he has a room reserved for the weekend, meaning Sabine and Linette have to work extremely hard to make it spotless. He doesn't tolerate disorganization.

It was half past six, Linette and Sabine had finished cleaning every corner of the tiny boutique. Linette stepped back away from the counter and sighed with relief. The counter was free from random stems and leaves. The colorful ribbon was neatly stacked on the side. The cabinet doors above the counter were sparkling in the sun. Inside the different wrapping papers, pens, and excess ribbon were organized to an appropriate extent. The tulips, Roses, hydrangeas, peonies, and lilies in front where color coordinated sparking a lovely feeling of satisfaction. Between the busy hours of the day they had organized everything.

Out back, the orders for the next day were each placed in their appropriate place ready to be picked up the following morning. Outside in the small garden beds the herbs were looking ripe as ever. Downstairs, the succulents such as the echeveria, barrel cactus, and jade plant were near their bloom. The freshly planted house plants were watered. The exotic plant crates were unloaded, and ready to be reviewed by Mr. Beauford. He strictly asks the girls to not touch them for they are of great value, but they figured that he would appreciate it if they had organized them for him.

~***~

The following afternoon, Linette and Sabine were busy as ever. Mr. Beauford had come that morning and inspected everything. As always, he showed up with neatly styled dark hair with hints of silver holding a sleek briefcase in his hand. His presence was slightly terrifying. He exuded authority in a tailored charcoal suit. Despite all this, he was surprisingly pleased with how the girls were running his shop.

A familiar face appeared behind the counter.

"Hello ladies! I'll have my usual," requested Hugo.

Every month Hugo Marchand orders a charming succulent or vegetable to add to his wife's garden. All the orders are already pre-wrapped in a box the night before and placed in their appropriate place, courtesy of Sabine, so when the customer comes to pick them up, they know exactly where they are and don't have to spend minutes going through all the different plants.

"I'll get it for you Hugo," Sabine exclaimed, noticing that Linette was lost in her train of thought. She made her way down the staircase and into the basement. In the meantime, Linette was serving other customers.

How can it be gone? I must've misplaced it. Sabine worried.

The slot where Hugo's parsnip was supposed to be was empty. Sabine panicked as she looked in other slots. Both of the girls had spent all of yesterday organizing everything. *Maybe we accidentally misplaced it?* She thought to herself as she began looking in crates nearby.

"Sabine, do you have it?" shouted Linette from upstairs.

Frantically, she looked around and saw a boxed plant that looked like the parsnip he had requested sitting on top of some crates. She sighed with relief and rushed upstairs with the parsnip in her hands.

"Here it is. Sorry for the slight delay," Sabine apologized and handed the plant to Hugo

"No worries. Have a good day!" Hugo grinned and made his way out of the shop.

~***~

Every Thursday evening Linette, Sabine, and Julien meet up at his parents' hotel terrace and they have a friendly get together. Ever since Linette and Sabine moved to Lourmarine, Julien has always treated them kindly, but, most importantly, he has been a hilarious friend. He was the first one to introduce them to all the townspeople and elaborate on the town's dynamics. Given that Lourmarine is small, they were the only older teenagers in town.

From the rooftop of the hotel, one could see the busy streets slowing down. People began to head home at a glacial pace. The sun dipped low over the small city of Lourmarin, the golden light bathed the terracotta rooftops and narrow cobblestone streets in a warm, honey yellow tone. The three of them had spread a checkered blanket across the tiles of the cozy terrace, its corners held down by mismatched plates piled high with cheeses, fresh baguettes, and ripe, juicy grapes along with the promised cassoulet, a traditional French duck stew.

Linette, Sabine, and Julien spent the evening chatting away over the special leftover stew from the hotel's restaurant. They laughed endlessly about

nonsense and talked over rumors about their small town. Their laughter echoed into the cool night air.

“You’ll never believe that Pierre and Ms. Martineau are a thing,” giggled Linnete

“You’re joking?” he scoffed.

“No not at all, he’s come in two times this week to get flowers for her!” added Sabine with excitement

“Who knew a mechanic and a baker would get along so well,” he snorted. They all burst into an uncontrollable laugh.

Suddenly, without a warning, Julien stopped and proceeded to shush them. Linette and Sabine couldn’t stop laughing. He was serious, he quickly threw a grape at Linette and Sabine to get their attention.

“What on earth was that for?” Sabine gasped.

“Shhhh, listen. It’s Pierre.

Down by the hotel Pierre and Hugo were deliberately arguing.

“You bastard, it’s always about the money with you,” snarred Pierre.

“Even if it was, what makes you responsible for my choices?” Hugo responded in a frustrated tone.

Their argument echoed all the way to the terrace where Linnete, Sabine, and Julien were carefully listening

“I didn’t realize they didn’t like each other,” Sabine whispered.

“I didn’t realize Mr. Hugo didn’t like people. He’s always presented himself as a nice fellow,” added Linnete.

“Well, I guess everyone has an unpleasant side?” Julien suggested.

“I heard Pierre has been having some trouble with his business lately,” he added.

“Maybe that’s why they’re arguing?” Linette suggested.

Whatever it was, it seemed serious. The aggressive tension between them couldn’t go unnoticed.

“You promised me the money by today,” Pierre snapped, his voice aggressively rising.

“You know I don’t have it yet!” Hugo shot back, his fists clenched.

“You think this is easy?” Hugo added.

“You’re making excuses!” Pierre’s voice cracked with anger.

They continued for another few minutes and then they stormed off in opposite directions into the dark night.

~***~

No one could prepare Sabine and Linette for the events that would occur the following morning. Upon their early arrival to the flower boutique, unexpectedly Mr. Beauford was standing outside the shop.

“Good morn-” before Linette could finish, he aggressively cut her off

“Where is my stock?” He demanded.

He was referring to the crates of exotic plants that were delivered every month to the shop.

“In the basement, monsieur like always” replied Sabine anxiously.

They headed downstairs to the basement to find chaos at best.

Flower stems and wilting petals were scattered across the floor, tangled in discarded leaves. A cluttered table held overturned vases, spilling water and dried petals. Floral foam spilled from jars, while frayed twine and unraveled ribbon lay in knots. Crates were flipped upside down.

“I am going to ask one last time: Where is my stock?”

“Right here, monsieur,” Sabine replied frightened as she stopped over the petals scattered across the floor, pointing towards the crates.

“They are missing an important item,” snarled Mr. Beauford as he pounded his fist into a crate causing it to snap open.

“We organized and counted everything last night, monsieur. I can promise you everything was here,” added Linette trembling.

“Well, recount everything! I have a client coming from Cannes tomorrow morning. Everything had better be here,” he stormed out of the basement and disappeared.

~***~

The whole afternoon Sabine managed the register, while Linette frantically was re-organizing the mess Mr. Beauford had created in hopes of finding whatever he was looking for. She had triple checked through the shipping list of items that had arrived in the past month and everything was here, except for a plant called water hemlock. It was labelled as exotic and cost a fortune.

How could we have lost something? She thought to herself. *We never lose track of anything.* She had searched through every square meter possible. Nothing. It wasn't in the flower bed, or in the supply cabinet, or on the stock shelves. It wasn't in the order piles or in the crates. *Where could it be? Why is it so important to him?* Linette untied her apron, rolled up her sleeves, slid down the wall and sat down in frustration. *Where could it be?*

Suddenly Sabine appeared at the bottom of the staircase. “Linnet, come quick.”

“What?” Linnette said in a frustrated tone.

“ It’s about Mr. Hugo.”

“Why should we be concerned?”

“ Linette, he’s dead.”

~***~

Julien, Linette, and Sabine found themselves standing outside the apartment in shock as they, along with half the town watched the paramedics carry Hugo’s body covered in a blue tarp, signifying his passing. The ladies in town surrounded the Marchand family and offered comfort to their grief. The two little girls, confused at what had happened, stood there watching their mother be overtaken by grief and sorrow that she was experiencing.

“ What happened?” Linette whispered into Julien’s ear.

“ Nobody really knows. I think the paramedics believe it was a heart attack.”

“ For a man his age, that’s extremely rare,” added Sabine as she joined the conversation

Suddenly, Linette’s eyes widened and as she was about to say something Julien shushed her.

“I know what you’re thinking.”

“ It’s Mr. Beauford. It’s always been him.”

“ What do you mean, Linnie?” Sabine asked, puzzled.

“ Hugo died of a heart attack”

Linette stayed silent and walked over to the ribbon cabinet where a dusty store catalog sat on the top shelf. She pulled it down.

“ Sabine, what was the plant Mr. Hugo requested for his wife last afternoon?” she asked

“ Ummm, let me think.”

“ I think it was parsnips?” Sabine replied.

Linnette searched the catalog for parsnips and found what she’d been looking for. Then she rushed downstairs. Julien and Sabine followed.

“ Show me what you gave him,” she asked intrigued.

“ I told you this already. His order was misplaced, but I found it eventually,” replied Sabine now confused.

“ Show me where you took his order from.”

Sabine walked over to the corner of the basement where she pointed her finger at a stack of boxed plants labelled parsnips.

“ These plants at first glance look like parsnips, but if you do a little deep digging in the catalog, we don’t actually sell parsnips”

“ So what are these?” asked Sabine confused as she pointed to pots of green plants sealed in clear glass boxes.

“ It’s a water hemlock. Parsleys look-alike that happen to be covered with toxins that if touched can lead to cardiac arrest.”

“ I don’t get it,” Julien sighed

“Mr. Beauford has been running an after-hours operation selling toxic plants to black market dealers who can use them to kill people and help dealers smuggle goods out of big cities for, I’m guessing, a quite hefty fee.”

“ That’s why he was so upset when his plant had gone missing and why he never lets us open the crates,” Sabine added.

“ Sabine unknowingly gave Hugo the wrong parsley. He must’ve opened it and touched it in some way, killing him almost instantly,” concluded Linette

“ So I killed Hugo? ” Sabine cried as she looked into Linette’s hazel eyes.

“ No, but Mr. Beauford did.”

Lucas So

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Critical Essay



Intelligent Solution or Unavoidable Force?: Artificial Intelligence Revolutionizes Africa's Future Medical Advancements

The emergence of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has altered society dramatically with its ability to mimic human intelligence and perform complex tasks. AI has garnered significant interest and sparked the imagination of scientists, researchers, and innovators worldwide. AI advancements, which range from the integration of [auto-piloting in vehicles](#) to the evolution of highly advanced conversational AI systems, are increasingly becoming noticeable and impactful in our everyday lives. However, amidst the plethora of technological innovations that capture our attention, the true potential and impact of AI in medical fields often go unnoticed.

Imagine a future where cutting-edge technology works hand in hand with the healing touch of doctors, revolutionizing healthcare. In Africa, this vision becomes tangible, as AI begins to play a pivotal role in the continent's medical advancements. Dr. Shadrack Opon calls artificial intelligence an [“unavoidable force”](#) in African healthcare, which will transform the medical field completely. AI can make treatment more accessible and economically feasible, bettering the efficiency of diagnosis and supplementing the efforts of doctors. It is a new era of medical advancement for Africa, and the continent needs to prepare itself to leverage AI.

Supplementing Medical Care

Brain drain—the substantial emigration of individuals from a country who have received advanced education and training—has been a significant issue for

African countries over the past few decades. Over [13%](#) of African skilled workers reside outside Africa, mostly in countries part of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), further exacerbating the scarcity of human capital in countries with existing shortages. Nigeria is one of such countries. [The Japa syndrome](#), referring to the recent mass emigration of Nigerian citizens, have caused a significant loss of doctors, furthermore impairing healthcare of the country. To address this shortfall, the implementation of AI technology compensates for these medical job vacancies by enhancing the productivity of healthcare professionals. “What AI can do is to augment lower skilled health care workers who have actually been delivering health care,” writes [Ayomide Owoyemi](#), a public health and technology specialist at the University of Illinois at Chicago. The recent advancements of AI technology specifically designed for diagnosis is an example of such an augmentation, rather than a replacement of human workers. While AI can conduct data-based tasks, it cannot provide mental health advice or empathy to patients essential for a calming bedside manner.

Tuberculosis (TB), an infectious disease that primarily affects the lungs, poses a significant and widespread problem across the entirety of Africa. According to the [World Health Organization \(WHO\)](#), over a quarter of tuberculosis-related deaths occur in the African region. Since TB is an [expensive disease to diagnose](#), especially following COVID-19 lockdowns, South Africa has witnessed a significant decline in tuberculosis testing rates, with reductions of up to [50%](#). However, the collaboration between the South African National Department of Health and Qure.ai offers an affordable and effective solution to address the issue of TB diagnosis by developing AI-based technology specifically designed for this purpose. Through the provision of mobile clinics, imaging equipment, and efficient AI software like [Qure's qXR](#), the accessibility of TB diagnosis is significantly enhanced, while also alleviating the healthcare burden by rapidly identifying TB indications in less than a minute.

Sanitation Improvements

The presence of severe water sanitation challenges in Africa creates a crisis that endangers the lives and well-being of millions through the spread of [waterborne diseases](#), which are caused by the intrusion of harmful bacteria or microbes into the body through the consumption of contaminated drinking water. In Africa, approximately [441 million](#) individuals do not have access to essential drinking water services, while [779 million](#) lack access to basic sanitation services, and [839](#)

[million](#) lack access to fundamental hygiene facilities. In Africa, the combination of water contamination has resulted in a significant prevalence of illness among its population, leading to a rapid rise in mortality rates. This unfortunate situation can be attributed, in part, to inadequate infrastructure such as poor public bathrooms that fails to adequately address water-related challenges. The water distribution network in South Africa experiences a loss of [40%](#) of water due to its outdated infrastructure. Moreover, the inadequate management of industrial and human waste further compounds the sanitation system issues. Around [90%](#) of industries in Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia, do not possess any form of water treatment facility, and waste is discharged directly into the surrounding environment. Although governments have taken measures to address and mitigate water contamination and leakage, the financial implications are substantial, placing a significant financial burden on governments. The African Development Bank estimates a cost of [\\$12 billion USD](#) is used annually to cover water sanitation and supply expenses. This dire situation necessitates attention and intervention to mitigate the devastating impact on public health.

Implementations of AI technology have the potential to revolutionize and streamline sanitation management by efficiently monitoring and optimizing waste treatment processes. Since May 2021, the [Institute of Technology and Global Health](#) has initiated a program with the goal of obtaining precise data from fecal samples to train AI. Once the AI is trained, their objective is to employ it autonomously for monitoring and tracking the sanitation levels of various regions in Africa. The AI system detects disease-causing pathogens at an early stage and contacts local doctors to alert them of impending outbreaks, thereby bypassing the potential harm caused by poor sanitation and safeguarding the well-being of individuals. However, AI cannot yet mitigate these pathogens.

An “Intelligent” Remedy

AI is being increasingly utilized in African healthcare to address prevalent healthcare problems and drive progress through innovation. By harnessing the power of AI, Africa is transforming disease diagnosis, healthcare delivery, and data analysis, improving health outcomes. As with any new technology, however, countries in the African region must be cautious about implementing AI in the healthcare sector. Some AI systems can be [vulnerable](#) to hackers, which could endanger patient privacy. Ethical guidelines for AI are still being developed, and therefore AI must not be allowed to make the final call on important medical

decisions. Artificial intelligence in healthcare is also unable to account for different [socioeconomic conditions](#)- technology developed in China or the US may not be equipped to detect diseases endemic to tropical regions or African ecosystems. While the integration of AI in African healthcare holds the promise of a brighter future, the technology should be adopted gradually. Although advancements in technology pave the way for better health and well-being for all individuals across the continent, more research is needed to improve AI's use in the African context.



