

Gold Key Winners

2024



**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' 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



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Nathan Arst

Grade 12, Parkway Central High School

Educator: Jason Lovera

Critical Essay



The Importance of Struggle

“You’re in the school play? That’s so lame. Why would someone go to that?” a kid at my lunch table smirked, proceeding to eat his lunch and start a new conversation as if nothing happened. I snapped back at him, effectively making it clear that I couldn't care less if he showed up. This shut him down, but left me stunned. How could he say something so blatantly rude and not see an issue with that? If I said something even remotely rude to another person, I would feel horrible on the inside all day and eagerly attempting to fix the situation. Not to mention, this kid was not messing with me as friends do--we hardly ever talked to each other.

While this remained a one-time encounter with this kid, it sparked attention to a broader concept. A male’s life rarely can be classified as easy. This does not negate women’s difficulties, or obstacles any other group endures, but rather illuminates an often silenced perspective. Aggression amongst teenage boys, specifically a group of athletes (as the table compromised mostly people who played sports), bears normality due to the prevalence of traits such as grit, toughness, and strength.

As a baseball player, I found myself surrounded by the aforementioned characteristics frequently. Yet, I always felt I was different from many others because of sensitivity. Throughout my teenage years, I have been pretty fortunate to have avoided many struggles. I think of myself as an outgoing, intelligent, compassionate, and (relatively) athletic person. I have remarkably high self-confidence. My sensitivity was perhaps hardly noticed because, from the outside, I appeared constantly smiling and comfortable with myself. For

the other guys at the table, they likely didn't think anything of the occurrence: just a typical instance of a guy messing with another guy. Yet, for some reason, words pierced me seemingly more significantly than others. I despised certain interactions similar to the one at hand. Furthermore, I loathed their lack of necessity and constant presence.

In his essay, "Evil", Lance Morrow introduces a revolutionary take on evil, asserting that "We cannot know evil systemically or scientifically. It is brutal or elusive, by turns vivid and vague, horrible and subtle. We can know it poetically, symbolically, historically, emotionally. We can know it by its works. But evil is sly and bizarre...When Hitler was at Berchtesgaden, he loved to see the neighborhood children and give them ice cream and cake. Saddam Hussein patted little Stuart Lockwood's head with avuncular menace" (Morrow 50). Of course, there are certain things and people that are unquestionably evil according to society's moral standards. But there's a difference between being dominated by evil, and just being pure evil. In Morrow's examples, people that society would label the closest

personifications of pure evil are evidently not pure evil. On a smaller scale, I began to realize that excessive aggression, which I denote as absolutely awful, maintained some form of good. Even in the most seemingly stressful, abhorrent situations, some form of goodness resides. Our ability to accept evil dictates our joy--as some form of it exists for everyone--and seek out the good. In my experience, I slowly learned how to accept the ever present trait of aggression and

seek the good in the situation. I'm sitting here, with the privilege of eating a great meal and having an opportunity to talk to my peers. While there are some I won't like, there are a lot I will. This privilege is not promised in life, and I have to remember that. Despite my gradual improvement, the act of disregarding evil's impact on me wasn't easy.

"All right, I'm not eating the rest of my food. You probably want it, right?" one guy asked another guy. Given the second guy's weight, the meaning of the joke was clear. While this elicited laughter from many, I shook my head. He has no idea what the other guy has gone through and how deep the weight "joke" may affect him. I contemplated the necessity of such rude, personal attacks that hardly epitomized any meaning of the term good fun; I love joking back and forth with people, but these type of high school lunch table interactions strayed away from genuine fun in my book. Even when I wasn't the recipient of a rude remark, I found myself

consumed with awful feelings on the inside. Do other people feel this way too? As I glanced around the table at other laughing faces, it appeared not.

“I’ll take the food,” I interjected, grabbing the leftover fries. Due to my skinny frame, I wasn’t quite the target for weight jokes. Ultimately, I intended to deflect the conversation to a hopefully lighter topic. Why can’t we just all laugh and joke about something together? I love joking, but why does it constantly have to come at the expense of someone else? Though I successfully changed the subject, it was only temporary. Unnecessary personal attacks continued to flood the table. Instantly, my mind turned to the atmosphere in the theater department, as it was just mentioned and was an integral part of my life at this time.

The consensus of the theater department was that it comprised the ‘losers of high school’...the ‘boring, not cool’ kids. While I didn’t end up making many long term friendships, it consisted of some of the nicest people I’d ever been around: supportive, energetic, and welcoming. These qualities are not a bonus, or abnormal; they are the norm and should be expected as such. “Enduring Pride” explains that pride controversy lies in its likeliness “to stir debate about whether it is a sin at all. After all, without a sense of pride, one might not achieve or continue to strive for excellence in one’s field of endeavor” (Dyson 1). Are my expectations for how other people should treat each other too high? Am I too confident in who I am to think I am worthy of avoiding all unnecessary conflicts? After a while, I came to the conclusion that the answer was in between. First, it remains essential to expect people to treat me with the utmost respect. I must cherish the people that do, and speak out against the people that don’t. I also have to realize that I won’t avoid every single altercation in life, and that’s alright. Moreover, I need to become more comfortable understanding that if issues don’t get resolved, maybe they weren’t meant to.

I realized I need to seek out these qualities to create the most amount of happiness for myself. I understood the importance of focusing on who I talk to, what I talk about with them, who to avoid, and what topics to avoid. Overly aggressive people will never fade from my life, and I have to know how to deal with them. Some situations command me addressing the issue head on, and sometimes I just need to distance myself from the toxic situation. That’s not showing a degree of fear, but rather maturity: embrace aggression as a part of life; if a problem arises, address it, and if no solution transpires, then step away from the issue and find solace in

calm.

I began to distance myself from people I disliked associating myself with. From that, I found a greater sense of serenity. Paradise Lost elaborates on this concept through Adam and Eve's actions after God expels them from Paradise, eliciting "natural tears they dropped, but wiped them soon; the world was all before them, where to choose their place of rest, and providence their guide: they hand in hand with wand'ring steps and slow, through Eden took their solitary way" (Milton 415). It is interesting how Adam and Eve's initial response indicates despair, yet Milton alludes to greater opportunities in New Jerusalem. From here arises *felix culpa*, the idea that from a lack of fortune, more fortune can come. For Adam and Eve, their sin of eating the forbidden fruit and consequential expulsion from paradise manifested a more significant good: the creation of New Jerusalem. In my instance, I had to endure aggressive, harsh environments to pave the way for my understanding that I need to consciously surround myself with positivity. In both instances, the greater good could not have been achieved without the initial evil.

With the horrors of slavery, atrocities of the Holocaust, and endless plagues of poverty, homelessness, and more forms of struggle, it remains crystal clear that evil exists. How can God, the entity in charge of the world, command obedience if he permits evil to this degree? "Toward a Hidden God" explains that for some people, God's futility "is a source of existential anguish: the Jew who lost his faith in a providential God at Auschwitz" (Toward a Hidden God 82). This logic makes sense--how can one praise or even begin to worship a power that has inflicted so much suffering upon them? I have wrestled with this concept for the past several years in particular, as religion has become significantly more impactful in my life. But from one perspective, this matter has nothing to do with religion; it's a matter of logic: how can people worship an entity who knowingly allows unthinkable forms of evil? But recently--though I still possess some qualms with this issue--it has become more clear for someone in my position. I acknowledge that my perspective on God would likely change if I was in a different situation (such as the Jewish person in the article who was afflicted by the Holocaust). However, I can only operate and formulate my position on what I understand. Evil bears a necessity in order to have good because without evil, we would

never know genuine good. The world would have a robotic element due to the lack of emotion.

Yet, I question the magnitude of some evil. For example, “When Evil is Cool” explores the necessity of a gruesome murder, stating that the two culprits were “neither deprived nor mistreated. They could look forward to a brilliant future. Why this senseless crime?” (Stattuck 77). God, the omnipotent, condoned this brutal murder that had a ripple effect which ravaged the lives of all involved. Is evil to this extent truly necessary? I don’t have a clear answer to the previous question, and I don’t know if I will ever become entirely satisfied with any answer. I also don’t know if there exists a way to measure the validity of a claim asserting evil to that degree bears necessity. However, I confidently assert that some extent of evil possesses necessity. We possess a duty to work with the evil to try and create the most amount of good possible, for that constitutes the mark of a human: not how much one manages to avoid a lack of fortune, but how well they can rebound from it and create good in society. A coward avoids failure out of fear, but a leader recognizes failure exists and embraces it to contribute further good.

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Aseel Ayesh

Grade 11, West High School
Poetry



What Am I?

What am I?

I am infinite.

Known to all but a lucky few.

1 syllable for a world full of pain.

I am anger in a heavy coat.

I have no color, and you cannot hold me.

Though some may tell you I am blue.

If you ask me, I'm red. The color of blood.

I taste like salt in your wounds.

I am heavy.

So damn heavy.

I hold the weight of the world in a single touch. I like to perch on your shoulders until you can no longer bear the burden of my existence and you fall to your knees in defeat.

I have no shape, but sometimes I am so potent that I may feel tangible. Like you could hold me in your hands and slit my throat. You want to wring my neck but there's nothing to grab.

I will gather inside you, hard and heavy like a stone, and tie knots in your chest until you can no longer breathe. I will squeeze your heart in my claws until you want to rip it out. I will find you on your darkest nights and hold your hand.

Whisper the truth in your ear until you beg me to stop.

I am the opposite of my namesake. A synonym for your greatest fear. I am immortal.

None shall escape me.

I am vicious, and I linger like a bad headache. I know your strength, and I will wear you down. I will force you to face me. I am not kind and have never claimed to be, but I will never lie to you.

A failed dream, a lost friend.

Your family withering away before your eyes.

Parents outlasting their children.

Put simply, I am absolutely terrifying.

I am your greatest fear come to life.

Your face will pale when you first lay eyes on me, but you will memorize the lines of my face.

No matter how many times we meet, I will always feel fresh.

I am the worst kind of longing. The kind that never ends. The kind that's always hungry. The kind you feel with every cell in your body. But I will never be satisfied. Once you think you've finally gotten rid of me, I will show up at your door and demand entry. Like a stray relative, I'll give you no warning. But I am a loyal, lifelong companion. Never to leave your side. I will wrap my arms around you and hold you close. Even when you scream and cry for me to go away, to let go, to leave you the hell alone. Even when you pry my fingers from your arm, I will sit in the corner and stare at you. I will persevere, and so will you. I will follow you to the ends of the earth. There is nowhere you can run or hide where I cannot find you.

I will never leave you.

You willingly ignore me until I make myself known. I am always a possibility, but it'll never happen to you. Until it does. I will intrude on your life, your routine, your very reality. I will rip the fabric of your world and stitch it anew. You cannot be angry, but you will be. After all, I am merely an extension of you. I am your memories personified.

I am the price you pay for having a family. For the existence of your dearest friends. For being human. I am all the love you did not get to give. All the love you still have left. I gather in the corners of your eyes and drip down your face. I make your hands shake and your chest heave until heavy sobs take their place. I fill your mind with fog, and scenarios and what-ifs. I am every opportunity you will never get to have. Stolen futures evaporating in the blink of an eye.

The softer you are, the deeper I cut, and the thicker your hide, the harder I'll hit. I will burrow beneath your skin like a parasite and shake you until you acknowledge me. I will sink my teeth into you until I draw blood.

I refuse to be ignored.

You will feel lost when I come, and you'll never quite stop feeling that way. Even when you are ready to leave me behind, I'll hide quietly in your pocket for another day.

You'll accept me or die trying. Make your peace that no matter how hard you try, I'm here to stay. You'll make room for me.

When you finally do, the reminders will be bittersweet, but they might just make you smile.

I am not proud of what I do, but I will never be ashamed of what I am.

I am proof that you loved.

I love you more than life itself because I thrive most in the absence of it.

Once you learn my name, you'll never forget it.

-Grief

Ella Braig

Grade 11, Ladue Horton Watkins HS
Educators: Jon Frank and Abigail
Eisenberg
Dramatic Script



“Catch and Release”

Cast of Characters (in Order of Appearance)

Dominic - 50s, male. A big brute of a man. Fisherman committed to trading and bartering at the local farmer’s market. Cold and rugged exterior, sensitive on the inside. Full of remorse for his actions. Holds on to the past (if he were to let go, there’d be claw marks on it.)

Elaine, the girl - 12-14, female. Newly shunned at her all-girls boarding school. Believes in things she is too old to believe in.

Mermaid - Any age, female. A tender guardian in a world absent of them.

Dominic has been holding onto everything he can: the loving family he left behind; his ill-fated relationship with his daughter. Even the fish he catches remain within his grasp until they’re gutted by his own hand. Unlike Dominic, Elaine is a prep school preteen who’s already learning how to let go of both silly fantasies and the people that come in and out of her life. When he docks his boat on the bank of Lake Harvey, Elaine begs him to teach her how to fish with a net so that she might catch a mermaid. They catch something, but not without a few casualties. Will they throw it back, or cling to it for dear life?

Scene 1

SETTING: Lake Harvey is no Lake of Shining Waters. Dull, grassy, and brimming with green water, it makes for perfect camouflage for the emerald

large-mouth bass that inhabit it. Among the wildlife sits the S.S. Rosie, a fishing boat anchored so close to the shore, its passenger could reach out and touch it.

(DOMINIC lugs a net up and over the edge of the S.S. Rosie. He grunts, shaking the net lightly to omit any possibility of water entering the boat. Once his trap has made its way into the watercraft, he retrieves a hearty bluegill from the netting. Holding its fins to its scaly body, he rummages for his swiss army knife in his windbreaker's pocket. Then, he puts the fish out of its misery and begins examining his next victim. As he goes to knife it, someone stands up behind him and cries out from the shore.)

The GIRL

What are you doing?

(The wind is blowing feverishly. DOMINIC can hardly hear her.)

DOMINIC

Huh?

THE GIRL

I said, "What are you doing?"

DOMINIC

Catching dinner. Get out of here, kid. You might get scared.

THE GIRL

Scared of what?

DOMINIC

(He huffs. He has no time for this kid's impish pestering.)

Of what I'm about to do to this fish. Get on out of here.

(Beat.)

THE GIRL

I'm not scared.

(She advances towards the boat and peers inside.)

Are you fishing?

DOMINIC

(Uninterested.)

Uh-huh.

THE GIRL

My dad used to take me fishing. Don't you need a pole to fish? Where's yours?

DOMINIC

You don't need a pole for this type of fishing.

THE GIRL

Then how do you catch the fish?

DOMINIC

By using...

(He guts another fish.)

a net.

THE GIRL

(Stunned. Perhaps even a little frightened.)

Ok, that's kind of scary. But it's not that scary. Why do you use a net, anyway?

DOMINIC

(As the two converse, he continues to slaughter the unlucky bluegill.)

You catch more fish that way.

THE GIRL

(She peers into the boat.)

Do you eat them?

DOMINIC

Some of them. Most of them get sold at the farmer's market.

(Beat.)

You got a name, kid?

ELAINE

Elaine. And I bet I can guess what yours is.

(She squints, concentrating hard on DOMINIC'S face.)

You look like a Harry to me. Or a Robert. But definitely not a Maurice. You're too scary looking. Most people named Maurice are—

DOMINIC

I'm sorry, do you want something from me? You want me to retrieve a ball you dropped into the lake or— or— what? What's with you?

ELAINE

I'm just looking for someone to talk to, that's all.

DOMINIC

(A sense of guilt falls over him. She's just a girl. He shouldn't have been so harsh, and he knows it.)

I don't look like a Maurice because I'm not a Maurice. I'm not a Harry or a Robert either. I'm a Dominic.

ELAINE

(Warming up to him again.)

Makes sense. You have that look about you. You know, The Dominic Look.

DOMINIC

(He chuckles. Funny kid. Treading with caution after his unnecessary outburst.)

That's a Henley Hall crest on your shirt, is it not?

(ELAINE nods.)

Don't you have school friends who will put up with you chatting their ear off?

ELAINE

Not particularly, no.

DOMINIC

You mean to tell me that in a whole boarding school, you can't find anyone suitable to talk to?

ELAINE

No, sir. I don't think the girls at the academy like me all that much anymore.

DOMINIC

Oh yeah? How come?

ELAINE

Well, they got real freaked out when I told them I wanted to find a mermaid.

(DOMINIC laughs. Then, he realizes that ELAINE might be serious and tries to disguise it with a cough. It's a pathetic attempt to preserve her feelings.)

ELAINE

I wasn't joking.

DOMINIC

I know. Something in my throat.

ELAINE.

It's ok. My friends laughed when I told them, too.

(A beat as DOMINIC mulls over her pitiful story.)

Do you believe in mermaids?

DOMINIC

Well, I'd have to say...

(He's a realist at heart, but is surprisingly afraid of crushing ELAINE'S spirits even more than the girls at Henley Hall.)

I'll believe it when I see it.

ELAINE

So, if you saw one,–

DOMINIC

Yeah.

ELAINE

–you’d believe in them?

(Beat.)

DOMINIC

It’s possible.

ELAINE

So, let me in your boat.

DOMINIC

What?

ELAINE

Let me in your boat, and we’ll find a mermaid together.

DOMINIC

Kid, I stopped chasing mermaids a long time ago.

ELAINE

But maybe, this time, you’ll find one.

DOMINIC

(Gathering the net and prepping it to be recast as he shakes his head.)

Nah.

ELAINE

We can help each other. You could catch twice as many fish with me assisting you. I promise, I’m handy with a pole. I could be handy with a net, too, if you taught me how to use one.

(DOMINIC considers. ELAINE wears a pleading expression.)

DOMINIC

(Begrudgingly.)

If we make our search quick, I guess I could spare some of my–

(ELAINE wastes no time hoisting herself into the vessel, tumbling to the

floor upon entry. She gives DOMINIC a thumbs up to signify her safety. DOMINIC trudges to the front of the boat and turns the wheel, steering them in the direction of deeper water. The lighting grows dimmer as they are shaded by trees. ELAINE gawks at the scenery. This goes on for quite some time. Then, they halt.)

ELAINE

Are we here? Did you spot a mermaid already?

DOMINIC

Just a minute, now. You wanna catch a mermaid? You have to work your way up to it. First, we've gotta start small.

(He retrieves the net from the ship's floor.)

Come here.

(ELAINE meets him at the front of the boat.)

First, you're gonna wind the rope around your hand, like so.

(He demonstrates. Then, he hands ELAINE the rope)

Now, you try.

(ELAINE copies his action. Then, DOMINIC uncoils the rope from around her hand and takes the net back.)

Good. That's the easy part, though. To cast the net, you need to put your whole body into it. Give it a great big toss.

(He flings the net into the lake.)

Watch how I do it a couple times. Then I'll let you give it a try.

ELAINE

Ok.

(Beat. DOMINIC pulls the net out of the water.)

You know, my dad taught me to always throw back anything you catch while fishing.

DOMINIC

Really? How come?

ELAINE

I don't know. He didn't like holding on to them like trophies. I think he had commitment issues.

DOMINIC

(He flings the net into the lake again.)

Is it hard, not being able to see him every day while you're at school?

ELAINE

It's not so bad. He lives in Florida, so I don't see him much, anyhow.

DOMINIC

Oh. I didn't realize.

ELAINE

But he says that when he comes back to Vermont, he'll bring me a mermaid.

DOMINIC

(Pulling the net out of the water.)

Well, that's awfully nice of him.

ELAINE

I guess.

DOMINIC

But— hold on, now— why go through all this trouble of baiting a mermaid into captivity if your dad's bringing you one from Florida?

ELAINE

Because I don't think he's coming back.

(Beat.)

He got a job out there that he really likes. So, I'm trying to catch my own mermaid in case he doesn't make good on his promise.

DOMINIC

(He's unsure of what to say.)

You ever caught a fish before?

ELAINE

No. I always drop the pole any time I feel a bite. The tugging makes me nervous.

DOMINIC

You're seven times those fishes' size. You've got nothing to be afraid of.

ELAINE

I'm not scared of the fish. I'm afraid I might hurt them when I pull them out of the water. Because I know I'm tricking them when I bait them with a worm, but I do it anyway. That feels wrong. Do you ever feel bad about that?

DOMINIC

Sometimes, but I try not to think about it. Their fishy families and everything.

(ELAINE giggles. DOMINIC chuckles, but it comes out like more of a scoff.)

ELAINE

Do you have a family? I mean, of course you have a family, but like, kids and stuff.

DOMINIC

Oh, you don't want to hear about that.

ELAINE

Yes, I do.

DOMINIC

It'll bum you out.

ELAINE

I do. I want to hear about it.

(DOMINIC huffs and hands ELAINE the net.)

DOMINIC

Well... now, evenly coil the rope up, just like I taught you

(ELAINE wraps the rope around her hand.)

Keep going. You've still got a lot of slack.

(Beat.)

Now, I used to be married. Used to have a daughter, too.

ELAINE

"Used to?"

DOMINIC

Yep. Rosie. That's her name. She looked like a Rosie, too. Named my boat after her. I doubt she wants anything to do with me these days. Now, toss the net in.

(ELAINE weakly throws the net in. It doesn't get very far.)

ELAINE

Why doesn't she want to see you?

DOMINIC

Don't get distracted. Come on, bring it back in. Bring it back in. Now, toss it again.

(ELAINE tosses the net once more. She's improved, but not by much.)

DOMINIC

Better. Try it again.

(ELAINE begins to rein the net back in, but he stops her.)

I got it.

(He takes it from ELAINE and pulls it over the edge of the boat himself. He takes his time doing so.)

Anyway, about my daughter: I won't go into too much detail. You know, most people say they made a lot of bad choices in their past and that's why everything's so messed up for them. But for me, it only took one to drive my Rosie away. Let's just leave it there, ok?

