

Gold 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 Gold Medal 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

Tsion Ananeia	Just Us	5
Toni Bamimore	Propaganda Makes the World Go Round	9
Casper Boll	The Butler Did It!	12
Jerry Chang	The Box	28
Isabell Cox-Garleanu	Blue Rhythm	31
Isabell Cox-Garleanu	Eulogy for My Living Son	32
Isabell Cox-Garleanu	Red Dress	34
Cameron Dryden	To the Moon and Back	37
Anjali George	First Daughters	41
Meona Hou	Bull. Crap.	48
Felicity Jackson	Parade!	49
Lakin Jaeger	The Letter	51
Isaah Kandula	The End of Assad: A New Era for Syria and the Middle East	54
Grace Kwak	A Love Letter to the Child I Used to Be	61
Valery Liang	Autumn Ghosts	64
Valery Liang	Eight Instance Where I Become Chinese	72
Valery Liang	Meigui	77
Valery Liang	Strangeland	81

Table of Contents

Valery Liang	The World You Are Looking For is ...	83
Alzhraa Mahmoud	Unveiling	85
Claire Masterson	Pulled From Orbit	91
Hannah Mathew	A Contradictory God: Understanding God's Care and Condemnation	98
Jamie Park	A Breakup Letter to AP Chem	105
Ira Rodrigues	Cycles of Self	107
Ira Rodrigues	Gateway to Dreams	111
Isabel Sapp	Dear Cain's Wife, with Love	114
Mira Schoewe	Eyes for Love	116
Gillian Sellet	The Antidote—A Portfolio	120
Ella Wang	Breath In and Breath Out	141
Isabella Wang	Trefoils	147
Jackson Wilks	Humbled on the Field	149
Jonathan Windsor Jr.	Blood Wars	152
Morgan Wright	Tea Through Time	160
Samuel Yao	The Pill	163

Table of Contents

Ziva Ye	A World of Color	166
Alisha Yin	Man Xia Lai	174
Celina Zhou	AKATHISIA	178
Celina Zhou	Monstrosity in the Absence of the Mother: Genesis and Corruption in Frankenstein	186
Celina Zhou	The Gas Station Prophet	190
Celina Zhou	The Ghost Ships of Theseus	198

Tsion Ananeia

Grade 8, Congress Middle School

Educator: Alyssa Contreras

Personal Essay and Memoir



Just Us

The tables shake eagerly and with ease, and it feels like millions of kids use them. Swiftly, the exit door creaks open seamlessly. “Tsion! You’re checking out.” The teacher announces. As soon as the words leave the after-school club teacher’s mouth, my eyes immediately flash to the door. Snatching my backpack in less than one millisecond, I race to exit the door, without looking back once. Wind gusts across my face and blows through my dark, voluminous, packed, curly hair. My tiny arms ram around my mother’s waist, pulling her into a mellow, secure, warm hug. “Mommy!” I yelp, my face stuffed against her body. She pulls my cheeks and grins. As we start to walk away, she smiles and waves at the teacher, holding my hand.

We jump into her car. As I buckle up, my ears are stunned and ecstatic as my mom turns up the radio’s volume. She pulls out of the parking lot, as we sing to the songs together. This is my favorite song! “24 karat magic in the AAAIRRR!” I belt out, my mom beams at me. She tries to finish the lyrics but fails miserably. “And head to nose, so prayer, ah, LOOK OUT!” she performs, bopping her head. I sigh slap my forehead and giggle, covering my face. She chuckles. “Did I do it again?” I nod and continue to laugh. We pull into our parking lot, still laughing at her error. I unbuckle my seat belt and the wind bashes me in the face as she opens the door. As we arrive home, I run upstairs to remove my backpack, grabbing my orange slices and my book out of it. I turn to the living room, amazed gazing at the tall, glowing Christmas tree, that we fixed up the night before. Unknowing time passes by as soon as I sit on the couch, reading my book. Suddenly, I catch a figure in my peripheral vision. My eyes unfocus on my book, slowly pulling my head towards the figure. Mom?

“BOO!” My mom shouts laughing. She waves with a smirk, holding up and shaking a shining, glittery, gift-wrapped bag. I smile, shocked, gazing at the bag in astonishment.

“You scared me!” I laugh. “What’s that?” I ask, dropping my book on the floor, and running to her. She tells me to sit down and I do. She starts explaining the item in the bag, but my ears decide to decline. My eyes twinkle as my mother moves the small, shining bag around. As soon as I hear the words “open it” I charge towards my mom. She backs up against the wall, laughing.

“Calm down, I’ll give it to you alright!” she spits. I laugh and put my hands out, heavily shutting my eyes. Abruptly, I gasp, feeling a soft, fuzzy item, plopping into my hands. A warm smile that I couldn’t resist, runs across my face.

“Open your eyes!” she whispers. The excitement starts to build up, my hands spark with thrill. I peeked out of one eye to see what treasured object was in the space of my hands. My eyes widen, as time decelerates. The gift shines, shimmers, and twinkles like an unopened treasure chest, so bright that it blinds any eye. Swiftly, the gift blends and fades into its natural figure. My mouth drops in front of my mom, smiling at my reaction. I gulp, speechless.

“Y-you got me the Beanie Boo Pink Unicorn?” I slowly release. My mom nodded, laughing, while my mouth was still on the floor. Why can’t I get any words out? Dropping the toy, I dash to my mom, pulling her into a warm embrace.

“Thank you,” I say, holding her tight. She smiles, putting me down.

“Remember when I told you that one day at the mall that I wasn’t going to get it for you?” She asks. I roll my eyes, laughing, picking the toy up. I hug the toy, closing my eyes. Its’ dark, twinkling eyes gaze at me. Humming, I sit down on the couch, mesmerized by it. My mom quickly grabs her phone to cherish this moment. She snaps a picture of me, holding my new, favorite toy. I pose, holding up two fingers with my eyes closed. After the photo is taken, she sits down beside me. I turn around with a smile.

“But you said that day that it was too expensive. Why did you get it now?” I ask, waving the toy in her face.

“I know, but you seemed so happy that day, playing with it in the store,” she responds. I nod, looking down.

“But it feels wrong. Why is it okay now if it was expensive then?” I add. she smiles.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. Sometimes I want to celebrate you. I want to show you my love for you.” she replies, kneeling to meet my eyes. I hug my stuffed animal tightly, cradling it.

“What if I lose it like I do with all my other toys?” I frown.

“I guess that can happen,” she responds. I gasp. She looks me in the eyes and asks, “Remember the fun we have in the car together? Or when we do karaoke? It’s the memories that matter.”

“So it’s not just about the toy?” I question. She nods.

“Yes, it is about the moments and love we share, ” she announces, caressing my cheek with her soft cold hand. “I love you, you know?”

“I love you too, Mom,” I utter. I pull her into a warm embrace, reinforcing our bond for years to come.

Toni Bamimore

Grade 8, John Burroughs School
Critical Essay



Propaganda Makes The World Go Round

All Quiet on the Western Front (1929), Beasts of No Nation (2015), and the “United We Win” poster (1943) are all from wildly different points in history. All Quiet on the Western Front depicts the horrors of war, specifically World War One, from the perspective of a young German boy. Beasts of No Nation, the most modern of the three, brings forth the story of a boy grappling with a fictional but accurate West-African War in the twenty-first century. And the “United We Win” poster meets the other two in the middle with its purpose being to recruit American soldiers in World War 2. The string bringing each of these works together stretches time to a startling degree, truly dating back to ancient times. Each of these works—whether they are aware of it or not—collectively depict the role of nationalism in manipulating the soldier’s mind before his hands have even felt the cloth of the uniform. They all go to prove the point that the very idea of patriotism is a social construct created to maneuver certain members of a society into the spots created for them by their leaders and, in these cases, military officials. To love your nation is, sadly, to love your own destruction.

In All Quiet on the Western Front (1929), author Erich Remarque is not shy in his depiction of nationalism, painting it as a weapon to recruit soldiers and simultaneously annihilate their sense of self. We see this plainly in the enlistment process of Paul and his schoolmates at 19 years old. The boys adopt many of their initial ideas from Kantorek, their schoolmaster and main authority figure. He deliberately feeds each of the boys German propaganda and convinces them all to adopt it as their own. The specific morsels he fed them were simple to chew on and disgustingly 2D. *Germany is good! France is bad! France is mean to Germany! Let’s get them!* Funny enough, Kantorek, with his constant praise in favor of the German army, does not enlist himself in the war. It’s his decision.

He's a grown adult and, in the grand scheme of things, merely a teacher. But to the boys, he is so much more. Kantorek serves as their introduction to the world. The good. The bad. And the morally gray. So for him to sing them songs of war while running away from it himself is disgusting and, frankly, manipulative. Because of this, Kantorek becomes the book's first explicit example of an authority figure using propaganda and the innate love of one's nation to sway young men into serving his ultimate agenda; one could easily and rightfully argue however that the most prominent example occurred long before the actual beginning of the story. And one does. Only after the boys witness the death of their close friend and the slaughter of too many innocent young men do they reflect on how ridiculous their enlistment decision was. Tjaden, one of the boys in the original group of hopeful fighters, responds to a claim made by an older boy in the troop that they are fighting because of their country's issue with France: "A country? I don't follow. A mountain in Germany cannot offend a mountain in France" (203). Through this near accusation, Tjaden becomes the first member of the group to criticize the national generalization ingrained into their brains. What does it mean for "countries" to fight when they are truly nothing more than land? When they were being marketed the war in their youth, the scale was deliberately enlarged, minimizing the ability to closely inspect the morality and factuality of the war. It was never their political leader. It was always *Germany*. Never intimate deaths of children and brothers. Always *wins* and *losses*. Because what proper German can watch their beautiful country crumble and take no action? In loving his nation, the soldier has become prey, and, again, Tjaden brings this point to a head: "I haven't any business here at all. I don't feel myself offended" (203). His bravery comes in the form of forcing the boys to confront the truth: they are not fighting for their "motherland," rather the ideals of a few shrinking men looking down upon the battlefields like abnormally bloody chess boards.

Nearly a hundred years later, *Beasts of No Nation* handled a similar topic but, being set in a different continent, was presented with entirely new challenges in terms of recruitment. In West Africa, recognized nations are not nearly as defining as tribes. The *strength* of the loyalty remains, only to a much smaller group. The film follows a young boy, Agu, after he loses his home and family in the violence of a Civil War. Agu is soon adopted by a powerful man, the Commandant, who indoctrinates him into his personal army. Agu could not have known this, but the Commandant typically and deliberately preys on young boys, specifically those who have just lost a significant part of their identity. Their

homes. Their brothers. Their sisters. Their mothers. The Commandant's army becomes an informal orphanage for broken down boys. What better group is there to form a nation out of than those without an identity? To truly become a nation, he needed to provide the boys with an identity, and to foster their loyalty, this identity needed to be shared. A culture. Through initiation rituals, uniforms, and group-sung chants, the commandant forms a tribe of his own. A tribe of lost boys. He molds a group that is not only willing to kill for the tribe but die for it too until their—his—goal is reached. And he abuses this loyalty in every possible way. The Commandant rapes Agu, and the audience is meant to assume that he is far from the first victim, for when Agu emerges from the tent, clearly shaken, the other boys comfort him in an understood silence. What they do *not* do, however, despite their numbers, is confront the Commandant, collectively convinced that their passivity is for the "greater good." The Commandant is a terrifyingly accurate depiction of how the inherent idea of owed loyalty to one's country, patriotism at its core, is a destructive tool used to force those down below into helping those above.

Every point made in 1929 and 2015 comes to a head in the "United We Win" poster of 1943, encouraging Americans to enlist in the newest world war. The flag is highlighted almost obnoxiously in the poster, as if to remind whoever sees it that they are American and must act as such. What truly makes the image striking, however, is *who* exactly is featured on the poster: two men, one white and one *black*. After centuries of being treated as subhuman, the black man has finally found his way into the sun of the American flag. This is not because his existence as a human being is now and forever respected. The black man is now an American man because *anyone* can be...if they cater unflinchingly to the country's new needs. To red stripes, white people, and blue eyes, black men are only tolerable because the military, and, therefore, death called for *all* men. *Now*, they are equal. And with the modern ability to inspect history, one can see how quickly the black man was pushed into the shade when the dollars of white supremacists called the country's name. The black man became a slave once again because that is the *American* way. An American exists and is treated according to his country's current needs. That poster whispered freedom to the "property." *"Die for the country that wanted you dead."*

All Quiet on the Western Front (1929), Beasts of No Nation (2015), and the 1943 "United We Win" poster are separated by time but are once again united by themes of dangerous nationalism. Each work boldly or subtly depicts the role of nationalism in the manipulation of a future soldier's mind. And each suggests,

whether they know it or not, that patriotism is a social construct created to ensure citizens remain in the positions created for them by the leaders of a nation and its military officials. So hang your flag in your house and wear it on your shirt when you sleep. Just know that when wartime comes, you will be obliged to bleed.

Casper Boll

Grade 12, Lindbergh High School
Dramatic Script



The Butler Did It!

SUMMARY

When eccentric tycoon Aaron Gans senses betrayal in the air, he invites his closest associates to a dinner party in order to save face: Ira Mossit, his quick-to-anger ex-wife with a burning passion for loyalty; Mila Mortali, his former business partner, still feeling betrayed after he pulled funds from her ultimate money-making scheme; Claude Meret, a Parisian “film”star who Aaron worked with, and who hasn’t forgotten his lingering debts; Ava Ritia, his closest-living relative, who greatly admires Aaron despite never meeting him before; and Samuel Ritia, Ava’s cool-as-a-cucumber brother who can’t pull his eyes away from his Gameboy; all welcomed by Ivor Pinchern, Aaron’s longtime butler and number one confidant. Will Aaron be able to rebuild old bridges, or will the ghosts of his past take him with them?

The following excerpt are the first 14 pages of a 28-page script.

INT. BEDROOM

On one side of the room, a tea table with one chair. On the opposite side of the room, a regal bed. Two standing mirrors are in the room. A well-dressed man, AARON, is pacing the room nervously. IVOR, the butler, enters, carrying a tea set.

IVOR

I’ve brought your tea, Sir Aaron.

IVOR notices AARON’s pacing.

IVOR (CONT'D)

Is something the matter?

IVOR sets the tea set on the table and begins preparing tea.

AARON

What? No, no. I just want to make sure everything goes smoothly this evening.

IVOR

I can assure you it will. All the gifts are in order, and all of the meals are prepared.

But I am curious... what's so special about tonight?

AARON

Well... ehm... I suppose I should tell you the truth.

IVOR

Oh?

AARON pulls a chair from the table and sits down.

AARON

You see, I've been concerned that one of my associates would soon... oh, I don't know... betray me.

IVOR suddenly drops the tea cup he was holding, tea spilling out onto the floor. IVOR gets onto the ground and dabs up the spilt tea with a napkin.

IVOR

Wh- where did you ever get that impression?

AARON

I'm not sure... just a feeling in my gut that somebody was out to get me.

Somebody close to me, even.

IVOR

Why, that's nonsense. Must be something with- the weather. You know, mercury is in retrograde.

AARON

Are you... disagreeing with me?

IVOR

No, no, no, not at all, Sir. I just think you need to... relax. It's hard work collecting wealth, I bet.

AARON props his feet up on the table, reclining in his chair.

AARON

Believe me Ivor, you have no idea.

IVOR

(sarcastic) I certainly don't.

AARON

Regardless, I wanted to invite all of my associates to dinner tonight to... make amends. An image boost, if you will.

IVOR

(muttering) You and your image.

AARON

What was that?

IVOR

Why, your image, Sir! It's your most enviable quality. I can't imagine that anyone could wish harm on such a charismatic man as yourself.

AARON

Right as always, Ivor. But still... this dinner party is starting to feel like a bad idea.

IVOR pours a new cup of tea in front of sitting AARON.

IVOR

It's never too late to cancel, Sir.

AARON

You're right. Let's just... call the whole thing off.

IVOR

It's done. By the way, your hair- it's a bit crooked.

AARON gasps and shoots over to a standing mirror to fix it. IVOR takes a vial from his pocket and pours the substance into the tea before stirring it in. AARON turns back to IVOR.

AARON

How's this?

IVOR

Perfect, Sir.

AARON sighs with relief and sits back down in his chair.

AARON sips his tea for a moment, then looks to IVOR standing by the door.

AARON

Well, what are you waiting for? Go downstairs and make sure none of them get in.

IVOR

Yes, Sir.

IVOR exits. Lights down.

INT. LIVING ROOM

A couch sits in the middle of the room, with a coffee table in front. Lounge chairs sit on either side of the couch.

AVA, IRA, MILA, CLAUDE, and SAMUEL sit in awkward silence.

MILA

So, how about this weather, hm?

Silence.

IRA

(sniffing the air) Does anybody smell that?

ALL

(resounding agreement)

CLAUDE

Ah, it takes me back to my home in Paris. Ze smell of rat poison.

ALL look at him, confused.

CLAUDE (CONT'D)

Rat poison? Do zey not have it in America?

SAMUEL

Ohhhh, I get it. (finger quotes) "Rat poison" huhuhuh. That's a good one, I gotta remember that.

MILA

(to Claude) No, we have it in America, dear. But maybe you could, er, enlighten us as to how it reminds you of home?

CLAUDE

Why, Paris is not only ze city of love, but also ze city of rats. So I guess you can say zat I am bit of expert in both. Wink wink.

AVA

And you use, like, poison?

CLAUDE

Moi? Oh non non non, not at all! Ze poison slows down zeir tiny little hearts and puts zem into a deep sleep. Doesn't even kill zem half ze time. Non, too merciful. I believe in snapping zem in ze neck wiz a simple trap. Zat works every time.

MILA

God, that's so cruel! Those little rats didn't do anything wrong.

CLAUDE

You are mistaken; I have seen zem eat human flesh and blood, wizout hesitation.

MILA

And what's so wrong with that?

Everyone looks at MILA.

MILA (CONT'D)

(ad lib) I mean, um, like, for a rat, to do, in a survival situation, you know, like, not like, for a human to do, or anything like-

IRA

(interrupting) You know, you look familiar. Remind me how you know Aaron?

MILA

We're old business partners. I'm Mila, by the way. And you are?

IRA

(to Claude) And how about you, Mister Rat?

CLAUDE

(offended) My name is Claude! Claude Meret. And I'm afraid I cannot disclose, for I have signed what you Americans would call, eh, Non-Disclose Agreement. All I can tell you is zat we made some riveting, eh, *films*.

IRA

What a coincidence; he made me sign one of those when we got divorced.

MILA

And he made me sign one when- um. While we were doing business.

AVA

You guys are like, soooooo lucky! I never signed any NDAs with Uncle Aaron.

IRA

(gulps) Uncle, you say?

AVA

Technically, he's my father-in-laws cousin's half-sister's brother's daughter's grandfather's son. But my brother and I always saw him as, like, an Uncle figure. Right, Samuel?

IVOR is onstage, about to enter the room.

SAMUEL

What? Uh, yeah. Whatever you said. Huhuh, rat poison. Huhuh.

IVOR is caught off guard. He enters.

IVOR

(anxious) Rat poison? There's no rat poison here.

IRA

Well, well, well. Fancy seeing you after all these years. I really thought you would've gotten sick of him by now.

IVOR

Good evening, Ira. Mila. Claude. And, I'm guessing you two (pointing to AVA and SAMUEL) are Ava and Samuel Ritia. Well, it's certainly nice to see you all together like this. But I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you all to leave.

ALL

(gasp) / What? / Are you kidding?

IVOR

Yes, I'm sorry, but the dinner party has been cancelled. (shooing) Go along, now.

IRA

No, no, no. I have waited far too long for his apology. I refuse to wait any longer.

AVA

And we would, like, totally love to meet our Uncle in person. Right, Samuel?

SAMUEL shrugs.

MILA

(tearing up) Ugh, this is just like Aaron. Abandoning me at the last second- us! I mean us! Abandoning us!

CLAUDE

Oui, I am wiz ze angry lady. He never repaid his... debt to me. I won't leave until he does. In fact, I demand to speak to him right now.

MILA

(composed) Yes, please let us speak to him, dear.

IRA

I agree. We're not leaving this place until we get what we deserve.

IVOR has an idea.

IVOR

What you deserve, you say? Well, I have good news. Aaron has actually arranged presents specially chosen for each of you.

ALL

Presents? / Wow! / Really?

IVOR

He requested that they be opened in a particular order, so please don't open your gift until I've instructed you to do so.

IVOR picks up a dining tray with everyone's gifts on them. He passes them out one by one until only one remains. He pulls a note from his pocket.

IVOR (CONT'D)

And it looks like I'm going first.

IVOR opens the gift and pulls out a box of tea identical to the one from earlier. His face drops.

IVOR (CONT'D)

Oh.

MILA

What is it, dear?

IVOR

It's Aaron's favorite brand of tea.

ALL seem put off, except for AVA.

AVA

Wow, I'd be, like, honored if I were you! My uncle really is a generous guy!

IVOR

(looking off into the distance) He... certainly is.

CLAUDE

So, who is second?

IVOR snaps out of it and checks his notecard.

IVOR

Yes, yes, that would be.... Samuel.

SAMUEL

'sup.

IVOR

Um. It's your turn to open your gift.

SAMUEL

Cool beans.

SAMUEL opens his present. It's a... pillow?

SAMUEL (CONT'D)

Hell yes, dude! Thank you my guy!

He fist bumps a confused IVOR.

IVOR

I mean, it's not from me, it's... oh, nevermind. Mila, your turn.

MILA

Okay, this is fun.

She opens the gift and, one-by-one, pulls out a scalpel, a syringe, and a... fork?

MILA (CONT'D)

(feigned joy) Supplies for work... Yaaaay...

CLAUDE

You are a doctor?

MILA

(laughing) Oh, kind of the opposite, dear. I'm a mortician.

CLAUDE

I did not know zat mortuaries use forks in America.

MILA, still holding the fork, quickly puts it back down.

MILA

Oh, we don't, haha, I'm not sure how that got in there, haha.

IVOR

Ahem. Ira?

IRA

This better be good.

IRA opens the gift. Her face contorts. She pulls out throwing knives.

IVOR

I almost forgot; he had a note for you (retrieves note from pocket, clears throat, reads aloud) "For my sharp shooter."

IRA

(high-pitched) Hm.

MILA

What does that mean, dear?

IRA

(grating) Oh, it's just this... little joke we had. About the time... that I threw a knife at him.

ALL recoil in shock.

IRA (CONT'D)

(taking sharp breaths) Well, I missed, of course. And now he'll never let me forget it.

IVOR

(sarcastic) How... romantic. (beat). Claude.

CLAUDE

Oui?

IVOR nods to the gift in CLAUDE's hands.

CLAUDE (CONT'D)

Ah.

CLAUDE opens the gift and pulls out a rope.

ALL

(feigned delight) Ahhh! / How... nice! / Wow!

IRA

What use have you got for a dirty old rope?

CLAUDE

(mischievous) Oh, I am sure I can sink of something.

ALL

Gross! / Ew! / (groan in disgust)

IVOR

Well, on that note, it's-

AVA

My turn! Right, mister butler man?

IVOR

Yes, Ava.

AVA

Okay! (opens present, pulls out golden pistol)

ALL gasp.

IVOR

(in disbelief) Sir Aaron's golden pistol is his most prized possession. And he gave it... to you?

ALL look at IVOR.

IVOR (CONT'D)

(through grated teeth) Ehm, his beloved niece. Of course! Who else?

IRA

Who else? All of us, who else! I got (holds up knives) this joke, Mila got surgery equipment, Claude got a rope, and Samuel got a pillow, for God's sake! It's not fair that you should get-

IRA reaches for the pistol. AVA instinctively slaps her in the face.

AVA

(screaming) IT'S MINE! NOT YOURS!

AVA holds the gun tightly to her chest. Everyone is looking at her.

AVA (CONT'D)

Oh. (giggles) Sorry about that, haha. I just don't think it'd be right to, like, go against Uncle Aaron's wishes.

MILA helps IRA up.

IRA

Um. Yeah. Sorry Ava.

IVOR

Well, this evening has been... something. But, like all things, it must end.

CLAUDE

But ze night has only just begun!

MILA

Yes, what kind of 'dinner party' skips the dinner?

AVA

I'm not leaving until I can thank my Uncle for his gift.

IRA

And I'm not going anywhere until I can give him a piece of my mind.

SAMUEL

And I kinda wanna go home.

ALL look at SAMUEL.

SAMUEL (CONT'D)

I mean- uh- yeah, let's stay.

IVOR

(sigh) Alright. I suppose we can proceed to dinner.

INT. DINING ROOM

A long dining table with five chairs on the back side and a chair on both ends. IVOR, CLAUDE, MILA, IRA, and AVA enter, with IVOR sitting at either end of the table, CLAUDE sitting next to him, and so on. CLAUDE notices the unusual chair orientation.

CLAUDE

What is zis, ze last supper?

IVOR

(muttering) Don't worry about it.

MILA

(trying to sound polite) So, our host will or will not be joining us for the dinner portion of the dinner party?

IVOR

(playful) Mila, you and I both know how flaky Aaron can be... especially given your "history."

IRA gives MILA a look.

MILA

(stilted) Yes, our business history.

IVOR

(realizing he effed up) Right, yes, of course. Certainly.

IRA

Uhm. Why don't you tell us more about this business, dear?

ALL are looking at MILA.

MILA

Well, you see, um- hey, where'd the kid go?

ALL look at the empty seat where SAMUEL should be.

AVA

He's probably asleep or whatever. He's, like, a total somnomanic.

MILA

Maybe we should bring him here? I could-

IVOR

(interrupting her) I'll get him myself. I'd rather not risk any of you bothering Sir Aaron.

MILA

(standing up) Maybe-

IVOR

(interrupting her) And while I'm gone, don't let anyone leave this room. (exits)

CLAUDE

So, Ms. Mortuary, tell us all about zis so-called "business".

AVA

Oh my God, yes, I'm literally dying to hear it.

MILA

Well, um, the truth is, I- I have to powder my nose!

MILA runs out of the room before anyone can stop her. IRA stands up to chase after her.

CLAUDE stops IRA.

CLAUDE

Ms. Angry Lady, take deep breath. Sit down, have some champagne, let your anger subside.

CLAUDE starts massaging her shoulders. IRA is completely subdued.

CLAUDE (CONT'D)

(directed at AVA) Little girl, go and fetch hysteric woman. Me and Angry Lady have alone time now, wink wink.

IRA snaps out of it and slaps him in the face.

IRA

Ugh, you sick freak! I'm going to-

IRA starts towards the door when IVOR enters, leading a sleepwalking Samuel, pushing IRA away.

IVOR

(IVOR gently pushes SAMUEL towards IRA's chair, SAMUEL sits down without waking) Found him sleepwalking the halls. You really ought to put a bell on him or something, Ms. Ritia.

IRA

Move out of my way, you lummoX! I can't stand another minute with this pervert!

IVOR

Good heavens Miss Mossit, settle down. What happened while I was gone? (looks around) And where is Miss Mortali? I told you not to let anyone-

IRA slaps him in the face. He reels away from the door. In his shock, she exits.

CLAUDE

(giggling) Oh, hysteric woman.

IVOR

Is this funny to you, you little-

MILA enters dramatically; without realizing, she grabs onto Samuel, who is still sitting in IRA's chair.

MILA

(nearly sobbing) FINE, I CONFESS! I SLEPT WITH AARON GANS! BUT I DIDN'T KNOW HE WAS MARRIED, YOU HAVE TO BELIEVE ME! PLEASE, IRA, YOU HAVE TO-

SAMUEL

Woah, take a chill pill, lady.

MILA opens her eyes and reels back in horror.

MILA

Ugh! But- where-

IVOR

(finishing her sentence) -is Ms. Mossit? She just left. Which none of you are doing from now on.

MILA

(returning to her seat) D- do you think she knows? What I did?

IVOR

Let's not worry about that now.

MILA

Oh, God, she must hate me. But she has to understand- it meant nothing! To either of us! Nothing, I swear!

MILA sobs. IVOR attempts to quiet her.

CLAUDE

Well, if you are searching for something zat means nothing...

IVOR splashes MILA's wine in CLAUDE's face and gives him a dirty look.

CLAUDE (CONT'D)

Ugh, you close-minded Americans. I am out of here!

CLAUDE exits, slamming the door behind him. IVOR jumps.

IVOR

No- wait! Gah!

IVOR goes to the door.

MILA

And now you're leaving too?

IVOR sighs, returns to MILA. IRA enters and takes IVOR's seat, refusing to make eye contact. Beat of silence.

IVOR

Well, now that most of us are here, I suppose I'll divulge the details of our dinner. *Although the following speech has been included in full, it should not reach completion before CLAUDE's interruption. It is up to actor/director discretion at which point the speech shall be interrupted by CLAUDE.*

IVOR (CONT'D)

For myself, the chefs have prepared Aaron's favorite dish: white truffle wagyu with artisan brussel sprouts.

AVA

Wow, my uncle really has classy taste...

IVOR

For Samuel, roasted turkey with an almond cranberry reduction.

SAMUEL

Sweet.

IVOR

For Mila, raw liver and heart. Ehm... he didn't specify which animal.

MILA

(wiping tears) Well... I do appreciate a bloody surprise...

IVOR

For Ira, roasted boar with sauteed asparagus.

IRA is silent.

IVOR (CONT'D)

For Claude, cooked rabbit with potatoes. Of course, he's not here. (beat) And finally, for Ava, saffron bluefin tuna topped with gold-flaked caviar.

CLAUDE (OFFSTAGE)

(screams)

ALL turn their heads towards the noise.

SAMUEL

What the dink is that noise?

Fade to black.

Jerry Chang

Grade 11, John Burroughs School

Educators: Joy Gebhardt

Flash Fiction



The Box

The man's wide eyes scanned the scene around him. It was grand opening day, yet the only sound in the town came from the dirt crunching under his feet. His gaze wandered from the battered remains of houses to the burnt doors of shops and then to the crumbling pillars that once held up the temple. As the man looked down, the sight of bodies scattered across the ground swarmed his vision.

"If only there had never been a box in the first place, then maybe this village would still have its people," he muttered through gritted teeth.

* * *

A few months before, the box had washed up on the shore of the town, and after being discovered by a few villagers, it was taken into the temple. The priest examined the box with his eyebrows scrunched, and after a minute of silence, he declared it to be a heaven-sent gift. It was an auspicious box that would "bless the village with happiness and prosperity," he exclaimed. So, the townspeople promptly declared a grand opening day for the box. Excited chatter echoed throughout the village, and eager smiles lit up many faces.

But with such a blessing in the village's possession, greedy eyes lingered on the crate. In the time leading up to the opening day, increasing numbers of scratches and dents marred the box's sturdy wooden shell. And though it was a period of great excitement, a cloud of tension had settled over the town, smothering its once cheerful atmosphere. Silence struck the village, with only whispers drifting through the air. Narrowed eyes darted around, observing their surroundings with a heightened vigilance. From sunrise to sunset, the priest's brow glistened with beads of sweat as he stood guard over the box.

One evening, as the priest was pacing around the crate, a sharp pain flashed through his body. Hands clutching his side and face twisted up, his eyes caught sight of a villager, then a glint of silver, then blackness. Doors began swinging open, and a crowd of people gathered around the priest's collapsed body in front of the church. While some tended to the priest with racing hearts, others stood over him, sneering. Murmurs and shouts began to fill the night sky.

"He deserved it." someone announced.

"How can you say that?" another villager cried out desperately.

"Oh, just open the box already!" someone else complained.

"No!"

More and more heads turned toward each other, hearts beating angrily and fists tightened by their sides. As life slowly drained out of the priest's body, the town turned on each other, and chaos ensued. By the end of the week, nearly every villager had blood on their hands.

* * *

Fists clenched, the man shouted curses at the sky until his voice could no longer hold. As he finally took in the scene around him with a hollow heart, tears splattered onto the dirt. It was now grand opening day, and the box sat in front of him, waiting to be opened. His reddened eyes locked with the lifeless ones of his mother, then his father, and then his friend, all sprawled out on the ground. Shoulders shaking uncontrollably, he sank to his knees and let the tears flow.

After his tears had dried, the man looked around once more at the silent, desolate surroundings. His trembling hands reached out and brushed the box, wiping dust off the top. Pressing a palm on the side of the crate, he closed his eyes and tried to picture what joyous items it contained. But, instead of a hopeful smile, he grimaced and squeezed his eyes tight, for he could only picture his village in ruins. Taking his hand off the box, the man shook his head and stepped away. He swiftly paced around and around, tugging forcefully on his hair, glaring at the box, and then shifting his gaze away again. Holding his head in his hands, he let out a shaky sigh and reached for the box again when his senses awakened with memory. Screams and cries filled the man's ears, and he quickly clamped his hands down on them to silence the sounds. His nose flared as he smelled burning buildings and skies filled with charred flesh. His hair stood on end when he looked back down at the countless corpses around him, and his vision blurred with red. He bit down on his teeth to bridle a vengeful scream. Breathing shakily, the man picked up the box and carried it to the town's shore.

The water rippled violently as the box plunged in. The lone man watched as it drifted away, getting smaller and smaller in the distance.

Perhaps it will bring prosperity to another village one day.

Isabelle Cox-Garleanu

Grade 11, Mary Institute & St. Louis
Country Day Schools
Poetry



Blue Rhythm

“Here is where infinity was born,” you said,
as the fireflies stole light from the stars, your
kitchen singing the melodies of frying tempura.
But tonight, I think, infinity never existed.
Its blue rhythm gone under the shadowed sea-walls,
periwinkle skies pour into our glasses of mugicha
and it is *now* that matters — just our heartbeats,
galloping across the sand’s whispers beneath us.
Right here I lure the salt scent to my pockets, to
my blood and lungs, body coated in the sound
of passing ships, like hums from ancient mariners
navigating the cerulean labyrinth of my soul.
With you I believe old myths, recounted by
Baba when she knew nothing of land but only
of sea: clamoring flutes and larks clinging onto
stories about ningyo, her teeth like golden fish.
She wouldn’t taste air,
calm, the ocean tide as her robe.
Calm, in the neon line that splits the sun and sea,
whilst the moon waits to be seen,
aching to paint the waves a lustrous silver.

Isabelle Cox-Garleanu

Grade 11, Mary Institute & St. Louis
Country Day Schools
Flash Fiction



Eulogy for My Living Son

When the brief golden hours end, you take the beaker in which the gem is melted and pour it onto yourself. You repeat everything and kiss your memories on the best parts as they unravel in front of you, dynamic and lateral, like trains moving in synchrony from left to right, reaching time, grasping it, shredding it. You remember how golden those hours were. Will your hours ever be as golden again?

When my pills dropped to the floor, the sound of my pulse was replaced by a sharp *ping* on the checkered bathroom tiles. I think you and I both died that day, except only my heart stopped. Yours still beats, but I imagine that it no longer does in the fluttering, bunny-rabbit manner of a child with a balloon gripped in hand. Now it must be beating in mere obedience, as if to pump blood at the command of some higher power above reddish cobalt skies whose duty is to keep you alive somehow.