Should I Be Held Responsible for What I Believe?

Introduction

In John Locke's philosophical views, belief is "the admitting or receiving of any proposition for true, upon arguments or proofs that are found to persuade us to receive it as true, without certain knowledge that it is so." A person may adopt a belief if sufficient reason and evidence are presented to demonstrate that the belief is convincing and deserving of acceptance. However, the belief may not be empirical or factual; it only necessitates the person's relatively subjective conviction in the truth of the proposition.

Yet it is not possible to have completely subjective convictions in deliberation used to derive a belief. The sense of whether an idea is rational or irrational, believable or not believable depends on the context and background knowledge of the individual. Therefore, the responsibility for one's beliefs is complicated. The essay argues that the constitution of an individual's beliefs is not solely their own responsibility, given the mixture of subjective and external factors influencing belief construction. Also, the idea that people have voluntary control over their beliefs cannot be used to justify holding them responsible for their beliefs.

Overpowering Of Normative Expectations

Bicchieri (2014) posits that expectations constitute conditional practices undertaken by an individual, contingent upon their beliefs regarding the anticipated behaviors and normative judgments of others within a given context. In essence, an individual's actions are determined by their conjectures about the prospective conduct and evaluations of their social counterparts. In other words, a person's expectations are shaped by their perceptions of the behaviors and beliefs of those around them, and they act accordingly. The prevalence of such expectations is crucial for the establishment and operation of cultural norms. These normative frameworks enable the coordinated behaviors and social cohesion that are integral to the functioning of societies. Normative expectations would be the expectations that accompany social norms, the aspect that hinders subjective beliefs.

Despite the presence of underlying personal disagreements and dissatisfaction, the public expression and representation of these sentiments appear to be subdued. Individuals seem to hold the perception that their views and beliefs differ from those of others around them (pluralistic ignorance). The imposing of such sociocultural norms and pressures often compels individuals to adhere to a particular ideological framework, thereby restricting their ability to exercise autonomous critical thinking and form independent beliefs. Consider a situation where a community has embraced conspicuous consumption as one of its norms. An individual who is part of the community is much more likely to adhere to the norm and to believe that the display of wealth through the use of luxury goods and experiences is necessary while failing to consider the severe costs of these actions upon the economy.

When a strong societal norm is established within a community, failing to adhere to that norm can result in the imposition of significant negative sanctions upon the non-conforming individual. Back to the context of the normative community, individuals who do not display a sufficient level of luxury goods and expensive apparel may be perceived by others within their community as being of lower status, lower social standing, and potentially lacking ambition or industriousness. Morrow (2014) argues that these sanctions for nonconformity actually could be used to alter and manipulate norms and beliefs.

Evidently, social norms function as a highly effective mechanism for constraining and regulating individual beliefs. There is substantial pressure exerted by the normative expectations of society, as well as the threat of punitive sanctions for nonconformity. As such, an individual's beliefs often do not truly

originate from within but are instead heavily influenced by the larger societal context. The constraints imposed by prevailing social norms can stifle the freedom of individuals to foster their authentic, self-generated perspectives and beliefs. This shows that individuals' beliefs should not be their own responsibility, but rather should be shaped by external factors.

Restriction of the Sense of Right and Wrong

Some who believe one should be held responsible for their beliefs claim that at a certain level of cognitive maturity, an individual should be able to determine what they believe in. It is argued that, at a certain stage of development, we gain responsibility for our beliefs. Beliefs are not abstract ideas but the foundations that shape our perceptions and actions. To deny accountability for our beliefs because they were molded by societal influences undermines the premise of morality. As rational individuals, we must carefully examine our beliefs, understand where they come from, and make sure they align with our principles.

Waldron (1981) argues that moral permissibility and moral right coexist as two different concepts. An individual may have a moral right to perform a morally wrong action. One such example that he provides is this: "An individual joins or supports an organization which he knows has racist leanings, such as the National Front in the United Kingdom; he canvasses support for it among a credulous electorate, and he exercises his vote in its favor." The individual could be considered to be performing something that is not morally permissible. However, he is also performing something that he has a moral right to. Is morality defined by an individual's personal beliefs, or is it ultimately determined by the beliefs and norms held by the broader community or the authorities that have the power to sanction certain actions? This is ethical relativism; the collective beliefs and norms established within a society or by those in positions of power are what determine the moral boundaries of what is acceptable and what is considered the "right" thing to do, rather than one's own subjective views.

Yet to align an individual's beliefs with ethical principles would be to align an individual's beliefs with what society believes is correct and just. During WWII, antisemitism was prevalent all across Germany; it was morally permissible to the Nazis. It would be impossible for an individual to take responsibility to determine their beliefs to be "right," as their spectrum of "right" is the range and perspective of just from their community.

The discomfort aroused by this possibility—that individuals in an antisemitic society are not responsible for their antisemitic beliefs—highlights the complex, nuanced nature of the question of responsibility for rights. And while individual citizens in a harmful, hateful society who, themselves, harbor harmful, hateful beliefs may not justly be held responsible for said harmful, hateful beliefs, the onus of responsibility must lie somewhere when those wider, societal beliefs are used to justify human harm. In this case, it's just to hold the entire society responsible for beliefs, with the responsibility, and any punishment for harmful actions done because of those beliefs, spread across all citizens. This was done to Germany in the form of reparations, industry dismantlement, confiscation of property, and forced labor of citizens as part of the 1947 Paris Peace Treaties. An apt conclusion to this essay, then, is the acknowledgment that, while individuals may not always be held responsible for their beliefs, even if those beliefs are commonly viewed as harmful or hateful, it is entirely just to hold responsible society as a whole that has inculcated those beliefs.

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Madeleine Staker

Grade 12, St. Teresa's Academy

Educator: Sarah Taber

Personal Essay & Memoir



Madeleine's Favorite Things

I crawl under the wicker frame of the couch and appear on the other side, securing my position in front of the TV. My grandma, MiMi, hunts for the remote as I wait in squirmy anticipation. The black screen fades into blue, and I'm transported into a world of wonder. Glistening gold letters fit the frame of the TV as I squint to read the words: *The Sound of Music*.

Yet *again*, my grandma has chosen an "ancient," grainy movie over one of the Disney Channel shows I'd likely pick, if given the option. But once Julie Andrews' angelic voice fills the room, I settle in and allow the simple, yet joy-filled moments of 'My Favorite Things' to root deep in my heart.

Years later, I reflect on this song and its deeper impact on my life. After spending much of my life frozen in the chill of perfectionism, I now intricately weave my memories and favorite things into its familiar melody, fostering a life that blooms with joy.

"Raindrops on roses and whiskers on kittens..."

The best time of the year is finally here – it's *The Great British Bake Off* season. Every Friday, from September to November, the BBC blesses me with a new episode. Over the years, I've successfully convinced my older sister, dad, and now skeptical younger brother to join me; they either enjoy it or grew tired of hearing me talk about it at every family dinner. Despite their opinions, it's become something I look forward to at the end of a long week. Snuggled on the couch, I invite the British accents and decadent illustrations to melt over me, like Nelly's hazelnut infused ganache on her fluffy meringue cake.

“Bright copper kettles and warm woolen mittens...”

The waxy cards bend and snap in front of me, generating excitement. In mere seconds, I'll get to indulge in Crane 457 – a family adaptation of Liverpool Rummy. Though I'm not inherently competitive, I savor the strategic thrill of playing cards to win; yet, it's the camaraderie that truly captivates me. Just hours before, I was carving down ski slopes with nearly-frostbitten toes, and now my large family is squeezing around an old oak poker table, warmed by the roaring fire. A moment that radiates pure bliss.

“Brown paper packages tied up with strings...”

I begin slowing down my pace to savor every last detail as the pages of *Remarkably Bright Creatures* thin. “There's a Scrabble game to win, after all.” The last sentence resonates in my mind, and I relish in the completion of the story. Invigorated by this feeling, I begin thinking about the long list of books I cannot wait to read – completely forgetting how long this one took to finish. As soon as I can, I step through the familiar doors of Rainy Day Books, matcha latte in hand, breathing in the intoxicating smell of freshly printed paper. I browse all the covers, carefully choosing my next read.

“Wild geese that fly with the moon on their wings...”

My hand reaches for the old school silver knob, dialing the volume even louder. The beats and rhythm pulse through my body, sending chills down my skin as wind laps through every open window. In the solitude of my car, belting the words to my favorite songs, I feel alive.

“Silver white winters that melt into springs...”

Clad in our black choir dresses, my friends and I wander through the cobblestone streets of Italy. Cafés overflow with lively patrons savoring rich company, and laughter crackles through the air, mixing with the warm summer breeze. As the sun sets and shop lights flicker to life, I feel something parallel to magic.

“These are a few of my favorite things.”

Thank you, MiMi, for sharing your love for that old movie. I realize now the life-changing perspective and appreciation for the small things it has given me!

Olivia Suh

Grade 10, Blue Valley North High School

Critical Essay



The Ethics Of Killing

Not all killings constitute criminal homicide, let alone murder. Otherwise, we would fail as a society to effectively distinguish between accidentally stepping on an ant and spitefully murdering one's gossipy neighbor. Implicit in this distinction is the dignity we ascribe to human life: conscious individuals are legally protected in so far as their pursuit of life and liberty is considered inalienable. But what constitutes a life inalienably protected? Clearly, the life of the fly is not included in this definition, and it would seem not all of mankind is either.

This paper examines three ways of (for lack of a better term) killing a human being—abortion, capital punishment, and euthanasia—and argues each remains ethical under certain conditions that, when met, render them ethically distinct from criminal homicide.

In the case of abortion, since we are dealing with an inchoate form of human life of notoriously ambiguous ontological status, to determine at what point the operation is ethical, we should first define what form of human life it would be unethical to destroy. Let us presume that any human life which is conscious, aware of pain, and desirous of pain's absence is worthy of protected status as an individual; by extension, as an individual, their unnatural death would be considered a form of criminal homicide. By the same logic, if a fetus were not in a state sufficiently developed to experience consciousness or some version of it, then any threat to the health or wellbeing of its mother by it would, if permitted, be considered a form of criminal homicide.

While it would be absurd to suggest that a fetus is conscious of its experience in the womb in a manner analogous to consciousness in a developed human mind, it remains a sound proposition that some form of nascent awareness is indeed active at this stage; just as, despite lacking memory of our earliest experience, it remains the case that we were aware of our surroundings even then and sensitive to pain and pleasure. Given this distinction between kinds of awareness, philosopher David Benatar distinguishes between full-fledged consciousness and wakefulness, defining the latter as “a state of arousal that is to be contrasted with (the various stages of) sleep” (*Better* 144).

Fortunately, it is possible to pinpoint precisely when some such baseline consciousness arises in a human fetus. Through evidence derived via encephalography (EEG), “which records electrical activity of the brain,” researchers have objectively determined around 30 weeks’ gestation as the point at which brain activity indicating a state of awareness opposed to unconscious sleep demonstrably appears (144, 145). Benatar’s argument, that wakefulness, while not synonymous with full-fledged consciousness, is nonetheless required for its development, marking the acquisition of one’s awareness of and susceptibility to unsought pain, has been further corroborated by a study of responses to painful stimuli by “pre-term neonates” (i.e., fetuses) (146). Whereas fetuses under twenty-eight weeks of age displayed no divergent response from baseline activity to a minimally painful lancing procedure, those having gestated at least 28 weeks displayed “facial movements...characteristic of term infants and adults subject to painful stimuli” (147; 146). Gestures including “brow lowering” and “eyes squeezed shut” “varied depending on whether the premature infant was asleep or awake at the time of the lancing,” further indicating a threshold for distinctly conscious awareness of one’s body and environment at around 28 weeks of life (146).

Without this minimal condition of consciousness, inalienable life cannot be said to exist, as the criminal dimension of killing only applies when we unjustifiably eliminate a life understood by all to be aware of its existence and opposed to its being curtailed without its consent. Conversely, that which is not in a state of organic development featuring awareness is incapable of perceiving not only negative sensations but sensation as such and is therefore incapable of achieving the reflection and feeling required to be considered fully alive (for this reason, perhaps the ant crushed on the sidewalk has a greater claim to protection than a fetus of less than 28 weeks’ gestation).

This calculation of the ethicality of abortion bypasses the more conventional concern over the reasoning or motivation a woman may have for terminating her pregnancy. As it happens, the “most common reason for seeking an abortion,” according to pro-life bioethicist Christopher Kaczor, “is simply that the circumstances of the pregnancy are not felt to be right, not right for the mother and not right for the one to be born” (*Ethics* 198). Kaczor concedes that “even a partial list of the circumstances” motivating an abortion “would include formidable difficulties...: broken families, drug abuse, crushing poverty, abusive relationships, incomplete education, fear of public humiliation, antagonistic partners, and failed love” (ibid). Yet, whereas, for Kaczor, a fetus is still to be viewed as a person, in consideration of the aforementioned EEG-based evidence, we are not dealing with a “person” strictly speaking at all when the fetus to be terminated is not even capable of demonstrating a baseline distinction in their activity from unaroused sleep. Hence, so long as conducted within these limits, it frankly does not matter what the reason may be for abortion: without killing a person protected by their inalienable right to life as defined by a state of conscious awareness, there is nothing unethical to the act.

Regarding abortions conducted after the 28-week cut-off, it is logically consistent to conclude that the fetus terminated in such cases qualifies as a person and that the act therefore constitutes criminal homicide. Of course, this is not as simple a determination as in the case of a pre-wakeful fetus; what, for instance, are we to do about a 30-week-old fetus resulting from incest or rape? It is not the scope of this paper to comprehensively determine the ethics of abortion tout court. Still, when a fetus threatens the life of its mother, especially when its own birth is unlikely to be successful, by utilitarian calculation alone, abortion remains the ethically acceptable option: without the abortion, we have two deaths of persons in varying states of conscious awareness, whereas, through it, we may preserve the life of the consciously aware mother at the cost of one proto-conscious (i.e., only wakeful) being, which is ethically preferable.

Consider the case of Nevaeh Crain, who died on October 29, 2023, at only eighteen years of age, due to complications from her pregnancy (Presser & Surana). Though she was opposed to abortion and committed to raising her daughter, Crain received delayed treatment for what was ultimately a miscarriage due to stringent laws in her home state of Texas against interfering with an unborn infant (ibid). Even after screening positive for sepsis, “a life-threatening and fast-moving reaction to an infection,” doctors let Crain leave the hospital without further care because “her six-month fetus had a heartbeat” (ibid). On her

third and final hospital visit, just hours later, “an obstetrician insisted on two ultrasounds to ‘confirm fetal demise’” (ibid). Some hours after, Nevaeh Crain died of organ failure (ibid). While the loss of one’s child is devastating, the loss of mother and child alike is even worse. In the case of Nevaeh Crain, the abortion of her already miscarried child, which, even if it were still alive, at six-months’ gestation would not qualify as conscious in the manner characteristic of inalienably protected life, would have been perfectly ethical and in keeping with the Hippocratic oath (ibid).