ELAINE

Ok.

(DOMINIC hands ELAINE the net.
She begins to wrap the rope around
her hand.)

DOMINIC

On a lighter note, my daughter was like you. Creative and so insightful. Wise beyond her years. She liked mermaids an awful lot, too, even when she was technically too old to care about that sort of thing. Her room was decorated with all kinds of sea creatures. Seashells, starfish, turtles with obnoxious, cartoonish grins. They annoyed the hell out of me, but she seemed to like it. That was all that mattered.

(ELAINE finishes wrapping her
hand.)

ELAINE

Maybe she'd forgive you if you brought her a mermaid. A real one.

DOMINIC

(Amused.)

I doubt even a mermaid would be enough to fix everything.

ELAINE

(Tossing the net into the water.)

Well, I just know that if my dad came back from Florida with a mermaid, I'd forgive him. No questions asked, I'd forgive him.

DOMINIC

If only it were that simple.

ELAINE

If we do catch a mermaid, you can have it. For your Rosie.

DOMINIC

Well, that's awfully kind of you.

(DOMINIC and ELAINE wait. And
wait. And wait for something to

stumble into their net. A flock of
seagulls squawk in the distance.
Suddenly, ELAINE feels a tug on her
rope. She stumbles forward.)

ELAINE

I caught something.

(The creature pulls her further towards the edge of the boat.)

I caught something!

DOMINIC

You sure did! Must be a big one, too!

(ELAINE'S top half is pulled over the
boat's edge. DOMINIC grabs onto her
legs, anchoring her to the S.S. Rosie.

ELAINE

(Panicked.)

Don't let go.

DOMINIC

I won't.

ELAINE

Don't let me fall in.

DOMINIC

I won't. I won't, Rosie.

ELAINE

That's not my—

(ELAINE is tugged overboard.
Blackout.)

Scene 2

SETTING: (The bottom of Lake Harvey. Unlike the surface, it is
picturesque— a dream-like haven for sea life to reside in.

ELAINE lies on the floor, sound asleep. Rays of light are

cast on her face, reflecting the lake's exterior. Next to her depleted body, a MERMAID basks in the under-the-sea glow, combing through her hair with her fingers.)

(ELAINE wakes up, coughing and spluttering as her lungs adapt to an unfamiliar environment. She sits up and takes in her surroundings, then notices the MERMAID. She's not as surprised by this image as most people would be.)

ELAINE

Are you real?

MERMAID

My goodness. What kind of a question is that?

ELAINE

Sorry. I've just never met a mermaid before. A real one, anyway.

(Beat.)

Can I touch your tail?

(She reaches out to touch it, but the MERMAID moves away from her.)

MERMAID

You sure are a lot more... forward than most girls your age.

ELAINE

Well, if you're going to be my mermaid, shouldn't you be able to trust me enough to let me touch your tail?

MERMAID

Your mermaid? You think I'm your mermaid?

(She laughs melodically.)

Sweet girl, I'm nobody's mermaid but my own.

ELAINE

But my dad said he'd—

MERMAID

Your dad says a lot of things, Elaine.

(Beat.)

ELAINE

Are you real?

MERMAID

Stop asking me that. I'm about as real as your father's promise that I'd be yours one day.

ELAINE

Not very real, then.

MERMAID

I'm afraid not. But you know what is real? What you have up there on the surface; with that man who sacrificed his Sunday to take you out to sea in search of me. That's the kind of thing a father gives up for his child. Don't dwell at the bottom of the lake, waiting for your father to make good on his promise, when there's someone on land who's willing to help you achieve the impossible at a moment's notice.

(ELAINE is stunned. After a moment of processing her words, she hugs the MERMAID, who returns the affection tenderly and with care.)

DOMINIC

(Off-stage.)

Elaine? Elaine! Elaine!

(Blackout.)

Scene 3

SETTING: (Back on the S.S. Rosie, later in the day. DOMINIC, now drenched, holds a tremorous ELAINE in his arms. She is nearly freezing.)

(ELAINE wakes up, hacking up lake water and gasping for air.)

DOMINIC

Woah, easy there, kid. Are you good?

(ELAINE nods.)

You alright?

(ELAINE sits up, her coughing decreasing.)

Jesus. I had to fish you out from the bottom of the lake. Looked like you were having a grand old time down there.

ELAINE

You're all wet.

DOMINIC

(Looking down at his clothing.)

Oh. Yeah. I had to fish you out from the bottom of the lake. Looked like you were having a grand old time down there.

(Beat.)

It was no big deal. Anyone would do it.

ELAINE

But why did you do it?

DOMINIC

I was just returning a favor. You gave me the most fun fishing trip I've had in a while.

(He stands up and grabs the now discarded net, which has managed to trap a large fish.)

Oh, and guess what? You caught something!

(He pulls the fish out from the net and holds it by the tail.)

Not exactly a mermaid, but something to be proud of nonetheless.

(He hands ELAINE the fish.)

ELAINE

Huh.

DOMINIC

Feel proud?

ELAINE

(Beaming.)

I do.

DOMINIC

Well, you should be. That might be the biggest first catch I've ever seen. You want me to show you how to skin it?

ELAINE

(Thinking.)

No, thanks. I don't think I want to do that.

DOMINIC

Why not?

ELAINE

Well, like we were talking about, I can't help but think about its family. How awful its children must feel.

DOMINIC

Well, what do you suppose we do with it?

ELAINE

We release it back into the lake. Return it to its fishy wife and kids.

(DOMINIC chuckles and ELAINE holds the fish over the edge of the boat.)

I think you should do the same with yours. All of them. You've already slaughtered enough for supper, anyway.

(DOMINIC hesitates, then bends down to retrieve a fish from his pile of bluegill. Then, he joins ELAINE at the front of the boat.)

DOMINIC

I don't want to throw it back.

ELAINE

This isn't the last fish you'll ever catch. There'll be more.

DOMINIC

I know.

ELAINE

Here. We'll do it at the same time. On the count of three: one... two... three.

(Neither of them release the fish. ELAINE nudges DOMINIC'S shoulder.)

That's three. It's time to let go.

(DOMINIC and ELAINE release their fish back into Lake Harvey. Blackout.)

END OF PLAY.

Ella Braig

Grade 11, Ladue Horton Watkins HS
Educators: Jon Frank and Abigail
Eisenberg
Journalism



“From Stage to School”

For drama teacher Jessica Winingham, every professional development day, every meeting and every school-wide event at Lindbergh was the same. While the roster of attendees may have varied from function to function, they were always completely, undeniably white. Many of Winingham’s coworkers brushed her off as an “other,” or simply ignored her entirely. But when a question was brought up about inclusivity efforts, everyone in the room would turn to look at her.

Winingham spent 13 years as one of the few people of color teaching at Lindbergh High School. Now, as the new head of Ladue High School’s theater department, she is taking steps to ensure that no student experiences the same level of isolation.

“I never want anyone to feel marginalized in my room,” Winingham said. “I always want people to feel like they can be their authentic selves. And that comes from a place of being in positions throughout my life where I was not encouraged to be that way.”

Winingham grew up in a household that embraced the performing arts. In fact, some of her earliest memories involve watching film adaptations of popular Broadway musicals.

“I was in a play for the first time when I was 8 or 9 at a community college, and then I was in *The Muny* when I was 9,” Winingham said. “And then after that, I was kind of obsessed. So I just did theater forever after that, and then all throughout school.”

Winingham pursued the dramatic arts long after high school and graduated from the University of Missouri with a Master's Degree in Secondary Education in 2011. As of 2020, she is in the process of earning a second Master's Degree in Theater Studies in Production and Design at Southern Oregon University.

Before Winingham knew she wanted to pursue education, she was a professional actress. Most notably, she headlined the feature film "Four Color Eulogy" in 2014. However, she describes her transition from exclusively acting to teaching as "really organic."

"I enjoy watching students grow in their art form much more than I need the validation of being in it," Winingham said. "I love performing, don't get me wrong. I'm a performer. I love attention. We all do. But my cup is filled much more from watching students than from me."

Winingham's potential as an educator was first discovered in 2004. At the time, she was performing in William Shakespeare's "Troilus and Cressida," with SLIGHTLYaskew Theatre Company, a program that she co-founded.

"Two women, who were seniors [from the Yale theater department], came to see our show, and then came up to myself and Meryl, who is the other woman that created the company with me, and said, 'We would like you to teach a workshop at Yale,'" Winingham said.

The course in question covered a form of South American theater technique, which Winingham led in winter of 2004 when she was in her 20s. Since then, she has lent her wisdom to performing arts departments such as the Center of Creative Arts and University City High School.

After over a decade spent at Lindbergh, Winingham was hired as the director of Ladue High School's theater department in 2023. Her first production at Ladue, "Puffs," is set to premiere Oct. 26 in the Performing Arts Center.

Winingham cares deeply about creating an environment in which students can feel comfortable. The cast of her most recent play is composed of 25 students, including junior Madison Davidson, who plays various roles that mirror well-known characters from the "Harry Potter" franchise.

"I feel that Ms. Winingham strives for diversity," Davidson said. "She makes it clear that she wants a comfortable space for [everyone] and doesn't want anyone to be [discriminatory] against people."

For many cast members, it was their first time auditioning to be a part of a theatrical production. In order to curate a supportive space for newcomers to let go of their nerves, Winingham acted as a warm and encouraging presence in a cold, black room.

“Going into the audition, she made sure everyone felt like they did an amazing job,” senior Jessica Steinberg, who portrays Sally Perks in “Puffs,” said. “That was something that I haven’t felt ever before from a director.”

A lot can change following a show’s final performance, but one factor will forever remain consistent in Ladue’s theater department: under Winingham’s jurisdiction, the curtain will never close on community-building.

“I love how theater is so ensemble-based,” Winingham said. I love [how] every show you make a family, and you invest in that family, and then it disappears.”

Alexandra Carson

Grade 12, Joplin High School
Short Story



Feu Follet

Vangie had always taken great solace in the church. Her family had faithfully attended Saint Augustine's Catholic Church for generations, ever since her Cajun ancestors arrived on this mosquito-infested, humid and muddy inlet after being exiled by the British centuries ago. And here is where they stayed, birthing a land and a life from the muck until this ground had truly become a home. The entirety of this place enveloped her as sanctuary.

Proudly erected and fervently occupied, the small, white cypress structure could no longer conceal the visible brown rot creeping along its nooks and crannies. Its protruding steeple sagged as it overlooked the sluggish bayou below, and the splintering wooden floorboards creaked and moaned without prompting. Vangie's grandmother insisted that it was the screams of the sinners and cheaters who were sent to suffer in eternal anguish under the worn planks of old St. Augustine's. But now, as her bejeweled heels too loudly clomped across the stained wood, Vangie didn't find eternal damnation to be quite the purgatory that her Meemaw described.

Uncharacteristically bypassing the holy water, Vangie settled, alone, into her regular pew. Men and women flooded through the doors as they always did at 6 A.M. every Sunday morning. This was a favored mass, for the early hour provided some a form of respite before the rigors of their day, and others a chance to fulfill their obligation without interfering with their plans and ploys. The organ began to pipe a familiar hymn, and Vangie forced herself to realize that this may be the last time she would hear this collection of notes. Odd, she

reflected, how so rarely when one is doing something for the last time that they realize it is, in fact, the last. These instances in life slip through the cracks of time, and often the cracks of memory, too.

But alas, there is always a last. The whole of the congregation obediently rose to mark the start of Mass, but unexpectedly, Vangie remained seated. It began as it always did:

“In the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit.”

As she sat motionless on the hard and unforgiving pew, Vangie's mind wandered. It regressed sixteen years, 3 months, and 17 days back in time, to the day that, although people spoke about it less, still permeated the memories of all southerners. By that time, hurricanes were named and not numbered, and forecasts were much more accurate. The peoples of South Louisiana had grown accustomed to major storms, a fixture of summers dating back to the time of the first exiled settlers. There had been a litany of them: Audrey, Betsy, Camille... And so, when Katrina's arrival was predicted, it was met by townsfolk with the usual measures of conciliation and reconciliation. The Cajuns had long known that hurricanes would blow in, over, and out, but the rarified beauty of the bayou and its way of life made the inconvenience of the imminent destruction worthwhile. Until Katrina. That was when everything changed, for the town, for Louisiana...and for Vangie. She didn't want to remember, but she didn't want to forget.

“I confess to almighty God and to you, my brothers and sisters, that I have greatly sinned, in my thoughts and in my words, in what I have done and in what I have failed to do.”

Vangie painfully recalled when the whipping and howling winds had finally calmed, indicating that her village was situated in that inglorious place known as the hurricane eye, that the townsfolk cautiously – yet, optimistically – ventured out of their darkened and damp homes to survey the destruction. Damage was expected. But not this much. Not this bad. The fleet of shrimp trawlers that normally lined the bayou – the essence of this place and these people – were unceremoniously piled into a tangled jumble of wood shards, ripped butterfly nets and contorted metal rigs. Utility poles and bait store signs and cypress trees lay randomly about the roadways and in flower beds and on

neighbors' roofs. She remembered the fateful moment when she and her beloved, Benoit, emerged from the remnants of their home. She remembered the look in his usually gleaming eyes, the look that something fundamental to his being had been broken, lost, taken. The wrinkles that had accumulated on his leathery tan skin over the years became more pronounced, and his voice, oh his voice. How weak, and how hopeless it was.

“Good lord, Vangie, look at all dis’ right here. Look, Vangie, look. It's all gone.”

He told her that he had to go and help. Vangie, of course, protested, but Cajun men possessed a certain and perennial hard-headedness about them. As Benoit began his search for lost people and found things, she heard the clomp and splash of his old rubber waders against the feet of water that churned in the street, and she suddenly felt more afraid than she had ever known possible. That was the last time she, or anyone else that she knew of, had seen Benoit. They had been married for fifty-two years, raised two children together, built a home from the ground up, and fostered one of the most successful trawler rental companies in their bend of the bayou. And suddenly, it was all taken away from her, the life and the love that they had shared for over half of a century, by a storm. She had never forgiven herself for that. She had never forgiven God for that. She had never forgiven Benoit for that.

“The Lord be with you.”

Suddenly, her thoughts were interrupted by the sound of a familiar voice.

“Miss Vangie, you comin’ to de Fais Do Do tomorrow night?”

The question was posed by Claude Hebert, a shrimper who used to call himself a neighbor before the tempest. Vangie glanced up, and promptly, but respectfully replied.

“Oh no, I think I have plans. Yes...I think...I think I do.”

She would like to have gone, for Vangie always enjoyed the Fais Do Do. The whole village would look forward to it, carefully planning dance cards and, more importantly, the menu. Gumbo. Potato salad. Boiled crawfish. And,

sometimes, jambalaya. She fondly recalled the laughter evoked by the usually inappropriate jokes, the distinct smell of crab boil and bilgewater that wafted thick in the air, and the bonfires started to ward off the alligators perched on the banks, that inevitably turned into the gathering place for the beer-drinking crowd. The children would playfully announce the arrival of guests when they skimmed to the dock in their pirogues and would scamper up and down the bayou searching for – but secretly pleading they wouldn't find – the evasive feu follet.

The mysterious glowing orbs of bouncing light that gave birth to bayou legends of all forms and fears; more practical people simply concluded that the illumination was the product of methane gas naturally escaping the dense bayou water, but more learned people knew what they really were – démons. What bon temps, Vangie reminisced. Strangely again, Vangie remembered that the last Fais Do Do was her last. She hoped she savored it enough.

Vangie knew without a doubt, though, that she had plans. After Katrina passed, time lapsed in a foggy nightmare of languish. Her mind, body and spirit were numb. Nothing much mattered after Benoit disappeared into the darkness of that stormy evening, and then into the ultimate darkness of no return. She only remembered flashes. Red Cross, hot ham sandwiches, cold red beans. Endless bottles of water. Denied insurance claims. Blue tarps. Frustration. Pain. Endless condolences. And, something unfamiliar to the Cajun people, a total sense of helplessness. Benoit had been a proud man, full of life verging on boisterous. He laughed hard, worked hard, and loved hard. He had been her salvation and her companion. And like the windows that once shielded their home from the harsh elements of her revered land, their family was irreparably shattered. It was in these desperate hours that Vangie devolved into an existence that she regarded as a purgatory on Earth. Vangie was tired. She was tired of life and she was tired of waiting.

“...through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault...”

She had planned, planned in that determined manner of a people who had been long tormented and forgotten. Vangie was willing to do anything, truly anything, to peer into Benoit's eyes, hear his laugh, see his smile, just one...more...time. Catholicism reveled in sacrifice, and she prayed that perhaps God could somehow forgive her for the sacrifice she was intending to make,

one that would most certainly, somehow, guarantee at least a temporal reunification with her betrothed. Vangie was committed to the ultimate spiritual faux pas, a deal with the devil. A fair exchange in her estimation, even if her sacrifice did not manifest in an eternity with her immortal beloved.

“Go in peace.”

Vangie did not detect the end of the mass by the usual final blessing, but instead by the commotion of the parishioners returning the kneelers to their upright positions. She pretended to busy herself in her pew until the morning crowd dissipated. Then, she slipped out of the sanctuary through the side door that led to the burial yard. Vangie intended to visit Benoit’s empty tomb, not so much for him but for herself, to ensure things were ready. She decided that, for that day, for her last day, she would rest under the grand oak tree in silence, and remember, until the afternoon began to give way to dusk. Her last dusk. This time she recognized the finality as such.

With the fall wavering and the days growing shorter, the only light being shed upon the pier when she arrived was that of the bare bulbs dangling from the ropes wrapped high around the pylons. As she gazed toward the darkened bank on the other side of the bayou, her tired eyes noticed it. The orb, deceptively but playfully bouncing off the water among the cypress tree knees. She squinted to be sure - to make sure that it was not a firefly or a reflection of the bulbs or a beam from a pirogue. But she knew - nothing bounces about in this still bayou but on its own volition. Her eyes tracked the orb with relentless precision. It was not the first time she had seen a feu follet, but it had been a while.

Since she was a child, her Maw and Papi warned her not to be enticed by them. They instilled that the feu follet were demons trying to trick the unsuspecting into the depths of the bayou where they would be seized by the devil. But now, Vangie was not unsuspecting. She was ready. This time, she had to follow. The orb dimmed, but she knew it would be back for her. There was no other way.

So as this last day neared its end, Vangie, still attired in her best mass dress, walked down to the bank of the bayou and waited. It didn’t take long. Although, she was resolute, and would wait as long as needed. Within moments, the feu

follet appeared, and she thought, perhaps, she heard the faint and beautiful sound of Benoit.

“I’m coming, ma chérie!”

She steadied her trembling hand to straighten her skirt, slipped off her rhinestone-buckled church heels, and stepped barefoot into the dark bayou.

Alexandra Carson

Grade 12, Joplin High School

Personal Essay



Entry: June 14th

The melancholy whine of a fiddle from the distant fais-do-do faintly echoed off the still and dark waters. Although a luminous summer afternoon, one of those in which the radiance of the sun sizzled exposed skin, light was incapable of penetrating the think membrane that was the bayou's surface. A set of bulging eyes, masking the muscular body of a slyly-hunting alligator beneath, was the solitary disruption in these motionless waters. Winged fireflies skimmed frantically about, mere inches above the swamp, in a fervent effort to find...something. They flitted unencumbered on this windless day, the blazing air so thick one could almost swallow it, or choke on it. Lining the banks of the bayou, where the land meets the dense water, a deep dark sludge unapologetically waited to ingest the shoes of those who dared to tread on it. Washed up oyster shells, emitting a salty and rotten stench, protruded unevenly from the muck as if attempting escape. Only the prevalent and promiscuous nine-banded armadillos, protected by their bullet-proof gray ruttled shells, seemed immune to being consumed into the mire. As a pair scavenged on the abandoned shells, the alligator deliberately swiveled his rounded eyes to peer at them.

An egret, shrouded in snow-white feathery plumes that appeared oddly pristine for this murky place, majestically perched on a fallen log protruding from the bank, somehow balanced on its slender and crooked black legs. Nearby, pink spoonbills roosted in fallen clumps of rancid peat moss that once draped the overhead branches. Periodically arising from the disheveled muck

were sturdy and unexpectedly straight cypress trees, whose roots, known by the local Cajuns as "knees," encircled their trunks like women in a quilting bee. Down past the ramshackled pier, battered by too many Gulf storms to recall and unceremoniously terminating in the bayou rather than above it, a solitary man perched in the back of his dented pick-up truck lazily cast a fishing line into the depths. His silhouette's only detectable movements were the occasional and unenthusiastic swatting of the persistent buzzing swarms of determined mosquitos. His lackluster efforts likely resulted from the locals' resignation that, in the end, the mosquito always prevailed.

The fisherman's line, weighted by a rusting remnant of some now unrecognizable tool, descended past the unseen bayou inhabitants. Slender garfish, with their extended saw-like jaws, skimmed past translucent crawfish and awkwardly-swimming toads of a mass greater than it seemed any frog should be. A water moccasin glided dangerously close to scampering blue crabs and a lumbering snapping turtle, whose gnarly snout opened wide to reveal razor-sharp teeth that dared the serpent to approach. Life, indeed, thrived beneath the surface, but was so shrouded in the dark waterway that this ecological abundance was immune to any prospect of human sight. As daylight mercifully descended into dusk, the melodies of the muted fiddle became amplified and indistinguishably mingled with the shrill of the accordion and the metallic clanging of the triangle. The aroma of crab boil and burnt roux wafted across the bayou, suggesting a much-anticipated gumbo was stewing, one seasoned with spices so pungent that even its scent teased the taste buds. While the jagged cypress tree branches obscured the festival grounds, one could easily imagine the dusty land transformed into a dance floor crowded with sweat-producing gyrations - "step, step, step....hold, step, hold" - to the cadence of the Zydeco waltz. Unamused, the drifting alligator sunk below the still surface into the aquatic congestion, his eyes momentarily reflecting the yellow moonlight as they disappeared from view, leaving the bayou, like me, motionless once again. This place, I would miss.