“Okasan, why would you kill someone I love?”

“Okasan, why would you kill yourself?”

I hear your questions. They flow from your mouth bitterly and cautiously like horrible slurs, soaked in purple pain, the hue of an unsolicited midnight bruise. Your father would give me those quite often. How is he, even? I can’t see him from here. I only see who I love. How heavy it must feel, my son, to be alive—to witness everything and everyone, even the moments and faces that bring tears to your eyes.

I remember holding you in my arms when you were barely a year old, lightly throwing you into the sky so that you could grasp a glimpse of the verdant countryside, a place where, when I closed my eyes, I could see specks of auburn

sun glistening against my cornea. Flying high above me, you longed for your fingertips to caress the blanching clouds, for the sprinkling rain to never crash to a halt. The wind, dominating my curls, colored our surroundings with the shades and resonances of thrilling emotions. *Aishiteruyo* [I love you], I would say as the cadence of my voice echoed past the wild apricot trees. *Aishiteruyo*. I never failed to catch you.

You, in my arms, with a laugh like the sun. That's when I knew, there is actually something much heavier than being alive. Love—in both life and death. It's heavier than the body, heavier than the soul. Love presses down on you, hard, before growing flowers from your chest and painting your hours golden. My son, your hours will be gold again, I promise, because you are full of love. You are falling so hard that you have no choice but to rise again.

When the Japanese noticed their teeth staining from meals centuries before the invention of toothpaste, they were unsure how to whiten them so they did the very opposite: they dyed them black. Black teeth became the norm. I wonder, my son, if you have learned to dye your heart the same way. To paint over the cracks and wounds with something opaque, something that says, *I won't hide the pain, I will fully soak in it to own it*. Have you learned this? I know I have. To answer your two questions, I killed myself to soak in my pain and own it. I killed myself because I want to live. Not to live *life*, but to live a certain peace in who I am, just pure peace in myself, as placid as a lake without ripples.

You know, my son, on Earth I would dream of being a girl who could make dresses come alive. Who could bike the world under a shooting star and ride it so rapidly that she would fall onto the sand and stand right back up, laughing with pearl white teeth and the moon in her eyes because it was just sand so nothing hurt. Who could gather with friends every Friday at city bars and become drunk on the cries of ecstatic trumpets. Who could whisper *aishiteruyo* to the man she married not because she was supposed to but because she felt it.

A girl whose burdens weren't in her son's hands.

But now, my love, I leave this world hoping you'll live out your dreams. Go ride a bicycle under shooting stars, fall and rise, laugh like nothing can break you. Love fully and deeply. Let tulips bloom out of your heart. Although I'm no longer here, my dreams live on in you, and that makes me eternal.

Isabelle Cox-Garleanu

Grade 11, Mary Institute & St. Louis
Country Day Schools
Poetry



Red Dress

I. Thread (n.)—the fragile filament
from Ma's womb, woven between my ribs
like a wilting petal prayer too pure to catch sin
but calamitous enough to infect a life.

Ma,
sewing wishes into seams,
turns them a red 着物 dress.
She says, "Wear it like armor.
Wear it like worth."

And I try
but the dress is too tight,
tailored to fit her hands,
not my skin.

I never asked for this skin.
This body,
this red—

糸.

A thread snaps.

Another.

Each glitter grip
cements itself to my waist,
clasps my chest,
until breathing morphs into a privilege.

Each stitch,
a stranglehold,
each string,
a sin.

II. Small (adj.)—
how the world shrinks
when it is worn.
My curves are not recycled
enough through the clouds
of ancestors
to fit
Ma's dreams
Ma's desires
that
sculpt scold scatter scrape
me in half.

But Ma, look,
 look at how our blood bleed in the same cadence,
 how we both gnaw grief with candied 麦茶 teeth,
 how we both quote silence to win an argument,
 how when we moved to this country the language
 of liberty tickled our tongues like ribbons of light,
 how our vowels were instructed to bathe in
 the elixir of red white blue skyscraper pyramids,
 how our blind hearts identify as black eyes,
 how small you make me feel,
 how you make me feel.

小, *small* in Japanese, is
integral to the 糸 kanji. It carries it.
Scars water my vision—
marks left by the god I couldn't believe in.
Pinned in Ma's plastic paradise,
I fight against the bones of a
bodysuit that tastes like chagrin.

III. Ma's voice (n.)—
“Why would you hurt
something I made?”

Does she mean me,
or the dress?

Does she see me,
or just the red?

Cameron Dryden

Grade 11, Olathe North High School

Educator: Deirdre Zongker

Short Story



To the Moon and Back

I look up to read the agenda for today on the board

“Practice your spelling words quietly while I take attendance!

Addition with two digits

Quiet reading time

Specials- music!

Lunch + lunch recess

Science- learning about our solar system!! “

Next to the agenda there is a cartoon picture of a moon with a big smile and a thumbs up, saying “your teacher loves you to the moon and back”

My teacher is sitting at her desk. She is wearing a pretty white dress with crescent moons on it. She likes to dress up kind of like Miss Frizzle. I take out my spelling words and start practicing, copying them down in my pink hello kitty notebook. My teacher takes attendance, asking each kid how their weekend was and if they did anything fun. “I got light up shoes!” exclaims Sarah S, as she stomps her foot on the ground to show off the red and blue lights on her new Paw Patrol shoes. My teacher smiles, and tells her how amazing and fun her shoes are. We go about our day as usual. I’m not very good with math and that makes me feel sad and dumb but my teacher tells me that I’m not dumb and I just need more time with math because it confuses me, but she’s sure we’ll figure it out. She leans over my desk, and patiently asks me questions to lead me towards how to get the answer. I feel so smart when I finish because I got there and I did the math. I smile, and she smiles back, showing as much enthusiasm as I do. “I knew you could do it. I’m so proud of you for not giving up,” she says. The rest of the day goes by as planned. We read our books and we sing silly songs in music. We

eat lunch and I find that my mom packed me a cookie, and a note in my lunchbox that says “I love you to the moon and back! Love- mom.” I go to recess and play tag with my friends. Stacy W. falls down and scrapes her knee, and my teacher hugs her and wipes away her tears with the sleeve of her moon covered dress. She gives her a bandaid and helps her put it on, and Stacey comes back to play.

Then, finally, it is time for my favorite class, science. My teacher goes to the front of the room, and she tells us all about how far away the planets are, and how we put a man on the moon but people can’t live there. She teaches us to remember the planets. We recite in unison “My very educated mother just served us nine pizzas,” My teacher smiles at us, proud. Her phone rings, and she walks over to pick it up. I watch as her face falls, and she looks terrified. This makes me uneasy because I’ve never seen her scared before. A few seconds later though she plasters on another smile, but it doesn’t reach her eyes. Her voice quickens as she says “Ok, class, we are going to play a school wide game of hush puppies. Whichever class stays the quietest wins. I’m going to turn off the lights now and we are going to be as quiet as we can,ok?” She rushes over to the door and locks it, then switches off the light. I sit in the corner, delighted at our new game. I am great at hushpuppies. I watch my teacher to see if she knows if we won yet. She looks around, counting under her breath. Her face falls. There are footsteps outside the door. She rushes a finger up to her lips. She must really care about this game because this is the only time I’ve seen her this serious. She points at the corner with a harsh look in her eyes, scaring the few kids left scattered around the room to the corner and away from the window in the door. I watch as Sarah H. scoots toward me, lighting up her blue and red light up shoes. She giggles. The footsteps stop. I see a shadow pass over the window. I look over, and I see that the bathroom pass is gone. Someone isn’t going to get to play hush puppies with us! I tug on my teacher’s sleeve, and point at the spot on the wall where the bathroom pass usually is. She looks at it and her eyes widen with horror. I hear the distant sound of running water from the sink by the bathroom. The shadow disappears, and the footsteps fade away from our classroom. My teacher looks frantic, almost crazed. She hands me the key to the door. She writes on a paper “ I am going to go be on Harry’s team for hushpuppies so he isn’t alone. You have to lock the door behind me. Do not open it for anyone, no matter who they say they are. Not if they say they’re the principal or the police, nobody.” I thought we were supposed to listen to the principal and the police, but I am proud she trusted me with her key and I don’t want to disobey her, so I nod. She looks out the window, then opens the door a crack, and then runs out towards the

back of the man who was in the window. I lock the door, and huddle with my classmates, suddenly scared. I have never been without a grownup before. We all jump as we hear a loud bang. Slowly, me and a few others creep towards the window. My teacher is laying on top of Harry S. Her white moon dress is turning bright red. I think it is unfortunate that someone left paint on the ground. I thought she fell and scraped herself but that much red is more blood than I've seen in my whole life so it has to be paint. The man walks down another hallway. I watch as Harry creeps out from under my teacher. He is crying. That makes sense because a grown up falling on you is scary. I hear shouting down the hallway, and watch as Harry runs back into the bathroom. A police man rushes his way towards our door. He mutters something I can't hear into his radio. He walks up to the door and asks me to unlock it. I debate it, my teacher said no to open it if they say they're police. He has a uniform though so I decide it isn't disobeying her. I unlock the door and the policeman steps inside. He sits with us for a while. At some point he goes and brings Harry to us. The fuzzy radio voice says "all clear," and we are paraded out into the bursting sunlight. My parents run to me and hug me. It has been a strange day. Some kids peed their pants because of how long we were locked in the room, or maybe because they were scared. I left all my stuff inside. I tell my parents how weird this day was, and my mom hugs me tighter. I try to pull my head back to breathe, and my mother says "no, baby, don't look." This makes me curious, so I look. Over by the police cars with the flashing red and blue lights, there are paramedics. I see them put my teacher in a funny sleeping bag that covers her face. That's good because my teacher is probably tired since she's such a good teacher and she was playing extreme hush puppies with us all day.

A few days later, my parents make me wear an itchy black dress, and we got in the car. A lot of kids from my school are there, and they're wearing black too. I watch as the grownups talk a lot, and I don't understand what's happening but everyone is quiet and everyone is sad so I sit as still as I can and stay quiet. I watch as they open a box. The box has my teacher in it. They give her a bundle of flowers. That's good; she likes flowers. Then they close the box. This is very strange. Then, I watch in horror as they lower the box down into the ground. They can't do that, my teacher is in there. I tug my mother's hand, and I ask "what are they doing why are they putting her in the ground?!" "She won't stay in the ground sweetheart, she's going to go live among the stars," I hope some day people can live on the moon because then I can go visit my teacher. My

teacher loves us to the moon and back. I hope she remembers to come back when she gets past the moon and into the stars.

Anjali George

Grade 12, Olathe North High School
Science Fiction and Fantasy



First Daughters

Tonight I lay asleep, my husband slumbering next to me as if to spite me one last time. I wish he hadn't stayed. I wish I could have had one last night all to myself. I observe his face in the moonlight with a critical eye. He is so old, and though I do not know what he looked like when he was younger, I do not think he was ever a handsome man. I am young and beautiful, a daughter who should have been given to a lord ten times this man's worth. But I was born first. Doubly cursed, some would say. Not only the first daughter, but the first child.

I roll over so as not to be subjected to the sight of my ugly husband, but his snores continue to disturb me. I wouldn't have slept anyway, but my resentment grows. If only it were him in my stead. I, who would dance and feast tomorrow in honor of the first of all daughters, and not this fool.

Through the glass window panes, I look at the sky and the stars placed within it. This will be my last time seeing it, I think, and that's what makes it real for me. Tears slide down my face and I clamp a hand over my mouth, but there's no need. I was never a loud crier.

I wipe my cheeks and watch the stars, waiting for dawn. Pink peels across the horizon and I see a little flash of light streaking across the sky. The first of daughters must be happy, for it is her day, I think. I cannot find it in myself to hate the goddess who demands my life; it is not her fault that she needs my blood to survive. Everyone says gods are not like men; they do not have our morals. My life is something she deserves, and who am I, a lowly mortal, to tell her she does not?

My husband stops snoring beside me. I stiffen as he leans over me to find my eyes still open. He doesn't look sad that his wife will die today. No, of course

he doesn't. He'll be marrying his new one today in hopes of gaining the first of daughter's blessing. His eyes are filled with a light I haven't seen since we first married. He's delighted. I rise from my bed and don a robe. My husband doesn't bother and stumbles out of the room. It's not long before the maids come rushing in.

I sit in calm silence as they braid berries through my hair. When they dust gold across my cheeks and brow, I do not waiver. I cross my hands idly in my lap when they stab briar thorns through my ears. *Why don't you stick an apple in my mouth, too*, I consider snapping. And when they take my robe from me I shiver, but it's easy to pretend that's from the morning chill. One does not have to rage and scream and smash things to be angry.

Other women attempt to hide themselves with their hands as we're paraded through the streets. I will do no such thing. The men are most excited to see ladies like me anyway. The highborn ones they would never see like this were I born second to another sister. I ignore their prying eyes and look at her beautiful face, peeking over the surrounding terracotta buildings. Soon, she will be drinking my life from the chalice in her hand. I try to remind myself that I will be shedding this form soon, so let them look.

The lines flooding to her altar begin to pile up, spilling into the streets. I can see her marble feet now, the place where I will die. Instinctively, I reach for my throat. I can hardly breathe, hardly think, all I can do is stand still as the first of the daughter's statue. The priests of Pater begin their prayers. It's expected that everyone joins in, but I can scarcely manage to mouth the words. After what seems like too short a time, the priests beckon the first ten girls forward. One by one, they are offered last words. Some girls wish their families luck and love. Some say nothing at all. I drown them out after the first five and can only focus on the line inching towards the altar. As one, the priests slash the girl's throats. They must have all finished because the first blood is spilled.. All is silent but for the gurgle of the dying girls. I watch feeling nothing but dread. I wish I had been first.

I wonder what my life would be like if I was born second. I wonder about it every day. Would I be married to a handsome and wealthy lord? Would we be happy? Would we have children? inevitably my daydream circles back around to if I would have had my own first daughter. Would I have stood by in this very crowd and watched her be slaughtered? Somehow, the thought calms me. It is better to be in this position than to have my own heart withered to dust as I saw my daughter be murdered and did nothing.

I am only a few girls back now, and when we move up, I am forced to stand in the former girls' blood. It sticks to my skin, the heat of it pouring into me. I do not blame the first of daughters, I tell myself. I do not blame her for taking my life. But can I forgive her for taking the life of every girl so unfortunate as to be born first?

The blood pulls at my feet as I move up. As these girls are killed a new wave of fresh blood sweeps over my feet, extending the pool's reach. The new girls move up to take the dead ones' places. I watch as they shove the bodies of the former girls off to be thrown on a cart and later burned. The callousness of the action makes me want to do something. I can do nothing I know, but the urge remains. The girl in front of me kneels before the priest

"Do you have any last words for this world?" The priest holding her head asks.

"I want to wish myself a joyful birthday," she says, gasping for air through her fear. "And to every girl who turned eighteen this year. I hope you all enjoyed it," she says and something in me fractures. Today was the day of her birth, and it is also the day that she died. When he cuts her throat, a whimper scratches its way out of me. My eyes burn with hatred for the priest when he doesn't even watch that girl's body fall into the other man's arms. She's so slick with blood that he drops her because of the priest's careless toss. Would that have been me, I would not have minded. But to see such a sweet girl's body so desecrated makes me furious.

I eye the priest's knife. With the element of surprise, I might seize it from him and slide it into his heart before anyone can stop me. Instead, I kneel. It wouldn't have changed anything.

"Do you have any last words for this world?" The priest asks, his dark eyes boring into mine.

"I curse you." I spit with vehemence. The priest turns red.

"I curse you all!" I yell. "Sweet Filia, I beg of you to strike these men down. They serve not your good father, but only themselves--" I am cut short. the priest has run his knife through the tissue and muscle of my throat. I choke on my own blood, hands coming up as if to hold it all in. My vision blackens around the edges as I choke and die. The sounds of the other girls dying fades, and I'm falling into hard arms that do nothing to comfort me. But beneath my weight, they soften.

"Wake up, little warrior," a sweet voice croons. With a voice like that, so honeyed and rich, how could I not obey? Something soft sweeps over my face and my eyes open. I'm laying in the lap of the most beautiful woman I've ever

seen. Every part of her is black as onyx, but she is softer than stone. Her hair tickles my face, but she brushes it behind one ear. My own hands follow hers, desperately trying to feel the thick strands. She laughs enchantingly.

"I am not a warrior," I blurt. I have to tell her before she discovers it herself and becomes disappointed with me. She cocks her head to the side.

"Are you not? You sounded like one to me," she says with a shiny black smile.

"I am a woman. I cannot be a warrior," I say and look away from her because I cannot bear to see her disappointed.

"Maybe not where you're from, but you are no longer there," she says, and I look around. I'm in a room that looks as though everything in it were built from ashes. The grainy black stone making up every table, the rug and drapes, even the Pater and Frater's alters. "Would you like to be a warrior?" she asks me, and I nod.

"Don't say yes because you think that's what I desire. Say what you feel," she says and places a hand on my chest. I falter.

"I don't know," I answer. "I never imagined I could be."

She sighs softly and her gaze turns thoughtful. "Your curse was a powerful thing. When I heard you speak with such vehemence, it was not your anger alone that you brought into the world. It was also mine," she says longingly.

"You made me heard in a world I have not touched in centuries. I thank you for it." She says and inclines her head. She is bowing towards me, I realize.

"Sweet Daughter--" I start but she stops me.

"I have a name," she says distantly. "Men like to forget it. I hear it so rarely sometimes I think I have as well."

The look in her black eyes is not sadness, but as if she is lost.

"Filia," I say. "That is your name." It's as if her soul returns to her body.

"That is my name, yes," she says.

"It is beautiful. I do not know why they do not call you it," I say.

"Because that would give me too much power," she snaps. The force of it scares me. A mortal is not meant to withstand a god's anger. She lays a warm finger on my brow. "I am sorry, child," she says.

"Don't apologize," I tell her. "Your anger is righteous." She smiles once more.

"I knew you were a bringer of justice," she tells me. I smile back, but yet I have brought no justice.

“But you will,” she tells me as if she can read my thoughts. “And so will all the other girls who’ve ever laid their lives down at my altar.”

“How?” I ask. I sound so small, but I want to believe her. She rises, slipping me off her lap and raising me with her. From the ground beneath us a chair forms from the ground. She sits on it and pats her knee. “Let me tell you a story,” she says as I sit.

“When the great Pater formed my brother from the sky, he possessed a strength the world has never seen,” Filia says and I try to not seem too dismayed at hearing a story I’ve heard many times over already. “You’ve heard a version of my story, but that does not mean it is the true one. Listen to mine and see how you feel,” she chides. As she talks, she plucks the berries from my hair.

“Happy with his success, Pater sought to form a second son of the earth. Instead, he pulled me from the ground. My brother had many talents. He was strong and had the power to summon storms and burn the world with sunfire. I had none. My father was dismayed, because he had not made a son at all; he made something new, something weaker,” she said, and though her voice is pained, it does not show in her features.

“He called her Daughter, Filia. When he made humans, they found some of their children turned out like me. At least for them, they discovered, daughters had the use of breeding. I had none for my father. He cast me out from his palace, allowing me one wish before I left. I asked him to give me the first daughter born to every man on the earth. He agreed. Humans could have many daughters, they would not miss one from their plentiful stock,” she scoffs.

“I sat in this wasteland for an entire year, desperately lonely. I was starving, but I had nothing to eat. Then, on the Day of First Daughters, blood fell down like rain. I began to drink and was nourished. And then the blood turned to ash. At first, I was afraid, but then the ash turned to souls. Girls fell from the sky by the thousands and I struggled to catch them all. They were terrified. Much more afraid than me. So I held them close until the fear abated. They taught me the only thing I had to fear was being alone, and I was never to be alone again.” She said and the pure contentment on her face makes me feel full in turn.

“I built their ashes into a home for us. I drank the blood rain every year so I would not starve. I was happy, but in my heart, I knew there was another reason I’d asked for the first daughters.” This is where her story deviates from my past learnings, I realize.

“I had asked my father for the first daughters in anger. I was not lesser than Frater because I had no powers. I had one that he did not, but Pater was too

blind to see it. I had a heart,” she says and I grow confused. “A woman’s heart.” She amended. “It is no fragile thing, and it has power. Women’s hearts are drawn to each other like lightning to the ground. We cannot escape the pull of one another. I collect the first daughters because I need them, and they need me.” She looks at me sorrowfully and I feel my heart breaking.

“Many girls think I am cruel for stealing their mortal lives until they come to me. The truth is, your world is crueler. How many girls come to me weeping because they were torn from their own children that they were forced to bear.” I feel sickness rising in my chest at her words.

the only use for a first daughter, my father and husband had joked, is to wed and bed them as soon as possible, before they expire. I was lucky enough to never be cursed with children of tragedy. Or even worse, to be cursed with another first daughter.

“And daughters that come after, their lives are almost worse. Many of them will bear a daughter who will die. They are married to men who treat them like property and they die in ways even more awful than a slit throat. Your own sister was one.” My heart seizes at the mention of Lydia.

“You always envied her.” Filia says and it’s true. I could not understand why she hadn’t been born first. I was prettier and smarter. Why was I wasted on the altar and she was allowed to live? “But then she died,” Filia says quietly. “I try to speak with all the lost women before they pass over. So many miscarriages, she suffered, even after her husband was told that another would likely kill her. Do you know what she told me?” Filia asks. I shake my head. “She told me he, the man who swore on my name to protect her, said ‘you will give me a son or die trying.’” And then I am weeping. The ash absorbs the sounds of my wails and Filia wraps her arms tightly around me.

“I hated her so much,” I sob into her shoulder. “She never deserved any of it.”

“She knew you didn’t hate her. Not truly. Do you know how I know? She asked me to tell you how much she loved you when you arrived. She wanted you to know she understood all along.” I freeze in her arms. Lydia had shown me nothing but kindness. I was always cruel to her in turn, cruel to everyone. That was the reason I was born first, I realized as I watched her funeral pyre light, because her heart did not come out shrunken and withered.

“Your heart is not shrunken nor withered. It is broken, but it can be mended,” Filia tells me. “And in the new world that we make, there will be no

more daughters with shattered hearts, first or not.” She releases me from the hug and grabs my shoulders to look at me.

“I will ask you again. Would you like to be a warrior? Would you like to fight with me?” she says and this time I do not answer to please anyone but myself.

“Yes,” I say and her smile turns sharp.

“My father gave me these girls because he thought them useless. He couldn’t conceive that I was planning his destruction with my one wish. All the fathers of the world who thought us weak and docile will see the true strength of a daughter.”

Meona Hou

Grade 10, John Burroughs School

Poetry



Bull. Crap.

Bull. Crap.

Shut up.

Not just any shut-up—

but that old man's shut-up.

That old, senile fool who dives into the muck

of my mind, dragging his spindly eyes,

crooked nose, shoddy ears,

Fraying wisps of hair

On a head worn thin by time.

His lips torn by the weight of words

he refuses to swallow.

SHUT UP!

No one knows how to just shut the hell up

The noise bleeds—

grating, grinding, scraping

against my skull.

A bitch-ass symphony,

a worthless chorus

of money-whores, crass mouths,

defiling everything they touch.

And yet here I stand,

ashamed not by their words,

but by the silence between them,

the absence of meaning,

the utter emptiness.

Bull. Crap.

Felicity Jackson

Grade 12, Parkway West High School
Educator: Andria Benmuvhar and Kat
Briggs
Poetry



Parade!

Parade!

Here come the beetles, adorned in every shade
With instruments both small and large, they lead a great parade!
Stag beetles twirl their twin batons,
Hulking Hercules heaves his horn,
Little ladies with freckled cheeks throw lucky beads to cheering ants

Some ricochet from leaf to leaf, taking to the sky
Light skitters through chitin mirrors of junebugs as they fly,
Scatters sequins to the forest floor
To stick to hook-shaped feet,
Which tap and skip amongst each other in a hop-and-shimmy dance

Look overhead to the four-winged acrobat troop
Juggling worm-silk garlands as they twirl and swoop
Dragons and damsels together
Launch graceful spins,
Shrieks bubbling from the crowd with each precise twist

Following close behind, an orchestra of humming-bees
In perfect synch they bow along to a celebratory symphony
Termites emerge from their burrows,

Bottle flies hum to the fiery tune
Sparkling camaraderie flares brighter beneath the rainbow mist
Come listen to the insects
The rustling roaches
Dappled amber on the leaf,
The shuffling carpet beetle-beads,
The clinking onyx
Of crickets hopping into one another,
The buzz of flies,
And termites' click,
And droning bees,
And odonates,
And junebugs green,
Red ladybirds,
Great Hercules,
Prismatic stags
Their colors sing.
Will you sing back?

Watch this wave of gleaming bodies flood the forest floor
A sweeping crescendo of spirit
To pull giants from their feet
Now come, behold the beetles! Attend to their ardent sound,
And listen when they tell you:

The time to march is now.



The Letter

The letter is addressed to a Mrs. Abigail Winslow. Beneath the name is her address. Curious. She assumes the letter is a mistake, sent to the wrong person by accident. Her name isn't, nor will it ever be, Abigail Winslow. She doesn't even know anyone named Abigail. She tosses it on the counter, unopened.

A few days later, the letter is still there, next to a larger pile of junk mail and catalogs and a stack of dirty dishes rotting in the sink. She picks up the letter and looks at it, debating whether to open it or not. Isn't reading someone else's mail some sort of crime? She can't quite remember. She runs her fingers along the heavy, creamy paper and, without even meaning to, begins to tear the envelope open. She doesn't realize what's happened until the letter is in her hands, and she is unfolding the paper. There is a date at the top. *March 22, 1988.*

The paper is cold on her fingers, and the letter inside that fancy, heavy envelope is not fancy or heavy itself. It's timeworn, crumpled looseleaf. She feels something then, an odd sense that something is not right. Something is very, very incorrect in the world, but she doesn't quite know what. The thought scares her enough that she sets the letter on the counter and pauses, waiting for the feeling to go away. In the dirty, fading kitchen, a still life. *Woman and Letter, 8x10, oils on canvas.* She waits for a moment until the feeling passes, and then she picks the letter back up and begins to read.

Dear Ms. Abigail Winslow,

We regret to inform you that your current identity has been compromised. In order to protect you and your family, we will require that you select a new identity from those listed below. Please write back with a response so we may send a passport, identity card, and other similar documents to help frame your new identity. We thank you for your compliance. If you have any questions or would like to send your choice of

identity to us for documentation, please send a letter to 154 Angel Ave. and use a false name.

Thank you for your cooperation!

Sincerely,

Maria Santino,

Head of Identification and Documentation

Her hand is shaking. Below the letter, there is a list of three names, occupations, ages and birthdates. What is this? She's not Abigail Winslow. She has no idea who Maria Santino is. She doesn't know why they want her to choose a new identity.

She rereads the letter. It's all the same, of course.

Poor Abigail. She and her family aren't safe, it seems. The woman folds the letter in her hands, again and again. Then she lifts her eyes from the paper and looks around the room.

It's a small apartment. There is a bed in the tiny other room and a cramped closet that fits all of the clothes she owns nicely. She doesn't own many clothes. She never had the money for them.

The kitchen is dirty and has been dirty since the day she moved in. Probably since the day it was built, she thinks, sliding a dust bunny across the floor with her foot. The cabinets are peeling yellowing white paint onto the dusty hardwood floors. Her fridge is empty, save for a near-empty milk carton and a few lone freezer meals. Gray sunlight filters in through the thin curtains, coating the kitchen in a lonely, pale grayish sheen. It makes her sad to look at.

She finishes looking at the kitchen and instead takes a look at her life.

She works from nine to five, making minimum wage at a corporate office. She is the secretary. No one says hello to her when they walk in. She expected a greeting the first few weeks. Now, she buries her face in her computer when she hears the door open. When people talk to her, it's always to ask her things. Could she maybe, possibly type up eight copies of a three-page document? Might she potentially be able to run down the street in the pouring rain to pick up the food they ordered, only to discover she's the only one without a container in the paper bag marked with her name?

Her life is small, and she spends it split between lonely work and dismal home. It makes her sad to look at.

She brings herself back, back to the present, back to the right now where she is just a small, lonely woman in a small, lonely house, living her small, lonely life.

And here, in her hands, is the chance to become someone else.

She hunts around in her brain for a reason to stay. A reason that the life she's living now is better than the one she'll take on later.

She looks at her life, looks at it and hurts for the woman she's giving up. What if she was destined for great things? But she knows she isn't. Lives are meant to have real meaning, and hers simply doesn't. She looks for a reason to stay.

She can't find one, so instead she hunts for a pen and a piece of paper.

She scribbles out a reply and picks a new identity. She is Miranda Shores, a blonde woman who works as an artist for a greeting card company. She lives in Vermont. She is 31 years old. She has an ex-husband named Tony and a dog named Ruthie. It all feels like one massive game of make-believe, like when the woman was only a girl and would pretend to be Somebody Else, living a glamorous life Somewhere Else. It doesn't quite feel real, and she supposes maybe it never will. Maybe it's not. But still, she imagines her old life as a piece of paper. Then she balls it up and tosses it in an imaginary trash bin. Something about her feels lighter as she opens her apartment door.

She slides into the persona of Miranda and walks downstairs to the mailboxes. The letter is cool in her hands, and it looks inconspicuous. It looks like nothing at all. She feels like nothing at all. Everything feels pretend. Like she'll remember who she is and go back to that woman, curl up and hide in her own, sad life. But she keeps walking.

She pretends she is invisible as she walks down the stairs. The letter is clutched tightly in her fist.

She slips it into the mailbox and never looks back.



The End of Assad: A New Era for Syria and the Middle East

The political and military conflict in Syria has been one of the most devastating disputes of the 21st century. The eventual overthrow of the al-Assad regime, which formerly controlled the country, is the heart of the turmoil. Bashar al-Assad, who succeeded his father Hafez al-Assad in 2000, maintained the family's authoritarian control through a combination of political oppression, military force, and economic power. For decades, the regime seemed unbreakable, rooted in a legacy of dictatorial government. However, the Syrian Civil War eruption in 2011 marked a turning point, exposing deep-rooted liabilities within the regime. What began as peaceful protests slowly escalated into a brutal conflict that engulfed the entire country. The al-Assad government faced immense challenges, including the uprisal of opposition forces and international intervention. These factors eventually led to the collapse of the al-Assad regime in December 2024, which left Syria in a state of crisis as they were left without a leader.

The decline of the al-Assad regime resulted from a combination of internal and external issues. The trouble for al-Assad began during the Arab Spring when protests broke out in many countries, including Syria. These protests, demanding change, were met with violent crackdowns by the government, which only further infuriated the people. By 2011, these protests had turned into a civil war, with different groups fighting against al-Assad's government (Safi et al.). Religious divisions also made matters worse. Al-Assad's government, led by the Alawite minority, was seen as favoring a small group while ignoring the Sunni majority. This led to more conflict, as communities formed militias to protect themselves from government forces and extremist groups (Saban). Syria's

economy was already in bad shape before the war, but it became much worse during the civil war. Years of corruption and bad management left the country unable to deal with the challenges of war. International sanctions made things even harder by cutting off access to money and global markets. These sanctions froze billions of dollars in assets and stopped the government from effectively funding its military (Jones). The war also caused a humanitarian crisis. Millions of people lost their homes, and schools and hospitals were destroyed. 90% of Syrians were living in poverty, with many relying on international humanitarian aid to survive (UNICEF). This suffering made the government even less popular and further weakened its control.

As Syria barreled down the path toward destruction, a few major players emerged in the process. Namely, many of the countries involved in fighting either for or against Syria began to show their colors. Russia and Iran supported al-Assad with money and weapons, but the U.S. launched airstrikes on Iranian forces and backed groups fighting against him (Grajewski; Dzulhisham). This created a battlefield where no single side could take full control. Regional problems also added to al-Assad's issues. Turkey supported rebel groups and sent its military into Northern Syria, making it harder for al-Assad to keep control of his territory (Dzulhisham; Stanicek). The U.S. and Russia, both of which are global superpowers, heavily influenced the Syrian conflict. The U.S. supported opposition groups through the "Timber Sycamore" program, which provided weapons and training to rebels (Mazzetti et al.). However, the U.S. faced difficulties ensuring that support went to moderate groups, not extremists. Conversely, Russia's 2015 intervention turned the tide in al-Assad's favor by supplying airpower and advanced weapons (Grajewski). This support helped al-Assad's forces regain crucial areas like Aleppo and parts of Damascus (Grajewski). Despite Russia's support, however, instability across the Middle East significantly challenged al-Assad's ability to hold power. Iran's support for al-Assad, both financially and militarily, was crucial for much of the conflict, but it also increased Iran's tensions with Israel. Israel's repeated airstrikes on Iranian positions in Syria also weakened al-Assad's military capabilities, making it harder to maintain control over these contested areas. These confrontations further drained the regime's resources and contributed to regional instability. The changing policies of neighboring countries, particularly Turkey, also contributed to al-Assad's struggles. Turkey's backing of opposition groups, which included supplying weapons for the rebel groups it aligned with, disrupted the Syrian government's efforts to stabilize key areas (Dzulhisham). Turkey's

military interventions in northern Syria significantly reduced al-Assad's territorial control and further crippled his authority (Stanicek). Some of al-Assad's long-standing allies began to reconsider their support as the conflict dragged on. While Iran and Hezbollah remained committed to their assistance, Russia's involvement in the conflict became more conditional. Russia pushed al-Assad to make political compromises and prioritize a stable country over a complete military victory, which conflicted with al-Assad's goals. This created friction between the regime and its main military backer, further adding to al-Assad's growing isolation.

While international actions were a significant factor in al-Assad's downfall, internal factors within Syria no doubt contributed to his demise. Rebel forces, including Kurdish militias and Islamist groups, added complexity to the conflict. The U.S.-backed groups, like the People's Defense Units (YPG) and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), were effective in fighting ISIS in northern Syria (Tanis). However, this partnership created tension with Turkey, which viewed the Kurdish forces as a threat (Tanis). Meanwhile, Islamist groups, some connected to Al-Qaeda, gained influence in rebel-controlled regions. These groups often fought with both moderate rebels and al-Assad's forces which, in turn, created a chaotic battlefield (Reuters). Al-Assad's loss of major territories revealed his declining power. By 2014, ISIS had taken over a large portion of eastern Syria, including Raqqa, which it named its capital (The Wilson Project). Losing these areas cut the regime from vital resources and exposed its inability to protect its borders. Additionally, long and costly battles for cities like Aleppo and Homs drained the Syrian army and highlighted its dependence on help from its allies, namely Iran and Hezbollah. The gradual loss of territory further damaged al-Assad's validity as a leader. Each defeat added to the perception that his government would inevitably collapse.