But if conscious life is the threshold beyond which killing a human being becomes questionable, by what logic can we call capital punishment also ethically possible (all death-row inmates, after all, are far older than 28 weeks)? Clearly, we need a new logic. We also need to be clear regarding our intention in proposing such a logic. Make no mistake: the widespread critiques of capital punishment as ineffective in terms of deterrence and historically racist in terms of the discriminatory way it has been inflicted upon minorities are absolutely valid. But the purpose of this paper is to approach capital punishment not so much as it has been used as in terms of when, if ever, it *may* be used. As such, we are merely concerned with what, if any, conditions qualify this kind of killing as ethically permissible.

A good starting point is philosopher of ethics Louis Pojman’s claim that “one who with malice aforethought kills a human being, forfeits his or her right to life and deserves to die” (“Defense” 1). John Locke held a similar view, arguing that the murderer, by murdering, thus “declares himself...to be a noxious creature, and therefore may be destroyed” (qtd. in Hoag). By accepting this logic, we can hold both abortion and capital punishment to be ethical without contradiction: the sanctity of conscious and/or wakeful human life is inalienable up to the point of nullifying one’s own right to life upon refusing to honor the same in another person through an act of criminal dehumanization, the most heinous of which is arguably murder. Why? Because the inalienable right to pursue one’s life and liberty is only practically secured when that pursuit simultaneously respects the overlapping pursuit of life and liberty by all other people, and vice versa. In this sense alone, we need appeal neither to deterrence nor outdated codes of law to justify capital punishment, being a matter of practically recognizing the ethical principle thus defined.

Regardless, concrete examples of capital punishment are, ethically speaking, harder to evaluate than abortion, as historical cases carry greater baggage, especially when resulting from prejudice. Yet it is worth considering

some of the literature on the reception to the death penalty by what specialists refer to as the “co-victims” of the murdered: their surviving family members and loved ones (*Wounds* 3). As capital punishment scholars James R. Acker and David R. Karp write, “Criminal homicide exacts incalculable harm. Individual lives are cruelly extinguished. Surviving family members—the co-victims of this devastating crime—are left without warning to cope with their loved one’s violent death” (3). To be clear, such claims must not lead to the conclusion that capital punishment is a matter of retributive, hypocritical bloodlust; it is, instead, when conducted properly (i.e., without bias), a means of providing not so much closure (which is likely impossible) as a sense of justice to these “co-victims” who, for reasons similar to Pojman’s, may feel that their loved one’s murderer’s execution constitutes a formal recognition of the sanctity of life and the consequences of deliberately choosing to refuse such recognition.

Consider, for instance, the response of Stanley and Phyllis Rosenbluth to witnessing the executions, each one year apart, of the duo who robbed and murdered their son and daughter-in-law: far from expressing sadistic satisfaction, the Rosenbluths write how “Each execution was gut-wrenching for us” (108). But despite confessing, “We did not rejoice in nor mourn the deaths of the killers,” the Rosenbluths claim that they “found a deep relief in knowing that they could never commit [their] horrific crime against another family” (*ibid*). Put otherwise, the relief of these co-victims is not in the temporary suspension of the law in the service of bloodlust but in the notion that a fundamental principle of the law—the prohibition against murder in the service of securing the inalienable right to life mutually among members of society—shall prevail against future criminal dehumanization (ethically speaking, this applies as strictly to petty criminals as it does members of business and government who encourage war abroad for the purpose of profit and at the expense of thousands of lives). To recap, our argument has thus far held that killing is ethical when life is either not authentically developed in a being—in the case of abortion, because lacking wakefulness—or forfeited—in the case of the death penalty, because of warrantless acts which reject the inalienable sanctity of life through dehumanizing violence. However, in the case of euthanasia or assisted suicide, there is no circumstance in which life is not present since the choice to kill oneself must be made by a living being, and those who desire to do so, on average, likely have not forfeited their right to life through murder. To qualify as ethical, this means the status of the life of the euthanized must differ from that of others, namely, by being intolerable or undignified. This is because the

inalienable sanctity of life is a result of the fact that the continuation of one's life is desired, either because the present is satisfactory to the individual or because they believe it will be eventually (or simply because they prefer to endure regardless, which is a kind of dignified content or baseline satisfaction). When, conversely, a life is not desired in the present or will not be desirable in the future, as in the case of a terminal illness, the inalienable sanctity of life no longer strictly applies; in fact, a life that is undesirable, in certain contexts, may be worse than having no life.

As such, the desire for euthanasia, and for suicide more broadly, is viable for cases in which the life being eliminated is no longer experienced as sanctified by one's desire to live it. These may involve (1) physical illnesses rendering one's immediate experience more painful than pleasurable, often entailing the prospect of irreversible and undignified decline; and (2) mental illnesses, like anhedonia and severe clinical depression, rendering one's immediate experience of life as characterized mainly by anguish and having no prospect of being reversed in the future into a more desirable and therefore sanctified state. In either case, forfeiting one's right to live is just and euthanasia may be ethically administered, so long as it is implemented with the cogent consent of the to-be-euthanized.

The main issue with deeming euthanasia and variant forms of what are essentially suicide ethical is the notion one might opt for suicide when alternative therapeutic avenues could have led them to change their mind. Instead of arguing against the ethicality of euthanasia, however, this simply means that, should euthanasia ever receive universal acceptance, the process of opting for it will be as rigorous and thorough as the situation demands to ensure that those who seek to die cannot be swayed or treated otherwise. Such rigor will also be needed to meet the charge of groups like the American Medical Association, which opposes physician aid in dying (PAD)—a variant of euthanasia practice where a physician provides a patient with the means to end their own life, typically when they have incurably painful medical conditions—as incompatible with the physician's role as a healer (Comer). To be clear, this view hardly represents the consensus on PAD given that a 2010 survey of 21,000 doctors found that 54% favored a patient's right to receive it, with supporters in the medical community arguing that it provides a compassionate option for those suffering greatly (ibid).

Indeed, euthanasia is all the more ethical precisely for being a matter of profoundly sympathetic compassion. However inconceivable it may be for one

person to contemplate desiring their death, to hold that reluctance as a superior moral principle is to blind oneself to how others feel, especially the long-suffering. As the *Australian Medical Student Journal* puts it, because “a patient has the right to make decisions relating to their life so long as it causes no harm to others,” individuals (unless, of course, having lost such privileges through depriving another of their desired life) should have their own bodily autonomies and decide “how and when they will die” (amsj.org). This may seem more palatable when thus considered as a matter of “our human rights...to make our own decisions and a right to dignified death” (ibid). It also may appear more sympathetic when viewed in logical terms as connected to one’s quality of life and the presence of pain. As Benatar opines, since “The presence of pain is bad” and “the absence of pain is good, even if that good is not enjoyed by anyone,” then “where the further life of which somebody is deprived is of sufficiently poor quality, death is not bad for that person. Instead, it is good” (*Better* 30; 216). Consider the story of Claire C, as covered by Michael Petillo in *The Brussel Times*. Since the age of six, Claire has had to endure “constant, severely debilitating pain in her right foot” in addition to epilepsy and spastic quadriplegia (Petillo). After spending 20,000 euros on an initially successful implant operation for nerve pain, “a few weeks later, the pain returned” (ibid). In addition to developing a morphine addiction due to the constant need to treat her constant pain, her foot pain eventually regained its full strength (ibid). She has consequently decided, according to Petillo, that “there is [nothing] noble through endless suffering” (ibid). She also views this decision as “a conscious choice...not biased by some form of [ephemeral] depression,” having followed the exhaustion of all possible alternative options. She therefore views her (at the time of writing) forthcoming euthanasia procedure as “an act of liberation” (ibid). Her case demonstrates the ethics of this form of “killing,” in that any prolongation of her life barring euthanasia would be an unconsented prolongation of suffering and a direct obstruction of her preference as an inalienably free and fully conscious human being.

In these various respects, under the strict conditions described and with corresponding permutations to the logic applied, the act of killing a human being may qualify as ethical.

Citations

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Chris Tao

Grade 11, John Burroughs School
Educators: Shannon Koropchak and Joy
Gebhardt
Short Story



The Letter

The constant drone of a typewriter had replaced the usual tranquility in room twenty. On ordinary days, nurses poured in and out of the room, but today the corridor was devoid of the usual clinking plates brought from room to room, the harsh footsteps of the doctors, and the occasional soft crying from visitors as they found their way to the exit. They knew no one left this place without loss.

Heavy footsteps echoed throughout the hall as the nurse entered the room, carrying fresh bed sheets in hand, with her usual clenched jaw and lips pursed tight, glowing with an artificial red. The patient turned to the nurse but did not acknowledge her appearance, looking right through her as if she was made of glass. Then he promptly turned back to the typewriter that had been his sole focus for days now.

“Can’t you see I’m busy,” the patient muttered, the lack of sleep evident by the crackling of his voice.

“I’m only here to change the sheets,” the nurse replied gently.

“They don’t need changing.” The monotonous drum of his keys started up again.

As the sun rose again, and the wind susurrated through the trees, the ward was filled with the aroma of magnolias, a scent that always gave the nurse an extra bounce in her step. The nurse pressed her ear to the door of room 20, her hunched shoulders relaxing as she heard the soft snores of the patient. Wasting

no time, she swept into the room, opening the blinds to allow the golden sunbeams to illuminate the dark room. The natural light helps fight the patients' depression, she remembered the head doctor saying. Today she swept the floor, littered with dozens of crumpled balls of paper, the ones that missed the trash can as the patient tossed them haphazardly from the desk to the trash bin. She slowly kneeled and shoveled the scrap pieces of paper into her dustpan. Curiosity burned at her twitching fingertips, and the longer she cleaned the more she adopted an overwhelming desire to know what this dying man had poured his heart and soul into every waking hour for as long as he had been admitted. She picked up the final ball of paper, hands shaking, and began to unravel it slowly, wincing at each crinkle of the paper that could awake the slumbering patient. She had only caught the first few words before she realized the man had sat fully upright and was glaring at her through narrow, piercing eyes. Long after she sputtered an apology and fled from his room, face red and hands palpitating from nervous tremors, the fragment of his writing turned through the nurse's mind all night.

"...I have no right to be in their life but I just wish to see them one more time before, well..."

The sun rose once more, and the heavy drum of rain seemed to intensify the deep silence encasing the ward. The nurse's mind wandered as she tiptoed to room 20, the sound of her quickening heartbeat almost audible in the solitude of the corridor. *Why wasn't I reassigned rooms? Why did he not ask for a new nurse?* It wasn't until she reached the door that she realized she had forgotten the sheets, and the morning tea, her face lighting up at the providential occurrence as she timidly walked away. It was only so long until she had to face the inevitable. *Maybe the sheets don't need changing today, I think tomorrow would be more suitable.*

In due course, the sun rose again. Upon entering the room with new sheets, the stale air suffocated the nurse as her eyes focused on the frail figure in front of her. The once formidable patient's eyes had lost their animation and now looked like sunken disks in a pool of gray water, his arms now shriveled like a raisin, and it looked as if each breath felt like knives stabbing into his heart. An IV drip with tubes scattered in every direction stood near the bed, while an empty table meant for cards, candy, and flowers had been pushed off into the corner of the room. A thin voice emerged from the shell of the patient, a voice once vibrant now was filled with the weight of impending departure, and in an almost unnoticeable movement of his pointer finger, he motioned for the nurse to come towards the bed.

"I am on my deathbed."

"Things can always improve," the nurse soothed.

"I have a favor to ask." The nurse leaned in, turning her ear to his voice.

"Anything you would like"

"I need you to finish my final message, my ode to a life lived in regret. Do not deny a dying man his final wish, I beg."

"If that is what you need, it is our job to make you as comfortable as possible."

And so, the nurse dragged the heavy metal typewriter and a chair over to the side of the bed and began to type. With each labored breath, the patient began to whisper,

"Dearest Lydia, I hope this letter finds you well. I remember the day I left as vividly as if it were yesterday. I still feel the thick California heat, recall the pink hue of your lipstick and your hair matted to your face as you ran after my car. If I could absorb your pain, our children's pain, and take it with me to the afterlife, maybe I could finally leave my heart unburdened. We were just children ourselves, so young, it feels like a lifetime ago. I have spent years replaying each moment of our life together, savoring each movie and dinner, each graze of your arm, I have missed it all. I remember returning, clean-shaven, stuffed rabbit in hand for the baby, ten roses for each month I had been away. I'll never forget the sound of the front door slamming, and the new car that had joined the driveway I had left so long ago. You moved on, but I never could. My actions have imprisoned me, and now I shall leave this world alone..."

The patient's mouth slowly shut, and words ceased, and his shallow breathing resumed. Trembling, tears struggled to fall from the man's decaying body. The nurse carefully took the unfinished manuscript from the typewriter. *The front desk will find out where to send this.* One trembling hand now covered his eyes, and the other motioned for the nurse to leave him. The nurse let out long, tired breaths, and slowly walked to her next room, eyes red, as she moved to prepare tea and a book for the woman in room 14. In the evening, the nurse entrusted the letter into the hands of her superiors to be mailed the next day.

Finally, the sun rose. Fresh bed sheets and extra paper in hand, the nurse plastered a firm smile on her face as her heavy footsteps rang through the corridor. Flinging the door open, the nurse is faced with an empty bed. Both hands flew to her mouth in an effort to suppress her gasp, ignoring the paper and sheets sent flying. Turning her head out the door, glancing up and down the hallway to make sure no one was nearby, she quickly tidied up her things, and briskly walked out the door, her heels *clack-clacking* down the hallway.

The sun rose, and a letter arrived for Room 20. Hundreds cycled in and out per day, carrying pointless sympathies, for every sender knew why the patient was there. The nurse's routine was interrupted by the voice of the receptionist, shoving a thin envelope in her hands and saying,

"Was this addressed to the deceased in room 20?" The nurse's heart stopped, eyes darting as she read the name on the envelope, the name *Lydia* catching her eye in the return address.

"Yes," the nurse mumbled, "it is," her voice quivering.

"Well, it's really none of our business," the receptionist chuckled. She quickly placed the letter in the paper shredder, muttering, "It's a real shame they never got their mail."

Mo Treitel-Knapp

Grade 11, Clayton High School

Educator: Katie Storms

Poetry



DNA Chains

Stories are the DNA chains of language.

Creativity is bonded together
by stardust sewage pipes.
They radiate tangerine strands of light,
which accentuate the crypticness of truth.

My stories are the DNA chains of language.

Truth is saturated with realness,
yet carries the responsibility
of resembling reality.
Stories shaped like
figure-eights challenge this.
They're twisted;
but real.

Your stories are the DNA chains of language.

The stardust sewage pipes
fused together resemble
millions of micro-test tubes
overloaded with the ingredients
(wonder, curiosity, & mystery),
which spurs the immersive chemical explosion
of truth.

Truth binds our DNA chains of language
together
to form stories.

Pretzeled stories
remind me of your licorice.
Rain dichotomizes them;
lightning zaps them,
until they're cough-drop-sized.
Richard Wright, Tim O'Brien, & Anthony Doerr
re-configured these sweats
into new structures,
from books
to photos
to change.

The leftovers are for you & me;
the future poets, storytellers, & dreamers.

Books are the vaults
to store these DNA chains of language.
Regardless,
you carry stories,
& so do I.

They're the DNA chains of language!