Alexandra Carson

Grade 12, Joplin High School
Personal Essay



Entry: October 31st

The truth is, when I learned my mom, brother and I were migrating north to the center of the nation from the lowlands of my birth, I was eager with anticipation about one solitary thing – seasons. You see, I had always learned there were four. My science teachers were adamant about that. But in South Louisiana, we experienced three less than typical. Or maybe, we didn't experience seasons at all. Just hot. And, hotter. And then, hottest. In that context, everything on Hallmark seemed alien and almost impossible. Yet, moving to the Ozarks would, in my estimation, actually empower me to write an essay on my favorite season with a definitive voice of experience.

And indeed, perhaps predictably, one of the first English class assignments dutifully handed out to meet some state curriculum guideline was to scribe a 400-word essay on this very topic. Eager to assimilate and not be "that" new girl, I methodically and formulaically began to espouse the joys of Autumn with something like this: "Harvest festivals, apple bobbing, sunflower field trials, bonfires, hayrides, craft fairs, and corn mazes mimic even the quaintest Hallmark movies, and the nip of chill signaling that sweater weather is descending upon the Midwest only serves to heighten the joyous anticipation...."

Blah. Blah. Blah.

And for 400 (OK, 417) words, I compliantly wrote the romanticized essay that I believed my English teacher wanted to me write in response to this predictable prompt. Descriptive words. Smooth transitions. Consistent literary conventions. The drill, you know...The truth is, I wrote the essay I needed to

write – to get a good grade for a good GPA for college admission for a fulfilling career. You get it.

The other truth is, Fall is actually my favorite season. I didn't just pick it for ease of creating verbal imagery or to take advantage of reader sentimentality. And, "Fall" is my preferred label for this season. Indeed, Google confirms that Autumn and Fall are synonyms. And maybe they are, to most. Just not to me. Fall is what happens in Fall. Nature recedes in preparation for a period of restorative dormancy. And in doing so, symbolizes not the end, but the beginning. Sort of like Mother Nature's commencement exercise. Offering a fresh start annually, Fall is the great equalizer. The monotony of the landscapes after that brief but glorious period of changes in leaf coloration creates a level playing field across the plains and along the foothills. Imagination fills in the gaps in Fall. Twigs and branches, fields and yards suddenly and indistinguishably blur into one another in an unceremonious array of sameness. Yet, there is something so contently beautiful about that equality, and the hope and promise that it offers.

The early days of my first Fall in Missouri were magical. We arrived in our new homeland mid-Summer, which appropriately here, just lasts for about three months. The wonderment I experienced after one evening going to bed surrounded by greenness and awakening miraculously and mysteriously to vibrant, majestic hues of mahogany red and bright orange interspersed with golden tones and deep purples was unforgettable. It was – and I hesitate to describe it this way for fear of sounding trite – but it was, literally, surreal. Like the pages of the [AAA Travel Magazine](#) article on Fall Foliage Drives brought to life. The kind of stunning beauty that makes you want to pull over and park illegally to take a photograph. Not for Instagram, but just so you might retain in perpetuity some hint of the majesty.

My native friends quickly grew weary of my leaf observations. But others in my new community responded with far less indifference. For as it turns out, the trees that first turn, demonstrate most vibrantly, and whose leaves linger the longest on their branches are the *Pyrus calleryana*, more commonly known as the dreaded Bradford Pear, that most notorious pariah of a tree. The resented and reprehensible stepchild of the botanical sphere, I had not realized the wrath that would ensue from my admiration of this natural wonder. A lesson in ecology quickly and vigorously followed.

Imported from Asia in the 1960s as an ornamental tree, formerly revered for its lengthy retention of Fall colors and strikingly magnificent white blooms in

Spring, this once highly-prized and widely-planted specimen was now under vicious attack. Stigmatized with the label of "invasive species" - which seems a significantly more onerous moniker than warranted - anti-Bradford Pear fervor has reached such levels that in 2024 it will become illegal to sell or trade in some states, joining the likes of Peyote, Kudzu and the Cocaine Poppy. And what precisely are the crimes of this tree? It grows quickly in poor soil, is attractive to birds, and thrives easily. Ironically, it was this last bit, the thriving part, that seemed to spark the outrage, for in thriving, it squeezes out more "native" species. Further causes for malignment included that it is not from "here," it has a pungent odor, and the limbs easily break under the weight of unusual burdens. The conclusions are clear - if it originates from elsewhere, occupies uninviting spaces, thrives, smells unusual, and succumbs to natural catastrophes, it is going on the list. I believe we used to call that pioneering. To keep us all safe from this vibrant product of nature, state agencies and other reputable entities are zealously advocating destruction of the Bradford Pear by any means necessary, including the liberal application of destructive pesticides. There is now a "bounty" - literally, the term used, likely salient from the recent past - associated with its eradication. Visions of a tree hanging in the branches of another tree emerge.

Thoughts of hypocrisy and irony take root, even as I try to banish them with the fervor of the anti-tree radicals. When the invaders become the invaded without reflection or recognition, when the descendants of those who cleared the way for the Trail of Tears, or celebrated the enslavement of the Missouri Compromise, now offer "bounty" on dismembered trees - these promiscuous pests - it seems blasphemous to laud the joy of haunted hayrides and ornate jack-o-lanterns. Yet, I am not sure my pedantic stance on the Bradford Pear and its parallels to slavery, ethnic cleaning and diaspora would have been adequately covered in 400 words. Maybe I could make something work for the upcoming haiku assignment.

Misunderstood tree,
Invaders judge, blind and free,
Nature's irony.

Or...maybe not.

I decided that assimilation in my new town might best be accomplished by keeping my essays minimally acrimonious, my colorful snapshots to myself, and my thoughts on botanical discrimination sublimated. Lacking acumen in

landscaping and forest management, and eager to fit in, I contained my seasonal joy. But as the brilliant leaves of the Bradford Pear finally succumbed to the chill signifying sweater weather, and I was about to face my first winter in this place where I was "not from here," I had to wonder. Will I be perceived as invasive?

Alexandra Carson

Grade 12, Joplin High School

Critical Essay



Remote Work, Mental Health and Post-pandemic Practices: Will Working at Home Last Longer and Exert a Greater Toll than COVID Itself?

The COVID-19 pandemic exerted global devastation that extended far beyond medical and health implications to include enormous economic, social and behavioral upheaval. Lifestyle and labor changes were thrust upon about a quarter of the worldwide labor force when traditional office workers occupying positions that depended upon information and communication technologies were unceremoniously sent home to work, often lacking the credible information, experienced leadership, and sufficient resources necessary to successfully undertake this most unexpected, urgent, untested, and unplanned transition to involuntary telework. While remote work has been utilized by industry and discussed in the literature for nearly 50 years, prior to COVID-19, the concept was typically deployed as a periodic incentive to a select segment of white-collar professional workers who had successfully navigated organizational barriers and resistance to earn sufficient trust to be empowered to not report to the physical workplace daily.

Met with generally positive reviews and demonstrated benefits for productivity, telework, as it was initially labeled, seemed a natural mechanism for stymieing the rampant spread of the coronavirus while maintaining a somewhat functional economy, observed Gascoigne in the research report, “Flexible Working: Lessons from the Pandemic,” published by the Chartered

Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD). But, despite the many empirical and anecdotal benefits of pandemic-era remote work, the longer-term and contemporarily-obscured harm to workers' mental health should mitigate enthusiasm for a future of full-time teleworkers. Hence, post-pandemic, all capable employees should return to some degree of physical presence in the workplace to prevent deleterious impacts on worker's mental health, caused by (a) work-life conflicts, (b) a distortion of work-life balance, and (c) feelings of social isolation and loneliness.

Despite inadequate time to reflect and a void of viable alternatives, business organizations were nonetheless optimistic about remote work as a mechanism for business continuity during the pandemic. There was a pervasive and naïve hope that traditional telework benefits would generalize post-pandemic. But, despite anticipated logistical and infrastructural barriers, unexpected impacts seem to be emerging, such as the impending "unhappiness epidemic," arising from the loneliness borne of social isolation resulting from telework that Albert Brooks warns of in his article in *The Atlantic* entitled, "The Hidden Toll of Remote Work." While literature on the efficacy of telework prior to the pandemic did not report significant complaints about this malady, Brooks' urgency in bringing to light the social, and related mental health, problems associated with remote work is his fear that the post-pandemic economy will continue to deploy remote working solutions with greater frequency than prior to COVID. Brooks' prediction about the increased intensity and utilization of remote work expanding to more employees, positions and organizations is commonly speculated, and there are many in concurrence based on affirmations of positive individual and organizational benefits of work from home, such as reduced employee turnover, easier staff recruiting, enhanced productivity, more positive returns on technological investments, infrastructural cost savings, and even employee satisfaction. But such optimism is based on a relatively limited timeframe, and during a period when remote work was novel, constituted a globally-shared experience, considered essential to physical survival, and widely anticipated to be a temporary fix rather than a long-term solution.

Consideration of post-pandemic continuance of remote work must expand to include additional impacts, particularly that of workers' mental health. Groppe and Elbeshbishi's market research published in the *USA Today* in January 2022, noted, "nearly two years into the COVID-19 pandemic, which brought a rise in depression, anxiety, stress, addiction and other challenges,

almost 9 in 10 registered voters believe there's a 'mental health crisis' in the nation," and that, "though it may be rare to find such agreement in a nation divided over so many issues, mental health experts said they're not surprised." To understand this domestic disposition, it is important to examine characteristics of remote work that once were considered benefits of the arrangement but that now contribute to questions about the viability of its continuance. While telework was originally hailed as a solution to reduce "work-life conflicts" - generally defined as concerns about one's work role interfering with an individuals' other personal and familial life roles, and vice versa - the pandemic experience resulted in a proliferation of conflicts due to entire households being quarantined in small shared spaces, noted Sandoval-Reyes and colleagues. That is, work-life conflict was previously reduced due to flexibility and autonomy in resolving overly-scheduled times and double-booked calendars. As Shirmohammadi et al. explained, "an assumption in the remote work literature has been that flexibility in the timing and execution of tasks enhances employees' perceptions of autonomy," which can seemingly reduce work-life conflicts. But, quarantined social units suddenly found full-time members with divergent and ongoing needs to be satisfied, heightening conflict rather than mitigating it. While it might be argued that restoration of normal societal operations may result in many in the household resuming typical activities outside of the home, eliminating conflicts in this domain, two concerns remain about this actually occurring. First, post-COVID, an unexpected number of elementary and secondary students have chosen to remain online to complete their schooling. Even at the collegiate level, universities anticipate a greater array and number of online offerings, which translates into offspring not necessarily being away from the home where employees are remotely working. Second, as many organizations are anticipating shifts toward permanent remote work, dual-career couples may find an increased likelihood of both partners teleworking. With the physical presence of others in the home while remote work is expected, the reported disruption, competition for attention and work-family conflict may likely continue. And, the empirically established result of work-life conflict is a manifestation of stress, anxiety and depression, all of which take a toll on workers' mental health.

Related to but distinct from the concept of work-life conflict, work-life balance concerns arise when there is an unwelcome distortion in the amount of time, attention and effort one affords to their workplace in comparison to

themselves, their families or their social networks. Kreiner and colleagues define work-life balance as "satisfaction with the amount of physical and psychological involvement with work and nonwork roles, or incompatibility between workers' family and work roles." While there is some evidence demonstrating an employee preference to be closer to their families, which would ameliorate certain anxieties, problems arise because of the frequently reported finding that teleworkers often labor longer hours than their office-housed counterparts. This is compounded by the problem that there is never truly a time "away" from work when one is remotely laboring, and that employees have a sense that they are always expected to be "on call." As Shirmohammadi et al. note, "the shifts in work and nonwork patterns during this time have influenced employees' work-family balance, which, in turn, impacted employees' adjustment to and satisfaction with remote work...and their work performance" (164). Interestingly, erosions in performance, when recognized by employees, can lead to emotional tolls in those with a high-achievement orientation.

Working from home can not only hinder organizational productivity, but might also impact stress levels and relationships at home, and lead to burnout if prescribed limits on office hours are not respected. Importantly, when the "right to disconnect" (i.e., from emails, phone calls, and other forms of contact outside of scheduled work hours; Eurofound) is disregarded, anxiety, guilt, fatigue and emotional bankruptcy often results. Research during the COVID-19 era suggests that remote work is accompanied by work intensification, and many participants in empirical studies reported excessive workloads and low work-life balance while working from home, as observed by Del Boca, Daniela, Profeta, and Rossi. The infusion of more types and more advanced information and communication technologies resulted in difficulty drawing impermeable boundaries between work and non-work hours. Resultantly, remote work arrangements typically increased work hours due to employers' expectations that employees should always be 'online' and available to respond immediately to work requests. These emergent findings contradict traditional thinking that remote work allows workers more autonomy and control over where to work and how to combine work and personal life. And, quite interestingly, even with family physically present, and the (over)use of always-connected communicative technologies, pandemic-era remote workers report a heightened sense of professional

isolation, which led to a sense of loneliness, and subsequently, stress, depression and anxiety.

In fact, perhaps the most detrimental impact of remote working is the incremental and sometimes invisible toll of accumulating feelings of loneliness and isolation, which has been shown to damage both physical and mental health (Kitigawa et al.). This is not to suggest that all COVID-related mental health impacts are due to remote working, yet some seemingly are as concluded in the meta-analytic review by Ernst and colleagues:

The pandemic and the public health measures implemented to slow the spread of COVID-19 heightened risk factors associated with poor mental health, including financial insecurity, unemployment, and fear. During this time, access to protective mental health factors, such as social connection, employment, access to physical exercise, and access to health services, fell considerably. Mental health data suggest that COVID-19 has exacerbated the mental health crisis, with the situation being described by some as a global mental health 'catastrophe'. The strictly implemented stay-at-home and quarantine measures are reported to have exacerbated stress and anger, substance abuse, online gaming, and gambling, and has led to a rise in rates of domestic violence and sexual abuse in the general population. (Ernst et al.)

In certain populations, remote working has been adamantly viewed as a culprit of our collective erosion in mental health. Hence, it is valuable to explore the relationship between the two, with an emphasis on how and why remote working causes emotional distress that leads to a breakdown of mental health. Interestingly, the stream of research that must be drawn upon for this analysis comes not from the business literature, but from psychology. Ernst et al. observed that "even before the COVID-19 pandemic, social isolation and loneliness were becoming major public health and policy concerns, largely due to their serious impact on longevity, mental and physical health, and well-being." And, increased loneliness has been repeatedly linked to mental disorders (Pan et al.). Loneliness literature from the aging, institutionalized populations, self-isolated individuals (such as gamers) and the disabled (Honigh et al.; Li et al.) provides insight into how a remote worker might be lonely even in the midst of being in the physical presence of others.

Within our social networks, individuals fulfill different needs, with coworkers critical to providing affirmation of professional worth and personal value. While technologies have made digital connectedness a round-the-clock phenomenon, allegedly reducing opportunities for loneliness, many reported

that digital coworker conversations are far briefer and more business-oriented than those previously held in person, and with colleagues being more task-focused, they are not able to meet others' psychological needs for belongingness or relatedness (Wang et al.). Also reported were frustrations for not being able to get ahold of colleagues when needed. Relatedly, some workers reported feelings of guilt for not being supportive colleagues, as they once had been, and even angst wondering about whether coworkers thought they might be slacking. Other missing interactions resulting in loneliness, as reported by Charalampous et al., included absent social cues to not remain sedentary and to remain attentive to nutritional and physical needs, no one to speak to about private but distressing work-related matters, and concerns about the confidentiality of conversations when they did take place, all of which increased worker distress. Sokolic noted that when digital communication technologies are the sole mechanism for employees to communicate, lower productivity levels due to less efficient meetings and limited collaboration result. "Working from home and communicating via ICT limits the scope of interactions within work and results in missed opportunities to build connections and social networks," and "physical and social interactions are related to basic psychological needs for belonging and connectedness, which depend on face-to-face interactions to be met" (Sokolic). Infrequent physical contact among workers weakens social ties and contributes to emotional and psychological problems, such as isolation and depression, and research during the pandemic has validated this claim based on the resultant loneliness. In fact, a meta-analysis synthesizing results from 34 studies conducted since the pandemic began reported robust increases in loneliness and a correlated decline in mental health among remote workers (Ernst et al.).

As time passes and the COVID-19 pandemic becomes better understood and managed, some worrisome aspects of this pandemic will be assuaged while others will likely emerge. These longer-term consequences may take the form of symptom persistence, new legislation and policies, enhanced likelihood of reinfection, morphing of the virus, and the emergence of more effective – and perhaps even more controversial – treatments and preventative measures. But as important as all these is the continued impact of the pandemic on mental health, particularly that of workers who find themselves permanently transformed to remote workers as the rest of the world returns to some sense of normalcy. Remote work during the pandemic, first implemented in March of 2020, was perceived to be a temporary solution to a transient viral

outbreak. But, as we pass the three-year anniversary of that fateful month, remote work appears to have a more enduring likelihood of survival and implementation than would have been anticipated; in fact, it is poised to outlive the virus itself.

And as such, it is important to bring to light the actual and burgeoning impact that this structural shift can have on the mental health of the labor force. In contrast to the lauded benefits of telework in the pre-pandemic era, remote workers are contemporarily likely to experience significantly more work-life conflict (due to incompatible demands within the collective, lack of dedicated workspace, and sharing of environments with others remotely working or learning) and work-life imbalances (due to the inability to digitally disconnect and the expectation for round-the-clock work availability) than their peers working in physical workplaces. Of even greater concerns is the toll that loneliness and professional isolation can have on teleworkers, increasing susceptibility to mental health diagnoses.

To avoid the possibility of these accumulating societal threats, and recognizing that remote work has proven to be an operationally-effective, cost-savings device for business organizations, perhaps a hybrid model that, as Brooks recommends, facilitates teleworking two to three days per week should be pursued. For, as the evidence suggests, post-pandemic, all capable employees should return to some degree of physical presence in the workplace to prevent deleterious impacts on worker's mental health caused by work-life conflicts and imbalances, social and professional isolation, and the under-regarded trauma of loneliness.

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Alexandra Carson

Grade 12, Joplin High School
Critical Essay



The Treasures of Trash

Thick and moist air, air seemingly being melted by the scorchingly hot sun, enveloped the scene. Hanging heavy in the atmosphere, sweat coated the skin of thousands of festival-goers, though the oppression of the heat and humidity did not dampen the buzz of excitement. The bustling downtown avenues, normally congested with honking cars, were saturated with (mostly) jubilant families and vendors selling everything from beer and boudin to alligator skulls and other bayou-influenced handicrafts. Zydeco music pulsated, and accordingly, bodies swayed and stomped to the rhythm of the accordion twang. As the Louisiana fête raged on, and as festival-goers grew increasingly less concerned about matters unrelated to the moment, the burning asphalt became obscured with discarded debris.

Dancers clamored for ice-cold drinks to replenish their bodies and rejuvenate their spirits. In their frenzy for hydration, caps from beer bottles, lemonades, water, and any brand of soda that could be acquired littered the grounds. These caps, mindlessly tossed by usually responsible folks, created a tapestry of overlapping metallic discs that were in equal parts mesmerizing and disturbing. On the elevated curb behind the beer tent was a storm drain, with another metallic disc, a larger one that served as a marker, adorned by an etched image of a whooping crane and which read "Rain only. Drains to Bayou."

All those of Acadian heritage know the bayou is the lifeblood of these peoples. And they know, with almost unanimous certainty, that brief but intense tropical rains will suddenly emerge and erupt into an afternoon downpour. And on this afternoon, although I was but eight years old, I knew, I

just knew, the situation before me would result in a cacophony of environmental catastrophe.

That is when it began.

With neither explanation nor permission, I escaped my mother's protective grip, weaved through a forest of shorts-covered legs and began gathering the caps into small piles, which I then scooped into a fabric basket created by lifting the hem of my skirt to my waist. Fearing being trampled, lost or scolded for being too near the beer tent, my mother determined it would be more expedient to help me rather than try to prevent my collection. As dusk approached, and with only minor cuts and scrapes, I had collected a backpack full to the brim with bottle caps that otherwise might have floated their way to the cypress-laden swamps.

The following Tuesday, recycling day, my mother finally mustered the fortitude to handle that backpack, intent to empty it into the bin for collection. But having just completed a module on "object lessons" in my enrichment class, I determined these particular objects might be conducive to teaching a good lesson. On that specific Tuesday, my passion for rescuing found objects, and for transforming them through upcycling into various forms of art that might inspire people to appreciate and reflect upon, commenced. With those small trinkets, I created bayou critters, blue crabs and red fish, green alligators and silver cranes, affixing them to old cabinet doors using leftover caulk we had stored in our garage. Using items which would have only served to crowd landfills and float in the Earth's oceans, those bottle caps were reborn as more than just wall hangings – they now served as tangible symbols of our need to be more environmentally-sensitive and elevated awareness of our symbiotic relationship with the flora and fauna that enveloped us. At every opportunity, I submitted my creations into competitions, exhibitions and shows – always part of some larger message about aquatic pollution. I used art to pique attention to environmental challenges, which imminently became cultural and social challenges if not tended to. And from this start, I expanded to create recycled art pieces to raise awareness about other societal ills in the realm of social justice.