After the fall of al-Assad's rule, Syria faces a fragmented and uncertain future. The country has been divided into regions controlled by various groups, including Kurdish forces, Islamist militias, and Turkish-backed factions. Each group governs its territories differently, leading to a lack of unity across the nation. Kurdish forces in the northeast have established autonomous administrations, while Turkish-backed factions in the northwest implement policies heavily influenced by Ankara, Turkey's capital (Tanis; Tokmajyan and Khaddour). Islamist militias in other areas often impose strict interpretations of Sharia law, creating stark contrasts in governing styles (Salem). This division increases the potential for continued conflict as groups compete for power and

resources. In some regions, such as Idlib, clashes between Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and other Islamist groups like ISIS have escalated. At the same time, while in the northeast, tensions persist between Kurdish forces and Turkish-backed militias, making it even harder to obtain a peaceful resolution (BBC News). The possibility of new governing structures emerging is uncertain, though some areas may attempt to establish local governments while others could remain under the control of armed groups. Any efforts to create a unified national government will face significant obstacles, including distrust among factions and the lack of a strong central authority (Fontenrose).

Additionally, many groups have conflicting interests in Syria's future. Some are seeking autonomy while others push for ideological dominance. Kurdish factions seek greater autonomy or even independence, while Islamist groups like HTS aim to establish a theocratic state (Tanis; NCTC). These deep divides make collaboration challenging and perpetuate the instability in the country. The international community's role in reconstruction and stabilization will be crucial in the new era for Syria. The U.S. and Russia and organizations such as the United Nations (UN) will need to decide how to support rebuilding efforts without augmenting existing tensions. Namely, the UN could facilitate peace talks between factions to establish ceasefires, while the U.S. and Russia might focus on incentivizing cooperation by giving aid for certain milestones. Additionally, regional influencers like Turkey and Iran must be deeply engaged to ensure their interests do not divert peace efforts. Without coordinated international action, Syria risks remaining in a state of prolonged conflict. Foreign intervention must prioritize humanitarian needs and avoid deepening existing divisions. This will require careful coordination among international powers to prevent counterproductive efforts that serve little to no purpose. Without a clear and united approach, foreign involvement risks worsening the problems it aims to solve. Moreover, rebuilding Syria will require addressing the long-term consequences of the conflict, such as widespread displacement and economic devastation. Millions of Syrians remain refugees or are internally displaced persons (IDP), and restoring their homes and livelihoods will be a monumental task. International aid must reach all regions of Syria equally, as favoring one area over the other could deepen pre-existing religious differences between the minority Alawi and the majority Sunnis, for example. Only through inclusive and well-planned reconstruction can Syria hope to move towards stability and recovery.

The fall of the al-Assad regime resulted from a combination of internal unrest and external pressures, and Syria's future remains complex and uncertain as the country's fragmentation into territories controlled by various groups complicates the achievement of domestic stability. Political, social, and military challenges will continue to shape the post-al-Assad era. The international community will also play a crucial role in determining Syria's path forward. Efforts to rebuild and stabilize the country must address the fundamental causes of the conflict while promoting cooperation among regional and global powers. Ultimately, the future of Syria will depend on the ability of its people and the international community to work together to overcome these challenges and build a more stable and unified nation.

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Grace Kwak

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Personal Essay and Memoir



A Love Letter to the Child I Used To Be

In middle school, I would slip away into an empty room of my grandma's restaurant, concealing myself from the people who ebbed and wafted just beyond that door. Her restaurant was beloved on the little island where I grew up, with waves of locals and tourists flowing in like the tides washing over the sandy beaches. Those people would refer to her as 'halmoni,' which means 'grandma' in Korean—this became her renowned nickname, and so they would endow her with compliments, saying,

"Halmoni, your food is so delicious. Can I have more?"

"Yes, now, have another bowl of rice. It's good to see you well-fed."

I wasn't exactly a model of good manners. While those outside shared warm remarks, savoring the comforting flavors of her crafted dishes, I remained a ghost in my own skin, acutely self-conscious of my presence. I didn't leave the room until hunger forced me out, and even then, I found myself looking at everything but the food, with miserable focus scattered like driftwood amid the bustling customers and endless footsteps—hundreds surging through the doors of my grandmother's prominent restaurant.

"I can't finish a second bowl,"

To the middle school girl I once was, the thought of being recognized there, in my family's restaurant, clad in my school uniform—felt like being caught in a spotlight on a vast stage, drowning in plain sight.

"Why do you feel as such?"

I was mortified, incarcerated by this nightmare of any form of waking recognition.

"I don't know, there's no reason, really."

“Well, you’ve gotten very prettier since last summer.”

My uniform wasn’t colored bleak; it was a bold red, a striking one—an unmistakable hue that whispered my affiliation with the “prestigious private school” every local hoped their child could attend. At that time, my hair was streaked with bleached highlights, a vivid contrast to the crimson of my polo and the deep navy of my skirt, a riot of colors that displayed who I was at the time.

“I only changed my hairstyle,”

My hair, tied back, neither diminished nor defined me; it merely framed the contours of my identity, molding my presence into something sharper, something more defined, instead of rupturing apart. Yet, within the school corridors, I felt anything but assured. My insecurities amplified, resonating in the void beyond those walls. Each hue I wore reflected the girl I was—a kaleidoscopic façade that masked the tremor of fear lingering beneath.

“Why did you change it so much? I loved it before,”

I grappled with the apprehension of being truly seen, known, and understood, yearning for a world where I could peel away from these excessive layers that made me feel out of place against the quiet turmoil inside me.

“I wanted to get rid of the boring brown hair.”

I developed this insatiable hunger, locking myself away in not just one space but several: the restaurant, my bedroom, friends who reached out, places with sinks. Hungry to remove myself from places I’d rather not see myself in—to avoid the apparition that follows me everywhere. I wanted a living warmth instead, empathetic closure, but it felt like a tumultuous pattern.

“I miss how my baby was before,” Facing the mirror became an unnerving habit. Getting ready each morning for school and gazing at the reflection of this little girl was building resentment within me. Perhaps that of my emotion was a confusing answer to a nearly impossible question (how should I react to myself less horribly?) which continuously bothered me. I knew I missed how I used to react, feel, talk, behave, care, think, and believe in everything, too.

“...I brought your favorite kimchi-jjigae. I would be pleased to see you finish your rice along with that,”

“...I’ll try,”

Each similar conversation I had with my grandma in that same room gave me fleeting reminders. Once she closed the door behind her, a looming fear grew upon me, enlarging even more and more. The word ‘ungrateful’ screeched at me and echoed into my head as if it were in the streets. I would slip away into an

empty room of my grandma's restaurant, concealing myself from the very people who hailed from the same place where I was born.

Heritage was like a heavy cloak I couldn't wear from how scared, mortified, and repulsed I was of myself. From being too scared to readily embrace myself to people, too mortified to embody my family and their cultural background, and too repulsed to stare at the identical twin, I must always watch when in front of a mirror. These layers of displacements were difficult to abandon, tethering to a self-conscious hurt.

I remember how estranged I was from myself—a grueling phase. And, although I am still a growing girl, I know enough to say that identity pulling in different directions begins the fragmentation and, with it, the struggle to reconcile back to yourself. But as I look at my reflection now, that same girl with hints of fear still in her eyes, I feel a gentle certainty rising, a promise I've started to make, one that binds me to who I am and who I'll become: I will love her so much, no matter what.

I will love her so much because of how my 'halmoni' took care of that girl and loved her all throughout. From the carefully thought-out meals to the nights spent working late, sweat beading down her brow from the kitchen heat, she gave herself up wholly to her family, whom she cherishes. Every meal she prepared felt like a silent reassurance, a reminder of her unwavering love, even when I could barely understand it then. But thinking of her, I realized it would break her heart to know that her granddaughter felt undeserving of love, that her baby had gone through heaps of troublesome pain.

It was never about 'ungratefulness'; it was about the distance I put between myself and everything she believed in me. She saw me as a reflection of her love and labor, a piece of herself. To reject that would be to deny the warm resilience she poured into me every day without fail. So now, as I look at my reflection, I see more than the fear or the doubt. I see the parts of me that she helped nurture, the strength she showed me in her own quiet way, and the love she gave, which I am slowly learning to give back to myself.

Valery Liang

Grade 11, Rolla Senior High School

Science Fiction and Fantasy



Autumn Ghosts

The autumn was turning crisp: frigid dawns and golden winds, candied sky and a strumming, breathing chill. Long nights undulated beneath the jade moon, struck a quiet calm amongst bowed forests and ancient trees.

The creature arrived in the rain-kissed woods on a morning where the great pines were still trembling from some fading dawn storm. Leaves drooped, damp and heavy, releasing the rich scent of earth and wilting grass.

It took one step.

Ten trees snapped in a fiery storm of anthocyanins.

Another.

A thousand birds shot screaming into the slate-cloud sky, crying the song of fright and hasty fleeing.

Rock ground to dust beneath its skin; white-bellied deer crouched petrified at the wreckage of weeping moss and bloody armor it wore in lieu of a face. Filthy water seeped into the chasms of the creature's footsteps. Frigid air swept this way and that, disturbed, perplexed, hollow.

And, slowly, surely, the vast timberland awakened, caught wordlessly in the beast's unknowing wake.

The Huntsman was on morning patrol when he saw it.

Long roads burned crimson with a million fallen leaves, winding bravely through the land he so proudly called home. The press of leather boots into the loose earth released dark and loamy root, stinging with the smell of bitterness and motherland.

Cool air kissed his face, and sent chills through his sharp steel-and-leather uniform to pierce a stiff spine. Behind him, the strictly soundless march of a dozen soldiers shook up the old ghosts of the wood.

Something was approaching. He could feel it in his bones, in the icy marrow that coursed through a war-weathered soul.

“Halt,” the Huntsman cried, and raised a scarred fist into the air.

Rustle, crunch, stop.

“Sir?” a young swordsman dared ask.

“Break patrol and assume defensive,” the Huntsman ordered, and made sure all could hear. “A monster has entered the autumn woods.”

We have encountered a god, the Huntsman wrote later, shivering over his battered field journal near midnight. *I am afraid it does not hear our prayers.*

Men, arrows, horses, guns; the losses were more than he could count in a lifetime. Within a week, the army of the grand autumn forest had learned its most important lesson: the monster was undefeatable.

Arrows were paper. Bullets were stings. A stallion charging head-on toward the monster’s feet could not throw it off its incessant path forward, steady and unwavering, never flinching from its march due northwest.

The thing could not be felled; that much, the Huntsman was sure of. Every day marked a new wake of scarlet paths and gleaming bones, snaking past the sure-worn roads that glimmered through the forest so neatly.

“I cannot face it,” a squire once confessed. “I am too afraid.”

The Huntsman had tightened chapped hands around his warhorse’s mane. Sneered and turned, kicked the animal forth with a baying wail. “Then leave, boy. Then leave.”

What was there to fear? Gallop and leap, duck and cry. Wave your broken sword about, weave between the monster’s legs as your men watch on helplessly. Nock an arrow, call for spears. Cock your best mahogany hunting rifle, aim and fire once, twice! Into what might or might not be the weed-choked pits the monster used for eyes.

He did not care if these battles never made so much as a dent on the beast. The forest was a peaceful land, and this monster who had brought unpeace must therefore pay its price. Tranquility was precious. Blood and bullets whistled past in a blur, day after day.

For its most reprehensible crime of existence, the monster must die.

The little swordsman who had been with the Huntsman on that first day the monster appeared—he was no longer quite so young, fifty new scars bestowed upon beaten skin in the span of three mere months.

He was good with the gun, resolutely sharp of eye. The winter had taught him to spot a white hare in the midst of a snowstorm, to pull the trigger and pierce its tiny heart without a blink of hesitation.

Red marks the enemy, my boy. Red is your guiding light. Forget this worship of the monster! Red will be our god now.

“Sir,” that soldier said one day, “don’t you think our war has become ... inefficient?”

The Huntsman sucked the last bits of grease dry from the rabbit bone in his hands. Stretched stiff fingers over the crackling fire they knelt around, watched numb breath mist above them. “I do not, boy, and you shan’t either.”

The other leaned back, smacked a dusting of fresh snow off his thick trousers. “The monster is near the middle of our woods now, and it only goes quicker by the day. How many horses have we wasted following it?”

It was a question of the rhetorical sort, but the Huntsman still saw the exact number tick in the back of his mind. Hundreds, hundreds. What would have once been mead and labor. “And your point?”

“Well—” A tremble, a shuddering inhale. “The calculations are simple. Let it pass through the heart of our land without interference, and emerge naturally on the other side. We shall never see its wretched face again.”

Contemplation; the snap of frigid flames.

“Hey, boy,” the Huntsman said. “Do you love the forest?”

The soldier’s response was immediate. “In the winter and autumn, summer and spring. To the ends of the earth, to the death of the bellflower’s ring.”

A schooltime chant. Sentimental words, sentimental things—they made him seem much younger than he ought to be, standing at the front lines of a warmthless and senseless fight.

The Huntsman swallowed, and gave a long, hearty sigh. “Then understand this: war is not logical. Does the monster bend its knee to the laws of arithmetic? Does it listen when you run up and say, *Stop, friend! Might you listen to the rules of nature that I have so defined?* No. It will crush you into finality. To protect the forest, we must meet cruelty with cruelty, madness with madness.”

“Madness?” The boy sprang to his feet, set to pacing about the flame. “Sir, it’s so simple! The monster walks forward in a straight line and has not erred for all the time we’ve known it. Leave it alone. To protect the forest, you must have faith in the forest.”

“Boy—”

“Think about it, sir. Think about your men.”

The snow had turned into a near-blizzard now, dreamer of maelstroms that howled and spun.

“You are a coward,” the Huntsman said at last, matter-of-factly without sparing the boy a glance. “And a fool. The most disastrous combination of all.”

“Huntsman, sir—”

“Be gone with you, boy.”

“Sir. I am afraid of dying before I can bid farewell to my family. Do you call that cravenly, decry me as ridiculous?”

“Be gone. With you.”

Eventually, the world quieted into a hazy blanket of white. The Huntsman extinguished the fire, tamped the last struggling embers into deep snow.

By the time he looked up, the soldier had long disappeared.

The Huntsman was right.

The faintest mirage of spring had begun to tentatively tap against winter’s endless door. The forest had shifted and frozen, thawed and grown icebound again.

That monster set permanent camp in the oldest heart of the wood, pacing every day beneath shaking winter sun. In the mornings, when the Huntsman patrolled upon his weary horse, the thing’s stomps and shrieks could be heard from leagues away.

A tomb—that was what the beloved wood had been rendered to, captured in a crypt of fear. His footsteps no longer echoed as he wandered the forest paths, pulled along by the fading lull of hard-etched muscle memory. The winter had swallowed the world whole, it seemed.

“Sir!” someone cried, and the Huntsman turned hazily.

It was the soldier of the darkest winter, whom the Huntsman had so cruelly cast aside.

He was smiling, golden hair sprinkled with fine pale snow. A gloved hand saluted sharply. “Sir, I’ve found something!”

A line in the snow.

When the Huntsman dismounted his steed, the animal rocked back and whinnied. Slowly, he stepped forward, knelt to inspect the sight.

A sharp, shallow canyon had been cut into the winter ground, upending gnarled trees and bare branches. It curved along for as far as he could see, a hideous scar ravaging the beauty of their forest.

Ah. The monster had marked its territory.

They visited the canyon every day, the Huntsman and the soldier; once in the morning, once in the evening, desperate and often alone.

There had been a moment of wildness where the Huntsman eased his horse forth, cleared the chasm, and landed smoothly in the monster's circle of land.

Both man and steed had barely survived the ordeal, marred with rattling earth and terrible roar. The monster, it appeared, did not like strangers inside its crude and stolen home.

Dawn was quick approaching now, the white sky a dreaming pink-orange-gold. Against the light, with his hunter's eyes, with his soldier's gaze, the Huntsman spotted a flutter of white on the other side of the abyss.

There was a cut-out paper doll peeking from behind a tree. Her hair trailed in the snow, curling in the shade and manner of a young doe's tail. A white shift wrapped around her body, all but swallowing pale cheeks and sharp silver eyes.

Oh—an angel. Just beyond the border stood an angel.

"It's a child," the soldier breathed. "She's—"

"Return to camp," the Huntsman ordered. "Gather the first squadron, and the warhorses—the strongest ones, who can take a hefty fall. We're saving her."

The soldier grinned. "Yes, sir!"

To think such a delicate being lived in the monster's land!

Seven men dead and three good horses ruined beyond repair. No girl. No hint of hope as the sun rose to its bitter zenith.

For days the monster knelt, devil of flesh and stone, curled around something—*protecting* something.

They only realized it much later—

"The girl's his ward," the soldier told the Huntsman. "As long as we're here, he will never let her go."

The Huntsman shook his head. "I will wait until the spring blooms in full, if I must. Let us see if that brute outlasts me."

The soldier smiled. "I wouldn't expect anything less of you, sir."

They waited together, sometimes, by the crook of a broken maple. Commander and soldier, guarding the most silent battlefield in all of the winter woods.

The Huntsman drifted to sleep alone one night, nestled by a dozen tangled roots. He opened aching eyes to frosty sunlight and a gentle shadow.

The girl leaned over him.

She was young, quite young; all brilliant and quicksilver eyes, hair and ragged dress snared by dirt and undergrowth. Her tiny hands were filthy, knees scraped bloodstained. Every bit of that winter doll he had seen across the border.

He reached forth as one might approach a ghost, or a new-hatched god. Whispered, "Hello. Have you run away?"

Hello. Are we your salvation?

The child flinched in one fluid movement, gave no response. She lowered snowy irises, shook out paper-thin limbs.

A fledgling bird, the Huntsman thought. A broken dove.

The Huntsman crouched before her, numb and rushed from sleep still. What a dream—what a dream! "Our forest camp is near. Come with me, little one. You will find no monsters there."

When he rose to stand, the girl gasped. Tripped back, stumbled, and bolted into the mossy tangle of border, a flash of incomprehensible too-quick white. Eventually, she emerged on the other side.

The monster's side.

The Huntsman cursed.

"Sir!" the soldier greeted that afternoon, running with rifle in hand. "Sir, the monster was spotted near the western border!"

And what of the girl?

They stood to the east, blind to dawn, blind to dayrise. The Huntsman contemplated the unfurling tangle of tentative green, the creep of tender bracken through winter roots. Chose, finally, to say, "That girl visited me today."

"That girl—the white doll?" the soldier exclaimed.

"The very. But I suppose I must have frightened her away." The Huntsman was grave. "Do not visit me until I give the order. I will walk into camp with the girl in my arms, or else not at all."

There was not a breath of hesitation on the soldier's part. "Understood, sir! I shall order for the area to be cleared of patrol."

"Thank you, my boy. Thank you."

The Huntsman did not sleep, but the girl arrived like the dawn: impossibly, in a kaleidoscope of infinity, somewhere within that questioning wake which pale light left upon darkness.

He blinked once upon his post by the wilting maple, and found her already at his side.

Dawn kissed her curling opal hair, shyly gilded every gleam of blood and smear of mud across her winter-perfect skin.

“Good morning,” the Huntsman whispered, clasping his hands behind his back. “Are you able to speak?”

A gleaming gaze, and no response of any sort.

The morning was chilly. How did she live, so cold and so lost?

His bare hands were frozen to the bone. He could not feel his numb fingers as they gently unwound, and stretched forth to offer a crumbling bit of bread.

An angel, or a desperate and starving thing? The girl grasped the mead faster than he could blink, almost faster than his soldier’s instincts, and inhaled it just as quickly.

Once again, she disappeared.

They played their game, Huntsman and snowy doll. Biscuits or cakes or bottled honeyed tea at the cusp of sunrise. Disappearance into the monster’s land once more, quickly as she had come, gone like a fairytale, gone like the morning sky and deep winter chill.

The monster meandered, as creatures and wandering things did. The soldier’s notes spoke of its wild and ceaseless cries, the way it would lay upon the earth at times, again protecting the shell of a girl which it had stolen.

She did not speak, and gave no indication of understanding when he gave orders, explanations, pleas. It turned him desperate. It turned him greedy.

The Huntsman hypothesized this: when the monster first entered the autumn woods, the girl was playing near the border. Had grown lost in the mountains of burning leaves and stormy roots, and been swept up by the monster’s warpath on that very first day.

Did monsters have young? Did it take her for one of its own, perhaps stealing the girl in sullen mourning of offspring previously lost?

No matter. The Huntsman did not count days any longer, but wild cherries had given their way to roses, and days had grown endless and hot, and, in the blur of things, the world turned to autumn once more.

Pink to red, mint and fern to darkest juniper. On good days, the girl breakfasted with him, and took a supper of bread and sometimes watery soup.

She seemed older now, bones not quite so hollow, movements no longer petrified and birdlike in their haste. A rounder heaviness had settled to her flesh, faintest rose blush blossomed against sharp cheeks and knucklebones.

Again; autumn again. He longed to bring this doll home, cure her of the trembling aches that stunted her step and welled rubies along flawless flesh.

Soon. So soon he could taste it. The Huntsman would carry his angel far, far away. Teach her to fly again, bestow upon her wings a million times more brilliant than what the monster had stolen.

“You’ve grown, my doll,” he told her one day, and outstretched cool arms without a phantom of hesitation. “And we will go home soon.”

The girl’s smile was dazzling. Moonshine so bright it painted shadows in the dark; daybreak so blinding that the world was consumed wholly by white.

Oh. The Huntsman had never seen it before. Had never seen anything quite so stunning, in all of humanity and war.

Quietly, beautifully, his doll and her smile wrapped small, steady arms around his waist, buried that unthinkable grin deep against him.

His hand found its home against her chest. Brushed downward, tearing the flimsy white membrane of her dress, scraped perfect hips and pearl-shine legs.

The Huntsman leaned forth and professed his love through a tender kiss.

A tear; a scream. Vaguely feral, vaguely betrayed.

Blood scattered in the faintest droplets against the fiery forest floor.

Charring, smoking flesh. The crushed remnants of a great border which once marked the distance between monster and humanity.

The Huntsman was dead.

And the Huntsman was wrong.

As it turns out, the girl and the monster were always one and the same.

Valery Liang

Grade 11, Rolla Senior High School

Personal Essay and Memoir



Valery Liang

Grade 11, Rolla Senior High School

Personal Essay and Memoir



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Personal Essay and Memoir



Valery Liang

Grade 11, Rolla Senior High School

Flash Fiction



Meigui

Meigui was a special girl.

She knew this because every adult she encountered would, without fail, exalt her as beautiful; she knew this because she was the only girl in all of her classes who could dance until her vision swam and her feet bled without crying.

And, overwhelmingly, Meigui knew this because she had the same coin-slot eyes and coal-black hair that made aunties lose their jobs and uncles be spat at on the streets, but her features had always been treated as a treasure rather than a curse.

My doll, my doll, the cameras would coo. Flash, flash. My perfect porcelain doll.

Bàba did not speak to Meigui often, but he was loud enough that she could still hear him every night, cries spilling out behind flimsy wooden doors:

“This is it. Can’t you see, darling? This is my American Dream.”

Her wilting mother or a nameless mistress might whisper, *Isn’t she too young?*

But they would be met with the sound of flesh striking flesh, a muffled shriek and a shatter that sent Meigui fleeing.

Left behind her wake was silence, a softly bleeding thing.

Ah, dear. You don’t understand. This is my salvation.

And because Meigui was so very special, by age seven, she knew exactly what it was like for an entire household to be paralyzed at the mercy of an angry man.

“Land a leading role,” Bàba told her across the kitchen table. “A big one. The money is running dry.”

“I can’t,” Meigui replied, and tumbled to the ground from the force of his blow.

But what was wrong with what she had said?

She had been born Rosetta Sun, a name made for America and made for the stars. They meant the same thing—*méiguī*, rose, and a surname passable as something Western, something holy.

Oh, Bàba had put such care into creating her.

Perhaps if she remained Rosetta now, Bàba’s mad dreams might still be possible. But producers and agents had fallen in love with her as Meigui, the oriental pearl—so Meigui she had become, exquisite ghost of every background scene and quiet supporting shot.

Bàba, Bàba. My skin glows yellow. This is all I’ll ever be.

Strikes and shouts and acrid fear, shattered plates and red faces and swollen, soundless tears—through this, he remained steadfast.

Meigui was right, but that was no reason for Bàba to forgive her.

At eleven, Bàba burned their house down.

Though Rosetta was Meigui now, Bàba never once spoke to her in Chinese. So the only word Meigui had ever learned, the only prayer she could scream now, primal and suffocating through the stench of soot and gasoline, was *duìbùqǐ*, *duìbùqǐ!*

(I’m sorry.)

Splintering glass.

(I’m so sorry.)

Broken porcelain.

(I’ll work harder.)

Something scarlet, weeping from her mother’s twisted neck.

(I’ll bleed more.)

The high whine of ambulances, the thump of firemen’s axes.

(Please! Please forgive me!)

And the power of a man’s fury.

At sixteen, Meigui vowed to never be alone.

The fire had made her an orphan, had mutilated her left leg and graced a soft face and slender torso with starry, ghastly scars.

She was still beautiful. But the cameras would never love her again.

It was not love, either, what she found in rain-soaked alleyways and dazzling hotel rooms. The ghosts of liquor and bloodstains that men left behind

draped across her body like fine, jagged jewels. Handprints and bruises lingered on plum-blossom skin, kept her company through cold days and long nights.

Because the men who took her were always drinking, Meigui learned to love alcohol too. Because those men were always angry, Meigui accepted pain as the norm. Agony and curses were embraced with open, bleeding arms, swallowed and rotted until she, too, became a creature of festering hate and simmering rage.

Who could blame her? Meigui had never been taught anything other than this, than a life spent mimicking the ways of angry men.

Alone did not mean lonely. Love was a frivolous question. Meigui's days were spent sinking into a haze of ink and forgetting, dreaming nothingness until she became something that was not human at all.

One day, she awoke with purple staining her neck and blue kissing her wrists, hips, spine. The man beside her slept peacefully, angel of gold hair and round, iron eyes, skin sweat-slicked and unblemished in the dark.

Bàba had made Meigui very good at keeping quiet. So she did not make a sound as she parted split, bleeding lips, raised an aching arm and curled scarred fingers around the empty bottle on the nightstand.

When she struck, the man screamed, and it was the most wonderful sound Meigui had heard in her life.

Glass shards dug into her hands, scraped bare legs and sliced tender flesh. Meigui wrapped her hands around the bottle's dismembered neck and swung, again and again.

His corpse had not yet cooled by the time Meigui dressed and fled, humming and swinging her arms as if nothing had happened at all.

At nineteen, Meigui drowned at the bottom of a pill bottle.

Even the most beautiful rose could lose its thorns. Meigui had grown tired of always hurting and being hurt in turn.

Her ghost hung above nighttime motels and storm-washed avenues, fluttered from town to town in silence. Men whispered of it—of collapsing in alleyways and falling sick at bars, of disastrous car crashes and chilling nightmares in places where nothing should be amiss at all.

She was a concept, a phantom of vengeance. In death, Meigui was furious, liberated, unforgiving.

Some years later, her ghost hung above a quiet midnight street. Curiously, it watched three laughing girls wander down windy asphalt with free smiles and linked hands.

Hands fluttered, happy cries rang out; in their dazzling dresses and soft jewels, the girls pushed away drunkards and madmen and embraced themselves as lovingly untouchable, as wholly free.

Ah ...

Meigui smiled, and disappeared.

Valery Liang

Grade 11, Rolla Senior High School

Poetry



Strangeland

I do not know the country you speak of—
The one built by insults, ignorance, shouts, red with blood or hate.
I do not recognize these great borders you name—
Each brick laid by the thousand times your lips have choked around
My hometown, my mother tongue, my favorite show, my last name;
Stuck together with macabre papier-mâché, that ghastly glue of
Each moment you saw me and cried *enemy, alien, illegal, strange*.
I am an outsider to these great cities you raise—
Raise through your hate, raise through the dark, raise with screams
of *dog-eater job-stealer country-breaker exotic-lover diversity-hire*.
You see: I am an intruder in my own hometown. *Persona non grata*.
I am a ghost that haunts the nation which raised me

Red

White

Blue ...

Red

White

Blue ...

A parasite that revels in a language you assume I cannot speak.
So you desire to brand me a child of this country you garishly paint,
Arcane land across the sea dark as my eyes, hair, blood?
Fine. Then it is all mine: *motherland, zǔguó, home, jiā*.

But, then ... what of the summers? The red bean ice cream bars and
Races down rain-slicked streets, sun beating down my back,
Sun peeling the skin off my cousin's face, sun lighting the world up,
Hazy rainbow and sprawling urban jungle just a sprint away?
What of the movies? The time I spilled my lychee ice cream
All over the pitch-black corner of a theater and an auntie I didn't know
Gave me tissues, told me *méi shì, méi shì* (it's alright, it's alright),
Held back my seven-year-old tears until my mother returned?
What of the two hundred *yuán* allowance my friend and I wasted
On glittering mall claw machines, and melting sugar-coated *tánghúlu*?

What of

the people?

I do not know the country you speak of. But I recognize with absolute surety
My mother's hometown, and then my father's: a world of doting family and
Spring Festival mooncakes, snapping red ribbons and dancing dragons,
My favorite street kiosk ice cream, the sizzle and laugh of vendors;
And, when I am brave enough, I stare at the red-white-blue flag over my desk
While repeating my surname, every tone, every lift, and I feel good about
Them being one and the same.

Valery Liang

Grade 11, Rolla Senior High School

Poetry



The word you are looking for is . . .

tell me a good memory,
my teacher says.
the air is lukewarm, summer hazy and sticky-sweet.
we sit in a circle on creaking beige chairs
and pass around little pockets of story.
I think about painting rubies around my wrists
and my mother's empty stare and I
become mute. my teacher mistakes this
silence as a product of a broken tongue and slanted eyes,
so smiles and tells me,
the word you are looking for is
forgot. I forgot. or: I can't remember right now.
say it with me. for-got. for-got.
yes, you think you've got it?
say it with me. my English is perfectly fine.
yes, do you understand now?
you'll have to wait a few weeks,
my counselor tells me.
I have asked to schedule a meeting about
next year's classes, about the vestiges of my future
amidst a spring yet to unfurl.
she seems quite exhausted when she adds,
I've got real problems to take care of
before you. students with *emergencies*, you see.
and I understand, I really do; some kids are killing

and cutting and burning themselves. some kids hurt.
but I do not know why my charcoal irises and
the blood in my veins set me apart from
that flock. is a yellow girl with a 4.0
incapable of feeling sad?
my permanent record is disgustingly clean and
my skin is soiled from blade ends and motherland.
what word am I looking for? ah—
I forgot. you will always look past my pain.
what do you think of our town?
my internship advisor asks.
it is summer again, and we sit outside
the sprawling local university where I volunteer.
my soul aches. this place is stifling.
I like it, I lie. the weather is always ...
humid? morbid? suffocating?
fair, my advisor says assuredly. the word
you are looking for is fair.
no. it is not fair. I know exactly what
word I am always looking for. my lips are stilted
and my accent is strange but, really, believe me:
I can speak for my own misery, and
I can do it perfectly well.

Alzhraa Mahmoud

Grade 11, Ladue Horton Watkins High School

Educator: Jon Frank

Personal Essay & Memoir



Unveiling

Long sheets of cloth flutter and twirl at the breeze's fingertips. Soft pastel chiffons ripple and undulate as stiffer jewel-toned cottons gather and crease, each scarf performing its own choreography as if each one feels a different rhythm being whispered by the wind. I tear my eyes away from the scarves drying on the clothesline next to the window and twist around to look up at my mother, wearing my favorite periwinkle blue hijab.

"Ijlisi! Sit still Zahraa!"

It was 8:00 in the morning, and just like every other school day at 8:00, she had me sitting criss-cross applesauce in her lap, her soft, delicate hands clutching three strands of long dark hair, twisting, turning, and tucking to create the thick, tight, slicked-back braid that had become my signature.

"Mama, I was wondering when I can start wearing hijab?" My gaze was once again set on the scarves, mesmerized by one in particular. Striped with various shades of peach and white, small tassels hanging daintily from each end.

She stopped. Frozen in the middle of winding the final elastic to finish off the braid.

"You can start whenever you want, but most girls start when they hit puberty. Why are you asking now?" I could hear a hesitant lilt in her voice, reluctance mixed with a dash of anticipation.

I hung on to that touch of excitement and proclaimed what I had been contemplating for the ten minutes I'd been sitting there.

"I want to wear a hijab to school today."

That was it. Simple. Frank. Quick. To the point. There was no explanation as to why I wanted to start wearing it on that particular day. Looking back even

now, I can't be entirely sure of my motivations or reasons. Perhaps I, having recently turned nine, wanted to flaunt how grown up I was to my mother and the other girls at the masjid. Perhaps I felt it was the next logical step in my journey as a Muslim girl, an official display of my Imaan (or faith) to the world. Perhaps it was as simple as the fact that I thought the scarves looked pretty that morning as they danced in the wind.

Regardless of my reasons, my mother agreed and I pounced upon the peach scarf as a tiger cub would a piece of meat, ripping it from the clothesline with my tiny clumsy paws. She helped me put it on, gently wrapping it around my head twice before pinning it in place so it wouldn't slip off the smooth surface of my head. By now, I was already running late for the bus and my sisters were screaming for me to hurry before Mr. Smith inevitably surged ahead, leaving us coughing in a cloud of his exhaust. I bolted towards the door, flinging it open, but just before I ducked out of our apartment complex I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror. I looked different. And for a split second, I questioned myself. But that moment passed and I grinned at my reflection—new, but all in all, the same—and slipped out the door.

When I arrived at school, I strutted into Mrs. Kline's classroom, tossing the front of my Hijab over my shoulder as if I had gotten a new hairdo. I was met with a mix of awe and well-intentioned confusion from my fellow fourth graders.

"What happened to your braid?!"

"Did you go bald?"

"What if it sets on fire!?"

"The color's so pretty!"

Kyle even asked if he was "allowed to wear one."

Mrs. Kline invited me to explain to the class what hijab was and why I started wearing it. I, always the attention seeker, quickly accepted the opportunity, sauntered up to the front of the class, and started to recite the speech that I would give a billion more times over the course of the next six years of my life. It goes something like this:

Yes, I wear it for my religion. Yes, it's to maintain modesty. Yes, it's my choice. No, I wasn't forced to wear it. No, I do not wear it in the shower and there's no such thing as "hijab and shoulders". Yes, it does get a bit hot. No, It is not glued to my head.

With every new person who asked it was exactly the same. Every single time. Wrap, pin, repeat.

The one thing that set this explanation about hijab apart from the others was one question I got from a classmate sitting in the front row.

“Are you gonna wear it tomorrow?”

I hadn’t thought that far ahead about whether or not I was going to officially start wearing hijab every day but at that moment I was high on attention and naively declared, “I’m going to wear hijab every single day for the rest of my life!”

So I went about the next couple of years doing just that. My braids were eventually replaced with buns and I learned to tie my hijab myself. This new morning ritual became as typical as the days when I sat in my mother’s lap.

Every year I would get more people asking me about my hijab, why I wore it, how I felt about it. Each interaction was virtually the same. They would slowly tip-toe up to me, give me a little compliment than abruptly blurt out,

“I seriously hope this isn’t offensive but like why do you wear that?”