Siddhanth Vijaykumar

Grade 10, Parkway Central High School
Science Fiction & Fantasy



The Dependent Variable

BEFORE
(Dawn of 2031)

The tiny mice scuttled over one another in a frenzy from one side of the small, clear glass box to the other. They clambered over and around the artificial obstacles in their way, struggling to reach the prize awaiting them: a small slab of cheese, which would most likely be the only food these mice would have for the week.

A man, dressed in a long, uniform white coat and tattered jeans watched these mice in interest. His eyes, covered by large glasses, focused on the leading mouse. This mouse, unlike the others, did not have any organic limbs. Its legs had been replaced completely with the newest version of a biomechanical limb design.

The scientist watched in approval as the upgraded mouse easily surpassed the others in speed and strength, overcoming any obstacle in its way and on a path directly towards the slab of cheese.

“Dr. Suller?”

The scientist frowned in thought. The biomechanical limb appeared, however, to be clamping forward too hard every single time the mouse jumped. *I need to make the landing gear on the heel looser. If that doesn't work, I might need to check the smoothness of the clamping mechanism itself.*

“Um, Dr. Suller?”

The voice registered in the scientist’s head, as he quickly turned towards the voice. It was the new intern, who nervously glanced at him, and then at the mice. He stood at the door of the small, well-lit lab room.

“Yes? What is it?” He asked in slight annoyance.

The intern blinked. “The building’s closing up early today, thanks to the supervising staff coming in.”

“Ah, yes. Of course.”

The scientist gathered up his things, glanced around the room, and turned off the lights. The intern made way for him as he moved down the hallway before escorting him to the parking lot.

As they walked past the front doors, Dr. Suller heard a clamor outside the main entrance. “What’s that?” He asked irritably.

“It’s another one of those small animal rights protests, sir. Nothing to worry about.”

“Hmm.” The scientist glanced outside the front windows of BioMech Inc.’s company building, barely able to hear the crowd of people outside, shouting at the doors. Some officers were trying to maintain control.

Why would anyone be protesting? Can’t they see that everything we do here is for the greater good? He voiced these thoughts aloud to the intern.

“U-Uh, well... I’m not entirely sure. Um, sir.” The intern stammered, looking down at his feet as he walked.

Dr. Suller glanced at him scrutinizingly as they finally reached the parking lot. The intern took leave of him there, barely managing to cover the relieved look on his own face.

As he drove home, Dr. Suller continued to think about the protest. How could people possibly be so foolish? Everything BioMech Inc. did was for the betterment of humanity. They were so close, too. Sure, some sacrifices would have to be made, but what difference were the lives of some mice for the MAJOR technological benefits to mankind?

The doctor shook his head in disbelief. He wondered to himself, *how will humanity survive if we’re this squeamish of decisions as easy to make as this?*

DURING

(Two Months Later)

Dr. Suller stared tiredly at the TV screen in his apartment in Los Angeles, where he had lived for years, flipping from one channel to the next. There wasn’t anything else to do. The building had been closed down temporarily due to

“classified circumstances”. He guessed it had something to do with those radical protests.

He finally settled down on one of the news channels. As he watched in boredom, he suddenly shot upright, eyes widening towards the screen.

“It has just been confirmed; an unidentified spherical object has been spotted in the sky off the West coast of the U.S...” The news anchor continued to speak, but the doctor stared intently at the image that had been pulled up on the screen.

Whatever it was, it looked at first glance like it might be hovering in the sky overhead. But Dr. Suller could tell from its appearance that it couldn't possibly be in the atmosphere. The object was grayed out, just as the Moon was in the morning sky. *How far away is that thing?* He stared at the image again. *And if we can see it like this when it's not in the atmosphere... How big is it?*

There was a rapid knocking at the door to his apartment. The doctor briskly strode towards it and opened the door, facing one of his friends who worked with him at BioMech. “John, have you seen this?!” His friend took out his phone, showing him a news article on the spherical object.

“Yes, I saw it on the TV just now, Harold,” John Suller replied, glancing at the article.

“But John, it doesn't look like...”

“It's not in the Earth's atmosphere, yes.”

“But... John, how big is that thing?!”

Dr. Suller pushed up his glasses grimly. “Big enough to pose some pretty important questions... and problems, too.”

Just then, he felt his phone buzzing in his pocket. “Mind if I take this?”

Harold nodded distractedly, still reading the news article. The doctor picked up his phone and walked to the other side of the room before answering. He recognized the number as Sarah's. She worked at NASA, so Dr. Suller could guess what this was about. “Hello?”

“Hey John, it's me. Did you hear about-”

“Yep.”

“You've probably noticed by now that it's not in the atmosphere. Judging by the data from the ISS, we're guessing it's only around fifty-thousand miles farther away than the Moon.” She said urgently.

“What?!” John whispered into the phone, glancing at Harold.

“Yeah, it's big. But there's something else. It's getting CLOSER.”

“How... How fast is it going?”

“I don’t know yet. But this can’t possibly be good.”

(Another Two Months Later)

Thank goodness I don’t live by the coasts. John Suller looked out the window. It was raining badly, and there wasn’t a single soul in sight. Most people in this neighborhood of Nashville stayed inside their houses.

Everyone knew what the celestial object was now. He sighed deeply, thinking over the events that had taken place over the past two months.

GPS and other global satellite systems went down first, and then soon after most long-range communication, cutting off the world from itself. The earthquakes, hurricanes, and other natural disasters came next in huge droves of power, leveling large cities across the world. The International Space Station fractured and exploded in the night sky.

Suller was thankful that he had moved away from Los Angeles in time. The tall tides along the Western coast became tsunamis. Los Angeles, Seattle, Portland, and any other North American city along the Pacific never stood a chance. He had travelled by car for days until he ran out of gas, then walked until finally coming to an abandoned neighborhood in Nashville, where earlier earthquakes had forced the former residents out. By then, the earthquakes here had appeared to have stopped, so John had decided it would be best to settle down along with others who had also come from other parts of the United States in search of safety.

John Suller had chosen one of the smaller houses; it wasn’t as if anyone had been living in it at the time. He’d been living there for close to a month.

He made a friend in Marco, a man who lived in the house next to him after fleeing from Louisiana due to the hurricanes and the floods. Suller spoke to other people who had fled to this neighborhood, where he learned some of the many things that had happened since the arrival of the new moon. People had taken to calling it Theia, after the hypothetical planet that had almost destroyed the Earth 4.5 billion years ago. Now, this Theia was threatening to do the same.

Because of the natural disasters it had caused, chaos began to take over humanity. National governments collapsed all around the world, as oceans destroyed cities or receded entirely due to the gravitational pull of Theia. After the PRC’s collapse, things only became worse as several of the nations who depended on China’s goods economically collapsed as well.

Over the course of his time in Nashville, John Suller spent the majority of his time trying to understand how and why this was happening. It didn't make any sense. Where had Theia come from? Why hadn't anyone seen it sooner?

There wasn't any way to gather more information about Theia itself. All space programs in the U.S. had been terminated a couple weeks prior, and NASA had fallen apart. He hadn't gotten back word from any of his old friends, including Harold and Sarah. He wasn't even sure if Harold had gotten out of Los Angeles before it was consumed by water.

All in all, Theia's appearance still didn't make any sense. It wasn't physically possible for a celestial object of THAT size to just appear in the inner solar system out of nowhere. There was only one conclusion the doctor came to.

There was something--some higher power--at work here.

But even if there is, that didn't answer the question of WHY. If there is some kind of higher power doing this to us, WHY are they doing this? What could they possibly hope to gain?

Perhaps... Perhaps it was some sort of experiment? A test? Suller had never read much science fiction before, but in the books that he did read, the aliens almost always were trying to test the humans in some way... or experiment and hurt them.

While interested in these books, Suller had dismissed them as pure fiction. But what if... there was some truth behind them?

His mind flashed back to the mice in the glass box. *A small sacrifice... for the benefit of mankind.*

He shook his head furiously. These were all just pure theories... only speculations. He had no way of proving them. He didn't want to prove them, either.

John Suller wasn't able to think for much longer. A loud, blaring noise sounded overhead, slightly muffled by the walls of his small home. *What the hell?* He rushed outside, where the blaring wail was much clearer and foreboding. Other refugees came out of their houses along the street as well, looking around in confusion.

The wailing transformed into a voice. *All citizens, please move to your designated nuclear bunker and commence safety procedures. This is not a drill. All citizens, please move to your designated nuclear bunker and commence safety procedures. This is not a drill.*

As the voice continued, Suller froze in shock. *Nukes?* He looked up in fear and was horrified at what he saw. *That's not a nuke.*

Far up in the sky, past the Earth's atmosphere, the Moon was fracturing and being torn to pieces. Suller could just barely make out bright specks from the thin magma layer that once protected the Moon's solid core.

He knew this might eventually happen. Theia and Earth's conflicting gravitational powers were pulling the Moon apart.

As the Moon continued to fracture, Theia's menacing form loomed over it.

At this point, the entire neighborhood was in upheaval. Suller snapped out of his shock, looking around.

"There!" One of his neighbors shouted, pointing at a spot in the ground. Someone else crouched down at the spot and tried to lift up a large, concrete trapdoor. Other people, including Suller, helped prop open the trapdoor so everyone else could get it in. A large radioactive sign was plastered over it. Every single neighborhood had a designated bunker, ever since a nuclear meltdown in Levy County that spread across Florida. As the neighborhood's people continued to go down, Suller looked up just in time to see the Moon silently explode in a flash, replaced by Theia in the sky.

"Get in!" Marco shouted as Suller blinked, still in part-shock at the sight above him.

He finally came back to his senses, following Marco and everyone else down before the trapdoor closed by itself. He barely saw large chunks of the Moon hurtling down to Earth.

AFTER

(Five Years Later)

"All civilians, please exit designated nuclear bunkers. Crisis is averted."

John looked up in confusion. He was busy typing his newest story. This one included one of the many theories he had on aliens in the galaxy.

"What?"

"All civilians, please exit designated nuclear bunkers. Crisis is averted."

"Did you hear that?" Marco walked into the room, staring up at speakers that lined the ceiling. "They're coming from the main area as well."

"Guys! Clay's calling a meeting in front of the gate!" Rio barged in as she usually did. "Come on, it's to do with the speakers!" She rushed as quickly as she had come in.

John and Marco glanced at each other, before John sighed, glancing at his story before closing his computer. They both walked out of the room and towards the gate, where everyone else was already waiting, talking excitedly amongst

themselves. The gate itself, made of solid titanium, shielded the ladder then they had all gone down so long ago, preventing them from ever going up.

Until now, it seemed. The gate was OPEN, and as Marco and John joined the crowd, Clay stood up in front of them all. Clay, one of the other residents of the small neighborhood, was voted leader during the first days of their time in the bunker.

“Everyone, settle down!” Clay called, as the voices began to dim. “As you can all obviously tell, the gate is open. And according to that voice on the speakers, it’s apparently safe to go up. However, we can’t know for sure what’s up there. I’ll take a small group with weapons, and we’ll check and make sure everything’s okay. Agreed?”

Everyone nodded in assent. Clay glanced around approvingly. “Alright. Rio, James... Ray... John and Marco, you’ll do fine as well. Let’s go.”

“Yes!” Marco popped up besides the others, as Clay passed him one of the rifles the group had found in the early days. The leader went through the open gates and began climbing the ladder, for the first time in five years. John followed, taking his rifle before hesitantly going up the ladder.

He remembered when he had been an esteemed scientist, holding himself above all the others in his own importance to technological advancement. Down here, he had learned what it meant to really be part of a community, how every single little thing mattered. Losing even a single wheat plant while farming in the bunker would mean a lot less food for everyone in the long run.

As they reached the top, John took in his surroundings. The world was decimated; where there had once been so much life there was almost nothing. Dust covered the remains of any of the houses that still stood.

But he could still see life. Plants and moss struggled over the houses to get more sunlight. The occasional tree flourished in the harsh surroundings. And up in the sky, Theia’s vast form loomed overhead. John could barely make out Theia’s thin new rings; formed from the remains of the Moon. *Those rings won’t last very long, John realized. They can’t withstand both the Earth’s and Theia’s gravitational pull. They’ll shatter, just like the Moon did.*

“John, snap out of it!” Marco shouldered him. “We need-”

The rest of his words were drowned out by the violent wind that suddenly enveloped them. In the sky, a large black helicopter slowly moved downwards, coming to rest on the ground.

As soldiers came out of the helicopter, John made out the United States flag on this side of the craft.

“Don’t worry, civilians,” One of the soldiers called. “Help has arrived.”

(Three Weeks Later)

Everything went pretty quickly. The new U.S. government had (for the most part) regained control of its old lands and was quickly beginning to restore peace and order across the revived nation. Now that the Earth and Theia were in a stable orbit, humanity had successfully survived. Of course, it may never be able to fully recover. While John was separated from his friends, whom he now considered almost family, he was still able to keep in touch with them. And he would never forget what he had learned in his time with them, or what he had learned from Theia.

Along with several other important corporations, BioMech Incorporated was restored by the U.S. government. John Suller was offered back his original job by a BioMech senior manager in order to “continue creating for the benefit of all mankind”.

In the end, he turned down the job.

The reasons in the letter he gave BioMech Inc. were very vague. He’d said something about how “*the mistreatment of lesser beings will make us JUST LIKE THEM*” or that “*we WERE the mice.*”

The BioMech senior manager shook his head in confusion, glancing at a few of his colleagues who were also reading the letter. *What’s wrong with this guy? Can’t he see that everything we do here is for the greater good?*

Joe Walsh

Grade 12, Mary Institute & St. Louis
Country Day School
Personal Essay & Memoir



Behind the Curtain: The Cost of Social Conformity

Theater kids are easy to laugh at. I used to laugh with them. But now I laugh at them. Because it's easy. It's easy to sit twenty rows away from the stage and send a judgemental stare to your peers. It's harder to stand on the stage with unwavering confidence while hundreds of scrutinizing pairs of eyes stare right through the character you are portraying, into your true emotions and fears. It's easy to sit back on a padded bench with your friends sitting around you. It's harder to admit that those aren't your friends, just marble pillars on a glossy facade that masks the flawed foundation.

I sat on that bench, comfortable and smug, my Phoenix Suns hoodie embracing the flesh that was uncomfortable showing. At that point, I was over two years into my covert operation. It had become too easy to play my part. The part had become me. I had worked tirelessly to be that character and wipe any recollection of my former self from the collective memory of my peers. Or was that my true self? Was I erasing my true self? I couldn't remember who I was anymore. But I knew who I wanted to be. Who I thought I wanted to be. I knew when my buddy in the row in front of me turned around and said that no one could pay him any amount of money to be in the musical, I had to laugh and agree. I knew when another friend of mine sitting behind me whispered that next year's fantasy football loser should have to do the musical, I had to keep laughing and say that that was a cruel punishment.

It's hard to stand on stage and perform with the lights on. When the lights are on you can see every person who turns and whispers or points and laughs. It's easy to be the one laughing. As I sat there comfortably, I squirmed a little bit. I know now that part of me was still there, telling me this was wrong.