Repurposing trash into treasure and conveying persuasive messages through the medium can ignite real, impactful change. Artwork is an effective mechanism for galvanizing the masses and enticing interest in those who may not want to otherwise hear; by observing the piece, audiences are forced to look at, to come face-to-face with, the effects of wasteful modern society and

pollution. And for that, art, for me, has become the means, not the end. In essence, I can no longer say that I create upcycled art without recognizing that upcycled art has created me.

Bridget Couture

Grade 11, Lincoln College Prep
Personal Essay



Anamnesis

Once my grandfather died, death was a lingering thing, tainting sunny memories with the haze of a dark storm. I felt it now. I understood the pattern of life. But not through this new path; rather, the absence of the old.

At family gatherings, there was an empty seat. When I gave up on violin, there wasn't a music partner to leave. Life simply continued without him, ebbed on. My grandfather was ashes in the earth, and I a soul above.

A few months prior, I overheard a conversation between him and my mother. He was whispering final messages to her, speaking about his son - my dad - and then his four grandchildren. In a weary voice, he said, "I don't want them to remember me like this."

And it stuck.

I was eleven. My grandfather was eighty-three. To this day I remember him as he was in those final months, weak, thin, and painfully clinging to the ones he'd leave behind. The voice I recall in my head is not low and bubbly, but trembling, and it says that he is tired, that he fears for his children. It speaks in sickness.

He was once the man who'd teach us how to fish and drive us from school when we caught the flu, but that is a faded image. I can barely summon his old appearance to mind, and when I look at early photographs of us, I wonder how he was for so long different.

I've unconsciously done exactly what he did not wish. Day after day. And as much as I try, I can't shift at all.

Numerous times, I asked myself, why hadn't I done more when I had the chance, before the disease overtook him? Why didn't I nudge my parents to visit?

You were young, a part of me always answered. You didn't know better; you did the best you could.

Yet when his wife, my grandmother, died that same spring, I couldn't accept that as true.

We'd called her Fifi, and him Pop-Pop. For 51 years they were a duo, and for my life they were a given. Their yellow house was full of microwavable meals and endless TV; it was where my sister and I went during the summer and begged to stay on days off. Often we'd hold fashion shows, wearing stained princess dresses hung in the office and twirling before our grandparents' eyes. When we got bored of that, we'd listen to Pop-Pop play his banjo, and after that, open a bag of Cheese Puffs for a movie night with Fifi.

They were two warm, welcoming faces threaded throughout the quilt of my life. And when they passed, it shattered me.

I didn't really show my grief to others; the tears and the aches came mostly when I was alone. Once, I was sitting on the carpet with my dog, trying to find the song itching at my memory. It ended up being "Greensleeves," and with a jolt I realized that it was the song I always heard on Fifi's kid piano, bought for us from a neighborhood garage sale. Drops shimmered in my eyes. Almost unasked for, memories of her, of Pop-Pop, began to flash before me, blurs of regret and shock like the ones which had struck when my dad had croaked, "Fifi died." Soon, the memories piled into a tower higher than I could climb, until humiliation filled me and I shoved them all away. I guess I thought that by doing so, the weight would vanish.

It didn't.

"Bridget," says my mom from the kitchen, in the fall. "Do you want to make Pink Stuff as a surprise for Dad?"

I look up from my book and soften. Pink Stuff was Fifi's staple, found in a newspaper decades ago and rebranded based on what her children called it. Sweet cherry pie filling, gooey mini marshmallows, fresh Cool Whip and condensed milk, all mixed, frozen, and served after dinner. Delicious, really. And at family gatherings, the dessert.

Every grandkid would bug Fifi before the meal, tugging on her maroon sweater and exclaiming in high-pitched voices, "did you make Pink Stuff?"

“Yes,” she would reply, rolling her eyes but clearly amused. Then she would open the freezer and expose the special glass bowl within. We'd peek over her arm, practically drooling at the pale-pink mountain, until she'd shoo us away. “You can't have any until later!”

Fifi was an inspiring woman. Beneath the sass and stubbornness, she had a tender heart poured out in the world. She took care of her husband for months after his diagnosis, helping him bathe and encouraging him to eat. And when she wasn't needed, she tended to the wild garden in her backyard. I distinctly remember the coldness of the living room window while I pressed my nose against it, and gazing in awe as Fifi waded through bees and watered their coneflowers. She was never dissuaded or struck by hesitation. She merely joined in the frenzy of nature, balanced herself with the world. Every spider she found in the house was named Charlotte, after the book, and carefully returned to the bushes. Every bird that graced her porch was pointed out and named, and the many injured animals found by the road were sheltered under her wing. But her compassion did not stop there. Multiple times I'd hear of her volunteering experiences, like the conversations she had with the frail neighbor she drove around. And as much as she contributed, Fifi never took money for her generosity. Her house was creaky and her clothes worn, but that was the life she was happy in. It was the one she shared with those she loved.

In fact, one of the last stories I have of her and Pop-Pop, before things got bad, was an instance of lack of self concern. She'd hit her head in the basement, but instead of calling my dad for a ride to the hospital, she'd placed a cloth on her head and adamantly ignored the wound. She'd told her husband she was fine, that she didn't need help. It was only later, when the blood kept running, that she took it back and asked him to call their son. My grandfather, who had for months been under her care, looked her firmly in the eye and responded, “Baby, I already did.”

His favorite song was “Amazing Grace.” After his funeral, my dad invited Fifi to watch live bag-pipers with the family. He didn't give many details. But after the finale, when the musicians surprised everyone and played my grandpa's song, she understood. That was the first and last time I saw my grandmother cry, because not long after that, she was gone.

It was an accident. A thrust on the gas instead of the breaks, and a direct collision with the parking lot post. It wasn't supposed to happen. It hadn't even been two months since her husband's death. She'd known how to drive for decades, yet in that one moment, she'd slipped....

In books, the first thing a character says when their loved one dies is simply “no.” The reaction is predictable, usually choked out after receiving an emotional goodbye. I didn’t get such a moment. I could have if I’d known. Instead of staying with my friends as my grandmother left my dad’s birthday party, I could have paused to give her a hug. I could have uttered a farewell. But I didn’t. I hadn’t. And still, fate took what it wished.

So it came to be that when I heard the news, “no” was the only word I could form. Not enough time had passed to cry; I was just in shock. Immobilized by disbelief. That’s the only truth in those stories, I guess. That none of us are prepared to let go.

I return my gaze to my mom, who’s waiting expectantly before me, her question hovering in the air. Pink Stuff. How long has it been since I’ve tasted it? Had Fifi even made the dessert after Pop-Pop died? I don’t know. Everything that spring was foggy and somber. I hadn’t really tried to look back. But I did know that Fifi was my Dad’s mother, and no matter what I felt, her death had hit him the hardest. With Pink Stuff, we could surprise him, just as he had her. It wouldn’t heal things - nothing ever could - but it was something. A sort of gift. “Yeah,” I nod. “We can make it. We can try.”

My mom smiles. “Just keep it a secret.”

“I will.”

The night before Thanksgiving, we take out a parched white note card. On it is scribbled, in Fifi’s bold, all-caps handwriting, the treasured recipe. I stare at the letters, soaking in the image of my grandma writing this, of her hands on this paper. With a sigh, I place it against the kitchen wall, and after gathering the ingredients, my mom, sister and I begin to follow the steps.

It was weird at the beginning, being the one to mix the batter and to actually know the secret. Watching the mixture slowly thicken, and then as the cherries melted, their rosy color blossoming out. You would think that the act would make the recipe less exotic and special, but the truth is, I only feel... happy; as if this is just a normal part of the holiday. Every time I gaze down at the recipe coming together, I see it inside my grandparents’ freezer. In Fifi’s hands, as she walks over to the wooden, claw-legged table where my family is sitting. Then now, in my hands, being brought to life again.

On Thanksgiving, we show the Pink Stuff to my dad. He smiles, looking fondly at the mixture, and quietly says, “Thank you,” before giving us a hug. He doesn’t say anything else, but to me the words are enough. In that moment, we’re held together by memories resurfaced.

I didn't realize it until later, but Pink Stuff was like a shift in the path. It guided me over a bridge I otherwise wouldn't have crossed. Gradually, as the dessert was served and memories bubbled up, I let reality sink in. I listened to my dad and aunt while they told stories about Fifi and Pop-Pop and revisited old times. I shared my own when they arose. And though I was originally worried it would make me emotional, the empty seats actually grew distant. The new scene became natural.

In May, my eyes were clearer. I helped clean my grandparents' house before it was put up for sale, and in June released my silent farewells. I went through the memory books Fifi had been filling since I was a baby, and laughed at the emails taped inside. They were always to my parents, informing them of their children's adventures in the little yellow house. In one, Fifi wrote of how I'd stuck all her postal stamps on my body and flaunted them before her horrified face. In another, she warned my parents of the "inevitable future of eye-rolling."

Through these such experiences, I began to understand that remembering was a continuation of love; an acceptance over burial. I loved my grandparents, and because of that their absence would always hurt. But now I had a choice of where that suffering laid. And I wanted to choose right.

After, whenever I made Pink Stuff, I thought of my grandparents. I still missed them deeply, but I was conscious of my grief. If it made me cry, smile, or laugh, then that was just what it was. Life, however merciless and finite, had provided me with the freedom to share my truth. This was one fractal of it, and I would not ignore that for anything.

Of course, when Pink Stuff resurfaced, the situation may never have been the same; I may not have been in that cozy yellow house or among the same people; I may not have been as naive, or burdened by the same pressures; and yet, when I prepared it, it was like I could shift back into my old body, with my grandparents beside me again.

Recipes really are strange things. Although everyone and everything surrounding them will change, they will always have this constant, reliable flavor and the ability to bring you back to cherished times. And Pink Stuff, well... it did just that. It was the gift Fifi had left us, to carry on when physical presence could not.

In one of her emails, my grandmother wrote, "These fun and innocent years past too quickly. We love and enjoy these kids and want them to remember Fun Times with Gramma Fifi, and Pop-Pop. All too soon they'll be

teenagers who'll roll their eyes and cross their arms and sigh at how ignorant and unsophisticated we grownups are. (That too will pass.) I just want to make a record of this special time, with copies for their Memory Books."

The email stands alone amidst the others, italicized and sent to her son, daughter, and stepdaughter late one night. At the top, there is written, "No response needed." And at the bottom, there is no answer. The email was just one in a hundred, a small message tucked between pictures.

I found it for the first time when I was, in fact, a teenager. I had not expected it in the least; I'd been searching for a cheery quote or random photo, not a glimpse into my grandmother's thoughts. But the thing is, the email didn't surprise me either. This was the Fifi I knew. And although he didn't write it - because he couldn't quite work the computer, because he left most of his thoughts unsaid - I know this was my grandfather, too.

Our world is connected by a web of interactions. Some nudge others, many hide the doors left locked. And through it all, I've arrived here, with the echo of a late-night message playing inside my head. My reaction is more thought than action. It's more of an idea the time spent with my grandparents has summoned. And what that is, what I want them both to know, is that I remember. I remember the difficulty and the sadness, the years of wordless embraces. I remember the way Pop-Pop tapped the glass door as we left, and how he would give his grandkids turns on his lap until the illness grew too strong. I remember the cheap coloring books Fifi bought, the chime of her bird call clocks and scuffed white sneakers, and how I was embarrassed she wore them at my school. I can remember the whole story, and where their lives' pages intertwine and end, but I can also heave and sift back to the beginning as well.

There's always life in a memory, if you look for it. There are always traces in the sand after the walker is gone. My grandparents' deaths taught me what nothing else would: to embrace the impermanent, and hold on to what I can while it remains.

"No response needed," is what Fifi wrote. But I don't think that's true.

If I could have responded, there would be an entire library of thoughts to release. Rivers of questions, emotions, and stories I'd spill out onto the keyboard and frantically stare at while awaiting a response. My life, since they left, and all the memories they took with them. But among those thoughts and queries, there is one thing which stands apart, that I would like to have said most of all.

And that is this:
Dear Fifi and Pop-Pop,
I've read your words.
And I remember.
I remember.
I remember.

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Journalism



Mishandling Misogynoir

1619.

That was the year that the first Black woman — a woman known as both Angela and Angelo — stepped foot on American soil. She was taken from what is most present-day Angola and sold to a captain as a slave, and, though she had no way of knowing, would mark the entrance of Black women to the Americas for centuries to come.

Since then, Black women have heavily contributed to American mainstream culture in every aspect of current culture, and even have made their way into the White House. From being on the lowest totem of society to creating social change and hoisting themselves up culturally, legally and economically, Black women have been catalysts for growth and advancement, reshaping their given narrative in America.

However, a unique discrimination still plagues many Black women in the United States to this very day. In fact, it is one of the most prevalent issues in the Black community — yet is hardly discussed; most people don't even recognize the term used to describe it: misogynoir.

Coined in 2010 by Black feminist scholar Moya Bailey, misogynoir is often described as the specific intersection where race and gender-based hatred collide for Black women and girls. As the term suggests, misogynoir consists of both misogyny and racism — prejudices that can manifest in the way of perpetuated stereotypes, microaggressions and discrimination, and, in many cases, physical or verbal violence and abuse.

Misogynoir can be traced back to a plethora of causes, like the enslavement and subsequent abuse of Black enslaved women by the hands of

white slave owners as well as the refusal to include Black women in early feminist movements. However, Grantville Heights senior and Black Student Union co-president Tiana Johnson notes that misogynoir can be perpetuated by members of the Black community themselves.

From being increasingly sexualized by the mass media and male-dominated hip hop industry to claims that blame Black women and single mothers for failure in the Black community — claims popularized by men like the late internet personality Kevin Samuels, Black women often face misogyny at the hands of Black men.

“Of course, you have the historical context [for misogynoir]. But you also have the mistreatment that we've been given by Black men. A lot of people are on the outside looking in, but when you normalize a treatment towards certain people, people [outside of the community] will start to adapt to that [mistreatment],” Johnson said. “I don't think that's the root [cause of misogynoir], but I feel like people outside of [the Black community] see the fact that even our own men sometimes don't value us and automatically think they can mistreat us as well.”

To add to that point, in the Black community, Black women often have to “choose” between their struggle as a member of the Black community and a struggle as a woman. Due to the complex, overarching structure of institutional racism — as well as the exclusion of many Black women from non-Black feminist movements — Black women tend to have a higher rate of racial loyalty, meaning that they will often forgo their identity as a woman in favor of supporting their race. This self-sacrificial, widespread “snitches get stitches” mentality often causes many women to keep quiet about abuse performed unto them by Black men.

Grantville Heights alumna and local equity activist Imani Mendes, who studies African American history and culture, has made connections with multiple Black women about this phenomenon.

“In the Black community, we often do this thing called ‘keeping it in the family.’ Nobody needs to know your business. It stems from a historical perspective, where Black people had to keep their problems to themselves,” Mendes said. “[This practice] had some upsides, but when it comes to assault, sexual assault and rape, many Black women have often heard their family members to ‘keep it in the family’ or to ‘keep it to themselves’ so that no one else would know. It's horrifying.”

Patriarchal ideologies dominate the Black community, which can normalize higher rates of domestic violence, especially against Black women. Effects from this abuse can include depression, PTSD, anxiety and contribute to hypertension. The combined natures of racial loyalty and ingrained patriarchal ideas resulted in Black women being the ethnicity with the highest rate of domestic violence-related homicides and domestic violence-related felony assaults in New York City in a study done by NYC's Mayor's Office to End Domestic and Gender-Based Violence coalition.

In addition to sexualization and abuse of Black women, there are numerous instances of pure bigotry and discrimination, especially on the internet. In the digital realm, anonymity provides a mask for racist, misogynistic comments and the denigration of Black women.

One example of the brutality of online hate rooted in misogynoir is illustrated in the case of Megan Thee Stallion and Tory Lanez. In 2020, rapper Megan Pete — more commonly known by her stage name, Megan Thee Stallion — was shot in the foot by Daystar Shemuel Shua Peterson, also known as Tory Lanez. Almost immediately after the incident, Pete was met with a flood of insults and online harassment that belittled her experience as well as several online influencers who refused to acknowledge that she had even been shot in the first place. This incident perpetuates the idea that Black women are not to be believed; instead, they are actually victim-blamed when they step forward to spotlight their abuse.

Furthermore, culminating in a subset of misogynoir, trans misogynoir combines anti-Black racism, transphobia and misogynoir to uniquely discriminate against Black women who are transgender. Black trans women face extreme marginalization and harassment — much of which often turns violent and fatal, as tracked by the Human Rights Campaign — both online and in their everyday lives and are one of the most at-risk groups in the U.S.,. To contrast the effects of misogyny that can remain largely unaddressed in the Black community, there are also effects of racism that have affected Black women. This includes the “Strong Black Woman” stereotype, which underplays Black women's struggles and has been used to historically reason the emotional and labor differences between non-Black and Black women. These differences in race can be seen in examples dating back centuries ago, particularly in abolitionist Sojourner Truth's famous 1851 speech “Ain't I A Woman?” This speech essentially describes how although Truth is a woman, due to her race, white men oppressed her in vastly different ways than her

white counterparts. While white women, especially in the South, were illustrated as dainty and domestic, Black women were often working like their male counterparts, subjugated to harsh conditions. Even after slavery, Black women were often dehumanized, facing high levels of sexual assault that went unpunished and exclusion from the women's suffrage movement that would give them the fundamental right to vote.

These perceived differences in race have even permeated the medical field. As recently as a few years ago, medical students were being taught that Black women had a higher pain tolerance, stemming back from when scientists and doctors — including the “Father of Gynecology” J. Marion Sims — would experiment on Black women without anesthesia or pain medicine to test their medical theories and treatments.

In 2022, former professional tennis player and Olympic champion Serena Williams revealed that she nearly died while giving birth to her first child due to the underreaction of hospital staff when Williams told them about her pain. Currently, Black women are almost three times more likely to die in childbirth than their white counterparts and face the highest maternal mortality rate out of any ethnicity counted.

“She is famous, influential, wealthy and she still has the problem [of being mistreated]; like, that shows you [misogynoir is] a systemic problem,” Mendes said. “I’ve had a chronic illness since I was a baby, and I’m thankful to have a diverse group of healthcare workers who have done lots of sensitivity training to take my complaints seriously. But the stories that I’ve heard from many [other] Black women who were mistreated by their hospital staff [are] countless.”

In addition, there are still double standards for Black women — and the Black community as a whole — in the workplace, especially with their hair. During an interview for a part-time job, Johnson recounted a time when she was asked to take her faux locs out of her hair due to them being ‘unprofessional,’ yet saw a white woman working in the same establishment with dreads. This is not an isolated case — often, styles that originate from Black women are often deemed ‘ghetto’ or ‘unprofessional’ until they become incorporated into mainstream culture.

“It's strange for other people to make those kinds of expectations for you and not for other races,” Johnson said. “It’s not just weird. It's also a bit humiliating at some point because you're questioning yourself [and your

culture] as well. Being misjudged based on your appearance [sucks] because it's not even about your actual appearance — it's about your skin color.” Oftentimes, the effects of misogynoir receive less attention due to a variety of factors, including victim blaming and systemic bias. In addition, discussions of misogynoir are often overshadowed by the broader topics of sexism and racism, which do not accurately encapsulate all of the particular intricacies that set misogynoir apart from the aforementioned categories. Mendes believes that it's vital for feminist leaders to understand that intersectionality is significant to further progress.

“It's vital for people who call themselves feminists to educate themselves on how misogynoir has affected Black women,” Mendes said. “If feminists — and I'm going to be frank, white feminists, particularly — truly want equality for women, then they need to comprehend the factors that affect all women of color, but especially Black women — both cis and trans — who have historically been excluded from the feminist movement. Any misogyny should not be tolerated, and misogynoir is no exception.”

To mitigate some of the unique struggles that Black women routinely face, many organizations have taken it upon themselves to reduce the harm of misogynoir. The #SayHerName campaign — created by Kimberlé Crenshaw, the African American Policy Forum and the Center for Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies — aims to raise awareness of Black women and girls who have suffered violence at the hands of the police. In addition, cultural awareness around racial loyalty has been researched upon and organizations like the Maryland Coalition Against Sexual Assault have been advocates for Black women who may have experienced abuse. The National Council of 100 Black Women advocates for public policies and raises awareness on important issues like health disparities, education and economic empowerment.

To continue misogynoir is to continue the disparities, discrimination and abuse that Black women have suffered through for centuries and for future generations. Though the deconstruction of misogynoir, as a multifaceted issue, will take several changes on the systemic level and will be near-impossible to deconstruct inequities that have been in place for centuries within a few years, in order to begin the first toddle toward equality in the future, it is necessary to first dismantle misogynoir through mere awareness and conversation.

“[We] have to combat [misogynoir] now. If we [do] not, we're just gonna keep repeating the same thing over and over again. If you haven't noticed,

we're just in a modernized system that our grandparents grew up in and the grandparents before that,” Johnson said. “We've been complacent. For the future generations, we have to get it together. Because it's not just [outside communities]. It's [the Black community] too. We're playing one hand and it's leaving the youth screwed up.”

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Portfolio



Remember the Forgotten

Go Down, Way Down

He's beautiful.

She's so entranced by his beauty that she startles when Charlotte leans over Evaline with her stout, hardly intimidating figure. Deep lines etch her face, worn and weary from arduous years in the blistering sun, and they crease even more as Charlotte furrows her silver-streaked eyebrows.

"You can barely see the thing," she says, her lips curving into something that isn't quite a sneer, but far from a smile.

The woman glances up at the elder, coming to the realization that she had murmured her thoughts aloud. In a way, Charlotte is right — a single, quarter-melted candle formed from the cheapest wax illuminates the dingy, musty shack, enough to barely sketch the outlines of Charlotte who only stands a couple steps away. "He's beautiful to me. I just know he is."