I’d smile and say, “Oh, it’s completely fine and not offensive at all!” In as reassuring of a tone as possible. I would, of course, answer their questions. After all, who else could explain the experience of wearing a hijab more than a Hijabi herself?

My English teachers especially, were endlessly fascinated with the piece of fabric I had wrapped around my head.

“I think writing about the Hijabi experience in America would be an incredibly compelling topic for your poem this unit.”

“Do you have any experiences of discrimination that you can focus on in your personal essay?”

“You have a very unique position of being the only person wearing a headscarf in the school! Doing that for your informative essay would be very beneficial and interesting for your peers.”

With every paper, presentation, and poem, I grew smaller. Simpler. Plainer. I may as well have been replaced by a nameplate that read *HIJAB GIRL!* As I sat in class scribbling the same tedious, unexciting blabber, I overheard my teachers discussing sports, music, and family, and even the complexities of religion with other students and I couldn’t help but wonder, *what about my interests? Is there not more to me than a textile I wear around my head? Is this all I am?*

So this same pattern ensued, until one day freshman year of high school.

It was the first day of school after Thanksgiving break and I woke up that foggy, destitute morning to see my staple black hijab staring back at me from

across my room hanging on the wall hook to dry. I stumbled out of bed into my bathroom, fumbling to get dressed, put up my hair, and put on my scarf.

A black hole.

That's all I saw when I looked at my reflection that morning. My scarf, creeping across my face, covering my nose, my eyes, my mouth, my throat, until I was nothing more than a large, black, hunking ball of fabric. I ripped the scarf from my head and threw it across the room where it landed into a crumpled, sad little heap.

You know what? Not today. Just. Not. Today, I thought.

As I stepped out into the cool, crisp autumn air I became cognizant of the fact that I was naked, completely exposed to the world. When I arrived at school that morning the words of my peers, from disappointment to discomfort, stripped me down even more.

"You look more white."

How am I supposed to respond to that?

"I love your hair but your hee-job was soooo unique."

I replied with a tight-lipped smile. It really isn't that special.

"Were you actually oppressed this entire time? Does this mean you aren't muz-lim anymore?"

Wha- there's a bunch of other female Muslims in this school not wearing hijab!

One fellow Muslim girl even went up to me, gushing about how proud of me she was because hijab was "The worst thing ever!"

None of them understood that the problem did not lie with my faith, but with their reductive understanding of who I was. And for once, I didn't want to answer any of their sharp, piercing questions. All of my answers were not going to be soft or reassuring anyway.

As the day came to a close, one teacher finally posed the million-dollar question that no one was brave enough to ask, not even myself.

"When are you gonna put it back on?"

To this, I had no response. I lingered upon that question and the myriad of opinions people had voiced for the rest of the day. *Why is my faith any of their business? Why do I owe it to them to be their token Muslim? Acting as if I stole a photo-op to display how diverse their school is. Like an animal that only serves to be gawked at in a zoo.* When I looked up from my geometry review packet, I saw my hijab, still on the floor, a black pool of disappointment, challenging me. *Maybe this is a huge part of my identity. Maybe this is the only part of me that is compelling,* I thought. Then and there, I knew my answer to the question my teacher had

posed earlier that day. I crept towards the scarf and carefully placed the smooth fabric back on the wall hook, finished my homework, and fell asleep.

The next day I strode back into school, hijab on, smile plastered, ready to answer any and all questions people would inevitably fling my way.

I know. Not very inspiring.

I ended up wearing my hijab every single day for the rest of the school year. This decision seemed to be what made everyone most comfortable and eventually people stopped peppering me with questions.

Of course, the end of a school year meant that another one would inevitably ensue.

There I was, the first day of sophomore year. A cool breeze flew in through my windows, tickling me awake. Slowly, I rose out of bed, making my way to the bathroom. Shower, dress, brush hair, tie hair up in a bun. I finally made my way over to pick my hijab for the day: the periwinkle blue number that my mother always wore, wrapping it slowly around my head twice and pinning the slippery fabric so it wouldn't fall off my head. All of a sudden, a thought popped into my head.

I'm not wearing hijab for myself.

I'm not wearing hijab for Allah.

I'm wearing hijab because other people expect me to.

That is definitely not the purpose of hijab.

I'm not entirely sure why these thoughts occurred to me all of a sudden. Perhaps it's because I was older, wiser. Perhaps this moment of self-actualization could be attributed to Allah directing me toward some sort of enlightenment. Perhaps, it was completely random.

Either way, I carefully unwrapped my head, took out the pins, and gently hung the hijab back up on the wall hook. My sister, already packed and ready, screamed for me to hurry up so we wouldn't miss the bus. I ran downstairs, hair flying behind me, and just before I slipped out the door my eyes caught on my reflection and I smiled. New, but all in all, the same.

Note from the author:

For many years of my life superficial characteristics, from hijab to my ethnicity have been conflated with identity. While an individual's experiences may have been impacted by their superficial appearance, not all people with those characteristics will go through the same things. Pushing the idea that there exists a "Hijabi experience" or a "Middle Eastern experience" only acts to strip individuals that have these traits of their individuality as you perpetuate the idea

that “Hijabi” or “Middle Eastern” is a monolith. This can go as far as to impact these people’s outlook on themselves and what truly makes them unique, as it did for me. Of course, the irony (and hypocrisy) of this essay being once again about hijab and my experiences as a result of wearing a hijab, is not lost on me. I spend an entire essay lamenting the impacts of the obsession my peers and teachers have had regarding hijab. How writing about it has had a negative impact on my perception of myself as a complex human being. Well, dear reader, I can reassure you, this is the last time.

Claire Masterson

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Educator: Annemarie Schloeman

Novel Writing



Pulled From Orbit

16-year-old Ava Rose Reigner’s world is falling apart, and she is the only one who can glue it back together. Her family has borne one tragedy after another, beginning over five years ago with the death of one of her triplet sisters, Willow, closely followed by her father leaving the family out of grief. The most recent event, occurring only two months prior to the start of the novel, was the mysterious disappearance of her other triplet sister, Adhara, following a bike accident, (“The Worst Thing”) sending her mother spiraling deep into depression. Ava Rose, being the only “normal one” left in her family, takes it upon herself to help her mother out of depression. But she begins receiving mysterious clues, or “tells” from Adhara, wrapping her up into a quest with the possibility of finding her father and sister, reuniting her parents in a field of flowers, and curing her mother’s depression all at once. Although the sisters find that the quest goes awry after their mother finds a new love interest, canceling out the possibility of reuniting with their father. Their plans are foiled, and the girls have to find a way to find their happy ending, even if it means losing the possibility of the perfect life they’ve manifested for years. Throughout this risky quest involving everything from letters to bake sales to plane rides, Ava Rose finds deeper meanings of new beginnings, loss, and trust.

One

Pulled From Orbit

Sitting on the overgrown grass that had basked in the summer sun until it set, I gazed up at the stars that shone like sequins in the sky. There were far too many to count, and each star was determined to shine brighter than the rest, to be the star that caught your eye. However, none of them could shine as bright as you. You were the star, and I was the planet that orbited you. Even when we were

far apart, we were still connected by the force of love, and I still orbited you. Until the urge to get what I wanted had overwhelmed me, forced me out of orbit and sent me hurtling towards you, the sun. We collided. Then you were no longer a star, but a supernova. Then you were nothing. I had nothing to orbit, so I became a lost planet, drifting in space, desperately searching for another star to orbit, but failing miserably. Without you, I would always be nothing more than a hopelessly wandering planet, insignificant to the universe. You would always be my star, your beautiful but blinding brightness contrasting with the inky black sky. You'd never cease to cast your perpetual warmth onto my planet of harsh ice, and you illuminated my dark, hopeless nights with your wide smiles that revealed your one crooked tooth, with your hearty and kind laughs, with your warm embraces that you wrapped me in; the hugs that shielded me from the dangers of reality. I was leaning back on my hands as I sat down, my legs out in front of me. I took my hands off the grass and placed them by my side as I laid down, my curly brown hair slain across the ground. It felt good to stretch out on the grass without a care in the world, to let all of my worries have set with the sun.

Or, almost all of them.

After five minutes of laying on the grass, I decided to go inside, for I could no longer withstand my shirt sticking to my back with sweat, the obnoxious swarm of mosquitoes eating me alive, and the boiling mid-July air that was so unbearably humid and thick that it was as if I was moving through peanut butter. Peeling myself up off the ground, I brushed dirt and grass off of my legs before stepping inside and basking in the cool, air-conditioned house.

I walked upstairs, skimming my finger along the white banister that was loose from years of us trying to hang on it or slide down it when we were younger. The house was eerily silent, so unlike the way it was years ago, thus every movement I made echoed through the whole house.

I walked back to our room at the end of the hall. I could hardly bear to look at your deserted twin bed any longer, frozen in time, with the white comforter still pulled so tight you could probably bounce a quarter on it, with your favorite blue pillows with the tassels still arranged perfectly against the dark brown headboard, waiting to wrap your luscious curls in an embrace as you dreamt. I sat on your bed and rubbed the blanket that still sustained the lingering aroma of your favorite fabric softener, your bed's final cry for your return. Seeing your deserted desk, with your pens vying for you to pull them from your favorite ceramic mug was like a dagger in my heart.

I sighed, running my finger along the smooth brown wood of your desk. I inhaled the familiar scent of the peach-scented candle you always lit when you started studying, so you knew you could take a break when the flame died. I gently rubbed the dead brown leaves of the unfortunate plant you would always forget to water. It was salt in my wound, having those little pieces of you scattered all around the room when I knew that I might never see you again. It was kind of uncanny, too, like being in a dead person's old bedroom. You probably weren't dead, but the room had the same eerie ambiance.

It felt weird to touch anything of yours, it felt weird to see your clothes in the closet that we shared, and it felt weird to even be in the room. It felt wrong somehow, even though the room was mine too. But ever since The Worst Thing, everything felt wrong. It was as if time had stopped last month, and I was just going through the motions of a hazy, altered reality.

I looked into the mirror above our dresser, which reflected the face of the worst girl in the world, her face still peppered with faint cuts and bruises from The Worst Thing. My memory of The Worst Thing replayed in my head, despite trying so hard to resist it. Heaving a sigh, I flopped onto my bed, exhausted, not caring that I was still wearing my sweat-soaked T-shirt from earlier. I pulled my white comforter (that was identical to yours) over myself, ready to settle in for ten hours of sleep, but I was about to turn off the lamp on my nightstand when I saw the first "tell".

Two

What you left me

I'd cleaned my room earlier and didn't remember leaving anything on my desk, so I sat up in bed and leaned over my headboard, but I still couldn't see what was on the paper. With great effort, I hauled myself out of bed and groggily walked over to my desk. I definitely hadn't put the paper there. There were two horizontal, stick-straight lines on the paper in neon yellow highlighter. It was definitely not my drawing, but nevertheless, I smiled. I knew it was you who had drawn it, because the lines on the paper were perfectly straight, with no bumps or waves. You were alive, but what did you want from me?

I begged my weary eyes to stay open as I studied the paper for several minutes, but nothing clicked. Twin telepathy was definitely not real. Sighing, I got back into bed and turned off the light, but not my stubborn, churning brain did not turn off, instead betraying me and endlessly spitting out questions about the slip of paper. I was ninety-nine percent sure that it was from you, but was it just my delusion? I had no idea what you meant, despite living with you my entire

life. Senseless thoughts and theories coasted through my head, and I dismissed every single one of them. Per usual, my underperforming brain couldn't even conceive one plausible theory. Were you hiding in the house somewhere? What were you trying to communicate to me? Questions busily buzzed around my brain, questions that I could not answer, questions that kept me lying awake in bed.

But at least you came back. You were my only hope.

Three

The broken constellation

I woke up puzzled, drenched in a cold sweat, and gasping for breath. I'd dreamt about the accident, about The Worst Thing. Innocent blood was spilt. Soft skin was scraped and torn. Screams pierced silence. I tried to shake it off, and tell my heart not to pound so hard in my chest. My breaths were so loud that they echoed off the walls. I needed to tell someone about the nightmare I'd had, to scream it, but I didn't have anybody to tell it to.

Ever since our family of five had become a family of two, I didn't need to talk that much. Mom had been mildly depressed for two years now, ever since what happened with Dad, but it had dramatically worsened in the past couple months, ever since you had run away. so she hardly came out of her room. I used to think she would get over her depression, but that was back when I had hope. When I had lots of tears left to cry. When I wished upon stars. I could hardly remember the last time Mom came to one of my lacrosse games or took me shopping or had a wholehearted conversation with me.

I wondered if Mom would be so depressed if I had been the one to run away. You were her perfect, golden child, always returning from school with straight A's. I didn't mind you being her favorite, though. (She never said aloud that you were her favorite, but it was pretty obvious). You were always very modest, and wouldn't have been caught dead gloating. You were also very funny, not one-hundred percent book smarts. Just the right words to make me crack up were always resting on the tip of your tongue. A smile crept across my face at the thought of you, my fraternal twin, the sister who comforted me as our family got smaller, the sister who never broke her promises. But you were also the sister who abandoned me after The Worst Thing, the sister who made a lousy effort to communicate with me, your only sister you had left. But did I deserve it? Did I deserve being alone in this world? Did I deserve to be kept in the dark? Probably, after The Worst Thing, after the million little mistakes and one huge one.

There were so many things I longed to tell you. I made a list of them in my head, even though I would probably never get the chance to say them. There had been a million other chances to tell you, but I'd wasted almost every single one of them. I felt a pang of guilt inside my heart that I tried to ignore, but it stubbornly remained, buzzing obnoxiously like a tiny housefly.

If I had the chance to, I'd tell you how important you were to our family (or what was left of it), which fell apart without you. I wanted to tell you how our family used to be a constellation, but without you, we were just a meaningless formation of stars. You needed to know how Mom was beside herself in grief. I wanted you to feel how deeply I missed you. How I missed your long, wavy dark brown hair that perfectly cascaded down your back, the lock of hair that you twirled your finger in when you were nervous, the way your big, beautiful, deep brown eyes pierced me, how the skin around your eyes folded when you smiled. I missed how your nose was ever-so-slightly crooked, and I missed the way you beamed, displaying all of your perfect, pearly-white teeth, and how when you smiled really hard, you revealed your one crooked tooth towards the back of your mouth. I missed the lonely dimple on your left cheek that dimple-d like mad when you were laughing. I missed all of you. I held on to the image of you in my head as I grabbed a piece of paper from my drawer. I drew a picture of you on it, using the image in my head as a guide. I made sure your brown eyes were as warm and welcoming as they had been towards me, your dewy skin as smooth as it actually was, your hair as luscious and thick as in reality. (I'd envied your gorgeous locks all of my life) I drew every single detail. After finishing, I smiled, admiring my work. Then I frowned because I realized it looked like a kindergartner drew it, but the drawing had feelings behind it, so that was more of the point. I set the artwork on top of the lines you'd drawn on the paper in neon yellow. I decided to include a letter too, to release the confusing blend of emotions that was bottled up inside of me. So I wrote a letter in pencil, because unlike you, I needed an eraser.

Dear Adhara,

I understand why you ran away. You had a reason. I did something terrible, something that cannot be undone. But my world is falling apart without you. Our family is falling apart. I have to brave the world alone, because Mom is too depressed to care about me. She hardly comes out of her room anymore. It's terrible. Please come back. Life is miserable without you. I'm worried about Mom. I'm worried about you. Also, did you draw lines on a piece of paper with a neon yellow marker and leave it on my desk? If so, could you tell me what the lines mean? Could you tell me

where you are? Again, I'm very worried. Two people managed to slip away from the family. I can't let you be the third. Please write back.

Love,

Ava Rose

I reread the words before shoving both the letter and the drawing over to the side. I didn't know where you were, so I couldn't mail the letter and drawing to you, but I could just leave them on my desk. If you came back to add more lines to your mysterious drawing (or, at least, I thought it was a drawing) you would surely see them, and hopefully write back.

I resisted the urge to repeatedly look out the window to see if you were walking down the street or something, to deliver something else. But you weren't.

I ignored my pressing brain and instead redirected my attention to my overdramatic growling stomach, so I walked downstairs to make some blueberry pancakes, Mom's favorite. Maybe that would cheer her up a bit. I don't have far horizons, but I supposed it was worth a shot.

I stirred the pancake batter, which was a bit thicker than it was supposed to be, but that was okay. Mom would still eat the pancakes. Probably. I made four pancakes, two for each of us. I put two of them on a plate, drizzled syrup on them, grabbed a fork, and took the plate up to Mom's room. Before, she loved breakfast in bed, especially on Mother's Day or her birthday, when we all woke up early to make her a tall stack of blueberry pancakes with a ridiculously large swirl of whipped cream and a waterfall of maple syrup and blueberry sauce. I wasn't sure if she liked it Now, though. I had no idea what Mom liked now, because she was a completely different person who didn't seem to find joy in anything.

I walked upstairs and gently pushed open the door to Mom's room. "Uh, Mom, I made some pancakes for you," I said softly before adding, "They're blueberry, your favorite." When we were little, in our space phase, we used to pretend that the pancake was the moon and the blueberries were craters.

"Oh, thank you, that's so thoughtful," Mom said in her empty-minded tone that was apparently her voice Now. Before, she would have dug straight into her pancakes, but Now, she just absentmindedly picked at them with her fork, and each four-pronged puncture in her breakfast was a puncture in my heart.

I wanted to shake this Not-Mom and scream at her, to demand what she did with my mother. What she did with the mom that blasted Taylor Swift and sang the lyrics into her spatula while baking cupcakes. What she did with the mom who, on hot summer afternoons, opened the sunroof and rolled down all the

windows and blasted more Taylor Swift while we drove. What she did with the mom who sat on the porch with us to watch the sunset dissolve into an inky black, with the shining stars making their bold statement on the tapestry of night. But instead, I gave Not-Mom a kiss on the forehead before walking out of her bedroom and closing the door behind me. I was worried about her. What if she never went back to normal? Would she ever be happy again? Would she smile or laugh again? What would it take to cheer her up?

I needed you. Surely that would get her back to normal, or at least not as sad as she was now. You were my only hope of getting Mom back.

I started back to our room—or I guess my room. Now, with a fire in my heart for you and Mom. I sat down at my desk to re-study the lines for the hundredth time. It was up to me.

Hannah Mathew

Grade 12, Parkway Central High School

Educator: Jason Lovera

Critical Essay



A Contradictory God: Understanding God's Care and Condemnation

"In the beginning, God created the heavens and earth," our Sunday School teacher would begin, her voice dropping and rising to make the creation story like a movie. On the first day, God created day and night and on each successive day, God would add something to his creation: first, the sky and sea, next land and fruit-bearing plants, after that the sun, moon, and stars, animals to roam the land, sky, and sea, and finally mankind to tend to this new creation.

"As a summary" the teacher would say, "Who can tell me what happened on the first day of creation?"

A hand shot up from the front row. "God made light and separated it from the darkness!" a girl explained.

"That's right!" the teacher enthusiastically nodded. "And what did He call the light?"

"Day!" we all shouted in unison.

"And the darkness?" she asked.

"Night!" we replied together.

The teacher smiled. "Exactly! Now this is a tough one, but what did God create on the sixth day?"

I raised my hand. "God made people," I replied

"That's right," the teacher said. "God made man and woman in His own image and told them to take care of the Earth!"

We sat in awe, imagining this perfect world, and the teacher would continue, "Now, what happened after Adam and Eve were made?"

"God told them not to eat the fruit from the tree," a boy in the back explained.

"But what did they do anyways?" the teacher asked.

We all looked at each other nervously. "They ate it," another girl responded.

"And what did that mean?" the teacher's voice grew serious. "What happened because of their disobedience?"

"He... He kicked them out of the garden," I said, my voice trembling.

"That's right," the teacher nodded, her tone soft but firm. "And because of that, no one could go to Heaven unless they believed in God."

"God is always good, right?" a girl with a black T-shirt asked timidly.

"Of course," the teacher replied quickly. "God is always good, but humans can do bad things because of Satan. This separates us from him, and that is why we need Jesus!"

I nodded, understanding, but a little confused. "But... if God is good, why would he allow Satan to harm Adam and Eve and cause future people to get hurt?" I asked.

The teacher smiled kindly, almost like she had been waiting for this question. "Well, God gave Adam and Eve a choice. Adam and Eve could have obeyed him, but God allowed them to do what they wanted. Since Adam and Eve chose to disobey, we must be watchful since Satan can easily come and tempt us. If we believe in God, then we can live in Paradise with our Father. If we do not, we will go to Hell." The way she said it made everything seem so clear, almost like there was no other way to think. God was good, and anything that went wrong was just because people did not follow His rules. The belief that evil comes from human free will is not a new concept in Christian doctrine. In fact, John Milton explores the nature of evil and free will in his 17th-century epic poem *Paradise Lost*. When God comments on Satan's descent into Hell and his eventual corruption of the human race, he explains "I[God] made him[Satan] just and right,/ Sufficient to have stood, though free to fall./Such I created all th' ethereal Powers/And spirits, both them who stood and them who failed"(Milton III.98-101). In essence, God justifies himself by arguing that evil stems from choice. God cannot be held morally responsible for suffering since he leaves humanity with the choice to do right or wrong. In my young mind, this idea fit neatly with my perception of God and Satan: God was just and benevolent, giving humans the right to choose and using suffering as a way to punish evil, while Satan was a terrible snake who tried to make humans choose the wrong path. As I left Sunday school that day, I felt a

comforting certainty. I knew God was good, and as long as I was good, I would go to Heaven. If I went to Hell, it was due to my actions in life. Alas, black-and-white worlds do not exist, and I was in for a rude awakening.

Every night before going to bed, my family has a word of prayer where we read a chapter from the Bible and pray. During one family prayer, we read the first chapter of the Book of Job. The Book of Job relates the sufferings of the titular character, Job, after he loses all his possessions and is afflicted with health issues. However, the first and second chapters of Job also describe God and his angels gathering together when Satan enters and explains how he has roamed the Earth, watching God's creation. God then asks Satan, "Hast thou considered my servant Job, that there is none like him in the earth, a perfect and an upright man, one that feareth God, and escheweth evil?" (*The Sronfield Study Bible*, Job 1.7-8). Satan argues that Job is faithful because God has blessed him, but if God were to take everything away then Job would certainly become faithless. God relents and allows Satan to take away Job's possessions, children, and health. Amidst his sufferings, Job still remained faithful.

"How could Job remain faithful?" I asked stunned. "God allowed Satan to take away all of Job's wealth and health"

"Job is a pious man, believing that God has a plan," my grandfather replied.

"But it seems like Satan bullied God into causing Job's suffering," I answered. "Is God really not that powerful?"

"God has a plan," my grandfather explained with a twinge of annoyance in his voice, "and we must follow his will since God knows what is best for us." I wanted to shout at my grandfather, "That's not fair to Job!" but I stayed silent. In that moment, I was introduced to a second face of God: one who could sit idly by while His people suffered. The shock and hurt I felt stemmed from the fact that God allowed Job to suffer, despite Job's piety. As Leszek Kolakowski explains in his article *Leibniz & Job: The Metaphysics of Evil & The Experience of Evil*, "the concept of evil as pure negativity is a simple deduction from the belief in a creator who is both unique and infinitely good" (Kolakowski 18). In other words, if God is good, then He should only allow good things to happen. The interaction between God and Satan as related in the Book of Job seemed to explain something else: that suffering was not necessarily a product of evil but rather a way for God to prove a point.

When this thought manifested in my thoughts, I quickly asked God for forgiveness at the time. I was afraid that God would punish me and send me to Hell. As images of fire and torture flooded my thoughts, I begged and pleaded

with God to spare me for doubting his goodness. After all, a central tenant of Christianity is that those who do not put their faith in God would be put to Hell. Since the Middle Ages, preachers have thundered from the pulpit about how humans were damned to suffer due to bad choices. As the article “Towards a Hidden God” explains, “Life was a vale of tears...men were urged to shun the pleasure of life if they would serve God, and to avoid any false step or suffer everlasting punishment in hell”(Towards a Hidden God Time Article). Hell became a scare tactic for the members of the congregation- and still does for many Christians such as my grandfather who became annoyed that night when I pushed him to explain why God would allow Job to suffer or the students in my Sunday school class who would hide their eyes behind their hands to block out the devil and what he could do to unsuspecting souls, the fear of God’s wrath kept many in check. Later, I came to realize that it seemed contradictory for a benevolent God—one who created the universe and extends mercy and compassion to all—to condemn someone to Hell solely for disbelief. As the article “Is Hell Dead” explains, “...the prospect of a place of eternal torment seems irreconcilable with the God of love”(Meacham 40). I soon struggled between the two sides of God: one that could build entire universes and allow suffering due to human actions and one that caused suffering needlessly. God became an enigma and as I grew older, these questions were at the forefront of my mind. God’s apparent contradictions were especially prevalent during the COVID-19 pandemic, where suffering and salvation existed side by side.

I still remember when news of the vaccine was announced. Reporters quizzed physicians and scientists about the vaccine and how it worked, but mainly everyone was excited to hear the good news that lockdown measures could probably come to a close soon. At the same time, I saw the death count had risen to one million by December 2020. The irony was not lost on me. While close to one million people died, fighting to breathe one more breath, a vaccine would prevent the suffering of a million more.

Later that night, in a fit of frustration, my dad commented that God sat on his throne and laughed, calling us suckers. My mom argued that God had a plan, and my dad should not disrespect him. The quick conversation seemed to mirror my thoughts. On one hand, I believed my dad when he said that God would willingly allow humans to suffer, just like he allowed Job’s suffering. At the same time, my mom’s quick response reflected the faith that I tried to cling to. The next day as I sat outside and watched the sky, I was once again stuck between two different sides of God. On one hand, God allowed humanity to create a

vaccine. At the same time, he condemned millions to die. As the clouds drifted past, I wanted to shout *Why God? Why would you condemn your creation to die?*

Much later, I came to realize that God does not answer many “why” questions about His nature or His actions. This realization led me to a reflection on the human limit of understanding. In Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, when Satan plots to rebel against God’s plan to instate the Son of God above all angels, the angel Abdiel argues “Shalt thou give law to God, shalt thou dispute/With him the points of liberty, who made/Thee what thou art, and formed the pow’rs of Heav’n/Such as he pleased”(Milton V.822–825). In essence, Abdiel argues that Satan cannot question God’s decisions because God has created the universe and everything in it. While Abdiel talks about the angels’ relationship with God, this also stands between God and humans. Since God is above the rest of creation, he is the ultimate authority, and all of creation must submit to his will. Abdiel’s attitude follows the philosopher Leibniz who believed that while evil will cause suffering, it is the best possible outcome within the natural laws established by God. As explained by Kolakowski’s article, “The proper attitude is to trust God’s plan in advance, without calculation or complaint; to accept it, and with it to accept all human misery and the indifferent destructiveness of nature”(Kolakowski 19). This perspective urges Christians to trust in God since God stands above and holds all wisdom. However, such an argument minimizes the pain and suffering that comes from these actions. For instance, the millions of people who died during the pandemic were not just statistics- they were sons, daughters, parents, grandparents, and siblings. While Leibniz and Abdiel could argue that “God never promised that he would suspend the laws of nature for our benefit and use miracles to prevent people from harming one another”(Kolakowski 19), it is hard to accept that God is indifferent to our suffering. If God had the power to put galaxies into space and send Jesus to redeem humanity’s sins, it seems callous of God to allow suffering for no reason and justify it as a way to allow for good to enter the world.

This tension caused me to search the Scriptures, and I was once again brought to the Book of Job. After Job’s friends try convincing him that God caused the suffering due to Job’s secret sins, God himself enters the conversation and justifies himself through a series of rhetorical questions. God begins with “Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? Declare, if thou hast understanding. Who hath laid the measures thereof, if thou knowest? Or who hath stretched this line upon it? Whereupon are the foundations thereof fastened? Or who laid the cornerstone thereof; When the morning stars sang

together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?”(The Sronfield Study Bible, Job. 38.4-7). In these series of questions, God asserts his position over all creation. Echoing Abdiel’s argument, God argues that since he created the universe, he is not bound to explain himself based on the human perception of justice and fairness. God’s wisdom is perfect and above human comprehension.

This realization shifted my perspective. God may be compassionate, but he allows suffering to further his plans because his plans are infinitely “good,” beyond the human conception of good and evil. To any human being, “...the same kinds of actions can be right or wrong depending on the circumstances or rather depending on whose name they are performed in”(Kolakowski 22), meaning that “good” and “bad” are relativistic terms, not divine terms that God operates on.

To illustrate this concept, consider the following: Suppose a man robs a bank to get money and buy food for his family. When he gets arrested, the police would call his robbery a “bad” deed since he broke the law. However, the man is desperate and needs food for his family, so he believes his deed, is morally “good.” If the police officer lets the man go, he may cause the family to suffer(which is bad); at the same time, if he lets the man go, the police officer would cause the law to suffer since he protects the man from legal consequences. In this way, “good” and “bad” are relative and not necessarily the way God operates since His wisdom and authority transcend human definitions of right and wrong. God may allow suffering, but he does not leave us alone- he comforts and restores as he did with Job, whom he blessed by doubling his property and children. At the same time, God is not obligated to explain or measure Himself to humanity’s arbitrary measurements of right and wrong when he allows suffering to exist.

In summary, I have come to recognize that God is full of contradictions. He can create the universe and at the same time send millions to die because he operates on his will, not the will of humanity. In the end, I find myself echoing the philosopher Michael Novak who said, “I do not understand God, nor the way in which he works...[When] I raise my heart in prayer, it is to no God I can see, or hear, or feel. It is to a God in as cold and obscure a polar night”(qtd. in “Towards a Hidden God” 83). This sense of mystery and contradiction was a stark reality during the COVID-19 pandemic, where death and mercy worked together. The pandemic has taught me that true belief is not based on simplistic views of good and evil, but rather on embracing God’s mysteries and accepting him as a maker who is both loving and seemingly indifferent.

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Jamie Park

Grade 11, Marquette High School

Humor



A Breakup Letter to AP Chem

Dear AP Chem,

It's over.

I'm cutting ties. Ripping off the Band-Aid. Packing my bags and catching the next flight to Australia with a counterfeit ID made from a Canon photo printer. Put simply, I want any memory of you erased. In fact, as I write this letter, I'm burning your irritatingly minimalist periodic table on a stake as a ritual sacrifice to whatever godforsaken deity that created you. I am attempting to satisfy his (I assumed the gender of said deity because you have done nothing but strengthen my hatred of the patriarchy) wishes and save generations of would-be victims, for I'm nothing if not a hero.

I've also shredded the lab book we used to share. Did you "predict" that? Turns out those little "secret notes" you used to write in the margins for "later" were the most dehumanizing, degrading, and insulting attacks on my essence I've ever seen.

"You and success repel each other like electrons."

Oh yeah? Your morals are as bent as a water molecule.

"You're as basic as sodium hydroxide."

Your entire curriculum is based off of discoveries made by *other people*. Free rider.

Here's what I really want to know. Did you really - and I mean genuinely, for real, on your mother's name - think I wouldn't find out? I'm not stupid, no matter how much you wanted me to think I was. I saw you flirting with AP Physics in the hallway, although that shouldn't have come as a surprise. No one at an acceptable point on the spectrum of insanity would bring up "vectors" and "forces" in casual conversation. At first, I thought you were just a narcissistic showboat - which, granted, you are - but you're also a dirty two faced cheater.

I just don't understand why you left me for *her*. Forgive me for being unkind, but she's boring. Dull. No glamour. And oh my good Lord, her creative intelligence is equivalent to a four year old boy who's been dropped on his head just enough times to cut his brain cells in half. In her labs, all she does is play with cars and drop balls on the floor. She is nothing if not an endless monotony of things that *everybody already knows*.

When you were with me, every day was exciting. New. Special. One day we're using the mole ratio for the first time, the next we're ranking molecule polarity like there's no tomorrow. We've titrated more times than I can count, each successful trial bringing new memories. The shades of the pink solutions would always match my shy blush.

And oh, remember our three month anniversary? We drew Lewis Dot structures under the moonlight to match the twinkling constellations overhead, munching on gas law cookies and crystalline solid peanut brittle. How could you possibly throw that away for the Shein quality, second-rate relationship AP Physics brings?

Regardless, I refuse to dwell on you (or her) any longer. Because honestly, I don't think we ever had something real. I didn't want you - I wanted the fame, the attention, the notoriety that came with your name. Now that our passion is less abundant than argon in Earth's atmosphere, we're done.

Goodbye AP Chem. Don't come knocking when your next victim realizes you're nothing but a bundle of empty words and broken hearts wrapped in shiny academic validation.

Sincerely,

A disgruntled AP Chemistry student

Ira Rodrigues

Grade 11, Ladue Horton Watkins High School
Personal Essay & Memoir



Cycles of Self

new moon

Every story begins with darkness. When you come into the world, you carry a mark of it with you: a small, dark birthmark on your forehead which your superstitious grandmother calls a blessing. *It will ward off evil*, she says every time she sees you, her face glowing with hope.

This is more reinforcement that you are special, born different. You are the first in your generation, the product of a long line of women who faced unhappiness, darkness, as an inextricable part of their lives. Mother to mother to mother has passed it on: their daughters molded into parents, their voices muffled into nothing. Girls, who sacrificed their education to stay home, their opportunities lost. Women, who lost their names in marriage, their ties to their family. This cycle is known.

But times are changing; the cycle is mutating. Like an endless new moon, finally showing some promise. Your birth is their hope.

You are anointed with love, with purpose, the namesake of a goddess, each one a little blessing of its own. Growing up, you will carry this with you, bearing the burden on reluctant shoulders. You need to be perfect.

waxing

As you grow, your family's expectations grow with you. *We know you can do anything*, they say, and then wait confidently for you to show it. So you bring home report cards filled with A's, homework always turned in on time, every compliment and bit of praise you receive stored up for your family to savor. You will become the perfect daughter.

It's not easy. You'll need to scrape away the parts of yourself that don't fit, chiseling away until you're raw. You will stay up late to study, you will lose sleep comparing yourself to the other girls at school. You bleed for every test score, every victory. It turns you sharp and sensitive, cold.

Maybe this is not normal. You see yourself reflected in your friends' concerned faces, and you see how pathetic it seems. *Do you even have a life*, a friend asks you one day, exchanging glances across the lunch table, as she watches you check your grades for the third time that hour, your food untouched. You don't think she meant to hurt, but the incident scars anyway, pockmarking your surface.

But it will be worth it.

So you can see the dark circles under your mother's eyes fade, so she doesn't look at you the way she looks at herself. So you can tell your grandmother, who never made it past the eighth grade, that you're top of your class, and let her smile, identical to yours, fill you up like fresh air. You try for your aunt, for your cousins, for all the women who came before; you feel them watching you, their faces hidden in an everchanging cosmos. *Try harder.*

full moon

When you were little, your favorite daydream was to imagine what kind of person you'd be at sixteen. She'd be tall and graceful, always put together, everything balanced. She'd never let anyone down. This phantom girl grows with you, the dark side of your moon, her laughter echoing in your ears when you fail.