Driving home from football practice that frigid late-November evening, every joint and bone in my body was frozen stiff, my sweat-frozen hair was beginning to thaw in the warmth of my powerful Jeep heating system, not a single mole of ATP could be found in my exhausted cells, and all I wanted to do was go home and surrender to the warm embrace of sleep. My mind was wide awake, though, as is the constant state of an ADHD brain. On a typical drive home, my mind is a gas particle in a minuscule air-tight vessel, bouncing frantically between my imminent school assignments, the mistakes I made at practice, and the embarrassing, seemingly life-ending slip-ups I had at school that, in reality, no one noticed or cared to remember. But this night was different. No matter what other anxieties my mind wanted to divert to, it kept crawling back to the assembly earlier that day and watching the members of the school musical perform a preview of their upcoming show.

That was not the first time I had contributed to mocking the so-called theater kids or any of the other performers who I now know had the guts I didn't have to be on that stage in front of the school. But I couldn't escape the feeling that a part of me I thought was buried was scratching and clawing at the barriers I had formed to make myself feel "normal". I know now that sitting on that pew, watching some of the people I used to call friends, while surrounded by the new owners of that title, I had felt an inkling of regret.

Looking back, it is a miracle that my Jeep didn't end up in the barrier off the side of I-64, or wrapped around a tree at the bottom of a hill on one of Town and Country's steep, winding roads. My eyes must have been on the road, as I made it home in one piece. But my mind was not. It was back in the auditorium, incessantly and repeatedly replaying the assembly, analyzing every second, desperately trying to decipher the anomaly I had felt. I tried to shake off the subconscious film study and the nagging spider-sense-like feeling in my gut that something was off, that something was missing. Whatever that something was, it was causing the ADHD-powered V8 nested in my skull to stall. Trying to cool the engine before it blew, I reassured myself that I had done nothing outside of my usual routine during the assembly. I was continuing to play my part perfectly; I was being who I wanted to be, as my Dad had told me to do. Bang. The slipping camshaft sprocket—the culprit of the cognitive engine failure—snapped into place

on the timing belt, and the V8 roared to life, sending me back to the night my dad's advice set me on my current path.

I had always gone to my parents when I needed help with anything. However, for years I avoided going to them when I was having trouble making friends at school, as I knew both had made friends easily their entire life and wouldn't understand. The night before I started my freshman year, I was hit with a wave of realization that I had been at the school for two years, had made next to zero friends, and was about to start high school alone. I broke down at dinner and my parents both rushed to ask what was wrong. When I told them about my realization and how I had been struggling to make friends for years but couldn't tell them because they wouldn't understand, I saw my mom give my dad the sort of "it's time to tell him" look that parents of kids with hidden super powers share when their secret is about to be revealed in a superhero movie. My mom went upstairs with my sister to help pick out an outfit and pack for her first day of sixth grade, while my dad beckoned for me to sit on the couch with him.

My dad is undoubtedly the most personable, socially comfortable person I have ever met, and I had always imagined that he was born that way and had been that way his entire life, making friends everywhere he went. I knew he moved to St. Louis in the middle of his sophomore year, but I had always blindly assumed he immediately made friends and immersed himself in the school community. What he told me on that couch put his story in perspective and changed the way I saw my own "struggles".

"As you know," he started, "I moved to a new city, St. Louis, in the middle of my sophomore year. Halfway through the school year, I had to enroll at a new school, entering a 700-person class of people I had never met and who had gone to school together for a year and a half at the very least. I had to learn how to be new, to know no one and somehow build relationships. It was very hard," he told me.

Immediately, my situation paled in comparison to his.

"You know," he continued, "I had grown up in a house where I had my three brothers as a support system, and I also had strong, supportive relationships with my parents. But John and Kevin [his two older brothers] had gone to college by the time we moved, and I felt that my parents were going through enough guilt and anxiety about the move that I shouldn't go to them about my struggles making friends. I decided I had to consider who I wanted to be when I went to school every day. I had to play that part and put a conscious effort into being extroverted, even when I didn't have the energy. It was

exhausting, but I kept at it and eventually made numerous friends who, as you know, are still some of my closest friends today. That skill I developed of being who I wanted to be and putting myself out there has been invaluable for the rest of my life. I've put that skill to work for decades after high school, building relationships and connections throughout college, law school, and my career. When you wake up and get ready for school tomorrow, I want you to think about who you want to be. Then be that person at school and football practice; go out of your way to talk to and hang out with whoever that person would be friends with. Building relationships takes effort. Remember that."

Thus, when I woke up the next morning and prepared for my first day of high school, I imagined the guy I wanted to be and put myself in his shoes. I made a plan for putting myself out there and socializing during the day. At school, I played the part with the expertise of a Tony Award-winning thespian. I adapted the attitude expected of the company I intended to become part of. This cycle of casting myself in my desired role and playing the part to perfection at school and football practice became my daily routine. Significant change took time, as my dad said it would. But my routine seemed to be working. As I continued to craft the facade that I thought my peers wanted to see, I gradually scraped away the parts of me I saw as flaws. I abandoned my love of performing. I ditched friendships I thought detracted from my public image. I became the boring, cold-hearted slug that high school culture praises.

Back in my Jeep, driving home from practice that late-November evening almost two and a half years later, it finally clicked that I had misunderstood my dad's message. I realized that he has always made friends by being the nice and outgoing guy that everyone wants to be around. While pretending to be someone I was not, I had become the opposite of that guy. I had become spiteful and was in a constant battle to "fit in" by making jokes at the expense of those I used to call friends. I realized I was going down the wrong path and had become someone I would hate if I encountered them face-to-face.

Reflecting on the two-and-a-half-year life of my "new self," I recognized that I had dismantled and abandoned multiple friendships stronger and more meaningful than anything I had formed pretending to be a spiteful jerk. Along with my lost friendships, I mourned the years of memories I lost by quitting participation in musical theater. The final realization I came to, however, was that this epiphany meant I was not past the point of no return. A part of my old self, a resistance of sorts, substantial enough to make me question my current heading, must have survived yet, fighting tooth and nail to control some

stronghold in my heart. The anomaly I felt during the assembly that day in November was the resistance's last resort, a final offensive to regain control of my conscience. Assisted by the sudden memory of my dad's advice, the offensive was successful.

Since the assembly and illuminating drive home, I have worked to repair the damage I caused while pretending to be someone I was not. I am quickly recovering and embracing my love of performing, as I have since sung solos in my school's Christmas and pop concerts and am excited to participate in this year's school musical. I have attempted to salvage some of the relationships I had abandoned. I have made a daily effort to be kind in circumstances when the spiteful instinct I had crafted would drive me to act otherwise. I have learned how to be intentionally extroverted without making jokes at the expense of others. That said, the damage done over two and a half years cannot be healed without leaving scars. Many people will remember how my words hurt them, and some of the friendships I will work to reconstruct will be permanently lost because of the way I abandoned them for a crowd of people I'll no longer strive to be around.

Isabella Wang

Grade 10, John Burroughs School

Poetry



Dinner Parties

The invitation ran through social networks via Wechat private messages,
tapping coworkers, longtime friends, and classmates on their shoulders.
At dusk: the doorbell and stove timer harmonizing,
summoning the busy hosts from bustling kitchen to illuminated foyer.
Sets of hands lifting trays of salmon out, placing sticky rice cakes on sheets,
gifting steamed buns in blue Tupperware. Poker chips are tossed across silk
tablecloths, over crystal wine glasses and jasmine-adorned napkins. There's
fresh
gossip being passed with each scoop of the chips, stories told with
accompaniment
of sunflower seeds split open. The holidays are just an excuse
to put up a tree and a request to find the best violin teacher.
From this patchworked label of Chinese, they try to locate our provincial
identities,
once so distinct, but now sewn together
by the one box on the census sheets. They settle for Chinese
because better Chinese than Asian, grumbling at "Asian American or Pacific
Islander"
(Why are we lumped in with the Hawaiians now?)
quick to correct the cashier trying to make small talk at the supermarket,
(No, we are not Japanese.)
always searching for their old selves by examining what they are not,
tracing out their outlines based on negative space, feeding their children

this incomplete photocopy. They ignore ink caught in the grooves,
lodged too deep to transfer. Do they know people at school
always ask their kids the same questions? Now when they ask
us if we are siblings or cousins, maybe we should say yes. After all, we share
the same tongue. Got it from our mother-
land.

Isabella Wang

Grade 10, John Burroughs School

Poetry



Lullaby for a Fifteen-Year-Old

Don't cry, girl, I know you think fifteen is too old for lullabies,
but then why do you need Billie Holliday crooning through airpods
when it's twelve a.m.? Days crease together and you only get
late nights, bluelight drilling reservoirs into your eyes. You're crumpling
like the crushed paper balls full of smeared red ink. Spine breaking,
fingertips indigo, neck aching, you see two thousand more
carbon-copy days laid out in front of you, neat as laundry, curving around
eternity's spine and then some. You're not sure if you'll ever become
someone, or if you'll disintegrate mid-air, mid-jump. You want
you want you want you keep going because in your head you keep
that other girl locked up, the one huddled under her joplin quilt in the dark
locks of hair, a dung beetle tucked in the bed of decisions,
surrounded, trapped, strangled because she couldn't keep going.
So you're here, and you want someone to rock you to sleep in their arms, to rock
the midterms and papers and chapped lips and auditions
and new ripped tights and rehearsals and driver's tests and arguments
and ellipticals and razor cuts and nice boys with girlfriends and lecturing parents
and car keys and college visits and mandatory sibling phone calls
and cooking meals that aren't ramen and unfinished TV shows
and abandonment issues and possible undiagnosed depression and broken lamps
out of you. Out of you, even though they're seeping in and solidifying
and everyday you're a little more ripe for shattering. But you see
her, fetal position, whenever you close your eyes, so you work

yourself until there's no sleep left in you, and you can't ever stop and take eight hours to recalibrate.

Don't cry, girl, I know you think fifteen is too old for lullabies, but fifteen-year-olds are the ones who need them the most.

Isabella Wang

Grade 10, John Burroughs School

Poetry



Two Languages

Taxonomy

I was willing to draw up runes of fractal limbs and fragmented crowns,
brush off the rust, sing a worship to roots resting knuckles in russet earth.
My peers had already chosen the ripe, fertile examinations:
how fatty acids dissolve from neuron sheaths,
how to carve catapults and windmills from wood,
how soundwaves entangle intricately in air,
so I settled for greeting trees. I guess the trees, with their arms
outstretched for bashful handshakes, liked my company,
even if I was sighing between each exchange. *Hold still*
so I can get a look at you; what's your name?
They're lonely, you know. Did you know
people can't tell apart a sumac and a legume
(sumac's slender stems of sharp-tipped leaves beset with red clusters,
legume's silver-smooth bark and loose lacework foliage),
some suburban kids have never seen fireflies, my brother
has forgotten how stars slide across the sky without clamoring citylights,
seventeen years ago, the dictionary wrangled fifty words
about nature into whiteness. And we're already baring
our naked flesh with bravado, our roots sinking
straight to Earth's unforgiving heart, ideas
unfurling with them. Even if we reached
our arms, drills, CATs into the topsoil that swallowed

those names, we'd get one last look at
the burial site silent as scattered souls.

Mandarin

I was a white girl until six. Imagine waking up one day with the weight
of railroads snaking through stone, gold-panning
camps by California rivers, propaganda spilling
buck-toothed rats across decades, and eighteen-eighty-two collapsing
onto your hunched shoulders as the world
beats *ching-chong* and *are you good at math* and *communist*
against your battered skin every year, so you grow tattered but
tall beyond your five-foot frame with bird-bones that let you fly
never more so rooted to the ground, the ground seeding small towns
that you feel blooming through your marrow; you hold up:
wolves eating children at night, pulling plows under sunlight knives,
skin rained with mosquito-bites, outdoor toilets sopped with grime,
sweet potato and no rice, soft dusk in the countryside,
flying to Minnesota with oversized suitcases, VISAs, and a desire
to carve the world open.

But the American Dream is like doing laundry in the Styx. Scrub away
stains of pinyin, four tones blooming in my mouth, calligraphy brush's touch;
why go to Chinese School if I'll never use it? But then I'm
across a paisley tablecloth (a roaring ocean, three decades) from my
grandparents, and words fall into the space between
as I'm unraveling, grabbing for the life I bleached white, just
wanting to say *how are you, this food is good, is that subway new?*
My grandparents won't look at me, afraid because I'm a reflection
of their deaths.

Remembering

It's possible to perform a resurrection, recollection, a reconnection of names.
You have to chant and scream, push and heave from your
tightening throat, an incantation of wild necromancy to shift into the past.
You have to pare away the thick outer circles until you unearth the core,
and then, in a ritual you once dismissed as fruitless and vestigial,
you carefully excavate the delicate, fleeting letters, and cradling
them in your weathered palms, you fit them back into you, turning them apart
until you learn how to grow roots again.

Alex Wang

Grade 11, Ladue Horton Watkins High
School
Poetry



w.a.r

act i: w is for weeping

embers propagate through homes
ravaging dinner tables, desk chairs, bed frames,
and closets of little clothes;
clothes now devoid of purpose.

blood soaked smog
plagues the streets
and drowns out
the silent births of orphans.

they watch
the devils in uniform
who love to kill
kill the loved.

act ii: a is for avengement

hands rubbed and scraped
in the burnt umber water
but the red wouldn't come out;
it stains the skin and engraves itself into the eyes.

their minds poisoned
with fear and reverence
but the hearts are tainted
tainted with ferocity and a lust for vengeance.

act iii: r is for recurrence

and so the violence recurs,
with numbers going up in the papers
while numbers go down in the towns.
and in each vengeful blow,
sorrow spins its endless wheel.

Molly Watts

Grade 11, Staley High School

Educator: Carol Toney

Short Story



The Extraordinary Griffin Adamos

Griffin Adamos was extraordinary. A ginger, six-foot-five hunk was hard to miss, especially in a small town like ours. His eyes tended to cross, his sculpted nose was hooked and covered in freckles. His Spotify was filled with weird, experimental artists, like Bjork and Kate Bush. He got great grades, played center on the basketball team, and loved Indian food. He was well-liked at school. He had a large circle, lots of girls fawning over him. I admired him from afar, an acquaintance at best. But we grew closer. Way closer than both of us could've ever imagined.

It started out innocent. Platonic. He needed help in Calculus, my favorite subject.

"Drew," he pleaded, "Dude, you've gotta help me. I don't understand any of this." Dramatically waving his worksheet in my face, I don't think he noticed my small smile, looking at this Greek god practically begging for my help. For someone who seemed to have it all—looks, charm, the effortless ability to make everyone like him—there was something humbling about watching him unravel over a few equations. We agreed to meet in the library after school.

Immediately after last hour ended, I rushed excitedly to the library. I sat down at a dusty table by the window, where the afternoon light streamed in just enough to make it feel less like a dungeon. He showed up with a pencil in his mouth and that dumb, lopsided grin. The one that made me feel like one of his girls, the ones that seemed to hang on his every word.

“Ready to become a Calculus genius?” I teased as he dropped his bag with a loud thud and slouched into the chair across from me. “Ready to embarrass myself in front of the only person patient enough to put up with me,” he shot back, flashing me that grin. I rolled my eyes, but I couldn’t help the way my cheeks warmed. “You’re not hopeless, Griffin. You just need to focus.”

He leaned forward, resting his chin on his hand as if contemplating my words. “Focus, huh? Easier said than done. I’m just a dumb jock,” he joked.

I laughed, shaking my head. “You’re not dumb. You just never try.”