"He sure came out nice and light," Charlotte remarks. Evaline is inclined to agree — his skin is the same color as his father's, bright and honeyed. It would be hard to tell which classification he came from for the first months of his life, but for his sake, Evaline prays that he'll receive his looks from his father. Maybe his life could be easier if there was no trace of his mother.

The soft ringlets that lay against his head are the color of damp sand and the loose texture is unfamiliar to the woman, whose own earth-hued hair is as dense as the cotton bolls that snag at the flesh of her fingers until her hands are raw and pink. Those same hands, scarred and bruised, try their best to be careful as they wipe the remnants of crimson blood off of his ivory-undertone skin.

Hardly the size and mass of a loaf of bread, his pale eyelashes flutter as his little lungs exercise themselves in the form of short, strangled screams. His face is wrinkly and the apples of his cheeks are as red as the fresh tomatoes in the small garden near the house. There are still smears of blood left over from the delivery, quickly left behind in favor of nursing and shushing the cries of a baby who'd come into a world that would spit in his eye for his mother's existence.

And yet, he is the most beautiful being the woman has ever seen.

The most beautiful thing about him, however, is that he's hers. After all, there's not much in her life that she can call her own.

She has a name herself — Evaline Marie. Unlike the ladies and gentlemen who live in the stately, pristine mansion that overlooks the entire cotton plantation, she has no last name and hardly a penny to her name. None of the lands that she toils over day by day under the face of the hot, blistering sun are of her own; she has no flesh and blood — she'd heard of a brother, but his name was lost to the wind, and the others had no interest in reliving his death. She'd had nothing.

Even her own purity had been tainted by the one who owned her. She can remember the shame that she'd been so sure emanating off of her form afterwards; the daze that had settled over her mind that had left her fainting underneath the hot sun and the gazes of pitying, rounded faces dripping with sweat. Memories of sluggishly shaking her head, letting the tears silently roll down her cheeks as her mind screamed the words that her mouth couldn't shape. As she had laid against the dusty planks of wood, the overwhelming stench of a man had suffused every nook and cranny of her lungs.

This blight on her virtue had caused the very same weight in her hands, and though the word loathing could never describe the potency of her revulsion and hatred of the baby's father, she can't help but wholeheartedly admire the loaf-massed baby boy and the most perfect, gentlest innocence he was.

Her fingers tremble as her muscles work on loosening after the process of birth, but she holds him steady, letting soft "shush"s stutter from her throat. Evaline had never given birth to any other children before, but Charlotte had. Like Evaline's brother, Charlotte's children are an enigma to the woman. She'd heard murmurs of vicious death and riveting tales of escape that always seemed to sputter just as soon as Charlotte rounded the corner, her scowl seeming to add at least three inches to her technically-short stature.

Evaline had been too young to understand what was happening, but she knew that there were some and now there are none; and plus, now, she sees the way that Charlotte tenses and her face becomes tight, so she doesn't bother. Besides, Charlotte had practically raised Evaline. Not as a daughter, but as a fellow slave on the Johnson plantation. Some people would define that to be a mother; Evaline wouldn't, but she also wouldn't know what a mother looks like — which is one of the reasons that she'd been terrified to become pregnant. The more anxious she grew, the more frightened she got, and the longer she waited...until eventually, she'd said nothing at all.

Despite the growing weight around her stomach; despite the bouts of dizziness that had caused dancing black spots in her vision, nobody had ever noticed. Nobody except for Charlotte, that is, who had concocted this whole plan in the first place.

It was a good thing that no one had noticed, she supposed. Though the infants in the big house were often lavished with silk blankets and hand-knitted dresses spun from the softest, coziest wool, babies of her kind were thrown dirty scraps of rags and the remnants of ratty, dilapidated clothes. They were passed around from person to person, leaving the laborers with even less sleep than usual: a discomfiting labor, especially in the brutal, dizzying heat of Mississippi. Worst of all, children of slaves were prone to be “sent down the river,” the occurrences of barely-toddling children being hauled away from their desperate mothers too common to even be considered tales. The white folks had the bogeymen as the devil, and slaves had the unfortunate nightmare of reality for their dose of horror. Hopefully, wherever the baby ends up going will be better than the hellhole that imprisons Evaline. Evaline isn't the smartest person she knows, but she's competent and had tried arduously to understand Charlotte's plan — to send the newborn child away with a white couple who'd make their way into town and out every so often. Evaline may not have been the brightest, but she isn't dumb — she knows that every time they leave, a familiar browned face or two would disappear as well, though there was never any public association with the two events.

Evaline has her concerns, but it is by far the best option. She can't do anything but trust that Charlotte's gut instinct is correct. Hopefully, with their help, he'll make it to heaven. Or, at least out of hell. With that thought, her gaze absentmindedly flits to her child's face again. She doesn't even know if she can smile anymore, years of joy beaten out of her, but

she thinks she does something akin to it when she glances down and sees him snuffling softly, his cloudy, gray eyes fluttering open every few seconds. Heaven sounds nice. Heaven is what her son deserves.

“Moses,” she says, after a few precious moments of the innocent sounds.

Charlotte glances up from her spot scrubbing the crimson stains off of their sorry excuse of a blanket. “What?”

“His name is Moses,” Evaline explains.

Charlotte’s old eyes narrow, the lines deepening around the corners of her eyelids, and she scowls at Evaline like she’s scolding the child she never had the ability to scold. “What are you naming him for?”

Evaline refuses to remove her gaze from her son’s face. Instead, she touches his head again delicately, as if he may break. “He needs a name, don’t he?”

Charlotte sucks her teeth, the space between her eyebrows wrinkling. “Those white folks will give him a name,” she says, her tone chiding. “Ain’t nobody gonna call him by the one you gave him.” Evaline wilts, and her gaze drops. “I know.”

The old woman’s back trembles as she lets out a sigh tinged with pity, lifting herself up from the floor. Charlotte shuffles around the cabin, the planks creaking underneath her weight. “He’s lucky.”

“You really think so?” She needs reassurance now more than ever; needs encouragement that her decision was the right one.

“Course.”

Charlotte doesn’t elaborate, but Evaline doesn’t need her to. Charlotte has never been motherly nor particularly affectionate, but she’s the only one that Evaline can rely on. If Charlotte says it’s so, then it must be so.

Charlotte exhales, laying a hand flat on Evaline’s shoulder. It sits heavy. “Ready?”

Moses gurgles, and Evaline presses him closer to her bosom. “No,” she replies shortly.

Charlotte sighs heavily, the breath rattling through her frame like the wind whistling through a worn hole in a wooden gate. “You’ll never be,” she says, her voice going soft like there’s a ghost of a memory passing over her. Evaline hangs her head, letting her fingers comb through Moses’s hair mindlessly. “Suppose not,” she replies. The baby’s eyes flutter as she rocks

him in her arms, and when she finally finds the strength to glance up at the elder woman again, her voice is barely a whisper. “A little longer, please?” Charlotte sucks her teeth in a way that has Evaline gripping Moses closer to her chest. It sounds like disapproval, and Evaline wilts again, but after another moment and another glance toward the two, Charlotte is swallowing, averting her eyes. “Just a few moments more.”

Evaline nods in gratitude. “Thank you.”

Awkwardly, she gazes upon the quieted babe. She’d pleaded for an extra moment or two, but she doesn’t know what to do with them. He wouldn’t remember any teary ‘I love you’s or any memories at all, really. What more could she give him besides a goodbye?

She presses a gentle, chaste kiss to the soft skin of his forehead. She squeezes her eyes shut, trying her hardest to stamp an image of Moses inside her brain so that it will never escape from her brain. Simultaneously, she prays, no, begs for Moses to thrive, and if he dies by the hand of that couple, she selfishly prays that she’ll never know.

True to her word, Evaline slackens her grip. “Alright. I’m...” She pauses. She’s not ready; she’ll never be ready for her precious, beautiful baby to be ripped from her arms. She’s not ready, but the most beautiful thing in her life should have the most beautiful things. Evaline wants him to have everything that she can’t — wants things to belong to him, wants him to learn how to read and write without whips cracking down on his unmarred, unscarred back, wants him to enjoy life instead of just surviving. “You can take him.”

She hadn’t accounted for the ache that would follow handing him over, but it’s there all the same, running up and over her side like a deep, festering gash. The baby is still and quiet, but tears well up in her dark brown eyes.

“Don’t start that crying, girl,” Charlotte warns, and the words feel like a sharp slap across the face. “Someone might hear.” Evaline freezes, and the tears don’t fall. The phrase is practically imprinted into Evaline’s mind after all of these years: “Stop crying, they might whip you”; “Shut your damn mouth, you’re gonna cause us more work”; “Shut up, and don’t say nothing unless you want to die.”

The last one had been from...him. Even now, months later, he hasn't sought her out again but she’s still haunted by his voice, a gripping nightmare recurring over and over again, even in the broad light of the day. Each time, she had shut up, forcing the tears in her eyes to dry until they’d seemingly evaporated into thin air.

Charlotte glances at Evaline, and she shakes her head. “Better be thankful,” she tuts, though her tone isn’t unkind, “I’m risking my hide for you.”

“Thank you, Charlotte.” Her eyes grow wide, and she rises quickly, wincing at the sharp pain that shoots through her abdomen. She shakes it off, like she always has, instead gliding across the room to dig under the makeshift mattress stuffed with itchy, earthy-smelling hay. “Hold on.” Her fingers catch on a shoddily-crafted envelope that she’d hidden underneath her pallet only days before Moses had arrived; she had attempted to mimic the fancy envelopes the missus would sometimes have her courier.

Charlotte frowns, peering at the old, shabby paper. “You know how to write?”

Evaline grimaces at the jumbled, rough characters she had scratched onto the scrap of paper. As a young girl, she’d stare at the letters on yellowed pages of books, pleading for them to become viable words and sentences. It had taken years and the help of one of those traveling schoolteachers — that Evaline had later heard had been hanged — that she’d learned how to crudely trace the alphabet. It had only taken a split-second of an ill-timed message for it to be beaten out of her. To this day, the darkened scars still curl around her back and sides, roping around her dark skin like vines.

“Not really,” she says, tucking the note underneath the rag, nestling it against the baby’s soft skin. She reaches out to caress his cheeks with the tips of her fingers before thinking better of it, drawing her hand back. “Hope he understands anyway. If these folks are as nice as you claim, I s’pose.” There’s a chance that the couple would deceive them, but the chance that her baby would be swept away from her as soon as the owners found out about his existence are greater, and the last thing she wants is for...him...to ever lay his sinful, greedy eyes upon her child. It’s a chance that she cannot risk, even if that means sending him away first — at least she gains the upper hand. Even the ability to dream that he’s capable of a better life sent away from Evaline on her own terms is better than watching her son be wrenched from her arms and sent to God knows where.

“They’re alright people,” Charlotte says. The old woman gazes down at Moses, and for the first time, her voice wavers, uncertainty creeping through her gruff demeanor. “You certain you want to see this through?” Evaline can’t trust her voice, so she just nods shakily, swallowing down the protests that instantly and instinctively arise in her throat. She averts her eyes

as Charlotte leaves, the wooden planks shifting under the uneven weight once again — the door creaks open and she can hear the soft thud as Charlotte lands in the damp mud outside of the shack, in the black of night.

Evaline holds her breath. One second passes, then two, then ten. Evaline doesn't think she breathes for the whole two-and-a-half minutes that Charlotte is away, and a fresh gulp of air fills her lungs when the door creaks open and in peeks Charlotte's visage.

She steps in, nudging her shoes to the side, before closing the door gently. Her eyes meet Evaline's, and despite her face remaining impassive, Evaline sees the hesitant ambivalence shining in her eyes. "It's done." Despite the sorrow that has burrowed and infested itself deep within her heart, more than anything else, an overwhelming sense of relief settles over Evaline's sentiments. Nobody would know about Moses.

Charlotte scratches the back of her neck idly. "Well."

It isn't a lag in conversation as much as it is a brief acknowledgment of the situation. Everything is over.

Months of carrying a baby she had only held in her arms for a brief ten, twenty minutes is surreal, and if she couldn't feel the sharp, contracting twinges of pain in the lower part of her body, Evaline might have thought that she was dreaming the whole thing up. A sick, twisted dream that ended with the cold crushing weight of her actuality.

But it's not a dream. And in reality, she had been left with something.

Moses had only been hers for hardly a few moments, but no one else would know of their little-spent time together and the prayers that Evaline had murmured, her eyes squeezing shut as she begged to the heavens; no one else would know how she cooed a sweet song to him, her honeyed voice cut by the naturally rough overtones that she had no idea how to soften; no one else would know the name that Evaline had gifted her sweet, sweet, innocent baby — a sin who had mutated into Evaline's greatest treasure and rebellion. Everybody might have seen the shame of her open secret, but nobody here would know of Evaline's darling, beautiful boy.

Nobody except them and God.

Eula Heriford

Grade 9, Lawrence Free State High School

Educators: Josie Clark

Poetry



1/4.

1/4.

i wish to be smaller
quiet as possible so i appear invisible
 but a wisp,
the mere memory of a girl.
just something else to lay discarded
forgotten.

One in four.

i want to disappear every time these men look at me
They can see right through me.
i watch these men from afar, i pray these men don't see me
They look and look and look and they look so hungry.
Ravenous as if they haven't been fed in days,
as if i'm the main course placed right in front of them.
i watch them approach with steel forks and knives
and all i can do is sit and stare.

 I am frozen

i have been plucked clean,
i am the new juicy turkey that sits covered in taut cloth on the table,
One in four.

The aroma of lemons wafts from my skin.

i smell sweet,
my legs exposed
my cleavage on display
I can't help but wonder

what did i do wrong?

There is no safety in a world full of hungry men,

Cloth or not.

They always find me.

One in four.

I watch the numbers

rise

fall

I watch as more girls are added to a pile, just another statistic

They have turned into something to be counted

No longer a person, merely a number.

One in four.

Am I destined to be a number?

three daughters, one mother.

Who is next?

1 in 4.

so young, so aware.

Too young, but when are you old enough?

1/4.

Gunnar Holmes

Grade 8, Parkway West Middle School

Educator: Tacy Bouslog

Personal Essay



Junk

As the clock hands ticked to 12:30 pm, a kindergartner's favorite time of day was about to begin. Centers. Now, if your school featured trite nap time for your kindergarten experience, let me clue you in on centers. During centers, a kid could be unfettered. You could frolic in the sand table feeling the little grains slide down your fingers. You could have tremendous, sprawling battles with Iron Man and Captain America. You could even just nap. Centers provide a time to be free. So what did Aiden and I do? We dug through the trash.

"Ok, kids, Centers have begun," Mrs. Helms echoed through the room. "Today's options include the sandbox, action figures, or the computers." Then she went back to shopping on her computer or something. I scanned the room for a potential partner for the perilous journey of Centers. A full 45 minutes of doing whatever one wants. My eyes landed on a short, and some might say, gross kid, Aiden. I bolted over to him to offer inclusion in my journey of exploration.

"Hey, Aiden, do you want to play?" I beckoned.

"Sure, let's go dig in the trash," he offered. My eyes instantly flicked to the trash can, dreaming of the many trinkets inside. I contemplated the possibilities of what we would find. All of it was wonderful. We began our adventure with the trek to the mini trash can, but for us, it was ginormous. I shimmied my beat-up, untied, black Nike shoes through the obstacles known as "desks." Aiden and I finally made our way to the trash can. A cascade of wonderful treasures blanketed the top like the magnificent white snow

blankets on the Rocky Mountain slopes. Mrs. Helms stirred at her desk; it was probably a good sale.

“Gunnar, do you see that Oreo wrapper underneath the Lay’s Barbecue Chip bag? Let’s go for that first,” Aiden excitedly suggested. I nodded my head in agreement. We decided to use our booger-crusted, wet, slimy hands to begin this expedition. I carefully squeezed my thumb and pointer finger together on the rigid edge of the Lay’s package. I floated it through the air very precisely and set it down next to my shoe. Aiden, like a lion, dove right into the mess. He wrapped his hand around the Oreo wrapper and pulled it out. He licked his already sticky finger to make it even more stickier and slid it on the aluminum of the Oreo wrapper, making the black crumbs stick to his finger. Once he finally felt like he had enough, he stuck his finger into his mouth, sucking them up like a vacuum, making the crumbs disappear forever in the abyss of his stomach. He threw the wrapper on the floor. The aluminum coruscated under the light. Mrs. Helm’s phone is illuminated with a notification as she scrambled to check it.

We heard the sound of footsteps behind us. Aiden and I whipped our heads around to find Abigail zooming towards us from the sandbox. “Why are you guys messing with that junk?” Abigail jeered at us. She stood over our crouching bodies looming over us. Her eyes turned wide at us. Why is she looking at us like that? What “junk” was she talking about? We’re not doing anything wrong. we just found treasure! What was she talking about? Finally, she flipped her ponytail and sashayed away. I still wonder why she was upset; to me, I was exploring the wonders of the dazzling depths of the trash can. We continued to pick apart the delicate artifacts until we spotted something. Something big. Just when we were about to hit the bottom and my nose filled with the wonderful smell of trash, we saw a bag of Goldfish. A filled-to-the-brim bag of Goldfish. Immediately, my hand plunged through the trash like a peregrine falcon diving for its prey. My hand grabbed the bag of goldfish; I pulled it out and raised it over my head in triumph. I slipped my finger into the Ziploc and slowly opened it. The yellow gold that is salubrious Goldfish shined like a diamond.

“Oh, baby! We hit the jackpot!” I exclaimed in ecstasy. I threw the salty cheesy goodness into my mouth and let it dissolve. As I went to pop another Goldfish in my mouth, the bag rustled as my fingers collided with the goldfish. Mrs. Helms's obliviousness finally faded as she peered up from her laptop at

the mysterious sound. She surveyed what we were doing for perhaps a second but finally realized.

“You guys are disgusting!” she sneered at us. I turned around to face her. I looked her dead in the eye and popped a Goldfish in my mouth. She looked at me like I was an alien that had descended upon Earth. Maybe she wanted some too? What could be disgusting about these glorious Goldfish?

“Please throw that away, Gunnar,” she told me in the stern yet non-threatening voice of a kindergarten teacher. My head cocked in bewilderment. Why would I throw away perfectly good Goldfish?

“Why?” I asked her, blind to the nature of the situation. To my kindergarten brain, this treasure should be cherished, not thrown back away.

“Because you could get sick from it. Plus, it’s gross,” she retorted with a pernicious tone as if she thought I was talking back. After savoring one last Goldfish, I close the zip-lock bag. I slowly lowered it into the mini trash can, like a final goodbye to a beloved character in a TV show. I finally managed to place it back in the can. Defeated, Aiden and I gently covered it up with the other junk we accumulated.

Aiden and I trudged back to our desks for the rest of centers. We pressed our heads on the cold plasticky surface of the desk. As I ran the whole situation through my mind, what she said made me contemplate reality. Centers are a time to be free, not confined. If it was my time to be free: why did she get to dictate what I did? However, that is not always the case for centers, much less life, as I learned later. Throughout the rest of the year, Aiden and I had a routine: Mrs. Helms would announce the start of centers, and we would slowly rise from our seats and shuffle our feet in defeat over to the sandbox. We picked up the sand, put it down, and poured it through the purple toy mill. Why are we confined to this? Why can’t we make a sand castle? Why couldn’t we adorn the sand castle with magnificent trinkets from the trash? My other classmates thoroughly enjoyed the sand. To me, though, it was still lifeless, bland sand. It would never come close to the glory of the Goldfish, never to be had again.

Lauren Hussey

Grade 12, Villa Duchesne-Oak Hill School

Short Story



Salted Caramel

“Don't go selling all that candy now, leave a treat for yourself!”

She always tells me that, leave a piece for myself so I can eat it on the way back home. It's her way of getting me to do things a regular kid would do. She brushes it off saying that I'm just 'all skin and bones'. But deep down, I think she feels guilty. Guilty that I can't go out and play with the kids upstairs. Guilty that I have to sell the candy I get from school so that we can have some money. I never do though; eat the salty caramel candy like she asks. I sell it along with its caramel brothers and sisters. Besides, wouldn't it be selfish of me to eat the candy when my mama barely eats at all?

I don't mind though, I'm not the biggest fan of caramel anyway, it's too chewy for me. It gets all stuck in my teeth and I have to spend five extra minutes flossing it out. Though if it was a candy I liked, I still don't think I would save a piece. Again, my Ma's gotta eat too and eating costs money. She works so hard for me. Two cleaning jobs so we can make rent, and we just barely do. She doesn't talk about it a lot because she doesn't want me to worry, but I still do. I worry one day she's gonna push herself too far. That's why I sell the candy, so she can relax.

I walk out the door after ma gives me a big kiss on the cheek. It's my favorite way of her saying 'I love you'. I can feel her kiss still though hours after. It's a reminder she's always there.

....10 pieces of salty caramel candies. It's not a lot but I'm still gonna try. For Ma. I always try for ma. First, I sold 3 pieces for five bucks to Mrs. Heidenreich. She lives in the nice apartment two blocks down from me and ma. She has pretty flowers in her yard based on the season. Right now, there's a lot of sunflowers. Mrs. Heidenreich is nice. She loves caramel and always buys a

couple. She also gives me a couple extra bucks cause I'm "her favorite ". I think she feels guilty for me, just like Ma. I don't like it when people feel guilty for me; I don't know why they do.

7 pieces of salty caramel candies left after leaving Mrs. Heidenreich. I sell two to the kids over on the next block. Rose and Daisy; or at least that's their names right now. They like to change their names, but they always match. April and May. Joy and Hope. They always match. I guess because they look the same they want their names to almost be the same. Their real names are Paige and Emalee, but they hate it; too different from each other. We all go to the same school together, they sit at the nice table with all the other twins in the school. Their table always calls me names.