When high school comes, you think you've finally found your place. You become more confident, more sure of yourself, not quite so unsure of where to land. You find friends, and you put down roots. Here is recognition, a place where you belong. You start to shine, muting that phantom girl, shutting her out.

Even if there are moments when you wonder if you'll ever be good enough, they're overshadowed by the joy you feel when you finally fit the mold. That flawless, impeccable ideal you've been raised to find is not. You have reached it. These are the moments that give you purpose, that validate you; moments when the pressure doesn't weigh so heavy on your back. They make everything seem less terrifying. You bask in them, breathe in your glory.

waning

But it's exhausting to maintain this ideal. Sometimes you give up.

Small failures. Small craters. How you can't look in the mirror anymore without hating who you see. How you almost failed your chemistry test last week, and it made you feel like the world was falling apart. How hard it is to talk to your family now, when you're always letting them down. How sadness feels like a constant companion now, and how fear of the future strangles you in your bed. Darkness creeps in, stealing your moonlight.

When this happens, you chant mantras like prayers, anything to help you sleep at night. *Remember that every waning is a step to a new beginning. Remember your promises. Remember the moon.*

Sometimes, it helps. But mostly, it can't suppress the fear that is always there in the back of your mind, forcing you onward: that any failure will chip the armor of your perfection, crack it like an eggshell. You can't let this persona go.

So that Friday night, when your mom finds you crying into your sweater and asks if you're okay, lies leap off your tongue with ease. Lie, lie, lie. It would break your heart if she knew how easily you're failing. Instead, you invent excuses like a magician pulling ribbons from a hat, until her face irons out with relief and she leaves you to crumble on your own.

This is necessary, you remind yourself, part of growing up. You force yourself to keep going: waking up early to smear concealer on after sleepless nights, dragging yourself to school each morning, textbooks and study guides burned into your eyelids. Push the darkness away for one more night.

new moon

But even the best daughters can't stop the moon from orbiting. The cycle repeats. The world goes dark again.

You hit rock bottom, but it doesn't feel quite so life-ending. You'll listen to your mother tell you she's proud of you, even when you're not succeeding. You'll hear stories from your parents of their own success and failure, of their own burdens. Their stories are different from your own, lives spent in the heat and dust of India, struggling for something greater, but being the eldest is something you all share. Even if your burdens are visible only to you, they understand the weight. You're surprised to find how deep their love reaches, that it's capable of protecting you from the implosion of your moon.

You'll find you can keep on going and leave behind this eternal pressure, this need to be perfect; that the version you are, even with all your flaws, is more realistic, more lively, more lovable. You need to carve your own path, find your own future. This is something you can do: crack this shell of perfection that traps you. Be imperfect, be natural, be woman.

A new moon. A new beginning. Start it all over again.

Ira Rodrigues

Grade 11, Ladue Horton Watkins High School
Journalism



Gateway to Dreams

On a quiet night in the darkened streets of Manila, Philippines, a printer hums. Hands work quickly in the silence to fold freshly inked copies into newspaper sheafs, their contents splashed with dark tales of government corruption and chilling stories of the latest victims. At 11, Trish Muyco-Tobin is one of these workers, helping her father publish the newest edition of the Manila Hotline. The newspaper was founded to oppose the Filipino president and his dictatorial government, and with every word they print, the danger grows.

But for Muyco-Tobin, the experience— watching her father become a spokesman for the Filipino opposition movement, reporters crowding their home; the nights she spent helping to print out new copies of the Manila Hotline; the bodyguards that shadowed their steps and the increased attention on their every move— was exhilarating. It followed her even as it became too risky to stay in the Philippines and she immigrated to America as a teenager. It became an integral part of her career and success in the St. Louis community. It's here, in the covert life that Muyco-Tobin and her family were leading, that the seeds of her lengthy journalism career were planted.

“At the time, to see that unfold as part of our daily lives, it just really fascinated me,” Muyco-Tobin said. “I think it was something innate in me, to want to always be on top of things and get the information first. From that day forward, I knew what I wanted to do, and I was dead set on doing that. I don't think I ever changed my mind from that time on.”

Today, Muyco-Tobin is an award-winning reporter, covering events from 9/11 to presidential campaigns over the span of a thirty-year career. She spent 10

years as editor-in-chief of the Ladue News, eight years as editor-in-chief of Gazelle Magazine, has hosted podcasts, worked as a broadcast reporter and is currently a professor of journalism at Webster University. Over the years, Muyco-Tobin has never forgotten her Filipino roots, and she believes it shapes her career even today.

“All those traditions, the life experiences, the culture, it helps form who I am now,” Muyco-Tobin said. “Even though I haven’t been back to the Philippines for 20 years, and I haven’t called at home in 40 years, it’s still so ingrained in me. Everything that I do is informed by those experiences from my childhood, because the first impression of what the world was to me was Manila and the Philippines. And that will always stay with [me].”

However, Muyco-Tobin’s journey from a Filipina immigrant to becoming a well-known journalist has had its own share of challenges, especially considering the lack of representation in the field when she began her career.

“I started out as a broadcaster in radio, and I was usually the only woman in the newsroom,” Muyco-Tobin said. “For the most part, newsrooms at the time were very male-dominated, so that gave me an impression of what it was like as a woman trying to be seen against all these men. Now that I look back at it, I was the only Filipino broadcast reporter back in the day. When I became a print journalist, and I became editor in chief of these publications here in St Louis, I did notice that. If you talk about diversity in the newsroom, I was it.”

For Muyco-Tobin, representation and intentionality in journalism is especially important because of her identity as an immigrant and Asian-American woman.

“When I came to the realization [of the lack of diversity], and regrettably, it came later than I wanted it to hit me, I became more intentional about the stories that we covered and about the people who were hired in that newsroom,” Muyco-Tobin said. “Every time I select a story to tell, I try to inform that with my life experiences, which, of course, would be different from your life experiences. I’m somebody who is not from this country, and yet who has lived in this country for 40 years now. I think that is something that contributes to this whole identity of being Asian-American and what that means. Every time I choose a story to tell, that selection is because of who I am.”

To fully express her social and cultural identity through journalism, Muyco-Tobin authors a monthly column in Gazelle Magazine, the Melting Pot, to bring to light the voices of immigrant women like her who found their own

success in American society. She felt it was especially important considering the social climate of the country.

“Not just as an Asian-American woman, but also as an immigrant, I wanted to respond,” Muyco-Tobin said. “In my own way, I wanted to say, you may say all you want about immigrants, but I’m going to show you with my storytelling. I’m going to focus on women who are successful and smart and highly educated and they happen to also be immigrants. That was the origin of my Melting Pot column, where I showcased successful women who may not have been born in this country, but who happened to call America and St. Louis home.”

After years of being part of the journalism field, Muyco-Tobin has found her own way to balance her identity as a Filipina immigrant with her career today as an American journalist, and believes that her life experiences have played a huge role in shaping her success. Her advice to other Asian-Americans looking to make their own mark in the community is to never forget their heritage, even if it makes them stand out.

“Stay true to what you are. That is very, very important,” Muyco-Tobin said. “I wish I had that guiding me when I was younger, but back then, it was a bigger deal to assimilate, because there weren’t that many [Asian-Americans]. You didn’t want to stick out like a sore thumb, you wanted to belong. But in this day and age, the Asian-American population is growing, and people are definitely owning their identity. There’s more pride associated with it. I would say, embrace all that. That will guide the choices that you make, and if you’re proud of who you are, that’s a huge deal.”

Isabel Sapp

Grade 12, Smithville High School

Educators: Amanda Collier

Poetry



Dear Cain's Wife, with love

dear cain's wife,
tell me your name.
tell me what your favorite food is. what the stars look like to you.
tell me, do you have a favorite constellation? what color are your eyes? what color
is your hair? what's your worst pet peeve? what is your worst fear? did you dream
of being married?
tell me, did eve ever say what it was like? marriage?
 did she speak of the surprise she felt as adam pushed her into the leaves
 pressed his hand over her mouth muffled her screams let animal instinct
 overtake him?
did she say how much it hurt? how she hit and smacked and fought? how it didn't
matter?
did she tell you, that when it was done, he rolled over and slept?
 that she snuck away and sobbed and washed the blood away in the
Euphrates?
 that she finally understood why it was a sin to be naked?
did she tell you she cried in joy at cain's birth? she thanked god she had a boy.
 did she say why?
tell me, on your wedding night, did cain hold you with the tenderness he showed
his crops
 his calloused hands cultivating and his body yielding to you
 or did brutality come naturally to all his relationships?
tell me, was abel the first person he ever hit?

tell me, when cain came to you weeping and forsaken, hands washed but still
dripping with his brother's blood,
were you surprised?
did you scream? or weep?
God made two exiles that day, but only one committed any crime
tell me, what was your sin? being a married woman?
what other choice did you have?
tell me, what was your dream? did you want to be something more than the first
murderer's wife?
tell me, what was your grief?
did you love abel?
did you laugh with him and ruffle his hair?
did you stay long enough to muse it again, blood-soaked as it was,
before adam put his son in the ground?
did you love your land, the only home you ever knew?
did you take one last look, like lot's wife, only centuries too early?
tell me, did you become a pillar of salt?
or is that only reserved for women who actually matter in the story?
tell me, did you love your husband, despite it all?
did you kiss his tears away or did you wipe your own?
tell me, are you ever jealous that you only get a verse when cain gets a whole
chapter?
you're a mislabelled footnote on the paper academics write about your
husband. are you ever angry?
do you ever think you deserve it?
tell me, do you ever blame yourself? you didn't stop it after all. you're not even
mentioned until after abel is dead.
let me tell you a secret:
i think cain would've killed him regardless.
does that make you feel better or worse?
tell me again, what was your name? no one seems to have written it down.

Mira Schoewe

Grade 9, Lindbergh High School
Science Fiction & Fantasy



Eyes for Love

Dahlia had a rendezvous with Fate. It took place at exactly 3:00 pm on a Saturday afternoon at a small cafe on 54th Street. At 2:46, she stepped foot onto the subway and stayed on the subway for forty minutes. She arrived at the cafe five minutes early. But by the time she got there, Fate had already gotten herself a drink, it was 3:15, and Dahlia was late. Fate smiled slyly at Dahlia as she sat down, knowing that she can manipulate time.

“And what brings you here,” she inquired.

“My mother is dead,” Dahlia attempted to speak with the conviction that could win Fate, but her words were small and disheartened, “and I want you to bring her back.”

Fate raised an eyebrow.

“I get requests like this almost every day. What makes you think that you are different from the rest?”

Dahlia did not think she was any different from the rest. In fact, she was just like them. Nevertheless, she tried.

“I have money.”

Fate laughed, and the whole world seemed to laugh with her. Dahlia felt a tinge of fury rise from shame and desperation.

“Your money is not worth my empathy, nor is it worth my time. Come back when you can give me something worth giving.” Fate got up to leave.

“Wait!” cried Dahlia. But Fate did not wait, and Dahlia watched her fade off into the distance.

A month later, they met again. Dahlia had an expensive pocket watch, a pearl necklace, and a diamond ring, which she had carefully picked from her Grandmother’s old jewelry box. She laid them proudly onto the table.

“See? I have everything you want. Will you help me now?”

Fate sighed, and a gentle wind blew from the open window and sent chills down Dahlia’s neck. Without a word, Fate got up and left. For a moment Dahlia sat motionless, and next she began to weep, both out of rage and out of misery.

Not too long after, in a world far beyond the works of you and me, Fate had told of Dahlia to everyone, and Dahlia was all anyone could talk about.

“How ignorant.” Beauty spoke plainly, her voice stained with apathy. It was Beauty’s apathy that made a fraction of the world go black.

“Never would I give up a life for anything less than all the stars in the sky,” declared Death. Fate concurred. But Love was much more human than the rest, and she could not help but feel a great sorrow on behalf of Dahlia. To lose someone is to lose yourself, and this was something Love could not bear to imagine. It was not long after this conclusion was made that she had arranged a conclave with Dahlia herself.

They met nowhere, for anywhere under the eye of Fate would be controlled. Whether the meeting was scheduled for morning or for night Dahlia could not tell, but Love brought her there with ease and a little bit of luck.

“I have nothing left to do!” wept Dahlia, and her tears were the fire of a million stars; Love could only melt at the sight of it.

“And why do you say that?” Love spoke with a soft and genuine compassion Dahlia had never in her life heard before. Her words were like the sea at dusk—they flowed like crystal waters in the air and everywhere with the gentleness of the earth and the sentiment of a great storm—and they washed Dahlia away into oblivion.

“Here,” said Love. “Let me propose this: all my life I have gone without eyes. And who is Love when she cannot see? Bring me a pair of eyes, and I bring you a deal with Fate.”

It was only now that Dahlia noticed the darkness Love had in her gaze—the eternal Stygian black that lay between the purity of her complexion like a scar on the face of Cleopatra—and then Dahlia began to feel just as much empathy for Love as Love did for her.

From dusk till dawn Dahlia worked and worked to carve a pair of beautiful glass eyes, staring into her little dresser mirror as to model their shape after her own coal-gray eyes, and she painted them kindly with her fingertips. When she was done, she held them up proudly to the sun and looked behind the glass, and a coruscation ran quickly through the blue-painted crystal. The view was warped but the vision was not—Dahlia and her mother and the proper unity of Fate and

Death in her favor. With a few brisk movements of her hand she had made the vision her own.

“Your eyes are blue,” Love observed when they met again, and Dahlia smiled tenderly. With a gentle hand she handed her own gray eyes, still wet with the tears of yesterday, to Love. When she did, her mind went clear again—as clear as the light that reflected off Love’s gaze—and with that, the deal was decided.

Though cunning, Fate was fair, and it did not take long for Fate to summon Death. But Death was a different story—Death took what he wanted and did not give back. And when he heard of Dahlia’s great desire, he thought nothing of it.

“Ha! For you to think you could win over Fate and Death themselves, the great rulers of the abstract world, what an insult!” Death’s words were like his will, dull but dripping with acid vengeance.

“You have taken my mother out of selfishness, and in return I lost my eyes and my heart and even myself, but still you cannot bear to give me even the slightest bit of your sympathy?!” And when Death did not care to respond, Dahlia could not help but wail a storm so real you could see the lightning crack from overhead. Her glass eyes clouded, and deep beneath them you could hear the thunder roar. And the thunder roared all the way home and through the night, where Dahlia lay restless in her waking nightmare.

The morning after was gray but beautiful just as well. But to Dahlia, it was as if the earth had shattered beneath her feet. She lay lonely and adrift in her bed, wearied and sorrowed like the September rainfall that glimmered on her windowsill. Shakily, she attempted to balance herself and walk to the door, using only the feeling of the walls and furniture to guide her there. Dahlia opened it to go off to where she did not know she was going—she stepped outside, then did nothing but sit down on her own dampened pavement and soak up the rain that washed a deluge in her soul, and her hair was dripping like the tears in her eyes that fell to the ground.

Then the rain stopped. Deep from an azure sky came the outcry of a silence so burning Dahlia could feel it in her chest, and from its flames came the dance of a butterfly that fluttered elegantly to the palm of her hand. It landed, then waited for just a moment. As it flitted away, it dropped a flower petal into her grasp. The petal began to transform, and with a holy dignity the petal had spiraled up into a flower—a pale white blooming dahlia flower that played the harp of a seraph and whispered the purity of a dove—and Dahlia was blown into ataraxia. She held it tightly and let her sobs water it into life, and as she did, she felt in it the beating of a heart—a heart that sang the tune of Dahlia and her mother and the union of

Fate and Death in her favor—and a little choir of Love that rang vigorously in the wind.

Gillian Sellet

Grade 12, Lawrence Free State High School
Portfolio



The Antidote

“Snoot Picklefoot and the Vaguely Demarcated Valley of Doom”

Snoot Picklefoot loved market day.

This did not come as a surprise to those who knew him. Snoot Picklefoot was a jovial man with a wobbly nose, round belly, and a chipper smile, renowned for his magnanimous nature.

The one thing that made Snoot angry was Mathilda Longpocket, who occupied the market stall next to him every Saturday and absolutely *ruined* the delightful fare of market day. Her pinched face, inability to take a joke, and strange popularity with the other smallfolk in town made her absolutely unbearable! Even worse, her scraggly, under tended turnips stole attention from his luscious carrots. She had it out for him, he was sure, and he nursed his grudge like the soil of his garden nursed his hardy carrots.

As such, Snoot’s mood was immediately soured when he hopped up to his stall and saw Mathilda setting up shop, her trademark scowl plastered on.

“Tildy,” he said coldly, using a name that gave the impression they were pals while indicating that he didn’t respect her enough to address her without a nickname.

“Oot,” Mathilda scoffed derisively.

He ignored her and marched behind his stall, where he had meticulously arranged his carrots earlier in the morning.

Snoot stopped dead.

His stall was empty.

There was only one person in the town duplicitous enough to commit such a deed. He turned towards Mathilda, to tackle her or issue a strongly worded reprimand, he hadn't decided, and found her glaring at her own merchandise. "I'll have your head for this," he hissed. She turned towards him, eyes flashing. "My head? You're the moldy turnip who went behind my back and spoiled my crop on market day!"

Snoot surveyed her wares. They did look a little moldier than usual.

"I don't see any difference," he said.

Mathilda made a noise like a howling boar and started to lunge over her counter at Snoot when a chill swept over the town of Snufflegrove.

A shadowy cloud rolled across the streets, and thunder boomed. All across Market Street, smallfolk screamed and ran.

Snoot ignored them. He was focused on locating his carrots. *Where could Mathilda have hidden them?*

A face formed in the aubergine smoke, and spoke with a bloodcurdling voice.

"Farmers of Snufflegrove. Long have I watched and resented your happy little lives. Long have I plotted my vengeance, and today I strike. I have taken the things that matter most to you, and unless a few adventurers brave the descent into my VALLEY OF DOOM, you will never see your loved ones again."

"What about my carrots?"

"Excuse me?"

"Where are my carrots?" Snoot repeated petulantly.

"And my turnips!" Mathilda added. The two looked at each other suspiciously.

This was the first time they had ever agreed.

"Your crops are the thing that matters most to you?" The voice in the sky let out a long suffering sigh, but a wicked smile crept across the smog-man's face.

"Forget what I said earlier about brave adventurers. I want these two to venture into my VALLEY OF DOOM and break the curse. This will be much more entertaining." And with that, the smoke dissipated and the voice was gone.

However, the sun didn't emerge from its hiding place behind the clouds, and frantic voices cried out for their siblings, children, or spouses.

Snoot felt determination crystallize in his stomach like a cream cheese glaze on a carrot cake. He knew what he had to do. He turned to his rival, Mathilda Longpocket, stuck out his hand, and wrenched a word from the darkest depths of his heart.

"Truce."

Mathilda stared at Snoot in shock, then burst out laughing. After her wrathful cackles rang out across the square for at least three minutes, she sobered suddenly and sighed.

“Yeah. Okay.”

Snoot blinked. “Really?”

“Yep. I want my turnips back; let’s go,” Mathilda said with the air of someone walking to their own execution.

As she headed out of town, Snoot followed. And just like that, as the sun emerged majestically from behind the clouds, the greatest adventuring duo ever known was born.



They were the worst adventurers the world had ever seen.

The pair of smallfolk traveled down the common path before taking a sharp right, toward the foreboding wooded hills. As they finished a grueling hike up the ridge, a peculiar sign caught their attention.

At the crest of the winding trail leading down into the mountainous valley stood a weather-beaten wooden sign, whose letters had all been faded by the elements, except for the first three.

D

A

N

The two regarded the sign closely.

“Well, Dan is a bit of a strange name for a valley,” Snoot said.

“Not like you can talk,” Mathilda said.

Snoot sighed. “Fair enough.” And without any knowledge of the DANGER awaiting them, they descended into the Valley of Doom.

As Snoot and Mathilda followed the direction of the smoke-man, they traversed a precarious path where one misstep could mean death, and monstrous beasts hid in the trees. While hiking through the misty forest, where peril could come at any moment, they engaged in a silent war. Mathilda made wild hazelnut stew, which she *knew* Snoot was allergic to. When a fierce storm broke out, Snoot splashed water all over Mathilda’s last clean pair of clothes. Things came to a head one dreary night as the pair camped around a fire.

“Snoot?” Mathilda called, “Have you seen my lucky socks?” Snoot snickered with barely-restrained glee.

“Nope!” A cold drizzle began among the pines of the forest.

Mathilda suddenly encroached on him, brandishing a stick like some kind of sword.

“Cut the crap, Snoot Picklefoot! I know you took them, and I know you’ve been plotting my downfall ever since we met!” Snoot looked down at the stake pointed at his heart and became incensed.

“*I’m plotting your downfall?! You are the most irritable, unlikable person I’ve ever met, Mathilda Longpocket!*”

“At least I’m not a selfish, lonely, two-faced snake! It must suck when your only friends are carrots, huh?” A branch snapped in the distance, and both smallfolk paused their argument to glance around nervously. Snoot felt pinpricks of dread dance along his arm, like carrot shoots breaking through soil. He shook it off and returned to Mathilda.

“Oh, please, Tildy, nobody even really likes you, they’re just pretending to like your stupid sense of humor so you don’t snap and STAB THEM IN THEIR SLEEP!” The wind howled through the trees.

“If you don’t give my socks back, you’re going to learn a lot more about being st—” At that moment, a silvery, snarling shape leapt into the clearing directly for Mathilda’s face. In a knee-jerk reaction, Snoot tackled her to the ground, adrenaline stripping away his anger like a carrot peeler, revealing underneath only a desire to survive.

The creature sailed past and quickly bounded around to face them. It was a strange feline animal, with eldritch eyes, and breath that came out in thick, icy huffs.

Snoot was frozen from fear as he and the creature stared at each other. He fumbled blindly for the stick Mathilda had dropped, only to realize that *she wasn’t there*.

All of Snoot’s greatest fears had been realized. He had been abandoned by his archenemy in the perilous woods, doomed to have his magnificent story ended by a wannabe shadow monster who would probably eat him and leave no remains for future bards to sing about.

The creature readied to pounce.

Goodbye, cruel world, he thought.

The silverwolf flew through the air—

—Only to connect mid-flight with a flaming club, wielded by none other than Mathilda Longpocket. She had crept around to the fire while the creature was distracted by Snoot, and grabbed a log, which she had whacked into the leaping creature with considerable force.

“Run!” She hissed, tugging him behind her as they fled the clearing.



The two ran through the night, only stopping once they emerged from the trees and hit a dead end at the base of a cliff.

“Tildy,” Snoot gasped as he leaned forward with his hands on his knees, “I owe you an apology. I acted irrationally back there, and I didn’t even mean any of the things I said. I think you’re a lovely person, exemplary, really; I’ve never had any problem with you—“

“Biscuits and gravy!” Mathilda burst out, aiming a kick at a large boulder next to her.

“Well, that’s not a very graceful way to accept an apology,” Snoot sniffed.

“No,” Mathilda sighed, “we forgot our bags back there.”

“Well, *trufflebuckets*.” Snoot couldn’t believe it. After all this effort, their lives were going to end here due to malnutrition. His hope withered like a wilting carrot stalk.

“Wait, Snoot, look!” Mathilda pointed at the cliff face behind him, and Snoot turned to see a large obsidian door in the rock. “It wasn’t there a second ago; I must have activated something when I kicked that rock.”

The door loomed out at them, gnarled and foreboding. Scratched roughly in the cliff side above it there was a poem in a strange, lilting tone.

You fools thought you could beat me

But now in this cavern I’ll treat thee

To sweet revenge

Your blood—

“D’you think they have food inside?” Snoot asked. Mathilda shrugged.

“I mean, probably, but didn’t you read the threatening limerick?”

“Nope, booooring!” Snoot drawled, and he wrenched open the door in search of some yum yums.

The imposing door flew open without any effort on Snoot’s part, and he stepped into a bare stone hallway. The end of the hallway vanished from sight as the candlelight fell short.

As Snoot and Mathilda stepped across the threshold, the whole cavern shook and the booming voice from Snufflegrove sounded again.

“I see you have braved the valley of doom to find me and retrieve that which you have lost. Your final challenge is to traverse my underground maze. It will be perilous, and you are very likely to die. However, if you make it to the end, I

will be waiting for you with your precious crops. Good luck.

MWHAHAHAHAHA.

A beat of silence passed as the laughter died off.

“Well. Let’s do it,” Mathilda said resolutely. Snoot frowned.

“Ok, but have we really thought this through?”

“What do you mean?” Mathilda said.

“I’m just saying. There’s no reason we have to die in search of our crops. I’m starting to think that the risk isn’t worth the reward.” Snoot spread his hands appealingly.

“Of course it’s worth the reward; what are you talking about?” Mathilda’s voice rose and her face flushed angrily.

“What, your turnips? You don’t need to get angry with me, I’m trying to make sure both of us get out of here alive! Why on earth do they matter so much!?” Snoot cried.

“BECAUSE THEY’RE ALL I HAVE!”

Snoot stepped back, shocked at Mathilda’s outburst. She paused, as if surprised by the volume of her own voice. Then her shoulders slumped.

“Please. It’s all I have going for me right now,” she mumbled.

“But everybody loves you!” Snoot exclaimed. “They all like you more than me and I was so jealous of you!”

“Yeah, but who am I if I’m not that farmer who sells turnips? I don’t remember the last time I actually did something that I enjoyed or hung out with someone just because I wanted to. I’m a bitter old crone with no hobbies.”

“I don’t think that!” Snoot said fiercely. He blinked, confused by his own conviction, before continuing. “You saved my life earlier.” When Mathilda only sniffled in response, he set his jaw, wrenching the words from his stomach like pulling a fresh carrot out of the dirt. “Let’s go get your turnips.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

Mathilda wiped her eyes as the two walked down the shadowy hallway. She nodded and adopted a determined expression.

“I’m with you, no matter what horrors are waiting in there for us.”



There was a suspicious lack of horrors waiting for them. Snoot and Mathilda peeked around every corner and jumped at every noise, but nothing happened. Upon further inspection, it wasn’t even a maze. There were never any choices to make, just several turns in the hallway with no other paths to follow. Snoot

actually felt a bit cheated. Where was the epic send off to his adventure? Was someone making fun of him? He hated being made fun of.

Finally, the pair neared the end, as the passageways became more cramped and the torches lighting the way became few and far between. Snoot revved himself up. This was where the big bad cloud man was waiting, and he was going to defeat him and impress Mathilda.

Wait, where had that come from? He was going to defeat him and find his carrots. Yep. That's what he was going to do. Totally.

Snoot threw back his shoulders and strutted into the room at the end of the tunnel. It seemed to be some sort of wizard's study, with alchemical drawings and potion ingredients on the walls. Most importantly, in the center of the room, there were two piles, one of carrots and the other of (non-moldy) turnips.

Mathilda slipped in behind him and her eyes widened at the sight of their prize. Overwhelmed with triumph, Snoot made his way over to his carrots and reached out for one.

"No touching!" cried the voice, and Snoot's hand was slapped away. He turned and discovered that the offender was a man with very large glasses, sunken features, and evidently very little spine.

"Sorry, do I know you? Your voice is awfully familiar but your face is...wimpy," Snoot ventured. The other man sniffed, affronted, and pushed his glasses farther up his nose.

"Obviously you—oh, wait, hang on," He muttered an incantation under his breath. "Sorry about that, I just find that the illusion spells really help with the whole vibe, y'know?" Snoot stared blankly at him. "I'm the reason you're here? I kidnapped your carrots?" the man continued. "And also those people, but I returned them pretty much as soon as you guys left. They were just bargaining chips anyway."

"I thought you were an evil monster. You're just a guy," Snoot said bluntly. Mathilda elbowed him. The man laughed in a way that sounded more pained than amused.

"Now, now, my friend, who said monsters and men were mutually exclusive? My name is Findelius Thorpe, and really," his eyes narrowed, "I'm just the monster you made me."

"How so?" Mathilda inquired dryly.

"Well, a long, long time ago, I was just a typical townspeople in Snufflegrove, practicing to be a powerful wizard. Nobody understood my need to discover new magical frontiers. They were jealous of my power and afraid of the unknown. It

was always, *'Findelius, you can't skip Krampmas dinner to read occult books in your house,'* and *'Findelius, an arcane ritual isn't a good enough excuse to not go to your sister's wedding.'*

"Nobody understood my art, so eventually I left Snufflegrove to dedicate myself to my real passion. But always, under the surface, there was a seething hatred of the people who rejected me, who had burdened me with their 'expectations' and 'healthy communication'. So I plotted my revenge. To steal their loved ones, the people who had been distracting them from their work! Then they could see my side of the argument."

"Well, it sort of seems like all that rejection was your fault and you failed to appreciate your support network so...we'll just take all these vegetables and leave," Snoot began.

"Wait! Don't you want to join me? I've never seen someone with such a single minded focus on their work! That's why I invited you to find me here!" Findelius cried.

"No, I don't think so. I think there are other things to life than growing carrots."

"Are you sure, Snoot? If you join me, I will offer you my most precious treasure," Findelius paused dramatically, "A 24-karat ring."

"A 24 carrot ring?" Snoot's eyes widened. The possibility was tantalizing. He felt his feet move of their own volition towards Findelius, felt his arm reach out for the ring.

"Snoot, you fool!" Mathilda yelled.

Her screech knocked Snoot out of his spell like a knife slicing through a crisp carrot, and he stared at the offending accessory, appalled to find it distinctly lacking in root vegetables.

"No thanks, Findelius. I'm going to take my produce AND my friend, and we're going back to Snufflegrove!"

"Nooooooooo!" Findelius howled, sinking to the ground in a puddle of ruined ambitions.

The intrepid adventurers gathered up their crops. Mathilda cleared her throat.

"So, I've been thinking...maybe a joint stall at the market? When we get back?"

Snoot looked up, shocked.

"Yeah. Yeah, sure!"

"Cool. I'll see you out there, Oot." Mathilda beamed at him and headed down the tunnel, back to the light.

Then it was just Snoot alone on the threshold, with an armful of carrots. He looked at the exit, then back at the sniveling Findelius.

“If you ever decide that you aren’t too good for friendships, I’m giving out free samples at our stall next week,” he called back to him. Findelius looked up, incredulous, and Snoot smiled to himself as he stepped through the door. Maybe the next market day would be even better than the last.

“All that Remains”

The tubers I dug up from the wasteland have gone bad. The stench of rot is so strong that sometimes it gets hard to breathe. I blame the incessant mold that’s developed due to a hairline crack in the concrete above my head, allowing the slightly acidic rain to drip its way into the corner where I keep my foraged food. Only the peach candies, in their tiny metal tin, are safe.

There is another corner that would be better served to hide the food from the elements, complete with a dusty shower curtain, but I don’t pay much attention to that corner these days.

Not that I’ve been specifically ignoring it.

There’s nothing behind the curtain, anyways.

I dump the roots down the side of the hill a ways off from my shelter, my legs too short to get as far away as I want to before depositing them. When I go back home, the rot smell hasn’t dissipated. Curious.

⌄ ⌄ ⌄

The man wrinkles his nose as he opens the door to my hideaway. Perhaps it’s musty. That would make sense.

He leaps back when we make eye contact, before speaking in a honeyed rumble of a voice.

“Woah there, kid! Didn’t realize there was anyone left in here. Don’t worry, we won’t hurt you.”

His head is bald like an egg, but he has a bushy beard. Not like an egg.

Two women shoulder in after him. One is stocky, scarred, and weather-worn. The other is quiet, faded, but in a nice way. Like an old quilt.

The larger woman also wrinkles her nose (*I get it, it doesn’t smell good, jeez*) and throws back the curtain from the corner where—

—In a whirl, she has a knife out, rusty blade singing at me. The one with the beard pushes her away and his honey-voice turns bitter, but as he sees the corner—

—Quilt lady exchanges a glance with the man and turns to me. She has deep wrinkles around her eyes, like grout in between cracked floor tiles. She asks me if anyone else lives here, and I say no. It’s the first time I’ve ever said that to a real

person. Now that I think about it, that would probably make it the first time I ever talked to a real person. Talking is much easier than finishing the opened tin of peach candies sitting on the bottom shelf of my cabinet.

⌄ ⌄ ⌄

James smiles

⌄ ⌄ ⌄

The loud, bright woman pulls the curtain back into place and seems...relieved? She exchanges words with the other two.

I overhear snatches:

“Looks like an infection,” from the angry one.

“Of course it was! did you expect her to have k—”

“Poor kid,” murmurs the faded woman as she looks at me. The other woman rolls her eyes, but it seems like she’s calmed down since her discovery in the corner. Do adults always look so relieved by death? It’s been so long since I talked to one that I can’t be sure, but it doesn’t seem like a normal thing.

Though now that I think about it, there isn’t anything dead in the corner, so I suppose her reaction is normal.

The man is approaching me. What does he want?

He stoops down to eye-level and holds out his hand. “Hey kiddo. Sorry again for barging in like this. I’m Trusken.” I stare at his outstretched hand. The adults are looking at me expectantly. I think I might be supposed to do something. After a beat he retracts his hand, still smiling wide. I wish I could tell if he’s pretending to be cheerful for my benefit, or if he’s just insane.

“My grumpy friend over there is Katja. Don’t mind her, she’s not a morning person.” He gives me a wink as the tall woman—Katja—folds her arms and narrows her eyes. “And our other companion—”

The other woman cuts in before he can introduce her himself: “My name is Noray. It’s a pleasure.” The lines near her eyes crinkle when she smiles. Trusken returns her smile and turns back to me.

“What’s your name, pal?”

My name. My name is a whisper in a cloud-filled room. It returns to me, but it feels like a piece of charred parchment. Like it could crumble if I tugged at it too fiercely. The voice that finally speaks is familiar to my ears, even though it should be dusty from disuse after all this time.

“Sonya.”

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James smiles, and holds out his hand to pull me over a ridge in the dirt. The air at the crest is heavy with the scent of foxgloves and violets.

⌄ ⌄ ⌄

Katja had briefly rifled through the shelves in my hideout, commissioning any scrap of food hiding there. When she stumbled on the tin of candy, she reached for it with a grin, but I snatched it away with an unprecedented burst of energy. If I couldn't savor the taste of peaches on my tongue, nobody could.

Their group built a campfire and congregated around it while they ate. Noray prepared some sort of meal from a variety of wrapped parcels. I can tell that their portions were made smaller than usual in an attempt to compensate for my dinner.

They attempt to indoctrinate me into their inner circle, sharing stories that they call their "greatest hits" and volleying questions at me. I bob my head enthusiastically when they look at me, but beyond that, I am like the smoke from the fire. Existing to fill the cracks in between the walls of their conversation.

I've eaten more than I have in days, but my stomach hurts. A sharp, metallic emotion is coiled there, evolving and reacting to the new human presence.

A little girl named Ivy features frequently in Trusken's stories, to the point where I look around to make sure that I haven't missed a fourth member of their party.

They laugh about her exploits and sigh over what a wonderful daughter he had. Had.