“Maybe I’d try harder if you bribed me with snacks,” he said, tapping my flat nose with the pencil. “Just saying.”

“Well..” I trailed, looking through my lunch leftovers, “If you do five problems, you can have a Rice Krispy treat.”

“Yum!” he exclaimed. “Deal! But you better not be underestimating me. I’ll make those problems disappear.”

Griffin took out the worksheet and flipped through it, the dramatic confidence returning as he squared his shoulders and adjusted his seat. I fought the grin tugging at the corner of my lips—he was something else, always so ridiculous, yet somehow endearing.

I watched him struggle with the first problem, his face furrowing in concentration. For a moment, I almost felt bad. It wasn’t like he *wasn’t* trying; it was just that his mind worked in a completely different way than mine. Griffin seemed to skip over the details and go straight for the answer—and it didn’t always work out for him.

After a few minutes, he sighed in frustration. “Dude, this is impossible.”

“It is not! Did you pay attention in class today? Or were you too busy flirting with Hayley?” I retorted. He shot me a look, his eyes narrowing as he dramatically crossed his arms. “I wasn’t flirting with Hayley. I was... *discussing* the assignment with her,” he said, clearly not believing his own excuse.

I couldn’t help but laugh. “Sure, ‘discussing.’ I’m sure that’s exactly what you were doing.”

Griffin smirked, his usual cocky self returning. “Hey, I can multitask. Besides, Hayley’s got nothing on you when it comes to brainpower. You’re the one actually making this math stuff make sense.”

I rolled my eyes, trying not to let the compliment get to me. “Flattery won’t get you the Rice Krispy treat. Focus, Griffin.”

He grinned wide, clearly undeterred. “Fine, fine, I’ll focus. But only because I know you’re holding out on me.”

I couldn't stop my smile as I watched him dive back into the worksheet, even if his brain clearly wasn't on the numbers. But slowly, he started working through the problems, stumbling and muttering under his breath, but making real progress. It was a bizarre mix of adorable and frustrating to see him get stuck, then try to figure it out again.

"Y'know," I said casually, "I'd be more impressed if you stopped talking to every girl in the class and focused on the stuff that matters."

His eyes flicked up to meet mine, and there was something unspoken between us for a moment, a silent understanding that stretched beyond the teasing. He cleared his throat, a little flustered now, and muttered, "I'll keep that in mind."

And so it began. I'd challenge him to think harder, and he'd challenge me to lighten up. Sometimes, he'd get a problem right and act like he'd just won an Olympic medal, complete with a fist pump and a ridiculous victory dance that made me laugh so hard, I nearly choked on my water. Other times, he'd get frustrated, slumping in his chair with a pout, waiting for me to rescue him.

But what really changed wasn't Griffin's math skills—it was everything else that came with it. His casual comments, the way he'd glance at me like he wanted to say something more but then chicken out, the lingering moments when we'd just sit in silence, not needing to fill the space with words. Slowly, it became something we both relied on, even when neither of us said it aloud.

One afternoon, I passed him a problem that was more complicated than the rest. He stared at it for a long time, tapping his pencil against the table. "You know," he said, his voice quieter than usual, "I never thought I'd be here, doing this. With you."

I raised an eyebrow, trying to keep my cool. "What, studying math? You're lucky you have me as your tutor. Otherwise, you'd be failing this class."

He looked up at me, his eyes meeting mine with an intensity I hadn't expected. "No, I mean—*this*. Hanging out like this. I didn't know we'd be... well, like this."

Oh. My stomach leaped into my chest. *Get it together, he doesn't mean it like that.* I gulped. "Because I'm such a dorky little nerd and you're a huge meathead?" I asked, trying to get back to our jokey dynamic, but my voice came out a little

more breathless than I intended. I hated how vulnerable I suddenly felt under his gaze.

Griffin blinked, clearly catching the shift, and his smirk softened just a little. "That's not what I meant," he said quietly, the teasing edge gone. "You're not a dorky nerd. You're... you're smart. And I guess, I didn't expect this. Us. But it's been... good. Really good."

I opened my mouth to say something, anything, but I was frozen, the tension between us thickening with every passing second. My heart was hammering in my chest, betraying my cool, nonchalant attitude. Was this really happening? Was he really saying what I thought he was saying?

He leaned back in his chair, breaking the moment with a half-chuckle, clearly trying to lighten the air again. "Anyway, this problem is kicking my ass. What even is a *definite integral*?" He threw his hands up in mock surrender, his frustration evident but tinged with humor. "This is like some kind of math wizardry, dude."

I stifled a laugh, trying to pretend I wasn't still feeling the warmth of that moment, his words echoing in my head. "Okay, focus, Griffin," I said, sliding my chair closer to him and pointing at the problem. "A definite integral is basically—"

"Yeah, yeah," he interrupted with a dramatic sigh. "You're gonna explain it and make it sound easy, and I'm gonna pretend I get it."

"Hey! We could just stop now, if you seriously feel that way," I teased, crossing my arms and giving him a mock stern look.

"No!" He protested. "Even though I hate math, I love the way you make it seem... less like torture." He leaned in closer, a playful sparkle in his eyes. "Honestly, Drew, you're like the human version of a cheat code. I'm just trying to figure out how you make all this boring stuff seem fun. Maybe it's just you. Maybe you're just a fun guy."

Internally, I was squealing. I couldn't wait to go home and think about how the famous Griffin Adamos, this ginger-haired hottie, called me a fun guy.

I tried my best to keep my face neutral, to pretend that his words hadn't sent a wave of warmth through me. "Yeah, well, don't get too carried away," I said, feigning a casual shrug. "You're probably just desperate for a pass in Calculus, and I'm the only sucker willing to help."

Griffin laughed, leaning back in his chair with a grin that stretched a little too wide. "Oh, it's not just about math, Drew. Though, I'm not gonna lie, this whole 'making everything easy' thing is pretty impressive. But yeah, I'm kinda starting to enjoy hanging out with you."

The way he said it—casual, like it was no big deal—made my stomach flip. My heart felt like it might actually explode out of my chest. He was *really* saying this, wasn't he?

I shifted in my seat, trying to play it cool. "Well, you know, I'm a pretty *awesome* tutor. I can't blame you for wanting to hang out with someone like me."

His grin softened, just a little, and for a second, I thought he might say something else—something a little more personal, a little more... real. But instead, he just gave a shrug and picked up his pencil.

"Alright, alright, enough with the compliments," he said, his usual cocky tone creeping back. "Let's see if I can actually finish this next problem without passing out from boredom."

One day, though, a small wrench got thrown into our routine. The library had flooded, and was now off-limits for the rest of the semester. I wasn't going to let that stop me from seeing him, though. I was going to make a big, ballsy move. I was going to invite him to *my house*.

I typed quickly, before I could chicken out.

"Hey, Griffin. Since the library is out of commission, how about you come over to my place to study? I've got snacks, a quieter place, and probably fewer distractions. Let me know what you think!"

I stared at the text for a second, then hit send. Immediately, my stomach did a flip. There was no turning back now.

It didn't take long for the response to come through.

"ooh. personal invite. Time?"

I almost laughed at how casual he made it seem. Like this was just another study session to him, even though my heart was pounding in my chest.

"Around 4? That work?"

His reply came almost instantly:

"perfect. be there soon :3"

This wasn't going to be just another tutoring session. I needed to kiss Griffin McElroy.

The thought hit me like a bolt of lightning. Sharp. Undeniable. I stared at my phone, trying to distract myself, but there it was again, that quiet voice inside my head, whispering louder than ever: *You need to kiss Griffin McElroy.*

Griffin showed up early, plopping his large frame on my family's worn-in couch. "So," he said, glancing over at me as he scooted closer. "Where are we starting today? Or should we just skip to the part where I get distracted by Rice Krispies?"

I looked at him, trying to gather my thoughts, but the only thing I could think of was how close he was. How *easy* this felt. How natural.

"Actually..." I said, a small smile tugging at my lips. "Maybe we can skip the math part for a bit."

His eyes locked onto mine, a little surprised, but he didn't pull away. "Oh?" he said, his voice suddenly lower, more curious. "What do you have in mind?"

For a second, I hesitated. But then, as if some invisible force was pushing me forward, I leaned in just slightly, giving him a look that was equal parts bold and nervous.

And then, before I could second-guess myself, I whispered, "Maybe we can just... kiss."

His eyes widened, and for a split second, I thought I'd made a huge mistake. But then, to my surprise, his grin reappeared, a bit softer, a bit more knowing.

"About time," he murmured.

And then, without another word, he closed the gap between us.

Passionate and all-consuming, this was the kind of first kiss I had been dreaming of. His hand slowly traced my cheek. Strong and a little calloused, presumably from weightlifting, it felt incredible. I leaned into his touch as he came up for air.

"I thought you were straight," I panted. Griffin paused, his breath warm against my skin as his hand stilled on my cheek. My question hung in the air between us, thick with uncertainty.

He smiled, though, his lips still hovering close to mine. "I get that," he said softly, his thumb brushing over the edge of my lip. "I've been thinking about it a lot, actually. I mean, I've always had... feelings, you know? But I never really thought about it. Not until I met you."

My heart raced, every word hanging in the air like a confession. “So... you’re saying you’re not straight?”

He chuckled, a little nervously. “Guess I’m saying I’m figuring it out too. But I’m definitely open to the idea of... this.” He gestured between us, his eyes filled with something deeper now. “If that’s okay with you.”

I swallowed, the reality of it all settling in. “I don’t know if I’ve ever been... open about it. Or even had the chance to *feel* it.” My voice was low, unsure. “I mean, That was my first kiss. Girl or- or boy.” I looked away, embarrassed.

Griffin didn’t pull away. Instead, he gently cupped my face, turning my gaze back towards his. His voice was soft, comforting, as he spoke. “Hey,” he said, his tone steady, “it’s okay. It’s not about how many kisses you’ve had, or who they were with. It’s about how you *feel* now. With me.”

“Before you ask, yes, I do like you ‘like that.’ No, this isn’t a cruel joke. And I.. I want to be together. More than just study buddies.” He smiled.

I was elated, but a little hesitant, a tiny knot in my stomach that made me pull back slightly. I had never been in a situation like this before.

Griffin noticed the shift in my energy immediately. His smile softened. “Hey, it’s okay,” he murmured, his voice low and soothing. “We don’t have to rush. We don’t have to do anything you’re not ready for.”

I was grateful for his patience, but I still couldn’t shake the lingering doubts. “It’s not that I don’t want this,” I said, my voice quieter now, unsure of how to express everything that was swirling in my mind. “I just... I don’t know. I don’t want this to be a big public thing. It would embarrass you, I mean, what would the other guys-”

Griffin cut me off gently, his fingers brushing against mine, his expression serious but understanding. “Drew,” he said, his voice soft but firm, “I get that. But what matters is *us*—not what anyone else thinks.”

I hesitated, the words hanging heavy in the air. “But what if they find out? What if they judge you? I don’t want to put you in that position.” I couldn’t help the worry in my chest, even as I was trying to let go of the weight of it all.

Griffin's gaze never wavered, his grip on my hand reassuring. "I don't care about what other people think of me. I care about *you*," he said, his words grounded with an honesty that made my heart skip. "This is about us, Drew. Not the basketball team, not anyone else. If this is something we want, then we figure it out together. And as for the guys, I'll handle them. I'm not going to let anyone make you feel less than you are—especially not because of who you are."

I took in a shaky breath, the weight of his words sinking in, calming the storm of doubt inside me. Griffin wasn't just talking about this moment; he was talking about us, about taking whatever came next together. No judgment. No pressure.

"But what if I mess up?" I asked, my voice almost a whisper, the vulnerability pouring out of me. "What if I'm not enough?"

"You're already more than enough, Drew," Griffin assured me. "Don't doubt that. I'm not going anywhere. So long as you want me here, I'm staying."

I spent the rest of the afternoon lying on Griffin's chest, our legs tangled under a blanket. His heartbeat was steady beneath me, a soft, rhythmic sound that somehow grounded me. I could hear the occasional sly quip from him, but I was too content to focus on anything other than the warmth of his presence, the way he made me feel safe without even trying. Right now, Griffin Adamos didn't need to do anything extraordinary. Just being here, in this quiet moment, was everything to me.

Luke Williams

Grade 9, Home School

Poetry



Introspective Reflection

No faults
In my structure.
“You are perfect,”
They say,
“A beautiful picture.”
“No one could ever
Compare to your figure.”
They give me admiration,
More than enough.
But if I wasn’t perfect,
Would they still give me love?
If not, then I must maintain
This ideal appearance.
Or into their hearts,
They will not give me admittance.
Learn to avoid anything
That could change their view of me.
Whether it be mentors, friends,
Or even my own family.
They are smudges,
Cracks and splatters.
And too much of them,

Could make me
 S h a t t e r
 Into a million pieces,
 Scattering across the floor.
 Now I am imperfect,
 And they will love me no more.
 Just holding me
 Will cut you deeply.
 So let go of me
 Before your hands become too bloody.
 And leave me be,
 I won't drag you down with me.
 Soon, I will be forgotten.
 My shards sinking into the ground.
 Becoming one with the dust,
 Dissipating without a sound.

This is my worst fear.
 To never be remembered.
 That's why I seek their admiration,
 And why I repeat to myself these letters.

Keep up the facade,
 Keep up the charade.
 To keep their approval,
 To keep their praise.
 No matter the consequences,
 No matter the pain.
 No matter the hardships,
 Or the bonds I will break.
 Do what they want me to do,
 Say what they want me to say.
 Even if it kills me inside,
 Their wishes I shall obey.
 Because I want their approval,
 I want their praise.
 And without it, I think

I will slowly fade away.

I am glass.

Fragile and easy to break.

And to be glass,

You must be fake.

Alisha Yin

Grade 10, Parkway West High School

Educator: Andria Benmuvhar

Poetry



circadian rhythms

i can still smell the pink (red?) puffer jacket,
my ears (nose?) are cold from crisp october (november?) wind
walking to school, wishing time would move faster.

I can still see the scrape (cut?) on my knee from falling down,
during four square (tag?), smart notebook coordinating origami
dreams that tangled elementary math papers into empty cubbies
wishing I could be somebody, today.

I can still hear the static from usb headphones droning
in the background of my youtube recommended
as teachers talked over plates of uneaten sandwiches (soup?)
and my desk piled with books and wrappers and dryer burnt clothes
knowing time was slipping, but I had plenty.

I can still taste the bitter stir fry bok choy and rice in
the shadow of the middle school trophy case mirror
my mind a pingpong game of smartass politics and black
colored pencils outlining sketchbook paper with buzzers and bio
dropping shoulder rests and spelling bees until i couldn't take the chlorine
crying because this wasn't how I dreamed it would be.

i can feel my circadian rhythms work overtime,
waking me up and telling me to sleep
until infinite campus dings; all my days are blurring into
one and all i want to do is go to bed, yearning stained purple sheets
know these golden years should pass my screen time and chip bags and
fifteen already with nothing in my future but a white vanity full of expectations
i cant meet and desk crowded with gift cards and art i made when i still cared,

but to be honest, all i still feel,
is my neurons disconnecting and demolishing the dissolved dissipation of the
me
still wearing my pink puffer coat.