"Move it Washington!" They chose Washington because they've never seen me have anything greater than a one dollar bill in my hands. But I don't really care what their names are and that they are twins or what they say about me. They give me money which lets Ma rest.

It's funny almost, Ma doesn't want me to think about her a lot but she's the only person constantly in my mind. She has done everything for me, so it only feels fair that I try to do the same for her. When I grow up, I want to be a strong woman so that mama will no longer have to worry about anything. She'll get to rest, I can do the work.

5 pieces of salty caramel candies when I bid Marie and Mary goodbye—they changed names again. It's getting dark now, but I've never minded the dark. The dark is comforting. People can't see how much money I have in my hands or that I'm wearing the same clothes that I had on the day before. Plus the moon is pretty, decorating the street in a pretty light. When no one is around I like to dance. I'll twirl in the middle of the street, humming my favorite tune as I go.

I'll find you
In the mourning sun
And when the night is new.
I'll be looking at the moon.
But I'll be seeing you.

That's my favorite song. It's my favorite because Ma sings it to me. Every night when she tucks me into bed. She brushes my hair out of my face while singing it. And when she finishes singing, she smiles and gives me a big kiss on the cheek. Sometimes I mess my hair up over and over again just so she has to keep singing to me.

As I'm dancing down the street, a figure approaches me. I freeze, mama always said; "never talk to strangers."

The figure, which I can now tell is a man, flashes a grin towards me. "I saw you selling those candies, can I buy some?" Ma's words cross my mind again. Never talk to strangers. But if he wants to buy some candy. And if he buys my candy, I'll get his money, which will help Ma. Ma will understand. Right? Afterall, the money goes to her. I nod and hold out the remaining candy I have.

He grabbed my wrist tightly, my salty caramel candies scattering across the moonlit road.

...It hurt

"You're hurting me!"

He didn't stop. He kept dragging and dragging and dragging me. I screamed, begged, and prayed to the Lord above. Hoping that someone, anyone, would help me. Someone would come and save me. That Ma would protect me.

But no one came.

As he pushed and shoved me further away from the town I knew, my thoughts raced.

Why? Why? Why? Why? Why? Why? Why? Why? Why? Why? Why? Why? Why? Why? Why? Why?

I wish I listened to Ma and kept the candies for myself.

Sky Jacobson

Grade 8, John Burroughs School
Journalism



The Notorious Inaccuracy of Wikipedia

One of the first things we learn about writing academic papers is how to research. One of the first things we are taught about how to research is to use credible sources. And one of the first things we are taught about credible sources is that Wikipedia is not a credible source.

We accept Wikipedia's lack of credibility as a cold hard fact. It's obvious, no questions asked. In any classroom today, whenever someone responds "Wikipedia" to "where did you get that information?" The quick and automatic answer is, "Wikipedia is not a reliable source." This idea is so deeply ingrained in our modern malleable student brains that we never think twice about it. Indeed, we never even think once. But is it true? Is Wikipedia really filled with inaccuracies, article after article? And how does it compare in accuracy and reliability to other recommended sources? Maybe we ought to think about it once and look at it from a different perspective.

This is an especially important question considering that Wikipedia is the fifth most visited website in the world and is frequently the first website to pop up when conducting a web search. Billions rely on Wikipedia. Are they all wrong?

The rationale for the perceived untrustworthiness of Wikipedia is that it is crowdsourced. That is, the articles on the website are all the work of unidentified strangers, ordinary men and women on the street, each claiming undocumented expertise, who combine the bits of knowledge to which each lays claims to create an encyclopedia purporting to contain the knowledge of everything known to human beings. Anyone can generally change any article

on the website at any time, which begs us to ask the question of whether the information is accurate. We have no guarantee that an expert on the topic has conducted research, wrote and then double-checked their work before hitting the “publish” button. There have been reported incidents when contributors created hoaxes, promulgated conspiracy theories, or just used the articles to drive web traffic to their own websites. Some topics -- Mohammed, Jesus Christ, and Donald Trump -- have proven so controversial that they have been locked down to prevent a constant wash of hyperbole, propaganda, and hate. For these reasons, many educators deem Wikipedia articles iffy at best.

While there is some truth in this belief, it ignores the other side of the story, the story that needs to be brought out into the light and maybe remove some of the dark shadows shed on the infamous Wikipedia.

To begin, while Wikipedia does not have paid authors and every article is written by volunteers, volunteer teams of experts and editors plus millions of knowledgeable readers maintain its accuracy and write its hundreds of thousands of articles. This is especially true for topics of mass interest, such as the Queen’s death and cancer, where thousands of people check, double check, and triple check every single word, making it practically impossible for false information to survive. This self-healing immune system against the virus of false information is rooted in the basic philosophy and structure of Wikipedia.

How good is Wikipedia at spreading facts and destroying falsehoods and inaccuracies? In 2005, *Nature*, the apex of scientific journalism, conducted a study comparing the accuracy of Wikipedia and its then main competitor, *Encyclopedia Britannica*. After a careful analysis of 42 parallel scientific articles in both publications, each a pair on a wide variety of scientific topics, *Nature* found that the factual differences between the two were not great, with both hovering around three to four errors per article. An article by the National Library of Medicine concluded that Wikipedia’s information on cancer is as accurate and comprehensive as a database maintained by medical experts. If these findings are true, then why is *Encyclopedia Britannica* listed in almost every student's reference pages for a research essay or project, while Wikipedia must not be named? The difference in treatment is even more unbalanced when one realizes that Wikipedia outsizes *Britannica* by almost one hundred times and that Wikipedia includes many references for further reading and research in its articles. The struggle between Wikipedia and *Britannica* is not a fair fight on size or readership and should be an easy win for Wiki, yet in the area of trust, specifically from students and teachers, *Britannica* is winning.

It is not to say Wikipedia doesn't have its share of errors, but no publication is perfectly correct, from the most prestigious publications to popular magazines to TikTok and Reels. Everything contains errors. Therefore instead of drawing a red line and saying outright that a source should not be used, especially Wikipedia -- which has been shown to be just as accurate as highly trusted sources -- we students should be taught about how to recognize accurate and especially inaccurate information on the Internet. Perhaps being able to tell the difference between right and wrong information on the Internet is one of the most important skills we need to survive in the Information Age. Saying no to Wikipedia is just the lazy way out and deprives students this important skill.

Rhea Jha

Grade 9, Rock Bridge Senior High School

Poetry



Death Beneath Moonlight

Nocturnal sleepers wake
At the crack of dusk,
Mica scrubbed out under fingernails and
Bells tolling in unison, starting the underground lives of girls.
Sparkling mica flowing down to clogged drains, bubbling with disease...
Tuberculosis.
Giggling as they brush past the boys,
wrapping their dupatta alluringly,
the girls head down to the rat holes.
The stench of death,
stale and vivid,
haunts the area
and brings conversation to an abrupt
halt.
The giggling girls are somehow converted into hardened miners,
dragging their hefty shovels behind them,
as they dislodge themselves from the comfort of childhood.
Gruelingly, they put themselves to work under the watchful eyes of managers,
hacking away at the ground,
scouring the ground for anything,
anything shimmering,
for that gleam of hope will let them survive
yet

another
day.

Newer girls slowly and awkwardly lift their pickaxes,
praying to God that the watchers don't see them struggle so.

A neighbor hears a slight crackle,
falling into a hyperactive rush, and hearing the soft thump of red sand,
burying the girl beneath it in
suffocation.

Yamaraj, ever-present on these grounds, envelops the girl in pitied embrace,
adding yet another tally to the
board.

Yet when will the time come when those
wealthy merchants' souls are snatched?

When will the time come to throw their souls to the wretched fire,
where they can burn just as the girls who toiled, foe?

For they live to die beneath moonlight.

Brian Kang

Grade 9, Blue Valley West High School

Flash Fiction



20th Century Man

I die.

I find myself in a black room. My senses are dull, but so peaceful, A string unfurls from the top of the universe. It flows softly in front of my eyes, swaying, and inviting me to tug at it. After a brief moment of hesitation, I reach out for the string. A searing light erupts from the contact point between the string and my hand.

I arrive at a crossroads of time, the collective memories I have accumulated throughout my lifetime. Another completely pitch-black room. The only thing visible to me is that string. I now understand what it is; a pulsing vein of my memories. It solidifies, a razor-straight line that grows bigger by the second. It consumes me, swallowing me, placing me within its maw.

I wake up, a blinding light searing my eyes. I try to scream, but instead of my deep voice, an infant's cry pierces through the air. I try to move, but I can't. I can only watch, as tiny hands wave in the air, unfamiliar doctors in masks look at me, and my mother beams at me. The beginning of my life. Again, I try to move but force it even more, straining with all my soul. Something clicks, and I grasp a hold of something. I pull and pull on it until I finally feel a jerk.

A swoosh. I'm now in a room, my childhood home. My memories are playing before me, even the ones that I have long since forgotten. I hear a shout. Someone screams. My mother is running through the house, tears streaming down her face, blurring her makeup. She has a cut in her white shirt. A large red patch blooms around it. My father stands in the doorway with a

knife in hand. It slips out of his hand. He slumps against the wall, his alcoholic delirium finally getting the better of him. My seven-year-old mind races. The rush of feelings is so vivid, I feel like I'll pass out. I grasp a hold of something again and pull.

A swoosh. Tears run down my face. I'm waiting for them to wake up. The sound of bombs reverberates in my ears. Blood stains my hands. I look down at the corpses of my friends. I pull, hard. Another swoosh. The rest of my memories play before my eyes, a movie of 68 years, compacted into just a few minutes. Black fills my vision. Words play before my eyes, flashing. A smooth, robotic voice fills my ears.

“Replay finished. You survived 68 years as a mid-20th-century male. You have beaten your previous high score of 57 years. Your modifiers were: ‘Abused Child’, and ‘War Veteran’. Cause of death: Diabetes, Obesity, Heart Disease. Play Again?”

“Damn it, America! ”

Tarini Karnati

Grade 12, Parkway Central High School

Educator: Jason Lovera

Critical Essay



Arranged Marriage: A Mess of Love and Free Will

Leaving my shoes at the door, my bare feet embraced the cool, marble flooring of my grandparents' home. My eyes took in the pastel wall, three green and one pink. Unlike the green walls, pictures of babies and weddings adorned the pink wall. I recognized almost all of them except for the frame leaning against the windowsill.

“Who are those people?” I asked, my finger pointing to the picture.

Turning her head to the picture, my grandma laughed. “You really don't recognize them?”

I shook my head and asked again.

“It's me and your grandpa. On our wedding day.”

Squinting my eyes, I looked closer at the image, trying to make sense of the details. The woman, or rather girl, looked like a teenager, and the guy standing next to her looked like he was in his mid-to-late-twenties, and I could not help but say, “That can't be right.”

Again, she laughed at my dumbfoundedness and slight horror. I had a good understanding of the normalized nature of age-gap, arranged marriages in 20th-century India. With the exception of my cousin, every marital relationship in my family resulted from an arrangement. My awareness did not equate to acceptance. As the first American-born and raised member of my family, my upbringing greatly differed from my relatives. My classmates in

elementary school had elaborate stories of their parents' romances and proposals, so the concept of a loveless marriage seemed strange. Considering that an abundant component of Bollywood movies centered around romance (and of course, changing times), I could not possibly have been the first one in my family to question the customs. What about dating? What about self-autonomy? What about love?

Later that day, my grandma and I went to the rooftop to enjoy the cool breeze that only appeared during the nights in India. Unable to fathom what she told me earlier, I reinitiated the conversation. Feeling justified to argue for the side of "true love," I asked, "How could you accept something so forced?"

She pointed to the sky. "Look up."

My neck craned up, allowing my eyes to scan the infinite stretch of twinkling lights and darkness looking down upon us.

"The Earth's position relative to space changes every day. Hinduism associates the stars and God together, which explains why a lot of traditions stem from astrology."

My mind immediately thought of naming ceremonies. The position of the stars and planets on a child's birthday determine the first syllable of their name. All of a sudden, I pictured myself in the middle of the local temple, my baby cousin crying in my mom's lap as his parents wrote the first syllable of his name in the bowl of rice. "What do the stars have to do with marriage?"

"The same way the celestial bodies determine an aspect of your name, they also determine your compatibility with another person. God made it easier to find our other halves."

Out loud, I did not say anything. In my head, I thought it was absurd. Arranged marriages supposedly existed as the cheat code to find one's other half of "a match made in heaven"? It made no sense.

Looking back at that moment, the certainty of an outcome and trust in a supernatural force sounds eerily similar to the fatalistic world of Oedipus. In the end of the play, when Oedipus' true lineage and prophecy comes to light, the Chorus cannot help but lament "Time, all-seeing Time has dragged you to the light, / judged your marriage monstrous from the start" (Sophocles 1341-1342). The capitalization of "Time" refers to God and His ability to see above the timeline, hence the oracles providing society glimpses of the future through cryptic prophecies. The "marriage monstrous" specifically talks about the contents of the prophecy, which state that Oedipus will marry his mother. Now in the world of Oedipus, fatalism to the conclusion exists, leaving no free

will for Oedipus to potentially change his fate. No matter what, God decrees the predicted event as inevitable. However, Oedipus' world completely contrasts the real world. Despite what my relatives like to think, horoscopes should contribute to an "arrangement" as one of many factors. Rituals and horoscopes exist as a mere suggestion that guides people. Its interpretation is never absolute and determined. The choice to choose who to marry can simply occur because of who an individual loves and not by God's force or plan.

However, would God force a union? John Milton addresses the relation between God and free will in his famous epic *Paradise Lost*. When God speaks to Son of God regarding the perceived actions of Satan, Adam, and Eve, He explains His decision to not intervene: "Not free, what proof could they have giv'n sincere / Of true allegiance, constant fair or love" (Milton III.102-104). The purpose of free will, as God says to His Son, serves to ensure complete responsibility, causal and moral, which serves as proof of genuinity. A decision that does not occur as a result of an individual's own choice cannot hold truth or value (in regards to the individual and the external outcome) to the fullest extent. Although the quote specifically refers to the relation between an individual and God, the same logic continues applicable to everyday situations. In the scenario of an arranged marriage, if an individual decides to marry a person of "God's" choosing, to what extent can that relation seem "sincere" and "of true allegiance...or love"? They only act in accordance and in obedience to God. Now, if my grandma willingly placed her trust in God, meaning she willingly gave up her right to choose who she married, then she remains morally responsible for the outcome of her marriage. In doing so, she should have recognized that she (willingly) gave up her chance towards a true, genuine, loving relationship. A marriage existing only in the name of "God" will always appear forced by Him. Considering that God created a world where every human could exercise free will, it seems extremely unlikely that He would force a marriage.

Back then, I remember arguing against this. "God would want you to have a happy marriage, not an unwanted, miserable marriage."

"True, but God was not the only aspect I had to consider. I could not simply ignore societal values of caste, religion, and family for 'happiness'," she replied.

In the modern Hindu society, family continues to exist as the most prevalent of the three constraints. Indian culture focuses more on family rather than the individual, and the same logic carries into marriage. The union

between two individuals does not only bind them but also their families, and the created connection between the two groups raises the stakes and importance of marriage. Prior to visiting my grandma, my family and I went to my aunt's house, where she pulled out all the old wedding photo albums. Flipping through the laminated pages, I stopped at the one with my cousin sisters and their spouses. My cousins married two brothers, the elder sister's marriage an arranged one and the younger sister's a love marriage. At the initial revelation of the interconnected relationships, I admiringly said, "That's kind of cool."

She shook her head. "It was a lot more complicated than that. Accepting their marriage took a lot of time and hesitance."

"Why? The decision seems like an easy one, since you already know the other family."

"What if the families get into a dispute? Then one marriage will affect the other and cause conflicts among four families. It was a very risky decision," she explained.

Considering that the younger sister did end up marrying into the same family, it seems free will can exist. Her scenario stands out from all the other marriages in my family, which begs the question: does free will exist in the presence of societal boundaries?

Stephen Cave, in his article "There's No Such Thing As Free Will," explores various beliefs surrounding the existence of free will. He addresses the viewpoint of Bruce Waller, a philosophy professor from Youngstown State University, whose stance argues "No one caused himself: No one chose...the environment into which he was born" (Waller 74). Despite the numerous opportunities to exercise free will, humans cannot predetermine their family and heritage before their birth. One does not have the power to "cause himself," which inherently places an external constraint, thus dampening free will. The mere existence of pre-established rules influences one's decisions because it influences what they learn and how they act. Therefore, the lack of choice of environment interferes with their deliberation. If my grandma lived and grew up in a different society (religion, caste, etc.), would she marry in a different manner? Would the difference in her society play an influence in her decision on who to marry? Any decision she makes as a Hindu woman will always occur under the influence of the societal constraints she grew up with.

However, Robert Sapolsky argues otherwise, in his book *Determined*: "[Y]ou have the luxury of deciding that effort and self-discipline aren't made

of biology” (Sapolsky 403). Although the quote refers to “deciding” beyond “biology,” the same principle remains applicable to the rules created by society. Humans have the “luxury” of free will to decide whether they choose to limit themselves to the boundaries they were born into or to become more than what they were given. In a world like today’s, the opportunities have vastly increased, providing individuals with a variety of choices to (re)create themselves, whether they choose to remain within or outside of their inborn society. Every person, despite their biology, contains the capabilities to improve upon and exercise their “effort and self-discipline”. What biology/circumstance provides an individual simply sets a starting point, and the extent of free will they choose to embrace and wield allows them to grow beyond their initial state. On the argument of free will, when my grandma willingly chose to think of the family, she should have full awareness that she gives up on a marriage of true love, therefore assuming complete responsibility for accepting an arranged marriage. However, her deliberation occurs under the influence of societal rules and traditions to act in accordance and for the betterment of the family. The underlying “manipulation” influences her deliberation, thus eliminating her free will.

What if she defied tradition? Othello did so when he married Desdemona. In Shakespeare’s Othello, characters (especially Iago) constantly bring up the abnormalities in Othello and Desdemona’s relationship, characterizing it as unnatural and incompatible: “Your daughter /.../ hath made a gross revolt / Tying her duty, beauty, wit, and fortunes / In an extravagant and wheeling stranger” (Shakespeare 1.1.148-151). The “gross revolt” which Iago mentions to Brabantio refers to the marriage of Othello and Desdemona. In his eyes (and others of society), someone with such “beauty, wit, and fortune” as Desdemona does not deserve to tie herself to an “extravagant and wheeling stranger”. Iago refers to Othello as a “wheeling stranger” because of his Moorish origin, which strikingly contrasts with the Venetian Desdemona. Black and white, old and young, and Moor and Venetian cannot mix. Nevertheless, the societal boundaries did not prevent Othello from exercising his free will to love and marry Desdemona, independent of external influence. He found a way around it and pursued Desdemona. Sure, in the real world, individuals cannot ignore the complexities and consequences that must factor into the decision process, but nevertheless, the “other” option, in most cases, exists and is sometimes worth acting upon. It seems unrealistic that free will only exists in the option of escape. If a person (willingly and out of

self-deliberation) chooses to become a part of another society/culture or to completely embrace the one their family associates with, they exercise free will. Their deliberation must take into account the expectations of their chosen culture, meaning they should hold full awareness before accepting and integrating themselves within their choice.

With heavy importance placed on family and religion, the idea of marriage tying not only two individuals but two families makes the consequences of disagreeing all the more dire. Truth be told, I never brought up the topic of marriage as a result of love; any conversation I had with family regarding marriage focused on the modern day matchmaking systems and the weddings that resulted from such services. The undertone of my grandmother's story implied that defying any familial expectations equates to selfishness, because in that instance, the individual places themselves before their family. Is it selfish to live one's life according to their wishes? Their desires? Out of respect for my grandma, I kept quiet and stared at the sky. Still, I could not find it in myself to agree that escaping an arranged marriage looks "selfish". Is love not a cause to be selfish for?

Unlike what my grandma (or the rest of my family) might think, I believe that when it comes to an individual's life, they are allowed to exhibit "selfishness" in order to establish autonomy in their life. An event as significant as marriage affects the individual more than it does family or God. Plus, a unique part of humanity consists of the experience of love. In *Paradise Lost*, when Adam asks God to create a partner for him, he outlines the reasons necessary for the creation of Eve: "[N]ot so is man, / But in degree, the cause of his desire / By conversation with his like to help, / Or solace his defects" (Milton VIII.416-419). Adam emphasizes the necessity of partnership just a few hours after his birth. His recognition of his "defects" and his need for "conversation" in Eden motivates him to ask God for a companion, a lover. He uses his free will to ask for a life-long partner that exists as his backbone, further emphasizing the importance of love. Although Adam only had one choice (Eve), the world now consists of billions of people, consequently increasing an individual's options and simultaneously making it harder to find the "one". Not only does love support marriage, but aspects such as trust, communication, and compromise exist as necessary foundational elements in any partnership. In the case of arranged marriages (specifically in the 20th century), the situation in itself allocates no time towards building that secure, stable foundation until after the marriage ceremonies. How can one find

“solace his defects” or have “conversation” with a stranger they are bound to for the rest of life? The setting of an arrangement does not make it possible for marriage to reach its true capabilities and levels of intimacy and trust, further proving the necessity for free will.

Still maintaining my stance against arranged marriage, I continued to push the topic. “Despite God, despite family, despite religion, why would you agree to marry a stranger?”

She automatically replied: “I have my whole life to get to know him.”

I could not simply agree with her logic. Sure, trust and communication could develop with time, but love? The primary basis of marriage? It would never exist.