Ivy is dead, but as Truskens mouth twists into a faint smile he doesn't seem sad. He looks at me from across the fire and laughs at something Katja says and He. Is. Such. A. Liar. The pain in my stomach intensifies to a bitter burn.

The laughter and stories and smiles aren't what grief looks like. Grief looks like a decaying body in the corner of a room, like a vase full of wilted violets, like a box of peach candies that you can never finish—

If he's this happy right now, then he couldn't possibly miss his daughter.

Liar.

Liar.

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James smiles, and holds out his hand to pull me over a ridge in the dirt. The air at the crest is heavy with the scent of foxgloves and violets. He winces and attempts to hide his shoulder from me, obscuring the festering cut that seems to grow by the day.

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I flee the scene. In the ruined building I shelter in, there is a piece of broken concrete that hangs down a bit farther than the rest of the piece-meal roof. I slip

through a hole in the wall and use a few rusted pipes as footholds to reach the slab. The silence that can be found up here, underneath the dusky sky and in between the howling wind, is deafening.

Or rather, it would be, if the pipes didn't squeak as Noray pulled herself up next to me. It's hard for adults to get up here. I wonder how she did it. She must be very squirrely—

"You're sad about something." Her voice interrupts my train of thought, and I turn onto my other side, away from her, so I can scowl into the night.

"I'm angry." My tone is sharp and clipped as broken glass. I don't think I've ever been angry at someone before. Well, not someone who was still conscious enough to receive the brunt of my ire. Noray shakes her head solemnly.

"They often show up as a pair." I don't speak or look at her. This conversation is over. Or apparently not, because she continues. "That man who passed away downstairs"—he didn't pass away, he just sat down in the corner and breathed shakily and then stopped moving—"left a letter. He asks whoever finds it to keep you safe. I'm guessing you can't read."

I give her my most withering stare, but she just smiles gently and shakes her head.

"That's okay honey, I can teach you once we get going again. I helped teach Ivy too."

"I'm not coming with you." Her eyebrows raise.

"Your guardian can't look after you anymore, Sonya. You don't have to trust us, but this is no place for a kid." She reaches for my shoulder and I slap her hand away before turning and staring stonily in the opposite direction from her.

"I'm not going," I reply stubbornly. Noray simply sighs and begins to ease herself down from the overhang, trying to make sure the rusty pipes don't break under her weight. My brain works in spite of itself, blurting out a final question that's been boiling inside me since dinner.

"Why is Trusken so happy that his daughter died?"

I feel, rather than see her turn around, before I glance back to get a good look at her face. Her mouth is pulled into a taut line, and her eyes well with tears. We make eye contact and there's a moment of silence as she looks at me with both pity and another emotion that I can't name.

"Sometimes you have to choose to honor someone's memory by laughing about their best moments. Otherwise the only option left is to fall apart."

I wonder if other people know these things like Noray and Trusken do, and if there's something wrong with me because I don't. I also think about James. I think about him for the first time since he—
—died.

⌄ ⌄ ⌄

James smiles, and holds out his hand to pull me over a ridge in the dirt. The air at the crest is heavy with the scent of foxgloves and violets. He winces and attempts to hide his shoulder from me, obscuring the festering cut that seems to grow by the day. He ruffles my hair affectionately and then walks ahead into the field as I squint my eyes against the rose-colored sunrise. I look around, and realize that I've lost sight of him through the tall grass. I'm alone.

⌄ ⌄ ⌄

I float back to the now-dead campfire in a sort of daze. Katja sits to the side of the room, fiddling with a carving knife and some sort of statue. She raises an eyebrow at me but doesn't say anything. I plop down onto a bench and sit and absolutely don't cry. Trusken finds me, Noray trailing him like a soft-voiced ghost before she sits down next to Katja. He squeezes my shoulder bravely. It's difficult to tell who is more surprised that I don't crumble at the touch.

"We're going to head out soon kiddo. Noray says that you won't come with us, but I have to ask you again." He is gentle and sad, and I'm not sure how I ever thought that he didn't miss his daughter. "It's not good to be alone, Sonya."

"Okay." My words don't surprise me like they did when I first spoke, the conversations I had with James clear in my mind, the rust of silence not yet gathered in my throat.

Trusken's eyes widen, but he beams hesitantly at me.

I continue: "You're right. I don't want to be alone anymore." Trusken's smile grows. Katja sends an approving nod in my direction and Noray bumps her shoulder, and I'm struck by how happy they seem, despite the ruined cities and radioactive wastelands and mutated creatures that lie outside my lonely safe haven. It reminds me of James, and the look on his face when he dug the silvery tin of candies out of the rubble of what was once a grocery store.

"Incredible," he breathed, "I haven't seen one of these since...before." And even though he must have had another family at some point, other people to look after that were gone now, he turned to me and smiled.

And Trusken isn't James, and I don't understand Noray, and I'm not sure that Katja likes me that much, but for the sake of the gaunt corpse in the basement, and the person he used to be, and the words he wrote in that letter, I try to smile.

My lips are chapped, and they stick to my teeth, and it's *really* awkward, but I think that this is the kind of thing that improves quickly with a little practice.

⌄ ⌄ ⌄

James smiles, and holds out his hand to pull me over a ridge in the dirt. The air at the crest is heavy with the scent of foxgloves and violets. He winces and attempts to hide his shoulder from me, obscuring the festering cut that seems to grow by the day. He ruffles my hair affectionately and then walks ahead into the field as I squint my eyes against the rose-colored sunrise. I look around, and realize that I've lost sight of him through the tall grass. I'm alone. I race into the brush, toward the spot where I lost him, whirling around to face a rustling noise coming from the distance. James emerges from the foliage, eyes laughing, presenting me with a small bundle of flowers. And he wasn't lost after all.

“Lingua Franca

I have a list written on the back of my heart
Of every word that I have thought of and loved
And forgotten immediately after

Vitriol

Zenith

Flummoxed

Deprecate

Coddiwomple

Dern

And of course, the slightly overused but still wonderful

Syzygy

I was taught that words were the most powerful tool available to us

That the only way to fix a problem was to speak about it

Letters are inscribed so deeply into our bones that

I'm half surprised we don't bleed ink

Our systems were built on the scratch of a quill

When we didn't evolve with wings we made them out of paper

When we couldn't cross oceans we assembled boats out of punctuation

Piles of paragraphs to shelter from the elements

Curls of the earliest cuneiform bridging gaps between mountains

The language of literacy can seem to many

Like a lock on the jealously guarded strongbox of knowledge

That alphabet leading to the gleaning of wisdom

Jewels nestled in the learned mans crown

The gleam like a dragon's hoard of treasure
Illuminating true purpose
Then why, when I write about something truly important to me,
Do my fingers trip over the words
When I argue with passion
Do syllables twist and coagulate before they leave my throat
How do letters fall short when rhetoric is supposedly infallible
Thousands of sensations inexpressible
Ineffable
Is a word that describes an emotion that can't be described in words
Whoever came up with that thought they were really clever, didn't they?
Letters strung together in a line
Could never hope to detail
A elderly woman whose mind is fading
Memories withering like fruit that has not yet been
Plucked from its branches
The image of her grandchild preserved
Fresh and golden in her mind
Even though they have never spoken a word in the same language
The crash of a soloists cadenza in a concert hall
Painting a picture wordlessly
Complementary colors clashing
Brushstrokes of a human hand
Conveying emotion
A feeling in the back of your mind
Just out of reach
Never quite palpable
But they can get pretty close
They can make people smile and laugh and cry
They can start and stop wars
They can bring joy
But they can also bring terror
In the millennia of its evolution
Language
The device that our success as a species can be accredited to
Still
falters

Is used to harm people
Is used to uplift
Is brand new
Is archaic
Is beautiful
Is ugly
I have a secret to confess
I used a thesaurus to write this poem
Because I couldn't think of words that were cool enough
To include in a poem about how cool words were
And I don't think my inability to absorb the English vernacular into my brain
Makes me a worse writer
I just sort of like the word thesaurus
Because it sounds like a type of dinosaur

“Galoshes”

I like frogs
Frogs have permeable skin
So thin water can pass right through
They drink through it
Breathe through it
They wear their lungs on the outside
Their heart on their sleeve
I wonder what that would be like
For things to move so easily you don't have to think
To absorb in an instant
The knowledge of a year
To feel the thoughts of others
To know what they want from you
Passing into your mind as easily
As water molecules through a
Thin
Membranous
Tissue
All frogs have to do is be completely submerged
I mean, really we should be able to do it too
The only thing standing between me and being a silly little frog

Is a few million, billion years of evolution
And the ability to consume water just by standing in it
To never have to hold my breath
When something becomes a little too close for comfort
Or I just want to not stand out for today
To blend into a crowd...
Which is coincidentally another thing frog skin is really good at!
Military grade camouflage
Frogs are veritable masters of disguise
They have the perfect gift of being exactly where they should be
And yet somehow you never expect to find them there
If I had a nickel for every time I saw a frog in a pond
And was SHOCKED to find that frog
I would have more than one nickel
Which is sometimes also how I react to finding myself
In places that I didn't necessarily aim to be in
But I certainly am there
When things become a bit more than I anticipated
Despite anticipating the fact that I was going to bite off more than I could chew
I guess that's one thing that frogs and I still have in common
Even though they can literally breathe through
their porous, slimy skin
Frogs still have lungs
They still drown
In the silence of their own minds
In the middle of the night when we can't see the moon
And can't quiet our beating breaths
Sometimes I hear a frog croaking
In the middle of a placid pond
And I'm like
Who is he talking to?
And then I think that maybe he's just
Talking to hear the sound of his own voice
To break the silence
To break the surface
And come up for air

“Meditation on a Scent That Does Not Exist”

The perfume smells of poppies
Four petals drenched like roses
Beetle black pools of lethargy
Luring like a siren to deeper waters
Fresh scented
Dead growing

In a vocabulary of verdure
A strange dance of detritus
Poppies are mausoleums
The crypt before a crocus
They herald death
Growing in fields where soldiers lay
Spring shoots from the ground marking a new day
In some sick sort of
Dalliance with decay

Mourners at a funeral dressed in red
Scarlet valleys left behind in their stead
Weeping tears of aubergine
Their sweet liquor lulling
Faces into deep dreams

When true lovers were kept apart
They would place flowers in window sills
Sending silent messages
I love you
Eternally devoted
Thinking of you
I am not free
A logical conclusion would be that
Someone was simply conveying their availability
But I find it ominous that such a bloom
Signals death as well as
an inability to escape

It stands to reason that in the language
Of flowers
The codex of secret things
Poppies mark a withering
End of a reapers journey
Suffocating obligation
Chained to a vermillion proliferation

But they also represent consolation
Warm light to a somber sojourn
Apologies for your loss
Playing a dirge of disintegration
In some ways it's comforting

The double edged sword
A blood red blossom
A frostbitten hand
A muffled breath
A tiny death
It giveth and it taketh away

“Allegory”

Family Dinner
Polite chatter
A whole roast ham and a dish of mashed potatoes and green beans
My uncle asked “how’ve you been?”
“Tough year”
“Keeping busy”
I told him I’m fine.
What I meant was that

I am like Atlas,
Holding up the sky
The earth’s orbit bears down between my shoulder blades
Spinning like a top, like a drill, boring a hole in my spine

Split in two
I cannot bear the brunt of this weight alone

Every step of the constellations sends tremors down my arms
Orion's gait brings me low to the ground
Pushes my eyes into the mud

My college essay asked
What work I plan to do in the future
I said
"I aim to continue making high quality creative work"
What I meant was that

I am like Hercules on the eve of his 5th labor
All of the fatigue and none of the promise of extradition
My hands are calloused from the dealings of greater gods
That watch, impersonal, as I hesitate before the hydra
Unsure if I can chop off its head for the thousandth time

They praised me for my hard work
Said I was dedicated and a good example for others
I said
"Oh, it's not that big of a deal"
What I meant was that

I am like Daedalus
Burning the midnight oil
To build my son's feathered pyre
They clapped when I pulled
The ant through the eye of the needle
But now they hate its honey cries and the
Way my handiwork bleeds from the eyes

You have made me like Hector
Watching my brother Paris
Sign his fate
Just because he dared to take the apple that fell from the tree

Into his waiting hands
And all I can do is write poetry like Cassandra
Who cried the future from the rooftops
And was dead before it could come true.

Ella Wang

Grade 8, Parkway West Middle School

Educator: Suzan Wilson

Short Story



Breathe In And Breathe Out

I thought my life was bad, but I didn't realize how much worse it would get. My name is Clara Martinez, and I am 8 years old. One thing about me is that I don't live in a normal home like other kids; I live at an adoption center in New Jersey. My biological mother abandoned me when I was only a few weeks old. *Why?* I'd hate to tell you that I'm wondering the same thing. One of the staff members, Mrs. Harley, told me that my birth mother was 17 when she abandoned me. *Crazy, right? Who is cruel enough to do something like that?* Mrs. Harley also informed me that I was brought here by a young lady who found me on the sidewalk. She is the reason I am alive today because who knows what could've happened if she hadn't seen me that day. However, my luck doesn't get any better. As I grew older, people began noticing signs of a speech disorder. I was recently diagnosed with a childhood-onset fluency disorder, which makes communicating difficult because of my slight stutter. It made sense why no one wanted to adopt me. *Who wants a kid with a disability?* I felt like the entire world was against me, and I felt unlovable. My intrusive thoughts were interrupted by Mrs. Harley tapping my shoulder and snapping me out of my gaze.

"Clara, I have some great news for you! A family is interested in getting to know you! Would you like to meet them?" Mrs. Harley asked, gesturing me to follow her.

"N-no, I-I don't want to go with y-y-you. Y-you know what they a-are going to do when they find out that I s-stutter," I whined. This wouldn't be the first time this had happened. A few years back, the same situation occurred. The family took one look at me after hearing me speak for the first time and shook their heads leaving me once again with no family.

"Come on, Clara, maybe this time will be different, but you will never know if you don't try," Mrs. Harley reassured, holding her hand out. I groaned. I just wanted to get this over with.

"Mr. and Mrs. Robinson, meet Clara." Mrs. Harley introduced me to Mr. and Mrs. Robinson. I looked up and down at the couple standing in front of me. *Maybe they aren't so bad.* I had the biggest smile; I wanted to make a good first impression.

"H-h-hello! It's so nice to meet you. My n-name is-" I stuttered nervously.

"Wait," Mr. Robinson interrupted. "You never told me she has a stutter?" He whispered into Mrs. Harley's ear, but apparently, it wasn't very much of a whisper because I heard what he said loud and clear. I felt my face burn and my teeth clench.

"I don't believe that her stuttering makes her any less of a sweet girl," Mrs. Harley responded. The couple glanced at each other and made a disgusted face.

"Um, we need some time to think about it. Have a nice day," the couple interrupted. They turned around and walked straight out the door. I clenched my fists until my knuckles turned white. I was enraged. Suddenly I couldn't control my temper anymore and let out a scream.

"AHHHHH! THIS ISN'T FAIR!" I screamed and knocked over a plant, dirt spilling all over the floor. I pushed over chairs and knocked over a stack of papers on a desk. I was having a complete meltdown.

"Cara! Please calm down!" Mrs. Harley gasped, attempting to hold her hand to take me somewhere to calm myself down, but I brushed her hand away instead. Mrs. Harley had to call an entire army of adults to calm me down. *Why do I stutter? Why can't I be like a normal child? Why did my mom abandon me? I hate myself!* The thoughts swarmed through my head like a tornado ripping apart houses and knocking over trees.

Eventually, the staff somehow managed to get me settled down. I could feel the stares burning into the back of my head. Mrs. Harley found me a therapist to help control my temper so I wouldn't lash out in the middle of the building again. The therapist's name is Mrs. Larson, although she insisted I call her Mrs. L for short. During my first therapy session, Mrs. L asked me so many questions I thought my head would burst.

"Clara, how are you feeling?" she asked.

"I-I don't know. I didn't mean to get so angry, but I couldn't help it. I'm sorry," I apologized sheepishly.

“Do you mind telling me what happened? Why did you lash out earlier?” I spilled everything to her, from how I felt when my mother left me on the street in the blazing sun to feeling jealous of watching other kids get adopted every day while I have been in the system for years and still cannot find a family. Mrs. L nodded and listened to me talk about my feelings. I don’t think I have ever spoken that much in my life. I told her I had a headache, and she dismissed me from the session. For the first time, I felt heard and understood. Mrs. L didn’t judge me because of my stutter; she just listened to me vent, which somehow made me feel better.

I fell into a deep sleep that night. I dreamt of living in a house, having a big family, and my own bedroom. That would be a perfect life. If only it could come true in real life.

“I thought about what you said last week, and I want to teach you some strategies to control your anxiety,” Mrs. L explained at my next therapy session. “Do this for me. Think of one time you were nervous or upset about something. It can be any time you felt like you didn’t belong or a moment you were angry. Now, I want you to squeeze your wrists into fists as hard as you can, like this,” she demonstrated. I imitated her action. “Excellent! Now, I want you to close your eyes and breathe in for a few seconds, hold it, then breathe out for another few seconds. I want you to try this strategy whenever you feel anxious or mad. Okay?”

I nodded and was dismissed for the day.

“Clara, someone is here to see you,” Mrs. Harley announced later that afternoon.

“W-w-who is it?” I was puzzled. *Who would come to see me?* Mrs. Harley led me to a woman in her late twenties. Her hair was brunette with a short bob cut. Her eyes were blue just like mine. I stared at her long and hard; then I realized she looked somewhat like me. My jaw fell to the floor. This woman was my birth mother. My hands started shaking, and I became very anxious. *I took a deep breath through my nose, held it for a few seconds, and exhaled,* as Mrs. L instructed me to do it.

“I will be right over here if you need me,” Mrs. Harley said, giving us some space. I didn’t know what to say, so I stared at the floor and twiddled my thumbs. *Was I supposed to talk to her and let her get to know me? No, she abandoned me. She doesn’t deserve to know anything about me.* Finally, my birth mom broke the awkward silence.

“Hi honey, you look well,” my birth mom said, reaching her hand out to grab mine, but I pulled my hand back just in time. For all I know, this woman could be dangerous.

“Y-you ab-abandoned me w-when I was only a few weeks o-old. And I don’t even know your n-name and y-you d-don’t even k-know anything a-b-bout me!” I exclaimed.

“My name is Evelyn, honey. I didn’t know what to do at the ti-” she reassured me, but I interrupted her instead.

“D-don’t you dare call me h-honey! Y-you are not my mom! You are just the p-p-person who a-abandoned me!” I screamed. “I-if y-you missed me, why d-didn’t y-you come f-find m-me earlier?” Evelyn looked genuinely hurt by my words, but I didn’t feel bad for yelling at her. She doesn’t deserve to come and say she missed me after leaving me in this sick place.

“Can we just sit down and talk? Please?” Evelyn asked. I didn’t say anything, but I sat down anyway. *Just remember to breathe in and breathe out.* Evelyn cleared her throat and began explaining her side of the story.

“I was 17 when I had you. It was a mistake, and it’s one of my biggest regrets. I should’ve been more responsible.” Evelyn looked ashamed. “My ex broke up with me when he found out that I was pregnant with you. I was in no shape to raise a kid on my own. I had school and my future to focus on, and I’m so sorry you weren’t a part of that. I just wanted you to have a better life. After I left you, I started going to counseling, and I began working on myself. I shouldn’t have left you on the street like that. I just want you to know that you didn’t do anything wrong; it was all my fault. I’m so sorry,” Evelyn sobbed. Her words made me realize I was wrong about why she left me. It wasn’t because she hated children; she knew she wouldn’t be a good mom, so she wanted me to find someone better. This made me feel a little bad for her. I tried my best to comfort her so she would stop crying.

Wiping tears from under her eyes, Evelyn said, “You seem like such a sweet girl. Come home with me, please? I promise I will never leave you on the street again,” she uttered. I was stunned. This was the least of my expectations. I sat there and thought for a moment. That could mean I finally had a place to go; however, it was with the person I dreaded the most. I had to think long and hard about this decision.

“I-I’m so-sorry, b-but n-n-no,” I said, finally. I couldn’t risk being abandoned again. Evelyn looked extremely disappointed.

"It's okay. I understand," Evelyn muttered. She got up and waved goodbye to me. A tear rolled down my cheek, but before another tear could fall, Mrs. Harley came running over with a sparkle in her eyes.

"Clara, there is a family who wants to adopt you!" She exclaimed. I wanted to be excited, but I was scared it would be like the other families who wanted to adopt me in the past.

"I d-d-don't want t-t-to get my hopes up. They will p-probably change their mind when they find out I s-s-stutter," I complained.

"Give it a chance, okay? Maybe it will work out! Besides, they seem to really like you!"

It took a lot of convincing, but I gave in and decided to take a chance.

"H-hello my n-n-name is Clara," I stuttered, nervously.

"Hi Clara, my name is Grace! It's so nice to meet you!" Gracie smiled so big you could see her gums.

"It's nice to meet you too," I said, shaking her hand. I could feel my hands start to sweat.

"I don't know how to say this, but I believe I brought you here long ago," Grace confessed.

"S-so why do you want to adopt me now, after all these years, when you could've d-d-done something earlier?" I asked.

"It's complicated. I wasn't in the best financial position at the time. I was only 20 and wasn't ready to raise a kid. But now, I have found a stable job and married my husband, who loves me. Unfortunately, I was told I am unable to have kids, so my husband and I have been thinking of adopting a child. You stood out to me, and I would love for you to be a member of my family," Grace swallowed. I was speechless. I couldn't even ring out the excitement. I was practically jumping out of my seat.

"Y-y-yes! I would l-love t-that" I burst into tears. I ran up to Grace and gave her a big bear hug. My dream was finally coming true.

I quickly packed up all my belongings, ready to go to my new home. I had to say goodbye to Mrs. L before I left. After all she did for me it would be rude of me not to.

"Hi, Clara! How are you?" Mrs. L greeted me as I walked in.

"I-I got adopted!" I jumped with glee.

"That's amazing! I'm so happy for you!" Mrs. L exclaimed.

"I'm g-going to miss you, Mrs. L. T-thank you for everything y-you taught m-me," I said finally.

“Of course, Clara, I will miss you too. And don’t forget, remember to—”

“Breathe in and breathe out,” I cut her off, smiling. I said a final goodbye and wrapped Mrs. L in a bear hug. I waved goodbye to Mrs. Harley and thanked her for all her help.

As I left with my newfound family, I looked back at the building I lived in for years. It felt a little upsetting to go; however, I was ecstatic to have found people who were willing to take me home even with my speech disorder!

I gazed out the window, watching the buildings and trees passing by. After about a half-an-hour-long car ride to my new house, we arrived and pulled into the driveway. The house is a thousand times better than what I was expecting. It was 3 stories, had a finished basement, and even a pool. But my favorite part was a golden retriever greeting me at the front door. My dream had finally come true. Now, I get to go to a real school with other kids my age and live my dream life. I realize now that being normal like the other kids wasn’t what I needed; I just needed a family who loved me for who I was. And now, I have just that.

Isabella Wang

Grade 10, John Burroughs School

Poetry



Trefoils

I whittle my pencils down to the acid-green, hatched metal cap,
reduce them to sunflower buds with concave crowns. I'm always catching
yellow before it slips away, a twirl, then slipping down the space in between
my fingers, if I cross my eyes, I cross the fractured, sun-spilt pavement
of wet white basketball circlets and crushed styrofoam trays, back when it was
cross my heart and hope to die—
we'll be friends again, even if I've never said *I love you*
in the grass on the last day of school,
I thought we might as well take Jesus off
the cross at Sunday sermons and shake him awake,
good news: we found Heaven. I'm whooping, twirling, you
laughing as you wrap around me.
Someone tell me I haven't been saved on the
clovers and cropped grass, sweet soil scent, blue arched dome
to infinity, your windy voice, our legs held to our knees,
my fingers clutching at those trefoils that just might be
a bouquet, I'm crafting crowns like in the movies
while the world's crafting our blessing. We are moving across time
liminal, limitless, boundless. You're me, but not me, because it's impossible
for people to have mixed our names up so many times
for the letters to not have rubbed identity off onto each other,
You'd be surprised how few people can tell apart
two short Asian girls in a public school. Maybe I'm pandering
because now that Heaven's gone, I'm settling for the scent of
crushed trefoil petals sprinkled across my skin,

those stares at the worn-out, tiny wood scrap caught in space,
yellow girls unified, turning the cobalt sharpener's blades
each rotation spinning the Earth apart, slicing unfurling revelations like ribbons
a conical drill. For now it's unbroken and some say
if you angle it like so, it just might pierce through
so we can cross over forever.

Jackson Wilks

Grade 8, Parkway West Middle School

Educator: Tracy Bouslog

Personal Essay & Memoir



Humbled on the Field

“Men” He started. “Today is your day to fight. To fight for what is yours. These boys have come to defeat you, and they’re trying it on your own god**** field. We’re here to demonstrate our dominance. We’re here to become undisputed,” Coach Matt declared. The word “undisputed” meant a lot to my coach; it had become his term of endearment for the team. His ultimate goal was for us to lead an undefeated, or “undisputed,” season. While these wise words might have penetrated the egos of my teammates and brought them back to earth, but these words had not been quite as strong for me. My ego had gradually snowballed from our countless victories into something seemingly unconquerable. We had thoroughly dismantled every team that faced us: Northwest, beat 58-0. Rockwood Summit, beat 54-0. Lindbergh, beat 48-0.

This is an easy win... This is an easy win... This is an easy win... I swirled around my helmet as I jogged shoulder to shoulder along the sideline. We gazed across the field as the referee flipped the coin into the air and then let it settle on the ground. A split second later, Coach Callahan looked back and yelled, “KICKOFF!” With this accustomed yet commanding voice, the thought that had been bouncing around in my head finally struck me: *It’s time. This is what all our practice and training has led up to. Don’t screw it up.*

Thump! The sound of the kickoff jolted me out of my paralyzing thought. As I raced down the field, I picked a little silhouette in the distance and zeroed in on him. I lowered my right shoulder and drove my legs, plowing into him. I quickly regained my balance and raced farther down the field. However, I looked over a split second later, I glanced back and saw him on the ground, the ball

securely tucked under his arm. “The kick is returned and taken up to the 40, where the Eureka offense will begin,” the announcer declared. I watched as our formidable Longhorn defense trotted onto the field, heads held high, confidence radiating from their eyes as if their victory was already decided.

I gazed at the field just as the ball left the center’s hands in slow motion, meandering toward the quarterback. He caught it, paused, and then handed the ball to their small but mighty running back. He shot down the middle of the field like a stubby train barreling down open tracks. He cut right, whizzing through the shoulder of our outside linebacker. Then, with one final cut to the left, he evaded the last defender, leaving nothing but an open field between him and the goal line.

My stomach twisted into a tight knot and sank to the floor. I was in disbelief. I could feel the energy being drained from the air. Coaches yelled, players threw things, and everyone’s hope blew away with the wind. I never imagined a team like ours could go from so high and mighty, to feeling this low.

Following that travesty of a first play, I jogged out with our Longhorn offense for the opening drive. Not one of our players on the field felt confident that we would make anything on this drive, and they were right. We’d try a run play, but it would fall 2 yards short. Next, we try a pass and it’d get tipped away by their 6’3 defensive end. The ball would hit the turf with a sickening “Smack”, 5 yards short of the intended receiver. This behemoth of a man could slice through one of our best offensive linemen like a hot knife through butter. As the quarters ticked past we continued to be bested at every shot we took. Finally being saved by the familiar scream of the scoreboard signaling the end of the second quarter.

His halftime speech began with, “Yall are playing down to their level. We taught you that when you play up at our level they can’t breathe. But when we stoop down and play at their level, that’s where they thrive. With these heavy words of encouragement, we returned to the field to start our stretches. “L-O-N-G-H-O-R-N-S... L-O-N-G-H-O-R-N-S... L-O-N-G-H-O-R-N-S,” we all shouted in unison as we did our jumping jacks. I made my way to the sideline to prepare for us to receive the ball. Our returner had failed to make a much-needed long run and had been stopped near the 30-yard line, so I stepped onto the field with all my hopes resting on our quarterback to step his game up.

Once we emerged from the huddle and settled into our stances, Braden yelled, “HIKE,” and our chance at redemption began. My teammates and I on the line fought to give him as much time to work with as we could. After an eternity of fighting in the trenches, he finally threw the ball. I stood from my tense stance

to watch our saving grace soar through the air. The ball sliced through the air with its signature tight spiral, like a bullet speeding toward the edge of the field.

I watched as the intended receiver looked back and locked eyes with the ball. My heart fluttered with hope as I watched our last-ditch attempt soar across the open blue sky like a bird finally set free from its cage. However, as the seconds ticked by, it became apparent that the throw was going to fall short. Instead of slowing down to catch the ball in stride, as the quarterback intended, the receiver continued running, leaving the ball ten yards behind him along the sideline. There, a man in the opposing jersey snatched it and took off in the opposite direction, sealing our fate.

With the final scoreboard chime signaling the start of the fourth quarter, I knew we were finished. The peril of my ego had finally caught up to me. We would make one or two big plays in that quarter, igniting the slightest bit of flame into the already extinguished fire.

Throughout my time playing football, my teammates and I developed into a true brotherhood. We forged bonds that not even the sharpest knife could sever. During practice, our strong connections allowed us to move as one, completing our plays with seamless precision. As we carried out our thoroughly practiced plays on our previous opponents, our prowess became evident. The ego boost from victory after victory seeped into my everyday life, developing me into an arrogant and cocky individual who could hardly tolerate the thought of losing. That is what made the image forever burned into my memory all the more painful: the scoreboard read Visitor - 16, Home - 8.



Blood Wars

3:47...

3:46...

3:45...

“How did it come to this,” a voice whispered, barely audible.

The owner of the voice sat on the floor of a dank room, which smelt of must and blood.

As a matter of fact, the owner of the voice was a man...well, not quite yet a man, but not a boy anymore. Perhaps this figure was a *young* man.

The young man continued sitting on the dirty floor staring at a digital clock that cast an eerie white glow upon his brow. It was just bright enough to show his dark red hair that appeared almost brown. He also looked deathly pale, but his skin was naturally white as milk. He was also dressed in the same color head to toe. Fanatically, he had white shoes, socks, sweatpants, a t-shirt, and an unseen undershirt all bright white.

2:28...

2:27...

2:26...

He began to feel a dull ache in the back of his neck rising into the base of his skull. Confused, he felt the back of his neck and his fingers ran across stitches and a small, hard, metallic bump. The young man felt panic strike him like lightning, for he knew not what was put into the back of his neck.

1:55...

1:54...

1:53...

He also felt a nearly undetectable object in his left ear.

It was odd because it did not obscure his hearing. Until it started making noise.

"What is your name?" it spouted into his ear causing him to cup it to the side of his head.

"Remus," he murmured.

Remus gazed anxiously at the clock.

1:02...

1:01...

0:59...

Panic gripped Remus's heart again.

"Who are you?!" he cried.

"A friend," it replied. "My name is Vincent."

"I don't care," Remus said rather corrosively.

0:33...

0:32...

0:31...

"We haven't much time," Vincent said urgently.

Remus ignored it and stood to his feet facing the clock breathing heavily.

0:20...

0:19...

0:18...

Vincent was very persistent.

"I'm here to help you, Remus"

"I don't want your help," Remus spat dejectedly.

0:09...

0:08...

0:07...

"Don't you want to live?" Vincent begged desperately.

0:05...

0:04...

0:03...

"Yes," Remus softly whispered, afraid.

0:02...

0:01...

0:00...

As soon as the clock ran out of time, the screen went black and the entire wall split, opening like double doors. Remus was instantly blinded by sunlight and refreshed by fresh air.

He sprinted through the opening, running out into a grassy clearing.

"Hang a right," Vincent told him.

When Remus turned right, he appeared to be in a patch of woods with blossoming trees. Remus continued running until he spotted an object glinting in the light.

"Pick that up," Vincent ordered.

Before he had picked it up, Remus heard a sharp cry of pain. Staying low he picked up the object. It turned out to be an unsheathed double-edged dagger.

Keeping the dagger in reversed grip, Remus peered out toward where he had heard the cry.

Remus saw two men struggling on the dirt. One had his knees on the other man's chest keeping him to the ground. The man on top was using his hands to strangle the struggling man on the ground.

"Walk away. Keep low!" Vincent instructed the wide-eyed Remus, who was flushed with adrenaline.

Remus crept away from the two men preceding backwards.

The man who was on bottom now appeared motionless and the second man stood with a hungry look in his eyes. Remus saw a red tattoo on his lean right forearm. He knew it was writing but was too far away to make it out.

Remus looked at his own forearm.

He had letters and numbers *Rt-7314* printed on his arm in yellow.

"Stay away from the 'reds,'" Vincent told him as the man darted in the opposite direction of where Remus was headed.

Suddenly, a few cracks like thunder sounded in the air.

Remus darted in panic knowing the sound came from firearms. He didn't know what to do at the moment. Remus vaguely remembered hearing Vincent's voice but could not focus on it.

Remus kept running until he ran into something solid.

The next thing Remus knew was that he was on the ground and tried to get up as fast as he could.

When he had gotten up, Remus was facing a man shorter than he was, but with bulging arms and hands slick with blood. In his hand he held a small stone and on the other arm he had a purple tattoo with similar labeling: *T-23418*. His shirt, once white, was now splattered with blood and dirt.

Remus was in an athletic stance with his blade held threateningly toward the man.

“We don’t have to fight,” Remus said boldly.

“Nobody gets out of this arena that way,” the man replied coldly, swinging his fist with the stone.

The man’s blow connected as Remus was ducking out of the way. A gash split open near Remus’s left eyebrow splattering red onto his white shirt. Now angry, meaning to pierce his adversary’s heart, Remus sank the dagger into the man’s shoulder. The man howled in agony.

Remus heard the man’s cries echo across the now silent area. Frightened, Remus retracted the blade and sank it into the man’s neck, severing his throat.

Remus’s opponent gagged and made no more noise, peering wide-eyed at Remus as he fell to the ground. After what seemed like hours for Remus, the man’s eyes glazed over and his face went blank.

Remus sank to his knees.

“Oh God,” he prayed desperately. “Please help me get out of this.”

“Amen,” Vincent said, almost sarcastically “*Now what do you think I’ve been trying to do?*”

Remus ignored him and heard waves crashing to shore. He looked behind him and saw a beach.

“Where do I need to go?” he asked sullenly.

“South,” Vincent told him seriously. “*Do not go to the beach. You will be picked off there.*”

Remus looked in the direction of the sun and saw it about to set over the sea. He started to head parallel to the beach the direction south.

Remus heard the occasional crack of gunshots in the distance and kept his knife close and continued south.

Eventually, Remus came upon a six-foot chain length fence topped with barbed wire. Oddly enough, the fence seemed out of place in the sort of shrine area he had ventured toward, but it had dark red beams holding the chained mesh.

Remus heard Vincent cuss through the microphone in his ear.

“What?!” Remus inquired of Vincent.

“*It’s already moved,*” he explained, frustrated.

“It moves!?” Remus cried agitated.