Alisha Yin

Grade 10, Parkway West High School

Educator: Andria Benmuvhar

Poetry



the breakfast after

the breakfast after

the gurney will be cotton warm as an oven,
injection sliding in his veins as syrup, spills
flapjack letters, hotcake calls, pancake pleads.

we are laying in beds relaxed couch frying pans,
lazily, ham this sausage, egg it on with comments
type "free him" type "innocent" type "stop"

metal strains from the cold concrete to the ceiling,
there is powdered donut clogging his throat until his
words are urgent strudels in the rust; every second ticks

we feast on his pitiful story, buttered biscuits gravy
on his drenched alibi, force the sizzle of bacon deafen, we whine,
type "exonerate" type "prison" type "clemency" type "justice"
coughs his truth into strawberry jam jars,
smashes it in scones, glass embedded
spills blood on the window his cr-

but our bacon sizzle drowns out his voice.
we grit and hash brown sympathetic story, sigh shake our heads
type "fail" type "reform" type "policy" type "irreversible"
type "tragedy"

his son sets the plate for him anyway

butter knives, folded napkin.
the food is cold now, he is not here for it.
type "life."

Ellie Young

Grade 9, Smith-Cotton High School

Short Story



What Will I Become?

If you aren't human what would you be? That doesn't make sense Elie.

He turned to me, I can tell he wanted to laugh. Sometimes he makes me feel so stupid for simple questions.

Well then Amy, What do you believe in?

Whenever you hear of death,

You would normally think of

dying in your sleep

or

blood lying all around you as you

bleed out.

But he had neither

So I never thought he was gone.

I told myself he overworked himself

or

forgot to get in bed

but the way mom cried and took my brother

away

makes me think something else

happened.

Sometimes

I lay awake at night,

thinking that this is all

one big

dream.
Just like Elie
believed,
everything in
life
was.

.
.

I hope he was right.

Accepting is better than hiding. Accept you need to learn and you will learn.

Giving his friends a note
was harder than I thought.
Watching their faces
crumble
when they started reading
especially with Ryllen
his was never finished.
It hurts to know
Elie never got to tell him
what he wished
he would.
But we all
knew
he never
could.
Elie never had many friends,
he had a few,
dozens even.
But he barely talked to them
he preferred to figure out why.
He was different I suppose,
he never explained it to me.
But
I think he knew I would never
understand
if he told me anyways.

Elie's note to me

was confusing
it included Ryllen a lot
and talked about his possessions.
I don't understand
why he told me and didn't finish
Ryllens note
or wrote a will,
but
it was nice of him anyways,
to give me something
of him after
he left us.

Dear Amy,

I was pushing myself to never write this note
but the day came
and I am terribly sorry
and I know if I talked to you before
my goal would never have happened.
I'm sorry we never got to grow up together
but I hope you will be able to move on.
My possessions should be distributed between you
and Ryllen.
I hope you two can figure it out
and not fight over anything.
Love you Amy, and don't let my actions
change you.

*If you ever get angry, please talk to me. Get you're feelings out. It's better than bottling
up and not knowing what to do when I'm gone.*

I wish

he gave me more
from him.
I wish he never
left.
Why would he have left me?
I thought he loved me.
Sometimes I wish I could yell at

him,
just to tell him
to come
back.

I never told

Ryllen he got any
possessions.
But he hasn't been to school
since Elie's
death.

I hope he doesn't start
distancing himself
like Elie did when he started
obsessing about the truth of our
origins,
and everything that I believe
is meant to stay
unknown.

Elie was never open

about what he believed in.
I believe he was an atheist
because he always went against his
mom's beliefs.

I think he thought she was
wrong
but maybe there was more.
He always made jokes about
Christianity and what he learned in church
and he always talked about how cells
made us.

I always listened because
I never knew what I myself
believed in.

But I think he explained
both,
because he wanted me
to figure out on my

own.

My friends

either knew or heard of Elie
but they never heard he was
gone.

So when I came to school
all 'emo' as Elie would say,
they asked questions and
more until the teacher had to
step in and tell them to back
off.

But I never wanted that,
to distance themselves.

But I guess I was
also too
scared to tell
them what
really happened

I guess.

Elie believed he lived in a dream.

I never understood it
of course
but I also never understood him.
How could someone so
smart
not believe anything
was
real?

But it was more surprising to
learn what he
thought of
himself
and what he never
told me,
after urging me to
open up to
him.

Lately,

Ryllen has been hanging out with a
detective,

which is odd considering he has
hated

talking to people as of late.

When I asked about it,

he shrugged it

off and told me he needed

help with something.

I think he wants to know

why his note never ended

but that's a guess, a

guesstimate as Elie would

say.

*Why ask for something you know you shouldn't have? Sometimes you know you don't
need that thing, but your want is blinding you.*

Today,

is the first day of

Thanksgiving break.

But I can't find anything to be

thankful for.

.

..

...

Am I

selfish?

I have all

these memories of Elie

and I'm

scared

because I don't know

if I can even be remotely

close to him.

He was so smart,

loved,

and...

and...
someone who was meant to stay with me.

In movies

the character who dies
always has an
assembly or memorial at
school
as respect to
them.

It seems nice
pleasant even.

But,
why show it in movies
if it's not true at
all?

My friend

Patilda says she was close to
Elie.

But I think
Elie was only
close to people his age.
He always felt pressured around kids
like he had to
prove he was more than he
was.

I don't know why he is
that way,
but sometimes I think
it's because he
wanted to be a good role model
for me,
and I guess it
rubbed off onto
other too.

Elie's parent got divorced

when he was 2.
So that means he has two families.

I was always
jealous
because he had double of everything.
But that also meant double the
negative
too.

But he always cared for
me.

Even when he was given the
responsibility of two toddlers.
I'm happy I'm closer in age to him,
because,
his brothers may barely remember
him,
or not at
all.

I have been reading through
my brother's stuff.

And he did an analysis on different
mental disabilities.

Mom has always said I had some
underlying ones.

But based on
Elie's studies

I think they are stronger.

But Elie always says at the beginning and
the end to never diagnose
yourself.

Everyone says

I'm an honor roll student
but how could I be
when I have troubles with
multiplication?

Elie never did and he wasn't given the
opportunities I
was.

Was it because they are

new
or because
they chose not to
take someone
who needed mental
help, but was not autistic.
Someone who was
mentally ill,
in a horrible way.

I do.

I hate pity.

I hate math.

I hate blood.

I hate Elie's mom.

I hate how I'm treated.

I hate lies.

I love my parents.

I love my brother.

I love Elie's other brother.

I love school.

I love kindness.

I love equality.

I miss everything that happened before
November 7th.

You are allowed to have feelings but don't let them stop you from living your life.

I used to get grounded

for talking back

or

being rude.

But lately

since Elie's

death

my attitude

hasn't gotten me

grounded.

Nothing has.

Is this pity?

Because no matter if it
is or
it isn't.

...

I hate it.

My family

always gets me gifts
whenever and even if
my birthday is in
four months on
Valentines Day
I get a lot of
gifts whenever.

But, I hope I get what I
wished for
this
year.

I remember

going through Elie's room
after he
passed
and he used to collect
glass sculptures
with laser prints on the
inside.

Maybe I can take his and
continue his collection.
Even if his are mostly from
Zoos and Aquariums.

Maybe

I could do a building
but he already has many
or an animal
but those are many too.
He does have a heart one
though
I'm not sure where to find

anything like
it.

Maybe he will come back.

Wishing.

Is wishing for something you know
will
never happen,
something you know
happened months
ago
stupid?

Or is that a normal symptom of
grief?

Elie said it was
stupid,
but out of what he
wrote,
it's on what he
believed or
saw.

Funeral.

Why are the things you
want to go
to,
the things I am
meant to be
at
the hardest to go to
out of everything I have
ever done.

Lately,

going out has been hard,
even doing something such as
getting up
feels like a load of
work.

In Elie's research, he described this in

many
ways.
He also said the best way to
deal with
it
is to
exercise.
But that's worse than getting out of
bed.
I feel so tired that Elie's route
doesn't seem that bad to
take.

At school

this girl,
a detective,
has been asking me
how I have been
feeling.
Her name is Coral.
She also has been asking Ryllen
questions.
Maybe she's trying to find out why Elie
took his life.
She's stupid if sshe
thinks
I'm going to spill
anything without
Elie's
consent.

*Being pissed off with someone has no use if they're gone, Amy.
It's time to accept that.*

My parents

have been urging
me
to get out of bed lately.
Trying to help
as they say.

My friends have been more
tolerable.

I remember
I used to say
this is pity.

But now,
it seems like this
isn't pity
but care.

My brother

George,
is a lot like
Elie.

Hair, eyes, personality, smarts.
All of it.

Maybe, just
maybe.

He can help me through
this.

More than I thought.

Looking back,

a few days
ago,

many told me
the stages of grief would take
months,
years even.

But now, acceptance seems
better
then years of guilt and
denial.

But honestly,
I know this is all because
of Elie's words to me.

Elie wrote about
it,
and his words always seemed

right.

He wouldn't like it if I was stuck on him.

he would want me to help

others.

Stuck in the same spot I

was.

I still deny it,

and hope he would come back.

But as he would say,

there's no use in denying what is

true.

One choice changes everything. Choosing to stay attached to something that will affect you in the future- good or bad- is not worth it. Choose what you want, not what you think is right at the time. Be who you want, Amy.

Sarina Zheng

Grade 8, Greenwood Lab School

Short Story



The Switch

The park at sunset was nearly empty, except for a golden-haired girl perched on the edge of a bench, scrolling absently through her phone. Lily's manicured nails tapped against the screen, her lips forming a frown. The group chat had become quiet, and for once, she didn't feel like returning to her perfectly decorated room. Home was just another stage, and tonight, she was tired of pretending.

Across the park, a petite, slightly awkward girl with dark, slightly matted hair like she had slept in it while it was still wet crouched; a notebook balanced on her knee, and her forehead furrowed in deep concentration. Watching as the light hit the water's surface, Irene's pencil madly danced along her notebook, sketching out the ripples and how it lapped at the garden's bank. The world was loud and demanding; here, in the quiet, she could breathe.

Both girls thought they were alone until Irene approached Lily's bench. "Oh, great, a witness," Lily muttered, pulling her worried frown back into her perfect façade. "Hey, Irene. I wasn't expecting you here. What's up?"

Irene smiled, "Oh, nothing much. It's just more peaceful here. It makes it easier to think."

"You're lucky," Lily sighed. "I'd give anything to have some quiet time. People always expect me to be 'on' all the time. It's exhausting."

Half-smiling, Irene said, "Nobody expects much from me. Still, I think it would be nice to be able to stand out once in a while."

"The wishing well is an excellent place for things like that," echoed a voice that wasn't Lily or Irene's. Both turned to see an old woman pointing her cane to a moss-covered stone structure near the stream.

"It's just an old wives' tale," Lily scoffed, rolling her eyes.

Intrigued, Irene inched toward the old woman. "What story?"

"Legend has it that if two people make a wish together, their lives will be changed." The old woman cackled ominously as she turned away from them.

"This is ridiculous," Lily said, starting to head toward home.

But Irene was already pulling a coin out of her bag. "It can't hurt to try, right?"

Reluctantly, Lily joined her and pulled out a coin from her purse. "What are we even wishing for?"

"Something... not this," Irene said.

"Something different," Lily agreed. They both tossed their coins in the well. Suddenly, a gust of wind whipped through the park. Then, as quickly as it began, the wind stopped.

"Do you feel any different?" Irene asked, her voice trembling.

"Not really," Lily said, shivering.

Both girls shrugged, convinced that the entire episode was no more than wishful thinking.

The next morning, Lily was roused by the sound of an alarm clock. She groaned and reached up to touch her phone. Instead, her hand brushed across something unfamiliar. *A book? What?* she thought, her hand flying up to her head. Instead of touching long sleek curls, she felt messy brown hair. Panic rose in her chest as she scrambled toward the mirror. Staring back at her, instead of Lily Miller, queen of Central High School, was Irene.

Across town, Irene fluttered open her eyes to find herself in a room full of photos of girls with perfect makeup and perfect clothes. She sat up, confused, and glanced down at her hands. Her nails were painted a glossy nude, and a

vanity full of makeup and skincare items sat across from the bed. Her reflection stopped her cold—Lily.

This isn't happening. Both girls thought. *I have to be dreaming.* Their parents shouted at them both, “You’re going to be late.”

At school, girls waved at Irene and called out Lily’s name. Irene managed several weak smiles, but inside, she panicked about how she would survive a day like this, as the popular girl. She never enjoyed being the center of attention, being in the spotlight among hordes of adoring fans. She swallowed back the feelings of insecurity and kept walking.

Lily fought back tears as she passed crowds of people. She was always in the spotlight, and now, she wasn’t noticed at all. As Lily walked to her class, she felt a tap on her shoulder. A shy-looking boy handed her a folded note.

“Here. You left this in your locker,” he mumbled, before hurrying away.

Lily unfolded the paper. It was a poem—emotional, and deeply personal in Irene’s handwriting.

What is this? Lily thought to herself, baffled.

By lunchtime, both Lily and Irene were barely holding themselves together. Irene sat with Lily’s large friend group, trying not to shrink into the shadows as they chattered. “Can you believe what Jessica said about Lauren’s dress?” one of them said, tossing her hair.

“Totally,” Irene replied, having no idea who Jessica or Lauren were.

They all laughed, and Irene managed a weak smile. She could feel their eyes on her, assessing every move as if they were waiting for a slight mistake that proved she wasn’t worthy of her lead role. This wasn’t just socializing; it was a battlefield.

Meanwhile, Lily sat alone in the library, poring over pages and pages of Irene writing about her insecurities and wishes about occasionally stepping into the spotlight. *Is this what she does all day?* Lily wondered, amazed.

As the week wore on, Lily and Irene learned to adapt. Irene learned how to navigate Lily's vast world of attention and popularity, realizing that confidence was about embracing who you are. She started speaking up, surprising Lily's friends with her authenticity. On the other hand, Lily found that she quite enjoyed Irene's world of quiet and straying towards the shadows. She learned to slow down, listen, and express herself through drawing and writing her feelings without worrying about maintaining appearances.

It was Thursday afternoon, and Irene was hanging out with Lily's friends, who were gossiping about a party they recently attended. Instead of laughing and nodding along, Irene surprised herself and the others by saying, "Actually, I don't think it's funny. Talking about people behind their backs? Think about how you would feel if people started doing that to you."

There was a stunned silence, as if they didn't know how to react. Finally, a girl named Emily sighed, "Yeah, you're right, Lily. I guess I've been too caught up in the drama."

"Maybe it's time for us to be a bit better," Irene said, offering a small smile.

To her surprise, the group didn't turn away from her. They nodded, some offering apologies. Irene's chest filled with a new sense of confidence—Lily's confidence. She didn't have to fake it. She just had to be honest.

At Irene's house, Lily sat in front of the computer, losing herself in another of Irene's beautiful poems. But as she sat, staring at the page, she realized something. Irene didn't just write because she had to. She wrote to express herself, to explore emotions that others often didn't understand.

Maybe... I don't have to be perfect, she realized, starting to type. She wrote about her insecurities at school, despite being the queen of Central High School. She wrote about the difficulty of maintaining her perfect façade to ensure her position in the popular crowd.

Friday morning arrived, and both girls felt the weight of the week. They had learned so much, but the magic of the wishing well was starting to fade. It was only a matter of time before they had to face the reality of returning to their own lives.