In multiple studies on the psychology of free will, Roy Baumeister and his colleagues determined that “a diminished belief in free [links] to stress, unhappiness, and a lesser commitment...lower sense of life’s meaningfulness” (Cave 72). The belief in determinism and the negative consequences that arise from it (proven by Baumeister’s studies) reiterate the importance of free will. If free will ceases to exist, the question “What is the point?” takes on a whole new meaning, because no one can truly hold responsibility for anything. The consequences of the deterministic mentality can range from poor studies to increased crime. Without moral blame and moral praise, the “meaningfulness” of life reduces to nothing, all the more reason to support and accept the significant role of free will to the human experience. In specific to arranged marriage, the expectation that one has no choice in marriage (as set by society) inherently contributes to “unhappiness, and a lesser commitment” towards the said arrangement, even before the actual marriage becomes established. The forced nature of the marriage “lowers [its] sense of...meaningfulness.” Sure, two individuals can optimistically decide to make the best of their arrangement, but it lacks genuinity and can never achieve the level of true love because everything becomes circumstantial.

That conversation took place five years ago, and even today, my view stands the same. It seems unfair that circumstance limits life, but simultaneously, the perspective that recognizes humans can exert control at different levels remains valuable because it instills value. In the context of love, my recognition centers around the fact that love exists in other forms, which provides individuals with the opportunity to willingly control certain aspects in order to create and nurture that love. Love in itself exists as a motivating factor and each human contains a unique hierarchy of priorities

built on their desires. In my grandma's instance, I can recognize and appreciate that her love for family and tradition exceeds that of true love.

Maybe the movies and people I surround myself with fuel my "hopeless romantic" desire to strongly believe in this idea of true love. So will I become subject to tradition or will I break free? My priorities are not obligated to mirror those of my family, and as I continue to grow, experience, and become my own individual, my free will and I will choose to do what is right in the name of love.

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Journalism



Exploring Love Beyond Borders

Part 1: Seollal Reflections: Traditional Bowing and Cultural Riches.

Silk hanboks dance like rainbows swirling in a festive whirl, and chatter paints the air like plum blossoms during vibrant springs. It is Seollal (설날) — a time of intergenerational respect and love towards elders, a celebration of the Lunar New Year.

“[During Seollal,] we dress in hanbok (한복) and eat rice cakes on [a] giant table of food. We [acknowledge] elders that have passed away and bow to them,” junior Donna Do said.

Bowing, during Korea’s Seollal holiday, unveils a dual significance. The solemn ritual of Charye (차례) symbolizes reverence and gratitude towards ancestors to create a link between past and present generations. The bowing also extends to Sebae (세배), another tradition during Seollal.

“[During Sebae,] children bow in front of their halmeoni (할머니) and halabeoji (할아버지) to receive money,” an anonymous student said.

Bowing in Sebae is associated with the tradition of receiving blessings and money from elders. It is a cultural practice demonstrating children’s respect and love for their grandparents. This ceremonial gesture during the Lunar New Year reflects how love is expressed within the Korean context.

While Korean cultural traditions emphasize familial love and respect, many from the younger generation report feeling disconnected in emotional expression from their elders. This perception, rooted in evolving cultural norms, sets the stage for a deeper examination of intergenerational relationships in contemporary Korean families.

“Love and affection is not very direct in the Korean household. Parents don’t say things like ‘I love you.’ Instead, [they are] rough on you and make you perform well because they’ll only love you if you go to a good college and are successful,” the anonymous student said.

In the Korean cultural environment, the articulation of emotions is often restrained, particularly among parents who opt for indirect means to foster success in their children. This approach can leave behind a palpable sense of perceived neglect.

“Korean parents view love as their kids being successful in life and showing them off to other Koreans. They don’t actually care about their kid themselves. That’s not really love, but that’s what Koreans think love is,” the anonymous student said.

This sentiment found resonance with junior Henry Lee.

“That’s why [Korean parents] want you to do all those instruments — so they can show you off,” Lee said.

Emerging from the aftermath of the Korean War in the 1950s, South Korea, once among the most impoverished nations, undertook a remarkable economic reconstruction. Central to this revitalization was a laser-sharp focus on education. In a mere decade post-war, the country witnessed a staggering decline in illiteracy rates, plummeting from 78% to an impressive 4%, as the [South China Morning Post reported](#).

The focus on education and success in Korean culture exists to this day.

“[Parents] compromise the amount of outer love they show to help focus kids more on success,” Lee said.

It also explains the low birth rate of South Korea — which, in 2022, had the world’s lowest fertility rate at 0.78, [according to a TIME article](#).

“I guess people don’t love each other. Koreans prioritize monetary things over children — or even the benefit of the country... because it would benefit the country if more people had children. They would rather prioritize success. I don’t blame them because I would prioritize my success over anything else,” Lee said.

The notion of love emerges from this complex interplay between parental expectations and filial or societal success. Of course, interpretations of this concept diverge among individuals.

“Love in Korea is proudness, a proud love, an ‘I love you because I am proud of you’ love,” Do said. “My parents express their love to me through food. They make [me] food that I want because they love me. I can eat their

love. I experience their love in their actions and how they prioritize my preferences and well-being.”

In Korean families, parental love often manifests less overtly than in other cultures. This subtlety can lead to a range of emotions and interpretations. Across Korea, parental love is expressed in various forms, from indirect and conditional to openly proud and nurturing. Recognizing this diversity provides a broader understanding of the cultural nuances in familial relationships.

Part 2: Colombian Love Unveiled: Generosity, Culinary Traditions, and Familial Bonds.

Vibrant colors and lively celebrations resonate through the streets of Colombian culture. Friends link arms as they enter parties on “El Día de Amor y Amistad,” the Day of Love and Friendship, an annual celebration on the third Saturday of September.

“There’s a lot of partying [in Colombia]; it’s just Colombian culture. People love to party and have fun. A lot of people over there are extroverted and like to have a good time,” junior Maria Panesso said. “[Colombians] do raffles at parties with actual good stuff. They [also] make a lot of food.”

Maria believes that the generosity displayed by Colombians during parties is a reflection of their overall loving and generous nature.

“[Colombians] give without expecting anything in return,” Panesso said. “My great aunt [and] her family would give other families nearby their produce because [she] had a farm. My great aunt still remembers all her neighbors’ and their children’s names.”

Generosity within the community is necessary to support the community’s nexus — especially due to an ineffective and corrupt government, according to Panesso.

“A lot of people [in Colombia], especially nowadays, are poor and [have] struggles. The government is corrupt. People can barely get a job and money. There’s a lot of inflation over there right now, so even getting a simple egg costs so much money,” Panesso said. “If you can’t expect anything from the government, you can only expect from the rest of us citizens. It’s a moral thing: people feel [that] by giving to other people, [they] better the community.”

Cooking is also a powerful language of love, as individuals invest their hearts in preparing meals for their families. Panesso fondly reminisces about her grandmother's heartfelt and meaningful baking.

"I remember my grandma used to make vanilla raisin cake for me. She would make it often and teach me how to do it, and it was made with love. They don't have to say it's made of love because you already know it's made with love," Panesso said.

However, as she delves deeper into the cultural nuances, Panesso acknowledges the role of societal norms in Colombian culture.

"Women mainly cook because of societal norms. Women do all the chores for the most part. From a young age, you're taught to be a housewife and be submissive to your husband. I feel like people don't value women enough, [in] my culture, even though [women] do a lot of stuff," Panesso said. "I feel like these societal norms are a common part of love around all cultures... women don't get treated well enough [due to] misogyny."

Love manifests in various practices within Colombian culture, with culinary traditions and acts of generosity playing a significant role in expressing affection. Social expectations also influence these expressions, often emphasizing women's roles in nurturing and caregiving. This emphasis can be seen in [Introduction: Violence against Women in Latin America](#), which sheds light on the societal norms regarding gender roles. Despite the complexities these expectations may introduce, "familismo" is a deeply rooted value in Colombian and Latinx culture, emphasizing strong loyalty, close relationships, and active contribution to the well-being of both nuclear and extended family networks, as evidenced by Cauce and Domenech-Rodriguez in [Latino families: Myths and Realities](#).

"It [was] always emphasized that no matter what — [whether for] your siblings or your family — you should still love them no matter what. [Colombian culture] puts family love over other types of love," Panesso said. Panesso's recollection transports us to a pivotal moment in her family's history when a heated discord between a brother and a sister threatened to tear the family apart. Then, the elders intervened with a unique approach to mending rifts, a remedy that underscored their profound importance on the bonds of family love.

"As punishment for them not getting along, they were tied up together until they were forced to say 'I'm sorry' and hug," Panesso said.

The lesson was clear — no matter the disagreements, misunderstandings or conflicts that may arise within the family, love between family is vital.

The vibrant tapestry of Colombian culture is woven through with threads of love — a love that is generous and resilient, often triumphing over societal and familial challenges. Panesso's story has shown how traditions serve as a backbone for a community that cherishes its familial bonds, celebrating them as a cherished cornerstone, even amidst life's inevitable complexities. Colombian love, with all its layers, continues to be a testament to the enduring strength found in the hearts of its people.

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(The source below adheres to the APA style guidelines as it pertains to a psychological subject matter.)

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Novel Writing



From the Ashes

It was in the long summer months of Long-Yi when the plague reappeared, shredding through Roasir. With the plague came quarantine: a swift hanging for those who tried to escape. Hell on Earth had arrived, and for those in Roasir, there was no redemption. Pus-filled blisters sprouted on those afflicted; flesh and blood melted off of bone; fevers shot through 39 degrees. No medicine could save those condemned to death by the plague as it indiscriminately tore its way through the countryside. No physician could understand its method of propagation, even though it spread as easily as a handshake between two men, as quickly as a knowing glance between mothers, as suddenly as the summer rains. Disfigured bodies piled up in the streets and rotted beneath the glaring sun, serenaded by the swarming flies. Farmers stopped farming, millers stopped milling, and teachers stopped teaching. Life in Roasir ground to a stop.

Fortunately, death tolls began to slow as the pestilence killed more than it could infect. By the thirtieth day, the plague met demise by its own hand. With one signature, quarantine was lifted, and the King's men entered the town not long after. The village was to be burned...

The first thing Ridian could remember was the stench. A deep, sickly smell that lay thicker than the wool quilt he was swaddled in. Smoke swirled around him. Lumber creaked. With a start, Ridian realized that the barn he'd been sleeping in was on fire. Ashes flaked down like snowflakes. One landed on his tongue, jolting him into painfully bright awareness.

"WAKE UP!" Ridian screamed, shaking his brother. Yan rolled over. It was a disgusting sight. The pride of the family, reduced to nothing but a

lolling, fleshy mess. They'd been hiding from the Burners for the past few days, but their time was up.

"YAN! Please..." Ridian slapped Yan's face lightly. His hand came away red and sticky. Ridian stared in horror at Yan. Flickering firelight lapped at Yan; shadowy demons crossed his face. Ridian had the strange urge to laugh at the scene, but instead tears filled his eyes. The blood boils... unwanted memories flooded into his mind.

When the blood boils first appeared on his father, everybody in his family had thought it was Weeper's Cough. A common, damnable disease, spread by maggots in the wheat, but one that was easily recovered from. And yet the boils didn't disappear. Ridian still remembered the screams coming from his father's bedroom, the anguished calls of pain that pierced the entire household. He still remembered his poor mother, constantly running back and forth between the pot of boiling water, transferring burning washcloths onto his father's body. They were never hot enough to ease his father's pain, and his mother's hands would stay constantly red, scalded by the burning cloth.

He remembered the faded green-flower wallpaper that he had grown to hate in that house. He remembered his younger brother Yan crying in the corner and rubbing his eyes with grubby dirty hands. Once, his neighbors tried to visit, bringing a cake along with them. Ridian remembered salivating at the thought of the sponge honey cake... the neighbors were greeted by the smell of rust and cries of pain; they never came back.

And then that night, before he and Yan had fled, his father had stumbled into his room.

"It burns..."

Ridian remembered crying out for his mother, but she had been infected by the same sickness. His father's eyes were filled with tears. "They're in my mouth. On my tongue. I swallow my blood."

Ridian remembered shaking with fear. But his father no longer saw him.

"Get them off of me. GET THEM OFF OF ME!"

Ridian had grabbed Yan and fled, leaving behind that house. Leaving behind that room. That room, where blood flowed endlessly. Where his father's last look was that of mad ecstasy as he tore through the blood boils. Where his father shredded his own flesh, and his mother scratched at her own skin.

In short, the blood boils were an omen of death. There was no hope for Yan.

Ridian said a quick prayer, wiped tears from his eyes, and ran out of the barn. Crunching timber, crackling flames: the barn collapsed behind him. And Ridian fled.

The first few nights on the road were miserable. Nightmares plagued his sleep. Ridian was an automaton, busying himself with gathering herbs and firewood. He knew his time would come: he'd been living with a victim of a highly contagious plague.

But it never did.

It was only after the first month that Ridian had come to terms with living. Wandering aimlessly in the countryside no longer appealed to him. Both time and his mind had colluded to lock away the harshest memories, and while Ridian still cried himself to sleep every night, he hungered for more.

Thus he set off on the trek for Kitara.

When Ridian was a child, there was one story that he held closest to his heart. One story that his father told him every night. One story that kept him daydreaming while in the fields. One story about his family.

Long long ago, before you were born, before Kitara became the capital, before the Shenji invasion, our family was the most powerful in the nation. Every accountant, every fisherman, every farmer knew our name. The king would go to us for advice. Even the barbaric tribes down south respected our ways. And the most powerful of us all, was Ridian.

Ridian would smile at hearing his own name.

Not you, his father would say playfully, the original Ridian. The one who gave us all we have to be thankful for, and the one who lost us everything. Deep sorrow tinged the voice of Ridian's father. Do you know why you are named Ridian? It means coming-again. You will bring this family back.

Every night, Ridian had studied the Four Ancient Texts, memorizing them in preparation for admission to the University. While he plowed the fields, he'd conjure up complex math equations and proofs, all in the aim of the University. His father would confuse him with odd mental paradoxes in training for the creativity that the University valued. But when Ridian turned six, his mother had another child. Yan. Yan's mental acuity was astounding. Ridian couldn't keep up. Slowly, his father stopped telling him that story about the original Ridian. And slowly, Ridian began having to work the fields on his own while the rest of his family prioritized teaching Yan.

One time, he stormed into the living room, his hands blistered from swinging the scythe all day and his face red and sweaty. He was met with the

peaceful sight of Yan, sitting at the only table in the house, three candles burnt out and one nearing its end. His parents sat there with Yan, concentrating deeply on every word that fell out of his chubby mouth. And Ridian exploded.

The booming words of his father still rung in his ears: You're no longer the priority here. Everyone in this family has made sacrifices. You must learn to eat bitterness. You must make sacrifices too.

But his family was dead; those sacrifices all for naught. And his ambitions were more alive than ever.

The first day on the road was painful. Blisters ate at his feet, while the sun cooked his neck. Ridian knew he'd been living in some tiny village out in Bei, and that Kitara was on the edge of Xi. Ideally, traveling southwest from the north to the east province would be easy. Reality was not so simple. The roads of Arla looped back on one another, and settlements seemed to appear out of thin air. Ridian didn't even try to conjure up memories of past geography lessons. They were tangled with other memories his mind had buried.

One morning, Ridian managed to catch a rabbit. It was a rare treat; he hadn't had meat since it all started. It wriggled weakly in his hands. Ridian grimaced his teeth, and sliced its back horizontally. Red. Sticky. Like the blood of his brother. Ridian's vision blurred. He shuddered, and dropped the knife, which narrowly missed slicing off his toe. It didn't matter. Ridian blinked hard, and promptly threw up.

There would be no meat for the time being.

It took one more month of sleeping under the stars and scouring for mushrooms and fungi before he finally met the capital. Hunger had worn away at his already lean frame, and heat had tanned his body. But all his discomfort and his pain melted away upon seeing the city.

Kitara was, in a word, overwhelming. Sun-soaked stone pavement lay warm beneath his worn feet. More people than Ridian had ever seen in his life flooded the wide streets, bartering, arguing, jabbering, laughing. Horse-drawn carts rumbled over the cobbled road while rickshaws carried stately figures through the crowds. An assortment of goods lay in each stall, which stood colorful against an impressive backdrop of undulating towers that shimmered in the morning light. Even the air felt special, felt soaked in new opportunities. He was immediately drunk on the atmosphere.

A constant stream of babble gurgled, with each individual word competing for Ridian's attention. Ridian swiveled his head, trying to keep track of all the sights, the smells, the sounds. He drank in the conversations.

Vendors hawked their wares, searching for potential customers. Academy students gossiped quickly and freely. Oil sizzled, and the scent of freshly fried dumplings wafted through the air.

Young children chattered as they raced down the road. Slouched servants haggled over the freshest cuts of meat. Blacksmiths forged glistening playthings. Street performers juggled, puppeteers recreated ancient tales, music danced through the air, spouses, tourists, artists, merchants, guards, a tapestry of foreign backgrounds and languages all meshing and mingling with one another. Ridian smiled. It was everything his father had described. It was more. He didn't know how long he stood there, a dazed smile on his face, inhaling the atmosphere.

A voice behind him interrupted his reverie.

"Yeah, I heard they use gutter oil! I wouldn't buy food there."

Ridian turned. "I'm sorry, are you talking to me?"

The first thing Ridian noticed about the speaker was his wide grin. He was wearing a too-large drab brown suit jacket that stretched down to his knees, making him seem even shorter than his already slight stature. A crinkled gray cap sat atop his head. His eyes sparkled with unknown mirth.

"No, silly, I'm talking to the person behind you. Of course I'm talking to you." He spoke quickly and enthusiastically. Ridian found it almost endearing how constant the young man's smile was. "Name's Beck. Beck – you don't need to know my last name." He stuck out his hand.

Ridian took hold of it tentatively. Beck guffawed at the gesture.

"You're supposed to shake it!"

Ridian flushed. "Sorry, I've... I've never been in this city before. Or anywhere in Xi. You see –"

Beck looked up at him. "Never been in Kitara? Well you're the luckiest foreigner I've ever met. Your first encounter is me!" He grinned again. "I can get you set up with a cheap room, board, all that. Follow me!" Beck turned, and with a step, he became part of the crowd. Ridian plunged forward after him.

Beck kept up a constant stream of monologue as they made their way through the labyrinthine streets of Kitara. Hordes of people became scattered clusters became the rare individual. The sun fell lower into the sky.

Day turned to night, and the pair reached Waterfront.

It was beautiful. Endless swathes of lit up buildings sprawled across the shoreside, with their reflections glittering mysteriously in the Kandas Ocean,

like visions of another world. Boisterous laughter erupted out of homely looking inns that dotted the muddy streets. Glasses clinked in taverns, and faint music wandered through the muggy air.

“Now those, my friend, are the pleasure barges. Definitely stay away from those...” Beck pointed forward, where massive, blindingly bright ships drifted lazily on the still, silver-foil ocean.

“They’re beautiful.” Ridian murmured.

Beck snorted. “Beautiful, but damn! If I’d known how bad they are...” He suddenly scowled. “Let’s just say, I wouldn’t be in this position right now.”

Ridian lifted an eyebrow, but Beck brushed breezily past him. “We’re nearly there, Ridian! The end is in sight.”

A light drizzle of rain began pattering on their heads.

The inn they stopped at was not one of the flashy, over-the-top ones that they had passed by. It wasn’t one that exuded confidence, one that swaggered, one that said a night’s stay there would be the best choice any traveler made. It wasn’t even a homely-looking little building, with a jazzy, hard-to-follow tune gliding out the open door, and a fireplace crackling inside. In fact, Ridian had walked past the inn they stopped at, mistaking it for a soon-to-be demolished shack, before being pulled back by Beck.

A creaking wooden sign hanging from the awning read “The Other Place.” Ridian raised his eyebrow—

“Really?”

Beck grinned. “Yeah man! The pricing here is insane!” He looked around, re-assessing the state of the building. “Ok, trust me. It’s way nicer than it looks. Forget about the, the...”

Beck wasn’t sure what to begin with. The entire building (if one could call it that) looked like a slight breeze could knock it over, which was especially worrying in the rain. A wooden support seemed to be missing, giving the entire inn a lopsided, asymmetric look. For some reason, the architect had chosen to expand the lodge vertically – perhaps they had been trying to replicate the Towers near the marketplace – but this attempted pastiche had gone horribly wrong, giving the building the appearance of a crooked finger stretching into the night sky. The wooden door was frail and old. A small lantern flickered above it, constantly in danger of going out. There were no windows to be seen. Even the setting was inauspicious: to its left, a smoking lounge, and to its right, an open lot littered with trash and crawling with flies.

“Just don’t worry about it at all. Trust me!” Beck gave a slight smile, and the pair pushed the door open and entered the hostel.

Surprisingly, the inside was bursting with life, though not the sort of life Ridian enjoyed associating with. Tokens clacked against each other at betting tables. Cards slid against each other and riffled against the stained green tables. Dealers shuffled while gamblers spat phlegm onto the ground, as slinky women clad in revealing gold cloth carried drinks to the patrons. Sleazy, greasy, aimless chords shifted around, and as Ridian tried to determine the source of the music, a slimy, oily, portly man waddled up to them.

“Hey, Beck! Brought a friend with you to the tables? Gonna try your luck tonight? Who’s the new kid?” His voice oozed with false sugar.

“Nah, Vurl. Don’tcha remember that I ain’t playing no more? Come on, man, I quit that life a while back.” Beck grimaced his mouth in what could have been a smile. “This is, err, Ridian!”

Vurl pursed his lips. “I ain’t never heard of no Ridian.” He pronounced the name in one quick syllable. “You from around here?” His piggish eyes moved up toward Ridian, who grew uncomfortable under the gaze.

Beck moved forward, motioning toward Ridian to keep him quiet. “He’s jus’ another traveler lookin’ for board, ya know?”

Vurl chortled. “Anotha one under your wing! He sure is a lucky feller... we can line him up with a room and food for... 18 coin?”