“*You need to run, Remus. North-East. Now!*” Vincent yelled.

Remus obeyed. He sprinted, turning northeast.

When he was running, Remus saw another man sprinting about thirty feet beside him.

"Don't engage," Vincent told him.

"How can you see things when I do?" Remus huffed.

"I can see through your eyes. Now stop talking and run!" Vincent said curtly.

Remus continued running and saw another fence about a hundred feet away. It was similar to the one he saw prior to him heading northeast. Except it was about a foot tall . . . then two feet.

"The third fence is rising!" Vincent cried. *"You need to cross it now!"*

Remus felt fear and adrenaline flood through his veins like fire. He ran faster than he had ever before. He ran like the very hand of death was trying to grasp him.

Remus came upon the fence when it was about four and a half feet tall and rising and he jumped knowing there was little to no time in order to climb it.

Soaring above the top of the fence Remus realized his mistake. The fence had barbed wire.

Remus's left heel barely clipped the barbed wire. But what he didn't know was that he jumped awkwardly enough to the extent that his right calf got caught in the barbed wire.

Remus hung from the chain length fence that was now six-foot in agony. His calf stung from the barbed wire and his bodyweight was pulling him downward causing the barbed wire rings to bend a little but still suspend him in the air. With his right side to the fence, he dropped his knife into the grass, trying with every fiber of will in his soul not to cry out in pain.

His eyes were blurry from pain. But suddenly, Remus heard a distant *thunk* deep within the earth and a strangled cry. Then a sound louder than thunder.

Remus's ears rang, his right calf was on fire with pain, and he had no way out.

He thought he could vaguely hear Vincent through the ringing but thought it useless to try and listen.

The people who put me here wanted this to happen, he thought suddenly. He had no idea where the thought came from, but it was true.

As though a fire had been lit in his chest, anger filled Remus like venom. Spreading until it had dimmed the ringing and the agony in his leg. He had begun to think briefly that it started to rain, but it was blood dripping from his mangled limb and into his face.

Remus twisted his body so his back was to the fence and his knee bent inwardly into an obtuse angle causing his quaternary muscle in his right leg to burn. He then gritted his teeth and sat up to battle the barbed wire. Using his left leg to prop against the mesh and keep him from falling, Remus began to pluck what appeared not to be regular barbed wire but wire propped with fishhooks.

Each time he ripped a fishhook from his calf, the fire in Remus's chest roared until it was an inferno of pain and anger in his soul.

The ringing eventually dimmed and Remus had removed enough hooks that the spiral wire could not bear his weight any longer. Remus fell, his lower back striking the hard, unforgiving ground filling his tailbone with anguish. And the menacing fishhooks satisfied themselves with a chunk of his leg about the size of a golf ball.

Remus lay on the ground bleeding, broken, and spent, staring into the open blue sky.

"Remus..." Vincent said softly and muffled in Remus's ears. *"It's not hopeless, man. I'm not going to tell you to get up but I'm going to tell you to drive on. This pain will end, buddy."*

"Vincent," Remus said weakly, fighting to stay conscious.

"Vincent!" he shouted, wanting to talk to Vincent even if it was the last time. Remus wanted to live.

With difficulty and pain Remus was able to sit up in a puddle of his own blood.

Remus cut off the ruined, blood-soaked right pant leg below the knee and ripped off his shirt, tying it around his calf haphazardly, already soaking in blood from the wound.

Remus grabbed the fence and used it to stand. He tried to walk, but his knee buckled. He held onto the fence refusing to fall again. Remus somehow knew that if he sank to the ground, he would not ever stand back up again.

"Remus," Vincent called in his ear.

"What do you need me to do?" he replied.

"For starters, walk eastward along the fence. You will find something you need. Leave the dagger." Vincent instructed.

Remus walked along the fence, limping and holding onto the fence.

He found himself smelling blood. And the fence was wet and sticky.

Remus's blood on his own hands had dried at this point. The blood he was touching was not his own. He continued along the fenceline and came across a small and simple revolver in the grass.

Behind the fence was a body with no head.

"Vincent?" Remus said, his guts squelching with discomfort. "What am I looking at?"

"Alas," said Vincent, *"This man didn't make it past the fence in time."*

"You mean..." Remus's voice seemed not to work as he felt the bump on the back of his neck.

"Yes." Vincent said ruefully. *"That device in your neck will explode if you go outside the boundaries. Or if the boundaries shrink and you are outside the new ones."*

Remus picked up the revolver and checked it. It was fully loaded with five .38 caliber bullets.

"He most likely threw it over before he was going to climb," Vincent hypothesized.

"Why not use his pockets?" Remus pondered aloud.

He peered at the body searching for the pockets on the corpse's pants. It evidently had empty pockets from Remus's view.

Perhaps he did not think while in haste, he thought.

Remus finally let go of the fence. He had difficulty balancing but was able to start a slow journey yet again northeast. Remus encountered very few living things. He only saw more mutilated corpses and ravens that feasted upon them.

Remus found a pool that distracted him from the pain in his body as he reached down to take handfuls of water to his mouth.

After he drank his fill, Remus silently relieved his bladder under a tree, remaining watchful of his surroundings while prepared to reach in his pocket and shoot anyone currently unseen. He continued limping northeast. Then he saw a fence begin to rise ten feet from him.

Remus struggled to move quickly and by the time he hurdled the fence it was four feet tall and rising. His leg buckled when he landed but he pressed onward, regaining his footing.

A long moment later, Vincent instructed him to start moving north.

Remus eventually came across a shrine that was what he suspected to be the center of the battlefield.

He had heard voices and peppered fire of gunshots and then silence.

Remus peered from behind a tree and saw a man with a red tattoo standing over a shredded corpse of a man.

The man apparently was triumphant and raised his arms to receive victory.

"He thinks he has won," Vincent told him. *"But you're the only opponent left."*

Remus's stomach felt sour.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out his revolver pulling the hammer back with his right thumb, grasping it with both hands putting his finger on the trigger.

He had it aimed at the back of the man's head but it felt like his finger was heavy.

"I don't want to." he said, as if he were in a trance.

The man spun around and alarmed Remus, aiming his weapon at him.

Remus pulled his trigger before the man could pull his.

The man's head lurched backward with a red haze, and his body followed it backward onto the ground. The man lay on his back with a blank look of surprise on his face while blood seeped from a wound in his forehead.

Remus dropped the revolver and vomited. Then he himself dropped as well to his knees.

He sat there and wept with ringing ears. He wept until the ringing stopped. He had heard a noise.

"What..." he said to himself.

The sound got louder as the muffled noises got dimmer.

He could hear clearly the sound of a fanfare playing brazenly all around him.

A black box rose from the ground in front of him. It was one of the boxes that had brought him here.

A man dressed in a white robe walked toward him from the black box. The man had a snowy white beard and shoulder length hair. In his hand he held a crown that looked like a wreath of golden leaves.

"Congratulations, victor of the Blood Wars," the man said with a deep, rich voice that seemed familiar to Remus.

Placing the crown on Remus's head he smiled and said, "My name is Vincent."

Morgan Wright

Grade 11, John Burroughs School

Educator: Shannon Koropchak

Flash Fiction



Tea Through Time

LANEY

Underneath the scorching, mid-July sun, a little girl sits cross-legged on the concrete facing her house. She is wearing denim shorts and a summer camp T-shirt much too big for her. Her eyes peek through large glass circles, and a halo of frizzy brown curls frame her face. She is staring at the ground.

Laid before her is a colorful porcelain tea cup; the last unbroken one of her mother's set, now neatly cracked in five pieces. At her forbidden tea party just one moment earlier, Laney had been drinking tap water out of the vessel, raising her pinky just as her mother did every morning until an ant had brushed her ankle. Out of instinct, her leg had jolted, and with a slight *clink*, the singular form had left her small fingers, come crashing down, tapped the earth, and become many.

As Laney's stinging eyes move up from the jagged mess before her, she glances at the front of her house. Her mother is standing frozen under the roof of their front porch, holding a spatula.

"Mama!" Laney calls.

No answer.

"Mama!"

IRENE

Irene stands, shielded from the hot sun by the asphalt shingles suspended above her head. Despite the unbearable heat, she has prepared crispy grilled cheeses — the kind with butter on the outside — and is coming to tell Laney it's time for lunch. After her feet tap across the weatherproofed cedar floor, however,

she is greeted by her daughter, seated on the hot concrete, tears streaming down her face, and Irene's last unbroken teacup on the ground— no longer unbroken.

The teacup originally belonged to a set of two, passed down from her mother. The first one, Irene had told Laney, was broken when her childhood dog knocked it off the kitchen counter. But this was not true. Though Irene loathed to admit it, she was the reason the first one had been broken.

As she stares at her daughter and the shattered porcelain memory strewn before her, Irene recalls the day she first felt disappointed in herself. Having stared at them every morning while she ate her breakfast, young Irene was very familiar with her mother's kitchen-cabinet-dwelling treasures. The small ceramic cups were surrounded by a pattern of rings of red, green, and blue circles and stars. One, seemingly neglected by its painter, had an incomplete pattern — the last circle and star of the rings only halfway painted. On that day, eager to satisfy her curiosity, Irene climbed up onto the counter, gingerly clasped the neglected tea cup, and began slowly lowering it. On her way, however, she lost traction with the counter, loosened her grip on the cup, and they both fell to the tile floor. Though her body had created a loud thump, the cup had met the floor with only a slight *clink*, shattering upon impact.

Despite the pain in her ribs, Irene reached and picked up a shard. If she moved her hand just so, the jagged splinter could slice her palm. Regardless, she valued one shattered thing more than the other. Irene shifted her eyes to the doorway where her own mother stood still, framed by the wood panels meant to surround a door. Predictably, her ears picked up the familiar and frequent sound that echoed through the house, as sharp as the shards of porcelain, reducing her to a small ant seeking refuge from the burning, hot July sun.

"Mama!" Irene hears, quickly brought back to the present.

"Mama!"

Irene feels her face begin to warm and that familiar sound to emerge, hoarse in her throat, but then she stops. Her eyes are hot and prickly as she feels her throat begin to tighten, constricting around invisible marbles. Though her vision begins to cloud, she can still make out the soft silhouette of her daughter sobbing over the pavement. Irene runs to Laney and gently lifts her small body into her arms. Stealing a glance at the ceramic fragments on the ground, she worries that at any moment they could jump up and slice her, the red stars becoming her blood. But she would escape. Irene holds her daughter tighter, feeling as though they have become one again.

As she begins to return to her house, Irene steps on a medium piece of ceramic, the muted crunch allowing a wave of vindication to please her ears. She would be different. Eventually, Irene, shirt dampened with Laney's tears, reaches her house and delicately places her daughter on the couch.

"I'm sorry, Mama," says Laney, retreating from her mother's embrace and sniffing quietly.

Irene pauses, pushing a curl from Laney's face. She inhales slowly, looking into her daughter's eyes, and softly replies, "It's ok. We all make mistakes."

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Sitting side by side at the dining room table, Laney and Irene paint mugs from the dollar store. They paint rings of circles and stars with vibrant reds, greens, and blues. Both humming along to the radio, they intently paint their cups. Just then, Irene's paintbrush slips and smudges a star.

"Damn it!"

Laney giggles.

"I'm not supposed to say that, am I?" says Irene.

Laney smiles, then looks up at her mother and says, "It's ok. We all make mistakes."

Samuel Yao

Grade 7, John Burroughs School

Flash Fiction



The Pill

The patient regarded the hole with profound reverence. It was the only thing that sustained and nurtured him. It gave him something to look forward to, and he took great joy in that. Each day he woke up to the harsh yet comforting sound of metal scraping across the aperture, bringing him something for sustenance. The consumables were adequate, but he anticipated something smaller, yet even more important.

The pill was a small, ivory-tinted capsule about half an inch in length. A small paper cup filled halfway with water accompanied the pellet to wash it down. Even before he brought the pill to his lips, an intense feeling of satisfaction washed over him. As the pill traveled down his esophagus and began to dissolve, this wave of complacency intensified.

It was as if he was born to take this pill.

After a bit, he started to feel lethargic. Without much thought, he walked over to his cot in a trance-like manner and passed out within a minute. The next day, the following events would recur once more.

The patient was content with this. Somehow, awaiting the capsule entertained him throughout the entire day. He would imagine what might happen when taking the pill, hoping a new sensation would take hold of him. When the time came he felt the same as always, and the patient felt alright with that.

One day, he woke up as his meal was slid into the room. As part of a habitual routine, the patient quickly ingested the meal and reached for the pill. However, as his grip tightened around the cup, the cylindrical shape seemingly unwrapped itself. Slowly, water spilled out as the cup's curvature was quickly

pulled taut. The patient tentatively reached forth, picking up the slip of cardboard as if it were an incendiary. As he examined it, the patient saw there were thick jet-black markings etched across the milky white cardstock.

Then, it all came crashing down like lightning.

He'd never felt anything like it before. Those random lines of what appeared to be ink instinctively formulated into something completely different. It was as if they were trying to convey a message.

Trying to say something.

And they told the patient, "Do not trust the pill."

The rest of the day was different. Instead of fantasizing about the pill, the patient found himself pondering about what that memorandum meant. He'd never seen anything like it, meaningless euclidean filaments creating a pattern that the patient understood.

And what did it mean not to trust the pill?

He decided to lay his thoughts aside and drifted into a restless sleep.

Once again, he awoke to the harsh sound of scraping metal as his meal was delivered. The patient slowly rose from his cot. Something felt different.

Something felt wrong.

He stumbled forward to pick up his tray and hastily grabbed for the cardboard cup. Once again, it split. The patient straightened the cardstock, and the process began once more. The dark lines etched on the cardboard sparked something in his mind.

"Remember. Turn Around."

Remember.

The force was so strong he hobbled backward a bit.

Remember.

That sleepy feeling he got every time he took the pill, was the very thing that made him a god. It pulled him away from the very thing humans had guaranteed. It made him immortal.

Remember.

But it also made him lose contact with those days and moments before him. That blurry feeling he felt every night was the thing that cleared his mind from the events that day.

When he took that pill, he forgot everything.

Remember.

Turn Around.

Slowly, the patient turned around. Somehow, while he was having an enlightenment, a door appeared behind him. His shaking hands reached forward, but he hesitated as his hands hovered over the handle. By leaving, he would leave the world he had always known. The one that made him a god. The one that he had so meticulously dreamed up.

His hand tightened around the doorknob, as the door swiftly unhinged into a new domain.

"I can dream up a better world out there," he thought as he slowly walked through the door.



A World of Color

“Remember, color is dangerous.” The headmaster recited in a neutral tone. A row of children, backs perfectly straight and hands at their sides, listened closely.

“Yes, headmaster,” the children intoned in perfect unity. Robert felt his insides churn. Little 8 year olds. My god. Praying and worshipping their elders like gods!

“Robert. Please lead today’s reading of the Founder’s Tale.” The headmaster patted Robert’s shoulder. “Don’t push yourself. Afterall, you are only an Assistant Teacher,” and in a quieter voice so the children would not hear: “and fix that facial expression.”

Robert still remembered the first time he questioned the “Supreme Founders” of their town. It was a school day, before the reading of the story was required every single day at story time. Now, the Founder’s Tale was (and still was in the moment) an incredible tale known by all. It was the tale of how the first founder, Finn, and his lover, Phoebe, together, eradicated all color and differences from the universe.

“They solved all the differences. They cured oppression, and made the world equal and good. They made our Earth more beautiful.” Even as a small child, Robert wept with joy at the beautiful story.

“I don’t like this story.” One little boy whined. The class turned dead silent, almost like a switch was flipped by that simple complaint. Robert remembered he could feel the air becoming colder and denser.

“Come with me.” The teacher’s expressive, passionate face became cold and detached. The boy began to shrink away, curling up into a shivering ball, but 2 other assistant teachers grabbed his arms and yanked him away. *What is happening?* Robert sat, fearful of the boy’s fate. But the teachers wouldn’t do that, right? They were so nice!

The boy was dragged out.

And Robert never did see him around ever again.

“They solved all the differences. They cured oppression, and made the world equal and good. They made our Earth more beautiful.” Robert finished. The children clapped, cheered, and jumped with joy. But Robert could not be less happy than he was at that moment. *If one child, Robert thought, if one child let out a single complaint about the Founder’s Tale, I would never see them again.*

“Let’s all clap for Teacher Robert!” The headmaster gave a wide, fake grin. The children yelled and clapped their hands together while giggling. Robert felt an inexplicable wave of shame. Was he being a hypocrite for doing nothing? And was the ignorance of the children a sin? Every single day, he was haunted by his own thoughts.

Children’s school days had an odd schedule. Arrive at 5 am. Then, basic math, such as quadratics. Afterwards, they reviewed basic grammar, like rhetorical devices. Story time was next, Robert’s least favorite part of the day. Lunch was a chunk of bland kale bread with some lukewarm water for each child to “promote unity even in food.” After, the children would create water at a molecular level, although most children were unable to. There was no class about history farther than the Founder’s Tale. That story was the only story you needed to know. It haunted him in every aspect of his life, to the monochrome *everything* in his town, to the assigned clothing and words like “unity” and “harmony.”

Robert walked to the front door of his one story house and placed his hand onto the thick, glass scanner. It made a high pitched whistling sound, before the door slid open with a puff of air. He entered a small decontaminating room where was sprayed with some kind of quick-drying disinfectant. It smelled strange, like something partly sour and partly bitter.

He stepped into his house, neatly removing his shoes, his jacket with the assistant teacher branding, and setting his briefcase in the designated slot. The inside of the house had no windows, unlike government offices. First thing in the house was a small kitchen area, with a little glass case with a button next to it. Press it, and it would dispense that day’s meal kit, usually bland soup with

chunks of protein, but sometimes it was a little more special, like a spongy cake made from prunes and raisins for dessert.

The floor in the entire house was black concrete, sanded out until it was as smooth as a pane of glass. Even in the bedroom, with its sparse little bed, a nightstand with a small alarm clock that would blare every morning, and a small nook for the thick book of the Founder's Tale that every house was required to have a copy of. His copy was dusty and old, as Robert hadn't touched it in years. No mirrors, those were only for government officials. Robert had never seen what a mirror looked like, he had only ever heard of mirrors, and how you could put something in front of it, and see it reflected back. Robert desperately wanted a mirror, but he could only sneak a peek at into the murky water in the pots used to make soup.

Robert did not know what he looked like. He could pull a hair out and try to inspect the color, but he did not know what shape his eyes really were, or what his nose looked like.

And that was his entire house. The only entertainment was a small, flat-screen television that only showed advertisements and propaganda. But it was something other than the Founder's Tale, so Robert allowed himself to indulge.

Everybody's house looked like this, and they lived there for their entire conscious life, to try to allow independence in children at an earlier age. Everyone except the founders, Finn and Phoebe. They live on the top of a huge government building. It towered above the sad, one story houses the rest of the population lived in. But the founders haven't been seen in so long, Robert believed them to be nothing but figureheads for the Lord Chancellor to puppet around.

The *clunk clunk clunk* of the sky turning darker told Robert the workers are turning the crank of nighttime. Robert walked over, pressing the button. With a slow *wrrrrrrrr* his meal kit lowered down. A chunk of fresh dough with a small box of protein chunks, a pot with water with kale broth, and a single pill.

He took it to the cooker, started boiling the water and poured the kale broth in. The kale broth, irritatingly familiar, boiled quickly. Robert took out his bowl, a simple white bowl designed for efficiency. All the silverware and ingredients were as thin and efficient as possible.

All the citizens of his town have 2 things removed at birth: their ability to leave the town, (as a shock would go through their body if they tried to escape past the city gates, immobilizing them) and their ability to hunger. Every child was told that hunger was greedy, and so, every citizen, from the youngest infant

to the oldest elder, would have to eat a “hunger pill” before they consumed their food.

Robert choked down the pill with his soup, bracing himself, for the shock of ravenous hunger. He ached for food, any food, and began devouring his meal. He hated taking the pill. It filled him with an emptiness and greediness so strong that Robert no longer felt like himself.

After devouring his food, he sat down, exhausted and worn out from the long day at the Children’s House.

He placed his dirty dishes into the case and disposed of the scraps into the recycling slot near the stove. Robert dragged a hand across his face, and trod miserably to his room. He no longer wanted to think anymore, so he decided he would just relax and watch the television instead.

He washed his hands in the sink, watching as the colorless powder the protein chunks were covered in turned the water cloudy. He dried his hands with a scratchy, white towel, and lay in bed, turning on the television.

“People’s testimonies about the acclaimed Founder’s Tale speak for themselves.” Robert raised his eyebrows. Maybe people had started to realize how awful that accursed story was?

“Y’know,” One man started. Robert leaned in. “I think that the Founder’s Tale is so beautiful. My kids love it, and I think that everybody should strive to fit Finn and Phoebe’s examples of true unity and getting rid of our differences.”

Robert groaned. Unity, differences, harmony. These simple words brought misery to his life.

The bright narrator continued. “Yes, the Founder’s Tale is the story of how Finn and Phoebe, the supreme founders of our utopian society, got rid of color and unnecessary objects of greed and selfishness.” Robert sighed and changed the channel.

“Supreme Founders–” Robert stopped changing channels and relaxed in the thin, tough bed, sinking into a restless sleep.

Robert got up at 4:30 in the morning. Normally, he would have gotten up earlier, but in the end, he would still get to the Children’s House on time if he ran.

Robert threw his jacket on and grabbed his briefcase, and slid on his worn, soft leather shoes. The sunrise was amazing, a mix of gray, darker gray, white, and black. Robert sighed, and then began to walk as fast as he could.

Running was not allowed. In the Founder’s Tale, it was said that running was a sign of trying to attain something before it was supposed to be attained. It was too selfish and was not a good sign of working as a community.

It was 4:59. He pressed a finger to the scanner, and the doors to the Children's House opened. The doors of the Children's House always reminded Robert of somebody's jaws, waiting to snap close and crush him.

"I am here." Robert announced.

"Barely on time. Clock in please." One of his co-workers said from across the room. Robert hardly even knew what his co-workers looked like. They never spared a glance.

And honestly, neither did he.

The children arrived first, placing their shoes into their compartments, straightening their tunics, and discussing their walk to the school.

"Hey guys! I saw that too!" One rather small, lanky child remarked. Everybody ignored him. He was not up to physical standards, his arms too thin, his body just a bit too sickly.

"Our Supreme Founder Finn has a perfect body ratio, and we should strive to attain it as well." The teachers would say to Robert.

Such "slogans" were plastered on the city walls and fastened to poles. *Make sure to smile!* One such poster said, with a picture of children grinning widely. Another one had only three words: *Unity, Harmony, Unanimity*, with hands clasped together encircling the words.

Robert patted the little boy's shoulder, giving him a little smile. The small boy's eyes went from forlorn to overjoyed. *They were wrong*, Robert thought bitterly. *How dare they treat a little boy like this?*

Robert sat by the side, watching the class as they did their worksheets. They wrote at lightning speed, the sound of papers flipping and rustling filling the air. Robert still remembered how he hated those morning worksheets.

He remembered when his teachers would hand out thick slabs of paper, sewn up into a book. He remembered the sweat dampening his back, the hysterical feeling of terror as he watched his classmates flip their pages. When time was up and he hadn't finished, he was forced to stand in front of the class and read out the answers he did have, most of them being wrong, of course, and so with every answer, chuckles and giggles erupt from the class.

"Alright children! Time is up! Hand in your papers please!" The headmaster took papers from everybody, except the small, lanky child. He, apparently, had not finished.

"Come up to the front of the class, please." The child's bottom lip quivered, and he stood up, shakily making his way up to the small podium. Robert felt his

heart pound in his ears. It was as if he was standing on that podium with the little boy. Laughter echoed through the classroom as the boy read his answers.

The children snickered. Robert felt a shiver run through his body, like a cold finger being dragged down his spine.

"So thin! One would think the little boy to be on the verge of death! How pale and pallid; he would blend in with silverware." The class laughed. Robert felt a wave of fury as the headmaster stood and did nothing.

"That is enough." Robert stood up. The class went silent. He trod to the podium, snatched the packet out of the boy's hands, and flipped to an empty page. "There are no more questions to answer. Class should continue now." He could feel his heartbeat pounding, the sweet taste of rebellion, elation unlike Robert had ever felt.

"Go back to your seat." Robert whispered to the boy.

"But..Teacher Robert...I had not finished reading my answers." The boy murmured back. "I will not be punished for this, will I?"

"Just go back to your seat." Robert said weakly. It was as if every word he had just said had made him more and more tired. He turned to the headmaster.

"May we continue class?" Robert asked. The headmaster seemed to scan Robert head to toe, as if considering, scanning Robert for gaps and discrepancies.

The headmaster sniffed. "Very well then."

What had he just done? If he was forcibly withdrawn from his job, he would be sent to the Hall of Happiness.

The Hall of Happiness was a place where people who had been withdrawn from their jobs would go. He had seen posters of people sitting on chairs in a circle, smiling and holding hands. They all wore white masks with rosy-cheeked grins plastered on their faces. *Come Join Us, In Happiness.*

"Gather around for the Founder's Tale!" The headmaster pulled one of the new co-workers aside. Her eyes were soulless. He shoved the worn book into her hands.

"Read it." The children chanted. The headmaster shouted for attention. The children went stiff, limbs snapping to their sides, heads all pointed at the woman reading the story. The cameras seemed to sense the change, swiveling around.

"The cameras made Finn feel like there was a guardian angel watching over him." The woman read with a monotone voice. Robert felt the pointed glare of the lens cut into his skin.

"Routine will make us all feel safe." Robert thought of the miserable nights he spent, huddling in his thin, papery sheets, dreading the early school day.

He felt his soul bend in on itself, giving into the weight of his own uselessness.

And in the dewy sunlight, Robert felt tears trickling down his face, wetting his mourning heart.

Later that day, Robert picked up his bags and put on his jacket. He felt dazed and lost, as if somebody had given him a firm slap across the face. Robert felt hopeless. *What a waste of time*, Robert spat silently. *I should just stay in line with the others.*

"Assistant Teacher Robert?" A small voice squeaked from below him. Robert felt himself snap to reality.

"Yes? Do you need me?" He saw the little boy scurry up to him.

"I want to thank you for helping me in class today." He bowed down. "I truly do not know what I would have done without your help."

"Yes, of course." Robert, still caught up in his web of misery, turned to leave.

"May I walk back with you? I want to talk about some things." the little boy said hopefully.

The obsoletes can walk together.

"The other children never talk to me." The small boy whispered.

"I see."

"They do not even look at me."

"Mm."

"Did they do that to you?"

"Indeed they did."

"I see."

What did that child want from me?

He woke up. The night workers had not yet switched the dome to day, so Robert was forced to walk in the dark. He wanted to roam the night streets, walk somewhere, anywhere.

He threw on his coat and shoes. He sprinted, running into the darkness. His monitor began beeping madly, whirring, flashing lights so bright his eyes began to burn.

"Where are you going?! Citizen #A496345, Robert! Stop this instant! Do not resist our attempt for peace!" A shout echoed over the township. Curtains pulled open, watching as Robert, dressed in nightwear and wearing his leather jacket and shiny work shoes, continued to run.

The flashing lights and beeping stopped.

And a countdown ensued.

5, 4, 3, 2, 1. Robert only saw a flash of light, and he heard a scream. Was it him, who screamed?

The little boy wallowed in his sadness. He had walked out that morning to see a smattering of blood and flesh, still fresh.

Assistant Teacher Robert was dead.

He ran into the night, and his collar deployed emergency reactions.

“Assistant Teacher Robert committed a grave sin.” The headmaster smirked. The boy felt furious and disrespected. Teacher Robert had done nothing wrong. He shuddered remembering the pieces of meat and chunks of flesh splattered all over the pavement. He remembered running to the unattended scene, and saw Teacher Robert’s charred Assistant Teacher badge.

He sighed heavily, a shaky, tired breath. Teacher Robert had never even known his name. It was about time he introduced himself.

The boy wiped away his tears and felt the fabric of the badge. *Assistant Teacher Robert, Citizen #A496345.*

“Hello Robert. My name is Kyle.” He whispered.

And he stayed at his desk, holding back tears as he tucked the charred badge into his backpack.

Alisha Yin

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Personal Essay & Memoir



Man Xia Lai

There is a persimmon tree in my front yard. It is still young, with only waxy green leaves to show for ten months of the year. However, during the months of autumn, the tree begins to grow topaz jewels.

When I was about eleven, I became very in touch with the environment in my yard. Before getting into the car to visit my sick *nai nai*, I would bend over on the driveway, collecting ants and bugs to name and tag. I wrote poems on a hill next to a Japanese maple sapling, and lay on the grass and porch singing to myself, staring at the wide array of fruit trees in my yard.

However, as summer's high heat reached its end, I was disappointed by the minimal harvest. Our pear tree, peach tree, plum trees, and grape vines all were ripening one by one. Yet, none of the orange orbs on the persimmon tree, from limbs high or low, were maturing.

Here is the thing with persimmons- their flesh bites back. I learned this the hard way. If you don't have the temperance to wait for the light, yellow-orange to develop into a dark, ruby color, its grainy fruit will begin to produce tannins. These are the fibers that cause bezoars and stomach stones- dangerous (and disgusting) masses of material that stick to the lining of your mouth. It's a risky gamble, because, unfortunately, ripe persimmons are glorious. They taste like sunshine, warm and syrupy, almost a candied fruit. Plucked fresh from the tree, their flesh simply melts in your mouth.

Whenever toddler me saw a persimmon that looked even potentially dark enough to eat, she would rip it off the branch, and take a large bite. The issue with persimmons is that they are still sweet when unripe— it is the aftertaste that

leaves you hacking and repulsed. When I was incorrect about my prediction, it took a minute to register the vanguard descending on my mouth. Every single crevice of my tongue, teeth, and cheek was attacked with a sticky coating. You cannot spit it out, wipe it off, scrape it off; it just stays, until your patience finally wears out. On many occasions, I saw many neighbors stroll by, look side to side, and take a bite from a persimmon off the tree. In mere seconds their face would transform into absolute disgust. The drying sensation hurts, water does little aid and toothpaste only makes it worse. Dry cafeteria cranberry juice pales in comparison with the attack from a persimmon.

My parents and grandparents used to berate me rushing, especially my grandmother. One day, she was resewing my clothes.

“Don’t rush the *shizi* tree, Xiangzi. You must be more *naixin*.”

“But, *nainai*, I’ve already waited so long! I don’t want to wait anymore. ”

“Ai, you must *manxialai*. Wait. You must not seek what you don’t have.”

My grandmother set down her sewing needle, and took me to the kitchen. There, we would make *mantou*, steamed buns. She mixed the dough with repose, adding in water drop by drop, until the paste was perfect. While I stomped around on the kitchen tiles, she would carefully mold out every lump of the forming mush. When I would rush in to roll out the unfinished dough, she would force me to halt- put on a checkered apron, open the window to let in some air, and continue to gently knead the dough. As I whined about the blend’s slow rise with yeast, my grandmother simply sat down and continued sewing, gently staring at the setting sun in the distance. In the end, each deliberate step garnered an aroma-producing bread, sponging flavors dipped into Chinese dishes.

And so I learned. When the buzzing of meetings, desks filled with uneaten plates of food, and arms itchy from drier burnt clothes became a whirl of monotone, I looked forward to a break; checking in on the progress of the persimmons. I would turn off my computer, walk through the front door, and out to the tree.

I knew how to check for progress. If the fruit did not pop off of the tree on the first pull, it was not ready. If the skin was even remotely firm, it was not ready. If the orange of the flesh did not match the shade of deep orange from the sun, it was not ready. If the squarish bark was not damaged by the claws of wildlife, it was not ready.

Check after check, I was eventually rewarded. The smallest variety on our tree began to ripen, day after day. The first week, I managed to harvest three small jewels for our kitchen table. That week, when we went to visit my

grandmother at the nursing home, I excitedly brought one for her to try. We met outside her dreary nursing home, in the embrace of the frosty October wind. My grandfather rolled her out in a picnic wheelbarrow, at a hill above the parking lot. I ran up and hugged her. Having been apart for so long, I breathed her in. She was the same— rose soap and incense, her floral top soft against my cheek. When I gave her the persimmon, she reached out a shaking hand, smiled, and took a bite.

“Good. This persimmon *shoule, hen tian*. Xiangzi, you have learned patience.”

I was glad to hear it was sweet. For the rest of the visit, we sat together, and watched the sunset slowly match the color of the persimmons.

That was the last time I talked to her.

Cinnamon gum was put into the pocket of a cheap funeral jacket; rose petals were sprinkled on the mahogany coffin as it was lowered into the ground.

The rest of October, and the beginning of November passed in a blur. The harvest did not pick up. Instead, I was still only rewarded with a few fruits every week, if any. I didn’t understand. The leaves had begun to yellow, falling off in clumps at the silty roots. The leaves from all the other trees had dropped off, fruits eaten and fallen. Yet, the adolescent persimmons still hung on.

I felt guilty. I wasn’t as sad as I was supposed to be. I saw deepening shadows and lines forming white hairs on my father’s face, my grandfather’s eyes perpetually swollen from tears. My aunt sunk into depression, my uncles built shrines an entire ocean away. Even our cat seemed to grieve, meowing at her mural on the mantle.

I missed her, missed our talks in the kitchen over fresh made noodles, missed a waiting hand at the bus stop, missed the memories of her that kept fleeting. But, each time I stepped outside, my heart beat inexplicably silent, only with the incoming, frigid Thanksgiving air to keep me company.

The topaz orbs seemed to glare at me from afar. I had waited. I had been patient. I had slowed down, toiled for hours every week, staring and watering and polishing every aspect of the persimmon tree. The north wind whistled folk songs through the near barren persimmon tree. The branches were now empty, gray and brown masses of drying wood, shriveled tops that clung onto the last of their fruits.

Why couldn’t they just let go? I wanted my tears to flow, I desperately needed grief to finally take hold of me. I needed to feel my emotions bubble and spill, prove that I, too, was unable to bear the sadness any longer. Yet, it stood

stoic, unmoving, unwilling to bend to my wishes. The orange was taunting me, sticking its green leaf tops to the limbs, unwilling to let go.

I was more upset with my inability to feel pain, than the actual act of remembering my grandmother. We visited her grave, lighting fire on paper money to the heavens, and placing food at the foot of the makeshift altar on freshly turned dirt. Each step my family seemed to be carrying the weight of the sky.

As the burning smoke curled into the air, I saw my *nainai*, in her coat, reaching out to take my persimmon the last time I saw her. That's when it finally dawned on me.

I was not bitter, or bargaining, or in denial, I simply was not yet ready to grieve.

You must not seek what you don't have.

And so, like the persimmon tree, I waited. I allowed life to take its course.

That December, the final month of the year, my grief finally ripened with the persimmons. As the first frost glazed over grass and sidewalk cracks, the persimmons were finally ready. I walked outside, and finally laid each fruit to rest in my hands. The heaviness dug into my palms, and I felt a light heat at the back of my eyes.