Lily stood by the edge of the well. Irene stood beside her, both of them gazing into the waters.

"I think I understand now," Lily said softly. "Why...why we needed to switch places."

Irene nodded. "We both needed to see what the other had, what we've been missing."

"I wasn't just scared of losing everything," Lily admitted. "I was scared that no one would see the real me."

"I've been scared of being seen at all," Irene said. "Of being too quiet, and unnoticed."

Lily turned toward her. "You know, you're not invisible. You just need to give yourself permission to be seen."

Irene smiled, a hint of the old confidence creeping into her expression. "And you—you're not just the life of the party. You're so much more than that."

Both girls took a deep breath. The air around them shimmered again, and they knew their time was almost up.

"I think I'm ready," Lily said.

"Me too," Irene replied.

The moment they spoke the words, the ground trembled slightly, and before they could blink, they were back in their own bodies.

The next day at school, things were different. Lily walked into the lunchroom with a new sense of purpose. She wasn't just the center of attention anymore, and she didn't need to be. She drifted toward Irene, who was sitting quietly at a table, lost in her notebook.

"Hey," Lily said softly, taking a seat across from her.

Irene looked up, eyes wide. "Lily? What's—"

"I think we both learned a few things," Lily said with a grin. "Like, it's okay to not always be 'on.'"

Irene smiled, the light from the window catching her hair. “And that it’s okay to speak up, to be noticed.”

Lily picked up one of Irene’s poems from the table. “I read this last night. It’s beautiful, Irene. You should share it.”

“I think I will,” Irene replied.

From that day on, things were different. Lily and Irene formed an unlikely but deep friendship. They helped each other navigate their worlds—Lily offering support when Irene needed to step out of her comfort zone, and Irene reminding Lily that there was more to life than popularity.

At the next school assembly, Irene stood confidently in front of the crowd and read one of her poems aloud. The applause was heartfelt, and Lily clapped the loudest, her eyes bright with pride.

And as for the wishing well? Neither of them needed it anymore. They had learned that they didn’t need magic to change—they just needed to believe in themselves.

Celina Zhou

Grade 11, Ladue Horton Watkins High
School

Educator: Abigail Eisenberg

Short Story



Aviary

My boyfriend hated Wren, but every time I told her, she just laughed at me from behind her canvas, the sunlight casting her face in shades of gold.

“Why doesn’t he like me?” she asked, eyes lit with amusement, though they didn’t move from her canvas as she fiddled with her brush idly, her hands already dark with ink.

There were too many reasons to list them all, but what I said was “I’ve never let him see me like this.” Like this: bared to the light, scars and all.

Raising her brows, Wren asked, “Why not?” probably more for her own satisfaction than for anything else. “You let me.”

It was less “let” than it was “give,” as it always was in her high-rise studio, with its wide open space and glass walls, so full of light it felt like it would burst.

I couldn’t shrug, careful to keep from shifting on the dais she had me posing on, but I could avert my eyes. “I don’t know.”

In response, Wren’s eyes finally lifted to meet mine, cutting and keen over the canvas, and I could read the accusation in her face — *Liar*.

I first met Wren in our junior year, armed with a meteoric, self-destructive determination: I’d seen her ad for a nude model a few days prior on one of the main quad’s bulletin boards, and I stepped into her old studio prepared to strip

myself raw with the same cruelty I saw in my own eyes every morning in the mirror.

When I slipped out of the robe she'd given me, though, there was nothing cutting in her eyes as they settled on my scars — the butchered expanse of my thighs, the discolored flesh of my shoulders, the delicate lines fitted between my ribs — only a strange, soft weight.

Then, she smiled. "Hi there," she said. "My name is Wren. You good to get started?"

I nodded hesitantly, introduced myself, and perched on the small dais she'd placed in the center of the room. My posing was stilted, and I flinched often, shifted from my perch, but Wren was endlessly patient with me, her voice soft but clear.

Before I knew it, hours had passed, and the light slanting through the blinds was fading into reds and golds. When she was done, I slumped over on the dais, breathing out slowly.

"Can I see it?" I blurted awkwardly, as I tugged on my sweatshirt. Wren blinked at me, slowly, birdlike, before understanding dawned on her face.

"Of course."

She pivoted her easel around on its legs as I approached her, studying the piece. As I examined it, mouth dry, Wren must have seen something in my eyes or on my face because she smiled up at me.

"You're beautiful," she said, and the contrast between her words and what I saw was so stark I couldn't help but think she was lying. I didn't have the courage to say anything, though, so I just returned my attention to the canvas.

Somehow, it hurt more to see my scars inked in such loving, careful detail than just looking at them in the mirror. It was awful, transfixing. I couldn't look away.

This is why my boyfriend hated Wren: on our fifth date, late into the night at a shitty bar, we'd started asking each other questions we didn't want to know the answers to.

Who was your first love?

"A painter I met back in college."

Why?

"I don't know. Artists are like the sun."

"These are new."

Wren always noticed the fresh ones. “Yeah.”

Her eyes flicked up to meet mine, brows knitting. “I thought you said it was getting better,” she said, not quite frowning. There was no judgment in her gaze, just an unreadable calm.

I didn’t know what to say to her. “Sorry,” I finally said.

“You don’t have to apologize,” she said, quietly, tapping her pen on the canvas.

Wren liked ink the best, I’d found, especially for sketching— something about its permanence, how each stroke would bleed into the canvas and scar it, how each mistake was irreversible. The reed pen she was using was one I’d carved for her a few months ago for a graduation gift, inspired by a set we’d seen out in the artists’ district. It was worn down now, but every time I offered to carve her a new one, she just smiled and said she’d use it until it broke.

I closed my eyes for a few moments, taking slow, deep breaths, trying to keep from succumbing to drowsiness in the sunlight. When I opened them again, Wren was studying me.

Averting my eyes, I said quietly, “Don’t look at me like that.”

Wren cocked her head. “Like what?”

“Like I’m beautiful,” I said. Like I’m a tragedy walking.

She smiled, her eyes curving into crescents.

“But you are,” she said, so easily, so smoothly that I didn’t even have the time to think she was lying this time.

And for a heartbeat, I wanted to break something, to rip off my own skin, reach in deep and hollow out the scream that was steadily building inside me — *Wren, Wren, when you look at me like that, how am I supposed to want to get better?*

This is why my boyfriend hated Wren: the first time I had let her draw me, the weight of her gaze had been heavy like nothing I’d ever known. The first time I had let her draw me, I had watched her as keenly as she had watched me, enraptured by the ink stains decorating her skin, the flickering of her hands behind the canvas, her figure in the light.

When I got careless with my staring, Wren caught my gaze over the easel and smiled at me. I hadn’t smiled, really smiled, for so long that when I smiled cautiously back, it felt a little foreign. Stiff. Like I wouldn’t ever be able to quite match her light. I’d try, though. I’d never stop trying.

I didn’t talk about my boyfriend to most of my friends, even a year into our relationship, but to Wren I was always an open book. I couldn’t tell her

everything, mostly because I'd never been able to put into words the strange distance, the little intricacies between him and I, but I told her enough that she could grasp that I was hurting him.

"You're kinda awful for that," Wren said, through the reed in her teeth.

I blinked hard but fought to keep my eyes open. "Yeah."

"He should dump you."

"Probably."

Her gaze darted up, a brow arching over the canvas. "Do you think he will?"

I rolled the words over in my mouth, trying to shape them into something that would sound less cruel.

"I think he's scared," I said finally. He looked at me like I was a ghost sometimes.

This is why my boyfriend hated Wren: I told him about my scars in a fit of drunken vulnerability, but I never showed him. The closest he came to seeing them was a sketch Wren had done and given to me: the first piece she'd made with the reed pen I'd carved her. On the paper, he traced the lines that Wren had inked years ago with his gentle, callused hands, his eyes dark and sad.

I'm sorry, he said, softly, quietly, but looking down at my mangled body on the paper, all I could hear was Wren's voice in my ear, like bells, saying — "You're beautiful."

Celina Zhou

Grade 11, Ladue Horton Watkins High
School

Educator: Abigail Eisenberg

Poetry



The White Boy Beats Me at Ping Pong

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. 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.

Celina Zhou

Grade 11, Ladue Horton Watkins High
School

Educator: Abigail Eisenberg

Poetry



In Polaroids, I Look Like a Ghost

& Ma tells me this is a good thing, that I have
this much. That my too sharp face is softened in
the flash, & no one can see the width of my ribs
in the dark, & all that shows on the developed
photo is the glow of my skin, the black gleam
of my eyes. I look like a fish, I say, & she shrugs,
flickers. You look like me. I picture myself burning it,
watching the ink drip down the plastic & smoke
blooming up into the ceiling until we choke on it.
I picture myself pleading with a vampire, Twilight
or otherwise. Bite me, I'd beg. Turn me. I don't give
a shit about death. I want to disappear. I picture
myself cutting myself out of photos, manic, scissor
happy, watching the scraps of my face falling onto
the floor. She's fucking crazy, they'd say, and I'd bask
in it. But my hands do not burst into flame, & I am
still wretchedly mortal, & I still exist in photos. & I
still exist. & I am not a ghost. Ma, I mouth, I wish
I were paler. Ma, I wish. Ma,

Celina Zhou

Grade 11, Ladue Horton Watkins High
School

Educator: Abigail Eisenberg

Poetry



Laws of Attraction

Last year on your birthday you bleached your hair
with Edith over her bathroom sink until it was bone
pale and just as brittle, and you were two blond yellow
girls, and she pressed her face to yours, flesh to flesh,
root to root, crooning (*Look, we could be sisters*),
but she fucking hated her sister and you knew her
better than Ellen ever could; you knew how some nights
she dreamt of cutting into the belly of a god or maybe
it was God and carving out her sins, spilling them into
Him; how the moles on her left shoulder looked like
Ursa Major and you told her so every time you kissed
her (*Sometimes I breathe you in and I choke on stars*);
how she loved dancing with you in her bedroom
to Father John Misty in the night, your bleached hair
whirling, incandescent, trapping slivers of lamplight,
spinning until it was only the two of you in your own
plane of being, loose limbed and smudged together
in the dark; on one of those nights you showed her
a study you found on *Nature* about human attraction
and homogeneity, how people are attracted to people
who look like them, and she scoffed and she called

it eugenicist bullshit, but then quieter she said (*We want to think we can be better than we are*) and you pressed yourself into the shape of her fisted hands and pulled your words over her skin (*Maybe we're just trying to love ourselves*); on one of those nights you told her what your mother had told you, years ago, at the first slash of blood at your thighs, that your body was a temple for men to raze; when your breath ran out she kissed you softly and spoke into your slotted mouths, bruised your voices into one — (*We're not a man / we're a mirror*).

Celina Zhou

Grade 11, Ladue Horton Watkins High
School

Educator: Abigail Eisenberg

Poetry



Portrait of the Physicist Giving My Eulogy

He doesn't bother with pleasantries, with all the *she loved*
and was loved's — he knows what inevitability is, how inertia
is proportional to loss, how I rotted in steps. He knows
it is not enough.

The laws of thermodynamics
dictate that the universe cycles infinitely
towards equal distribution. Humans are
flashpoints of heat, hoarders of energy,
and that is why we die. The macrocosm breaks
us apart and subsumes us into itself.

He doesn't think about my corpse decaying behind him; the glass vacancy
bleeding over my eyes, my skin spooling loose and slipping away. He thinks
about the sky, about my body starbirding against his Mazda sunroof, about
my voice refracting in the wind. How all the poets die young and how
every great space odyssey is a tragedy and how we were of the same kind,
he and I: the kind of people who press up so close to the universe
that we can't help giving ourselves back to it.

But, while lives are open systems,
existence is a closed one. Everything that is

*is conserved. Every particle and every joule
that made up who she was will remain, their
paths irreversibly changed by their time
constituting her body. They will simply
be more disordered than before*

and what he means is that I'll be out there, circling into the endless dust, until
the heat death of the universe. The churchlight is breaking through the cold,
and he is trapping his lament in his ribs to swallow the waves. He is forgetting
the difference between entropy and elegy. He is dreaming of kneeling by the
casket,

his back bow-drawn over the altar. In the dream he lays his voice into my open
throat & bruises apart his grief, batters it tender, consolable. In the dream we are
the reason Ma learns to glut on her vertigo, rolling it through her porcelain teeth.
In the dream he tells me *You exist*
and is that not enough?

Celina Zhou

Grade 11, Ladue Horton Watkins High
School

Educator: Abigail Eisenberg
Flash Fiction



WHEN WE WERE SEVENTEEN, I TOLD YOU, “SMOKING WILL KILL YOU SOMEDAY,”

and you laughed, and you said, “That’s the point.”

I remember this day clearly: it was exactly nine years ago when I met your eyes. You were newly seventeen, and we were sprawled out on the hood of your car in the middle of a cornfield off of I-70. It was fall, post-harvest, and the fields around us were already barren and scorched to the roots to reveal the dark, ashen earth beneath. Only this one remained unburnt, stubbornly clinging to life.

We’d both gotten the weather alerts on our phones that morning — *RECORD DRYNESS: FIRE WARNING* — and the emails from the news telling everyone in the area to stay inside. I’d dragged my feet when you’d turned up on my driveway with your Camry and a pack of cigs, but you’d linked your arm through mine, fixed me with those expectant eyes, and said, “Please? It’s my birthday,” and I’d caved. Mama always told me I was too steady, fixed like a fiercely rooted tree — but I was soft for you, always, pithy and tender and rotting at the heart.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

You shrugged. “Can’t see myself living past twenty-five.”

I frowned at you, but you just grinned, full of teeth, your eyes curving into crescents.

“C’mon, think about it,” you said. “Imagine me wrinkly and old. I think I’d hate it.”

You loved old things, though. You'd spent hours with me wandering the Met when we'd taken a road trip to New York over spring break, drinking in the dim lights and glass with torturous rapture. Whenever we passed some old artifact that sparked your memory, you'd hook your chin over my shoulder and your thumbs through the belt loops of my jeans and murmur in my ear a fragment of translated Mayan poetry or Sufi ghazals. And you told me, once, that you loved my eyes because they made you think of dust and empty churches and deep woods and silence. Even now, on occasion, when I'm least expecting it, I catch my own gaze in the mirror, remember your words, and wonder if you would still love these tired eyes if you were with me now.

In the dry silence, you reached over to take my hand in yours, tapping your index finger against my wrist hummingbird-beat fast, before slowing your rhythm until it matched the low thrum of my pulse.

"Don't look so sad," you said. "I think you'll live forever."

This is what I didn't say then: I wanted to. I would have loved you endlessly if only you'd let me.

"If you say so," I murmured.

You smiled in that incandescent way of yours, the way that pulled away your human veneer and revealed the struck-match, flashfire creature beneath, the way that you smiled when you felt as though you'd already won.

It's been eleven months and seven days since I last saw you. I didn't go to your funeral, you know — I should have, but there was part of me that knew there was nothing left in that body worth mourning. You were already gone.

I come to the plains to grieve you instead, to the ashes and cornfields and empty space.

It's October again, and in the open air, I light a match and watch the smoke billow upward, outward, until it drifts far out of my sight. Or maybe it just fades away.

I'm twenty-six and you'll always be twenty-five, but still I say to the dying, newborn fire, "Happy birthday."