I looked up into space, where the sun had already begun its descent. Pearls began to blur my vision as I finally felt tears form in my eyes, and gently, I held up my auburn gemstone to the sky. Behind the melting skyline, the orange shades blended into one.

Manxialai.

Slowly and patiently, I watched as the sun finally set.

Celina Zhou

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Short Story



AKATHISIA

Before my father was a father, he was a poet, but before he was a poet, he was a soldier.

To most people, I supposed, it was as easy to see the father in him as it was to see myself in the mirror. But it was hard to see the poet in him as the years went on — and harder still to see the soldier in his gentle eyes and tremulous voice.

The soldier didn't live in that mild voice, the voice that people blinked at whenever he told them where he served in Iraq. No, the soldier lived in Dad's sleep, curled up in the spaces where soft, pithy flesh gave way to brittle bone. One night, when we'd settled in one place for long enough for him to really, truly sleep, I'd found him thrashing in his sheets, tremors running through his hands, the soldier looming over him like a funeral shroud. I've never been particularly pious, but that night I'd knelt at his bedside and begged whatever god there was that the morning would come and the sun would scorch the soldier away. Fear slipped over him, limning the planes of his face in awful light, and when he finally woke he'd stared at me with those sallow eyes and salt had streaked down his cheeks. He'd tried to reach for me, and I'd had to catch his hand midair before it fell.

"I'm sorry, kit," Dad had said, his voice like a wounded animal. "I don't want you to see me like this."

I saw him like this so often that it hurt, but I couldn't bring myself to tell him so. In the soldier's shadow, I'd smiled weakly, leaned into his touch and tried to pretend like closing my eyes didn't make me dizzy.

The first time he'd gone to a psychiatrist, he'd taken me with him. He hadn't even wanted to go himself; we didn't have health insurance, and I caught him the night before hunched over the kitchen table. Bills were scattered around him, and under the flickering light I watched him nip at his knuckles, gnawing mindlessly at them in stress like he could teeth down to bone.

I was thirteen, then. Old enough to know that there was a sickness in Dad's head, an old, festering wound that was whetting its claws on the brittlest parts of him. Gambling addiction, alcoholism, depression — none of those words had any meaning to me. I knew the sickness the same way a dog knew its own mortality: the slick, dizzying press of fear that closed in on my throat every time I came too close.

The next morning, he drove us to the hospital and I sat in the waiting room, picking at the fabric of a chair until a pile of lint built up on the floor, listening to the drone of CNN on the TV in the corner.

I only perked up when Dad came back through the long, white hallway that led to the office, and I peered at him as he talked to the lady behind the desk, watching her hot pink manicure flash over the keyboard.

"Prozac, huh?" she said, smiling coldly but politely in that particular customer-service way. "I can send it to the pharmacy down at Manchester and 5th, if that works for you."

"Yeah, that would be perfect."

He was shifting his weight from one foot to the other. I pressed up close to him, hooking my thumbs through his belt loops like I could steady him against a storm only we could sense — the scented edge of ozone in the air, that deep-settled, animal fear.

We drove home in quiet, terse silence, his hands flexing and uncurling over and over on the wheel, and I knew he was holding back tears, or a hollowed-out scream of rage. I'd never quite been able to tell the difference with him.

When I was eight, Dad drove us up to Boston from our condo in Providence — it was one of the good phases, the lulls where he was more poet than soldier, happier than not, and I could smile freely in the day and sleep soundly in the night. In the rush of the city he'd found an alcove in a quiet street, veiled in beads and the scent of incense. A psychic was inside, he said, with a wry smile and a

little flicker of wicked amusement, as he pulled the beads aside with a high chime. He was curious.

The psychic was younger than I expected — I'd expected it to be an old, wrinkled woman, but instead it was a young man, his eyes bright and keen.

I settled myself on an ottoman in the corner, eyeing the assortment of crystals around us. The psychic examined Dad's hands, tracing his palm lines, asking him to breathe in the incense around them, while the smile that played on Dad's lips told me he was more amused than anything else at the man's strange little tricks.

"You have an observant eye," the psychic said, his gaze heavy-lidded and his voice lower than it had been before. "A steady, leader's soul. The soul of a king — you will be a trailblazer in your field, and great success awaits you."

Dad's shoulders trembled, and I could tell he was holding in laughter.

"Really?" Dad said, once he bit back the laughter, all wide-eyed earnesty. "I'll get the big deal with the firm?"

The psychic nodded sagely. "Yes, yes. You will have great luck with your deals in the future."

He couldn't keep in the laughter then, and a snicker bubbled up out of his throat and into the small room. The psychic blinked, startled, before a high flush settled on his cheeks when he realized why Dad was laughing.

"You should be careful, though," the psychic said sharply, eyes narrowed with indignation. "If you become too arrogant, you'll lose what's most important to you."

His gaze flashed to me. "You'll — you'll lose your daughter."

The smile didn't even flicker on Dad's face. "Sure thing," he said cheerily, with all the bravado he had when he was sober and roaming. "Thanks for the experience."

And he ushered me out into the open air, laughing all the while at his own little tricks.

"Guess I should have expected that. Don't ever waste your money on someone who says they can predict the future, yeah?" Dad said, ruffling my hair. "You're smarter than that, kit. You're smarter than me."

Before the tremors started, Dad was brilliant with his hands. He'd always keep a deck of cards in his pocket for whenever we had a quiet moment; riffle them through his fingers, showboating with his favorite tricks. Tenkai palm, riffle force. Cross cut, double lift. I'd watch the cards pass through his hands,

whisper thin and tremulous in the movement, and a small smile would play at his lips as he watched my enchantment.

Back then, and even now, he hated betting — he only ever gambled in the casinos. It was something about the physicality of it, he'd say, in that rumbling, lyrical voice of his. Something about the jazz over the voices, the heat of breath and coin, the lightless rooms where he could forget that he was an artist and just be a man. The weight of the dice through his fingers, the feel of the cards in his hands, the sound of the chips as they moved, that particular kind of music.

Dad sounded the most like a poet in those moments, an awful light in his eyes, composing towards his own ruin.

The gambling nights were almost always school nights, strangely enough. He tried to block out his time on weekends to spend time with me; we drove out to empty gas stations, hiking trails, tiny cafes in the city's heart, and the world seemed bright, the motion of it unstoppable. Even before the meds wound him taut with restlessness, he seemed the most at home in the open air.

We were wanderers — that was what he liked to call us — because “*nomads*” was too pretentious, “*migrants*” was too cold — but we weren't true floaters. Dad always made sure to stay in one place long enough for me to pass through at least a year of school uninterrupted, long enough for me to make friends and mourn them when we left. Their contacts built up in my phone, which he got for me young when he realized how much I grieved the attachments — Julia from New York, with the long pigtails that she braided with beads and tossed like whips, Amie from Reno, who exclusively drank chocolate milk at lunch, Kay from Denver, whose gunmetal eyes were the only thing I could picture when I thought of her now.

But we never settled for more than two years, and every summer he'd take me by the hand and we'd drift out through the open door — Amsterdam, San Juan, Vegas, Lyon, Providence. Wherever he could go to feel untethered, drunk on Scottish whisky and the light of the world, any anchor chains he'd had left severed, their molted stumps trailing behind him.

Except, of course, me. I was his shadow, the chemtrail lingering in his wake.

On weeknights, he'd come back late enough that I hadn't waited up to eat with him. When he finally stumbled through the door, his gait was loose and staggered, spooled open with whiskey. He was never violent like drunk fathers were in the movies, just quiet, tired, and sad.

Most of these nights, Dad wouldn't make it to bed. I'd lay him on the couch, drape a blanket over him and place a glass of water beside him. Every time he woke up crying, and every time he told me he'd fix it, but of all the promises he'd made that was the one he never kept.

He came home every Monday smelling like smoke. The cut of the cards became clearer every time, like a circle I was coming to know. The world kept turning, but never quite as brightly as it did when we pretended we were whole.

Prozac, active ingredient fluoxetine, is an oral medication of the selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor class, used for treatment of major depressive disorder, anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and bipolar disorder, when taken in conjunction with olanzapine. Common side effects include , insomnia, loss of appetite, nausea, dry mouth, with serious side effects including seizures, increased risk of suicidal behavior, and akathisia, a psychomotor dysfunction marked by muscle quivering and an inability to remain still.

It started with the itching; his legs would bounce almost mindlessly when he sat, like his bones themselves were rattling under his skin, and he'd pick at himself, his skin tags and moles and old scars, like he wanted to peel off and crawl out of his own body.

Then, the pacing. The endless, circling pacing, like an animal on its deathbed, waiting to die but unable to shake off the instinct to run. When we stayed in one house for long enough, he'd wear pale tracks into the hardwood, like warm spots bleached out by the sun.

It hit his hands last. He stopped carrying around his favorite deck of cards, he never used breakable silverware, he started using pencils rather than pens to avoid staining ink all over his papers, and every time he finished writing his eraser would be ground down and dark graphite would be smeared like ash over his hands.

It took my father six months of living with akathisia to give up on writing by hand and switch to typing, and four more to give up on typing, too. Ten months, total, for him to become a poet in voice only, in only his careful diction. He hated text-to-speech, but I was patient enough to sit with him in the twilight and listen and write until his moleskine journals were just as full with my own handwriting as his. Sometimes I'd find him flipping through them, and the look on his face as he read his words in my writing was something I was never able to name.

Every English teacher I've ever had has said that I spoke like a poet. It's hard to tell them that it was because of these nights, listening to his words, letting his voice settle into the soft, giving parts of my mind. I was no poet; I was an echo.

I learned to drive more out of necessity than anything else: Dad had eventually stopped being able to drive safely after months of driving with white-knuckled hands on the wheel tight enough to bruise his palms, jaw tight with single minded focus like he could take the tremors in his teeth and chew them into fine, brittle nothings.

He couldn't; it consumed him long before he could consume it.

So he took taxis to the casinos, I taught myself to drive in a Walmart parking lot, and the world kept turning.

Some nights, Dad would call me when he was out and I was working at home, hunched over schoolwork, scrolling endlessly through scholarship applications. His voice was slurred, jazz in the background, and I wondered if he even remembered who he was calling. But, red-eyed and exhausted, I'd grab my keys, shrug on a jacket, and drive out into the cold. I was a circler, a creature of habit. I kept coming back. I couldn't help it.

I knew the route to the casino well enough by now. Impulsively, I flicked through my phone and found a number I hadn't called in months — Kay. I still remembered her gunmetal eyes.

The phone rang, once, twice. The intersection light went green, and I turned the corner.

The number you are trying to reach is not available. Please leave a message after the tone.

A high drone of a sound rang through the car, but I said nothing. I wondered if she'd hear the sound of my breaths, soft and shallow, if she listened to the message.

I hadn't expected her to pick up, hadn't really wanted to. She'd gotten sick of me doing this, I knew — cutting myself on her open edges, just to remind myself how much it hurt. Remind myself that the only person I really had was him.

The hotel casino wasn't too busy on a Thursday night, so I could pull up to the door with little trouble. I wet my lips, and prayed to God that Dad would walk out of that casino sober enough to remember my name.

The doorman gave me a familiar pitying look when I told him why I was there. I lingered outside, shifting on my feet like I could shake off the shame.

A minute passed. Two. He stumbled out the door, barely walking straight. There was recognition in his eyes when an employee guided him towards me but it wasn't my name he called when he saw me.

"Maria," he said, his voice low and loose. "Maria, Maria. I thought you left. I thought you were in Paris."

God was passed out on the casino floor, and my father was calling my mother's name.

I drove home quietly, watching my own hands flex over the wheel, unsure if the sound that was cocooning in my chest was one of grief or one of fury.

Dad was so still in the backseat that I thought he'd fallen asleep, but something gleamed in the rearview mirror and I met his open, glassy eyes. He was crying, and in the dark it looked black as spilled oil.

I couldn't look at him, and he couldn't look at himself. He didn't apologize. If he had, I didn't know if I would've forgiven him.

I spent the next morning hunched over my laptop at the kitchen table, making final edits on the essay I hadn't gotten to finish. I'd just submitted it when I heard Dad's footsteps down the hallway, the pained sound that tore from his throat at the sight of light through the kitchen window.

"Good morning," I said mildly, as he slumped in a chair, rubbing at his temples.

"Water," he said, his voice raspy, almost unthinking. "Please."

I poured a glass, pressed it into his hands, and placed a pill bottle beside him. He drank greedily, in starved gulps, and only noticed the bottle when he finished the glass. He stared at it with an expression I couldn't read, stared at the plain black prescription label, how it was bright and gold in the sun.

"Fucking hell, I'm pathetic," he said, sounding hollow. He clattered out a pill, took it dry, and when he'd swallowed it a rasping, humorless laugh bubbled out of him. "God, kit, I don't know why you stayed."

Because I had not inherited his restlessness, the akathisia, because I was constant to a fault, because I had not known anything other than this, because he was rotting from the inside. Because I would not become him. I shut my laptop, tapped my fingers on the case.

"You remember the psychic?" I asked quietly. "In Boston."

He blinked slowly, not understanding. "Yeah, I remember."

"Soul of a king, he said." *Your daughter will leave you.*

His face crumpled. This time, I couldn't look away.

I remembered, too, how he had laughed in the open air, so unsure of his own future but sure that anyone who tried to tell it for him was wrong. How I had watched the cards passing through his fingers before he lost the movement. How he always said it was magic, and how I'd never been able to stop myself from believing him.

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Critical Essay



Monstrosity in the Absence of the Mother: Genesis and Corruption in *Frankenstein*

In certain sects of Christianity, particularly in the United States, churches preach a doctrine known as the Prosperity Gospel. Because humanity is the child of God, as these preachers claim, they are destined for prosperity, glory, and abundance. They fashion themselves, and mankind as a whole, into “little gods,” beings of authority over the rest of the natural world — man over woman, man over animal, man over earth and sea. In this gospel, men are beings with power, no matter how cruel or unjustified that power may be. In *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley, the Judeo-Christian Genesis, as an antecedent and mirror of Victor Frankenstein’s creation of the monster, becomes a bastardization of birth-giving. Within this framework, wherein creator and creation are portrayed as both betrayed and betrayers, Shelley’s work argues that religion and purely male-oriented creationism are forces of corruption and conflict rather than good.

The novel *Frankenstein* is framed in the intentional absence of women as well as the corruption that occurs in that absence. In the wake of his mother’s death, V. Frankenstein arrives at Ingolstadt, the college at which he plans to study — far from the gentle, nurturing nature of Elizabeth Lavenza, Frankenstein’s childhood friend and now fiancée, as well. Before Frankenstein departs from Geneva, Elizabeth has always been a balancing force to Frankenstein’s more extreme nature: “[Elizabeth] was the living spirit of love to soften and attract; [he] might have become sullen in [his] study, rough through the ardour of [his] nature, but that she was there to subdue [him] to a semblance of her own gentleness” (37). However, in the absence of both of these feminine presences in

his life, Frankenstein instead finds companionship in two male professors and begins to develop an unhealthy obsession with creating a being who, “would bless [him] as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to [him]. No father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as [he] should deserve theirs” (54). It is in this desire that the corruption of the novel is formed: Frankenstein does not seek to create life for the sake of life and joy, he seeks creation for glory, for having a being to worship him. In Frankenstein’s own childhood, however, “[he] was [his parents’] plaything and their idol, and something better — their child, the innocent and helpless creature bestowed on them by heaven, whom to bring up to good” (31-32). The stark contrast between these births — Frankenstein’s creation of the monster in order to have a being to worship him like man does God, versus his mother’s carrying and birth of him in order to love and idolize her child — creates a dichotomy between true and false mothers. Thus, Frankenstein’s creation of the monster becomes a perversion of the creation of life and parenthood — of motherhood. He creates an unnatural being by breaking the grounds of human capability and encroaching on the nature of motherhood, and then turns away from his child in disgust instead of embracing it with joy like his mother did him.

This perversion can also be examined through a theological context. *Frankenstein* contains innumerable references to both Biblical scenes as well as verses from *Paradise Lost*, an epic poem about the corruption of man by John Milton. After discovering scenes from Genesis in his reading, Frankenstein’s creature relates his own existence to both Adam and Satan. [Paradise Lost] moved every feeling of wonder and awe that the picture of an omnipotent God warring with his creatures was capable of exciting ... Like Adam, [the creature] was apparently united by no link to any other being in existence, but [Adam’s] state was far different from [his] in every other respect. [Adam] had come forth from the hands of God a perfect creature, happy and prosperous, guarded by the especial care of his Creator; he was allowed to converse with and acquire knowledge from beings of a superior nature but [the creature] was wretched, helpless, and alone. Many times [he] considered Satan as the fitter emblem of [his] condition, for often, like [Satan], when [the creature] viewed the bliss of [his] protectors, the bitter gall of envy rose within [him] (139).

Yet where the creature sees himself as Frankenstein’s Adam, Frankenstein himself is also Adam, an inheritor of the original sin as decreed in the Bible. Neither Adam is perfect, happy, or prosperous: both are flawed, possessing two sides of the monstrosity of man, and Shelley’s work frames this as something

inherent to Abrahamic ideas of creation. Most polytheistic religions feature a mother goddess, a personification of nature often related to either the earth or the sky, and a bringer of fertility who was the progenitor of man. However, the Abrahamic faiths feature a single male God, creating life without a female counterpart. In this absence of woman and mother, just as Frankenstein's creation of the monster was flawed in Shelley's work, so too was God's Creation of Man in Genesis. The creature is grotesque and vengeful, but the human characters must also be considered such: the elder Frankenstein is lecherous, the younger cruel and selfish, Clerval naive and Elizabeth spineless — they are all marred by God's and Frankenstein's failures to be true mothers. By placing these two flawed iterations of creation in conjunction, *Frankenstein* transforms birth from something visceral yet beautiful into something truly grotesque; it bastardizes life-giving and motherhood into the creation of a being that is expected to worship its creator and punished if it doesn't.

Frankenstein must also be examined through the lens of its history. As referenced in the introduction by Percy Bisshe Shelley, it was around the time of publishing that E. Darwin, grandfather of the better known Charles Darwin, began developing theories of evolution that diverged from the previously accepted theories of how species came to be — usually in the framework of religion and Genesis. While M. Shelley was outwardly religious, many of the references within *Frankenstein* suggest at a more anti-religious, more agnostic relationship with the world, whether it be comparisons between Frankenstein and God, or references to *Paradise Lost*, a poem at once spiritual and caustically critical of the church of Milton's time. In conjunction, these two happenings mark, if not a total separation from the church and religious thought, a slow divergence from hyper religious thought. In addition, Shelley, daughter of early women's rights thinker Mary Wollstonecraft, also existed in a sphere of protofeminism and gender essentialism. Republican motherhood, for example, in North America, was the idea that women were responsible for the morality of their husbands and children, emphasizing their separation from male society but also their dignity — the virtue of both sides of the gender binary that was widely accepted at the time. These ideas, developing in the late 18th century, paired with Shelley's own mother's work, would have been likely influences on *Frankenstein*. The novel was progressive for the time, with Shelley breaking grounds and essentially creating the genre of science fiction in the process, but modern examinations may find the ideas portrayed in *Frankenstein* as flawed. The gender essentialism of the time, confining people to a gender binary in which roles were

strictly defined, has now been wholly dissected by newer waves of feminist thought. While the protofeminism in *Frankenstein* centers around women's roles as mothers and motherhood being inextricable from femininity, modern feminism asks this: is a woman defined by her ability to be a mother? Should she be? While these questions are left unanswered in the subtext of *Frankenstein*, they provide grounds for further interrogation of the work and of the history surrounding it.

Ultimately, *Frankenstein* is feminist within two frameworks: the first being Shelley herself, a trailblazer for women in the literary sphere and creator of the science fiction genre. The second, Shelley's work itself, places the mother squarely at the heart of morality, and in doing so, portrays both Genesis and the creation of Frankenstein's creature in the absence of womanhood and motherhood as flawed, immoral births.

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Novel Writing



The Gas Station Prophet

A story about spirituality, intimacy, and the Midwestern spirit, *The Gas Station Prophet* follows two university students pressed up so close to the universe that they can't help giving themselves back of it — Micah, a prophet, who sees gods in mirrors and dreams of the eldritch; and Eli, her guide, a Midwestern starboy chafing at the seams of the life he was born into and seeking something more. Running away from their hometown for the summer, the two drive out into the Great Plains armed with a beat up Camry and a couple hundred dollars, searching for divinity in the mundane and the wild —in the tallgrass prairie, rickety gas stations along the interstate, shitty roadside motels, long drives with the windows rolled down, and the great, vast, empty space of the Midwestern plain that promises to swallow up them both into the fabric of the universe.

Chapter 1

I notice as soon as I walk out of the airport terminal that my parents took out the passenger-side mirror on their car.

The frame is still there, but the mirror is gone. As I approach, I can see glass dust pooled inside, catching the light, like they'd smashed it in and hadn't cleaned it out. At the sight, a laugh, brittle and just a little bit manic, bubbles out of me. Ba eyes me carefully, disdainfully, at the sound, but my father says nothing as he takes my luggage from me and shoos me into the passenger seat. I want to tell him it's probably illegal to be driving around without it, but I resist the urge when I see the stony look on his face.

The rearview mirror is gone, too, I realize, when I slip inside.

The school must have told them about the mirrors. But the school doesn't know shit — this I know for certain. All they'd seen was the way I'd unscrewed the school-assigned vanity mirror from the wall and placed it, face down, on the floor. They hadn't seen the angels, their blooded teeth, how their wings cut against the reflected light, how their laughter hadn't been like church bells ringing but rather like wind chimes in a storm, shattering glass.

You're sick, Micah, Julian had said, the day everything had fallen apart, her face twisted with an emotion I couldn't name. *There's something wrong with you.*

Every day, I think, she seems more and more right.

The drive down and off I-55 from Chicago is long, and quiet. Ba's hands flex and tighten over the wheel every time I move, so I occupy myself with staring listlessly out the window as the prairie races by. In the glass, my reflection is faint enough to ignore. Neither of us speak for hours, and in fact it's been so long since I've last spoken I almost think I'm forgetting how.

We make it home in time for dinner, winding through Messenger's streets as the sun begins to dip. The shitty bakery at the corner two blocks from town hall, the gas stations on 6th St., the pothole-lined, crumbling roads — it's all the same, I realize.

Ma's standing in the doorway when we finally make it home, her figure thin and gray. After Ba parks, I heave a suitcase out of the trunk and make my way up the driveway. As I approach the door, I can see the weight on her face, but she presses me into a hug all the same. I go stiff in her arms, and after a moment, she pulls away. I try to pretend the emotion that draws tight on her face isn't disappointment. Shame.

"Come eat," she says, quietly. "I made dinner."

I'm not hungry, but I manage a soft, "Okay," anyway.

The house hasn't changed much either; the mismatched yard sale furniture and straining bookshelf. I'm ushered off to the hallway bathroom by Ma; the frame above the sink is empty, so I wash my hands staring at the tile where the mirror used to be.

The kitchen table is already set when I peek in, lingering in the doorway uncertainly.

"Sit," Ma says, without looking up. I do.

My appetite is gone, swallowed up by the maw in the mirror, so I pluck at the food absentmindedly. Ba shuffles into the kitchen, rolls up his sleeves, and sits.

In eighth grade, I'd spent a Saturday afternoon romping through the yard with Sarah and Amy, laughing until we were breathless. When we'd gone inside for dinner, the house had felt cold in comparison to the open air. We'd perched like birds at the table and ate quietly, exchanging glances. Ba had left halfway through.

On our way out, Sarah had curled her fingers around my wrist, hooking her chin over my shoulder and drawing in close.

"Micah," she'd whispered, as we slipped through the door and out of earshot. "Your dinners are so quiet. Are your parents mad at you or something?"

I'd shrugged. "No," I'd said. "We're quiet people."

Sarah had wrinkled her nose at me, but Amy was bounding ahead with a whoop, the sprinklers coming to life, and dinner was quickly forgotten.

Now, Ma's gaze lifts up to me, to my still full bowl, and her brows knit together.

"You've gotten too thin," she says. "Eat."

Messenger's summers are early and stifling, but it's even more stifling to stay in the house. It's empty for most of the day while my parents work, but I'm realizing by the moment that I can't fucking stand the sight of an empty frame. I spend most of my time out on the patio in the afternoons, iced tea in hand, sweat-slicked and panting, and it's there that Eli finds me.

He's on a run when he sees me, his face shadowed by the sun, but I know that it's him as soon as he comes into sight. I could recognize him by his gait alone, I think, that loping, sinuous grace. On the sidewalk, he slows to a stop, lifting a hand to his brow to shield his face and squinting at me.

After a beat, recognition lights his face, and he raises a hand in greeting.

"Micah," Eli calls. "You're home."

"Yeah," I say, as he jogs up the path, a little wary at the sight of him approaching so casually, as if it hadn't been months since we'd last texted — and years since we'd last talked, really talked. He smiles, a half-slash of joy, looking like the sun, and I forget how we drifted apart to begin with.

He ducks under the patio roof. "How was junior year?"

Tension coils tight through my ribs. There are so many things I could tell him — how I hadn't used public bathrooms for weeks because I couldn't stand the sight of the mirrors; how I'd cried alone on a call in my dorm, the other end silent (*Ma, I'm so tired*); how my friends had started looking at me as though I was an animal or maybe just fucked in the head, and every time they did, there was distant laughter in my ears and blood in my mouth.

"It was fine."

"Got any plans for the summer?" Eli asks. "Any fancy tech internships?"

"No," I say. "Nothing."

"Damn," he says, and I look down at my tea. "Me neither."

It's quiet for a beat, and I wonder if he's waiting for me to ask about him. I don't, though, feeling cruel as the silence stretches on, and finally he speaks again.

"I was gonna head to the lab soon," he says, jerking his head further downtown, towards campus. "Wanna come with?"

"Aren't you," I say, chewing through the words, "working?"

He shrugs. "Not really. I took all my finals. Just wrapping up some research stuff at the moment."

"C'mon," he says, coaxing, before I even get a chance to refuse. "Don't just sit around all day."

I roll my bottom lip between my teeth, avoiding his gaze. Eli seems like the kind of person who wouldn't understand the sleep impulse, who wouldn't understand how sometimes I was happy enough sinking back into the fabric of the universe and never drifting out.

Still, I sigh, and he smiles.

"Let me change," I say. "I'll be quick."

He blinks, cocks his head at my lounge shorts and sports bra. For a heartbeat, I'm seized with the sharp, desperate desire to see myself through his eyes — the hollows of my cheeks, the light casting lines across my collar; a frightened animal wound so tight with tension I could break at any moment.

"You don't have to," he says mildly, but I'm already standing.

"I'll be quick," I repeat, tossing the words over my shoulder as I step back into the house. The door shuts on the light, and I pad down the hallway in silence.

"You were quick," Eli says, when I reappear in the doorway in a pair of jean cutoffs and a faded tank.

"Told you so," I say. He huffs.

"Shut up and walk, woman," he says, bumping my hip with his own, all playful grace. It pulls a laugh out of me, startled, light and bubbling. I'd forgotten how easy it was to fall back into a rhythm with him, to forget everything but the warmth in my belly. The angels are laughing in my ears but when I'm laughing too they don't sound quite as cruel.

Eli walks me to his driveway, his strides long but slow enough that I can keep up with a little effort. His Camry's parked by the curb, and he ushers me into the passenger seat.

The mirror is unavoidable here. I catch my own eye in the sideview, my gaze fracturing against a winged god, and I try to hide the way my breath curls into my throat like a prayer.

"You good?" Eli asks.

"Yeah," I say, barely hearing my own voice. "Just hot."

He smiles, sheepish. "Yeah, I'll crank the AC on."

As he drives, he puts on music, something slow, ambient, melancholy.

"King Woman?" I murmur, grasping desperately at the distraction. "Didn't expect that from you."

He lights up. "You know them?"

I shrug, fighting hard to ignore the angel in the mirror and focus on the music, his hands against the wheel, golden in the light. "A little. Not enough."

Eli smiles, his eyes curving into crescents. "No," he says. "I'm glad."

The H. Magdalene Fundamental Quantum Computing Laboratory is a mass of whirring snarls of wire, the lights running low and blue, cast into eerie clarity. It's empty except for us as Eli leads me through the machines, and I have to fight the urge to reach out and touch them, to feel the way the metal sings under my fingers.

"Am I even allowed to be in here?" I whisper to him, feeling out of place.

He shrugs. "Probably not," he says, with that easy carelessness I can't help envying. "But it's fine, just don't break anything."

I make a skeptical sound, but Eli just draws deeper into the maze. He names the machines as we wind through the rows, and I pretend that I know what frequency synthesizers and laser interferometers are, how an atomic clock runs differently than an analog.

"It's so dark," I say.

"It's peaceful, though. Always quiet."

Strangely enough, he's right. Through the whir of the machines, the soft thrum and singing metal, the angels are singing a contented song.

"What've you been working on?"

Eli winces, rolls his shoulders. "God, what *am* I working on? A bunch of nerd shit, to be honest."

He launches into an explanation about atom decay in time crystals, spontaneous symmetry breaking and crystalline structures at a quantum level.

"That sounds exhausting," I murmur.

He makes a face. "It is," he says. "But it's rewarding. My supervisor always says that here we come as close to the heart of existence as we ever will. She's the smartest person I know."

"She sounds like it," I say softly, and in the dark, I realize that maybe Eli understands the sleep impulse after all, the sinking into the world. Maybe we were of the same kind, he and I, the people who press up so close to the universe that we can't help giving ourselves back to it.

"I think I'm going insane," I say, very quietly.

"I know."

"I wanted to drop out. The dean wouldn't let me."

Eli looks at me as though he's been seized by that rapturous desire I felt as I tried to see myself in his eyes. Those eyes, alight with something I'm too afraid to name.

"Run away with me," he says.

The laugh that bursts from me is brittle and cruel, something that I think hurts me more than it hurts him, because he just watches me until I go quiet.

"Where?" I ask, just to humor him, to humor myself.

"Anywhere."

I study him. "Do you like it here?"

The look that passes over his face is tired, quietly so. "I wish I did."

I look down at his hands, the dark tan dusting the tops of them, like his veins run with gold. His parents must still have him working on the farm. Even back during high school, he'd spent so much time out in the fields. I still remember how he looked in the classes we had together, eager, attentive, lit with hunger.

"I mean it, Micah," he says. "Even just for the summer. We could go anywhere."

"If I left," I say, "I don't think I'd ever be able to come back."

"Is that such a bad idea to you?"

Everything hurts and I can't meet his gaze. Instead, I close my eyes. Even in the dark I couldn't stop seeing gods.

"I don't know."

Before he drops me off at home, Eli asks if I still have his number.

I pause, rolling the words over in my mouth like I can soften them on my tongue. His number isn't in my contacts, but I remember it. He used to be in that pool of people whose numbers I never saved to avoid the joy it would have

trained into me with each notification — though eventually that just meant I memorized it.

“Yeah,” I say, finally. “I have it.”

He smiles. “I’ll text you.”

Ma’s at the kitchen table nursing a cup of tea when I step back inside.

“I was out with a friend.”

“Okay,” she says. “Your father will be back later.”

In the quiet, her aloneness — the slope of her shoulders, the hollow light of her eyes — is loud. I hesitate in the doorway, feeling like a household spirit, only able to enter when given permission. This liminality, at least, is familiar; I could only ever be a filial child when my parents weren’t looking.

“I’m sorry, Ma,” I say.

She peers up at me. “What for?”

Julian had brought a Polaroid to the bar we’d snuck into on my 20th birthday, a speakeasy hole in the wall, where the bartender hadn’t even glanced at our fake IDs, and she’d coaxed Claire’s boyfriend into taking a photo of us in the corner of a leather booth. I told her I hated how I looked on film, how the flash whited my face and drew out the black gleam of my eyes. She’d wrinkled her nose at me, her hand on my open back, tracing soft circles over the ridges of my spine, each vertebra a prayer bead spun between her fingers.

“You look pretty,” she’d said, pressed her mouth against my neck and pulled the words over my skin. “You look like your mom.”

Ma, I’d only ever shown her one photo of you, but she remembered it all the same. Ma, I love you so much it hurts. Ma, I wish you didn’t exist in the place that you are. Ma —

“I ruined the house,” I say, finally, hoarsely.

She blinks, very slowly. “A few mirrors is hardly ruined, *Shiyin*.”

“You loved that bathroom,” I say.

Her mouth curls. “It’s just glass, silly child.”

But here I was, going mad over it.

“He doesn’t love you,” the angel says. It’s wearing my face tonight, and my voice, with only its eyes god-bright.

We are sitting somewhere familiar, the floor of Julian’s dorm room, on the warm spot lit by the sun through her window, pressed knee to bony knee. The fluorescent light whirs above us, a quiet, near imperceptible drone.

“What makes you think I want him to?”

The angel snickers. “Oh, please,” it says. “There’s nothing you can hide from me.”

I frown despite myself. “I don’t. The fact that we’re here,” I gesture to the room around us, Julian’s favorite hoodie draped over the bed, her over-watered succulent on the windowsill, “should be testament enough to that.”

Testament enough to the fact that I was heartsick over a girl who thought I was going mad, who wouldn’t even look me in the eye.

“Liar,” the angel says, an awful, faltering song. “Prophets aren’t supposed to be whores, Micah.”

I close my eyes, but I’m already asleep. This was a creature that had cut out a part of me and grafted itself into the open wound.

“I hate you,” I whisper.

“Oh, darling prophet,” the angel says, eyes dark and splintered. “I know.”

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Poetry



The Ghost Ships of Theseus

I tell my therapist that it's easy to become a transhumanist;
how every pill I take, yawn-mouthed and starfished on the floor
quetiapine splintering open on my tongue, tears me
further and further from men and closer to sunhood, to the rush
of neon threshing through my hollowed bones;
how I am becoming something more. (*You're fucking
insane : That's why I'm here, isn't it?*) In my bedroom,
I am become Paracelsus, scrawling on my books, my walls, my
skin my soul. Bluelight burnt against my lids, how I see
you even in my dreams.

In my bedroom I am become mother,
split-heart, open-womb, slick with the life I have taken
into me and my child's face is my own.

Listen — what happens when a widow
and a Mechanical Turk
exist in a room
without light? If a human dies in a forest and no one
is around to hear it

does it still have a name? I tell my therapist
how the ships split like a heart from its ribs, living
to blight. How one day I would do the same, decaying into life—
how many ships do you need
to think

I tell my therapist I think I'd rather die before I fucked a man,
much less a king,
but I already have and I'm not allowed
to die; how his body was inescapable, bent over
mine and folding
me into his seams, bloodlet to crown me but not before
embalming me in it is this what
you want? This body, soft with rot?
If I could I would give it to you I would claw
out my heart
from my sunken chest and let it slumber in yours;
you can learn the rage in it (*Who are you even
talking to?* :

199

scrawling closer to sunhood
cradles splintered
on my tongue
open-womb in the salts
bloodlet to drown
the ships are burning on the water
and the water
is trying to
save them the ships break
open their hulls
and the carcasses
rot into life the ships are gods at the
death of
time the ships
are we are
inevitable.