Ridian reached into his pockets, but Beck slapped Ridian’s arm again.

“Come on, Vurl, we can do better than that! 10 coin, or my man might haf ta find a different spot.”

“16.”

“12.”

“14.”

Beck nodded, and with the haggling complete, Vurl stepped aside, letting them pass.

“Vurl’s a good man,” Beck murmured, as the pair skirted around another gambling table. “Actually, he’s far from it, but he’s an understandable man, and that’s as good as ‘good’ in my books. You just have to find the right balance with him.” Beck had switched his accent back to the one Ridian was familiar with. His face darkened for a moment. “Though I’m pretty sure the gambling he runs here is rigged. It shouldn’t matter for you. This is the cheapest rooming in all of Kitara, and it’s even more of a steal since it’s this

close to the water. This, not the marketplace, is the real life of Kitara. Kitara's always been a port town, and it always will be."

Ridian nodded slowly.

"Anyways," Beck continued, "your room is number 901. 14 coin is the lowest I've seen him stoop to, and the cheaper the room, the higher up it is. You get the highest room, man!" He clapped Ridian on the back, congratulating him for his utter lack of action.

For every step up the winding staircase they took, a new doubt emerged in Ridian's mind. Was this really the right choice? Did he have any other options? Ridian didn't like how easily Beck had swapped accents when talking to Vurl. What a stupid thought! – Ridian pictured himself explaining it to someone else: "Oh, yeah, I threw away the cheapest room in all of Kitara because I didn't like my friend's tone." He was thankful, of course, but... his father's voice rang in his ears. The greatest treachery hides beneath the guise of friendship.

Beck was also mysteriously silent as they shuffled up the stairs. Just as Ridian opened his mouth to speak, Beck beat him to the punch.

"We're here." He said.

Ridian stopped with a start. They stood at the doorstep of a flimsy splintered wooden door that was missing a handle.

Beck smiled weakly. "I'll meet you here again in the morning."

With that, Beck tipped his cap, stuck his hands in his pockets, began whistling a tuneless tune, and strolled back down the stairs.

Valery Liang

Grade 10, Rolla Senior High

Flash Fiction



Fate; Like Darkness

There is no light, though it is early morning.

Chains render the monster immobile against the frigid cell, as they always have. The same thorns rip into his skin, and the same bite of iron and old blood stings the air like acid. They have not bothered to change the tall, windowless walls of the prison, nor fix the jagged tears in the ground from a thousand desperate hands.

When the monster was a child, he had been told the sun was born to an ancient time: a realm beyond pain, beyond calamity, beyond destiny. It ascends for eternity, and, to it, all empires shine no differently.

To the monster, too, every banner marks the selfsame torment. With each ragged, fevered breath he draws, he waits, passive and patient, for his execution.

He knows three things:

One, the sun rises every day.

Two, even so, the world is made of darkness.

Three, he lives in a fairytale.

The story has tragic beginnings—a glorious kingdom cast into shadow by a cruel dictator, who wreaks havoc upon the people with his legions of made devils. But the tumultuous conflict has passed, and it lingers at its end: an army of light has slain the wicked king, and his demons have been sentenced to hanging by ropes of blood.

Below the earth, darkness is death, a limp weight on numb shoulders. Darkness is uncaring, unwavering. Darkness is the closest thing he has to a friend.

He thinks he has spent too long gazing into it, and now has trouble telling where it ends and he begins. Gradually, the monster is being devoured by something more awful than himself.

Strangely, today, his world is forced to pieces by the breeze of an open door. His barbed manacles are ripped painfully out of his skin, and, monotonously, soldiers make him stand.

In the haze, he hears but does not see his guard tell him, simply, “Tomorrow.”

The monster nods. He understands how fairytales go.

“Any last requests?” the guard asks, not unkindly, and the monster remains silent.

Fate, like darkness, cannot be changed.

Softly but urgently, the guard leads him down a maze of corridors. The monster stumbles when he follows.

They emerge in a land brilliant enough to be the surface of the sun. After long minutes, the monster’s eyes adjust and recognize the scene before him as an endless, verdant plain, swaying grasses and wildflowers brushing to his knees like freshly cut jewels. Hills and willows ripple against sweet breeze, bound only by the sky, by the ends of the world.

Suffering is his history. He is not proud of it, but it is all he has.

Yet the dawn is so gentle that it does not hurt his eyes, which have not seen light in months. A fainting whisper of pinks and oranges and golds accent shy azure hints. Petals flutter open and closed like a butterfly’s wings. Breathless and vast, clouds explode above his head.

The monster had forgotten all the world’s colors. It turns out they are gorgeous. They are horrific.

Unwittingly, they make him imagine that world before pain, before loss—before suffering.

The guard settles down against the fields and tips his head back to drink the sky. The sun gilds his face and light hair, contrasts with the sharpness of his suit. He waves, and light glitters off the face of his watch. “Have you watched the sunrise before?”

A memory stirs in the monster’s mind, so distant it could have belonged to someone else. He remains standing, but admits, “Every day, as a child.”

His voice is raspy and broken and fits him perfectly. It is quiet and disused, but the guard blinks as if he had shouted.

“As a child?” he asks.

“Before,” the monster supplies.

He watches the sun play magic on his sheet-white skin, dazzle the crimson still dripping out of his wounds. How strange, the way his veins are transmuted to such depthless rivers of gold.

An indescribable expression crosses the guard’s face. Then the man laughs, dryly, and shakes his head. “And this will be your last time.”

It isn’t a question. The monster says nothing.

They stay there together, in the beautiful plain that stretches on for eternity: the monster without a past, and the man who was only just remembering that all monsters had been children, once.

The journey back to the prison is wordless. The chains dig into the same old scars that the sun had kissed so gently.

But when the monster closes his eyes, he sees blue sky. He hears children’s laughter, and feels open ground tilting heedlessly under him as he runs. Beyond him, a grand city on a mountain glitters, its walls and turrets high. Ribbons fly from towers, and the scent of sweet things fills cool air.

When he opens his eyes again, blood washes over the time-worn scene, fading back into memory. The city walls cave in, and the town is buried beneath ash and fallen timber. Ravaged and unmoving, despite shifting worlds and dynasties, its ruins smolder.

The darkness caresses him. It chokes him until he is utterly, irrevocably paralyzed.

Of course—this is a fairytale, and he is fated to be its monster.

And fate, like darkness, cannot be changed.

Valery Liang

Grade 10, Rolla Senior High

SciFi/Fantasy



The Stories Broken Dragons Tell

It was night when snow began to fall like powder through the forest, a crisp, chilled sugar against the dark.

The trees lingered high like bowed titans. Their roots ripped through packed earth, great humps of a frozen leviathan. Beyond their shadows, the girl swore she could hear the whisper of pale ghosts in the foliage, the murmur of ancient demons in the falling evening.

Every step felt like it would tumble her into an endless pit, swallowing her for an eternity. The cold dragged at her legs, and each distant flutter of an owl's wings sent a deep shiver down her spine. Her breath misted. Her heart jackrabbited errantly.

But tonight, she was a soldier. And soldiers could not be afraid.

Comfortingly, she stroked her handgun. It was rather small, leather-plated silver carved with the Crown's sigil. But no one in the Little Legion was ever deemed large enough for a true rifle. So she would make do for now.

A thick military jacket weighed her down more than it kept her warm. Her boots pinched her heels, and they sunk further and further into snow when she moved forth.

The girl dreamed of warm milk, and the luxury of a raised cot. Of double rations and bits of sugar in her biscuits. But she had made the mistake of falling from her squadron during a long march; children were lost constantly, and the gone were simply marked as dead.

She had to move forward, alone, unwavering. It was all the Crown ordered.

She trekked on until sunrise, the solitary little soldier.

The girl's face was scraped raw. She could no longer feel her fingers. The snow had stopped, but clear skies and sustained cold only meant higher chances of freezing to death.

She had a tentative sort of plan in mind: persist due east, where the Legion was headed, and wait in the first town she found for the armymen to come and raze the village to the ground.

They would find her then, wouldn't they? Reward her, even, if she began to prepare the slaughter before them.

Milk, sugar, and biscuits ...

It was dawn when the clouds parted, and light rose to caress the hill she had crested. Against sparse clusters of evergreens, frost glittered like spun sugar. Pink, orange, gold, blue—she could imagine the sweetness melting against her tongue, filling her empty stomach.

When the soldier glanced down, she saw a dragonkin's village.

In her mind flickered everything she had heard about the devil towns. They were built in the hearts of mountains, always kept pitch-black, sulfur-hot and acidic, decorated only with rotting corpses strung upside-down by their ankles. They were inhabited by demons with slitted pupils and barbed scales who breathed fire.

Perhaps she was in the wrong place? It was certainly a village, snow-dusted white cottages spiraling around a cobbled central square. Broad stone roads branched into tiny alleyways, and frozen streams stretched merrily through the area. Far beyond, large lakes glistened, painted with the blush of sunrise.

The clear air brought laughter to her numb ears. She saw tendrils of warm smoke, the faint flicker of cooking meats and candies. But—there, from the thin pole in their square, a purple banner snapped in the wind. Upon it was the outline of a red sickle moon, and a longsword that pierced it through the heart.

The flag of the descendants of dragons, who had ravaged the known world for ten thousand years.

Who, now, the Crown was eradicating from the earth.

The soldier started her stumbling walk down the hill. She considered how stupid the dragonkin were. Why not hide away in the far south, the place she was from, where the lands were as fiery as their hearts? How they must suffer, tucked away in the bitter ice of the north.

Easy targets, her Commander might have scoffed, simple bait.

Her limbs grew duller as she walked. For every hour she stumbled along, the cold climbed higher, and the village flickered further away. Her body was a singular gaping wound, held tightly by fine snow, baked dry by frigid, frigid winter light.

Pinpricks shoved into her every pore. Her body trembled, maddened, undulating, as her essence struggled to warm her organs.

Still, she walked on.

It was noon when her legs gave out underneath her. She hit her head hard against the ground and her eyes rolled up to see the blurred outline of a stone wall.

Wall—and was that wood? It was a cottage above her, with a small round window curtained and sectioned crosswise by two wooden poles. The breeze carried footsteps to her, along with the smell of butter and warm chocolate.

Deliriously, the soldier reached for her handgun with a gloved, unfeeling hand. From what remained of her soul's core, she drew out a flickering blue scrap of magical essence and gathered it into a ball in the back of the weapon. She tried to lift her arm to the window and pull the trigger, but the essence sputtered out before the pistol's force could hit it.

The girl collapsed onto the snow with an exhausted, muffled shriek. What lay around her? Green and ghostly white, the pinks and purples of a winter garden. Pale picket fence, and, of course, endless banks of ice.

The footsteps from before were louder now, horrifying, war drums against her head.

With the bit of consciousness she had left, she forced the gun under a pile of snow, packed it as far into the hard earth as she could.

Her body felt too hot and too cold at the same time. Oddly, she had the sharp urge to strip off her overcoat, but she knew it would kill her. Ah ... was this how it was to freeze to death?

Voices, too scrambled to understand. Essence inside her, roaring against encroaching ice. Words, repeated over and over, and the girl was asking in return—

Mother, is that you?

She woke in a cottage with a bed like a cloud.

It was far softer than any cot she had ever slept in. Countless downy pillows enclosed her, muffled by thick blankets, as if she were drowning; but the waters were so warm that she did not quite mind being claimed by this sea, this storm.

The scent of cinnamon and cream startled her into movement. A distinct creamy scent underlay it, accented by the crackle of low, hearty fire.

She tilted her head and widened her eyes, watery grey and oversized. The building was only single-room, as far as she could tell. Lacquered wood and well-worn stone, it had a single closed door, a broad fireplace, a stout closet, and a scattering of tables and nightstands. All sorts of chairs and quilts filled the place, decorated with shining trinkets.

Suddenly, she was attacked with two thoughts: My gun! and then everything hurts!

The soldier tried to sit up, and her body seized in painful protest. After a bit of internal battle, she came to accept that she could no longer move properly. Forfeiting, she cast her gaze to the small pan of sweetened milk over the fire, the loaves of bread on the counter over it—

And, above that all, the dragon banner of the pierced moon.

Her breath stopped. She was still in the dragonkin village.

And she had nothing to direct her magical essence, nothing to protect her. Could she kill them?

Did they recognize the origins of her weapons, her clothes? Would they kill her?

Promptly, the front door clicked open. A bright red bell above it jingled merrily, and a cloaked woman wandered in.

Fear blinded the soldier momentarily.

When the woman swept off her hood, the soldier saw the lines traced into her face, the shock of grey hair pulled back into a bun. The other put down the basket in her arms and smiled warmly.

“So you’re awake,” she called, voice only slightly raspy.

The girl said nothing.

The woman hobbled about the room, setting things to sorts here and there. More logs were fed to the now-orange fire; some new bright yarn was piled on a desk by the rocking chair; milk was spooned into two steaming mugs and set on the stand by the cottage’s large bed, where the girl lay.

As she worked to cut some bread, the woman continued, “Found you out there half-dead in the snow. Your clothes were so worn, gods above, and you were blue as all death. Say, where are your parents?”

The thick dough was added to a plate and delivered to the girl’s bedside.

“Your family,” the woman urged, louder. “I’m sure they miss you, little one.”

The girl no longer remembered her parents' faces. She wondered if she could rise quickly enough to slam the plate into the woman's temple. Crawl, if she had to, so she could reach her gun.

"They're gone," the girl forced out finally, turning away. She stiffened her hands underneath the sheets.

"Ah, well, I'm sorry," the woman replied gently. "But I don't mind it. Always take in a wanderer, especially on a winter day like this, eh? Come on, drink some milk."

A cup was passed to her. Despite herself, the girl took a sip, felt sweet warmth explode in her mouth.

How long had it been since she last had milk? It was strong, lovely, dashed with cinnamon. She finished it quickly, and absently wondered if the woman meant to poison her with it.

With that thought, she sunk again into a deep sleep.

It was dusk when she awoke. Outside, the same colors of dawn accented condensing snow, fading into nightfall. The fire crackled warmly, and she could still taste hints of sweet milk on the tip of her tongue.

I'll stay until I get my strength back, she told herself firmly, glancing around the room.

Dragons were wicked. It was only a matter of time before their true colors shone.

The old woman was knitting by the fireplace. Her rocking chair swung soothingly back and forth, and her needles clicked to a steady rhythm. In her lap, a long tongue of scarlet scarf unfurled.

Again, the woman looked at the girl and smiled. "Have some bread," she suggested. "And join me."

If there had not been poison in the milk, perhaps it was instead healing elixir. The girl found that she could sit up with some effort, and slowly chew through a slice of buttery bread with dried fruit and nuts. She finished off another cup of milk and spiced pieces of sausage set in a small dish.

Her essence fluttered against her heart, bright blue as the southern seas. Strength trickled, slowly but surely, back into her bones. She was almost sure this was the most full she had ever been.

And again, despite herself, the girl found herself saying, "Thank you."

"Of course," the woman laughed, and patted a thick cushion beside her. "Join me, little one."

The girl sat up and realized her gloves had been taken off. She wore a thick, warm, fluffy coat she had not owned before, and soft slippers waited by the side of the bed.

She stood and put the shoes on. “My—”

“Your jacket is here, dear. Do you know how to mend cloth?”

The girl nodded numbly. She stumbled her way across the room and flopped down onto the saffron cushion, drawing her knees up to her chest. There was a rich, sugary scent in the room, and it felt—terrifyingly—more like home than anything.

The woman handed her a spool of light thread, a sharp and small needle. The girl noticed her old coat warming against the base of the fireplace and pulled it to her side, feeling around for any rips.

The flame crackled. A batch of tomato soup bubbled in its kettle. The girl set to work on a gap in a sleeve, never daring to look up at the woman.

I could kill her now. I could slay the dragon.

But her mother had always taught her to be gracious and respectful to her hosts. And ... why would she think of her mother now, that willowy, long-dead figure she could not even remember the face of?

“Did you like the food, little one?” the old woman asked against the dying sunset.

The girl traced old ruts in the cool wooden floor with her fingers. She kept her eyes trained on the ground. “Very much. Thank you.”

“I’m glad.”

The girl said nothing else. There was only the passing of needle through cloth, the click of metal, the warm scents of home.

The tomato soup began to overcook.

Gradually, to replace the silence, the woman started to speak. She talked first of the village; of how she had helped build it from its first timbers half a century ago, and pave the long roads with fresh stones. How wonderful it had been to hold the first town feast in a commune of nothing but half-finished homes, fires and pastries and laughter filling every bit of the air.

She spoke of the slow flow of time, of ancient dragonkin traditions, of the solitude of wanderers and the fiercely loving togetherness between lost souls.

There had been two twin boys born to the couple next door, and they had always stolen her brightest roses as children. (But they always only used it to make sweet pastries, and would place a basket of them on her porch, knock on

the door, and flee.) There had been a wonderful baker who sang like a goddess, but she eventually eloped with a foreign soldier in a tumultuous turn of events. (The girl giggled hearing the twists of the story.)

There had been a sickness around a decade ago, and, though it passed with the winter, it hurt the young ones the most. By the time spring broke, many new parents had lost their babies, and a new generation was buried into the earth with wilted wildflowers. (The girl almost cried when she heard it, before she remembered that it was dragons the woman was talking about.)

Dragons ... if they were so wicked, why were their stories so beautiful?

It was night when the Crown's soldiers came.

Their torches arrived first, shining a violent blue so unlike the gentle flame of the village. A rumble of endless footsteps, and then the familiar scattered marching of the Little Legion below it.

The girl had slipped on her jacket. The woman had fallen silent.

The tomato soup had burned by then.

There were warning bells tolling all about town, a shrill din of screaming and shuttering doors and the awful clang of weapons constantly sharpened for war.

"I'm scared of the dark," the girl admitted.

Wordlessly, the woman pulled her into her lap. Her presence was warm and steady, a mooring stone against crashing waves.

The woman did not say do not be afraid, or ridiculous, you are stronger than any shadow. Instead, she held the little girl's hand and whispered, "It's alright to be scared, little one."

The girl squeezed her eyes shut.

She felt something cold and hard touch her clasped hand. She looked down to find that the woman had, ever so softly, placed her gun back into her small palm.

She knew—?

"It's high time for you to go back, isn't it?" the woman said.

That old fear flared. Vehemently, the girl shook her head.

"They'll burn us all," the woman warned, though her tone was kind as always. "They are angry tonight. Spare yourself, little one."

The girl clung to her, and did not move. Silently, a tear dripped down her cheek.

Mother ...

With surprising strength, the woman lifted the small hand that held the gun to her own temple. Laughed, all shining powdered sugar. “It’s alright to be scared, dear, but you must move past it regardless.”

The girl was crying freely now. “I can’t ... ”

“I’m sorry, love, but I will die tonight,” the old woman rasped. She held the girl’s eyes steadily, blue against grey. “Save yourself.”

No!

Without warning, the woman pulled the trigger. Unwittingly, those sparks of leftover essence from when the girl had collapsed that afternoon shot out, quicker than any bullet.

Limpness. Death. Eternity.

Throughout the honeyed, soft air of the cottage, the broken dragon’s last word echoed like a curse:

“Live!”

It was night. The girl was nestled in the arms of a cooling corpse. She numbly clutched her old handgun and stroked it as her tears dried.

She looked up. In her head, she heard that plea, that order, over and over—

Live, live, live.

Serena Liu

Grade 12, Parkway West High School
Journalism



Lotus Blossoms and Dragon Ladies

I was 13 the first time I was catcalled. The words stuck like oil, dripping off my jean shorts and leaving me with a thick feeling of shame. He snickered as he yelled after me, voice greasy and low: “I’ve never been with an Asian girl before.”

Through his eyes, I became an object for him to project his desires on. Maybe he thought I was exotic. Oriental. Anything but human.

The fetishization of Asian women is deeply rooted in American history. In 1834, Afong Moy, the first known Chinese woman in the United States, was shipped to New York by her white owners and touted around the country. She was displayed amongst Chinese goods and silks, with national newspapers reporting her as a novelty to be gawked at. Moy’s owners shaped early American perceptions of Asian women, reducing us to quiet, submissive and irrevocably foreign caricatures.

In real life and popular media, Asian women continued to be defined by pervasive stereotypes. For example, the Page Act of 1875 effectively banned the entrance of Asian women into the United States because they were profiled by immigration officials as dirty prostitutes. Nationwide, Asian women were sexualized and seen as a threat to the moral character of White America. This “Yellow Peril” — blatant xenophobia towards Asians — was reflected on the silver screen. In Hollywood, Asian actresses were forced into hypersexual tropes. Films such as Stanley Kubrik’s highly acclaimed “Full Metal Jacket” depict Asian women as docile and pure Lotus Blossoms existing only to please White men. Meanwhile, the “Daughter of the Dragon” and “Kill Bill” featured

aggressive Dragon Ladies armed with seductive exotic looks and exciting moral ambiguity. Both tropes, while starkly in contrast, invariably mold and objectify Asian women to fit fantasies.

Some progress has been made in creating more realistic representations of Asian women, from Evelyn Wang in “Everything Everywhere All At Once” to Rachel Chu in “Crazy Rich Asians.” But this fetishization remains dangerously prevalent in popular culture. In “The Office,” Michael and Andy pick up two Asian girls and then struggle to tell them apart. In “Mean Girls,” two Asian girls have an affair with a teacher. A study found that in top films from 2010 to 2019, 17 percent of female Asian and Pacific Islander characters are objectified while 13 percent are dressed sexually. Many contemporary television and film producers would still rather portray Asian women as the target of lazy sexual jokes instead of fully fleshed-out characters.

Meanwhile, on social media, popular content creators and celebrities like Ariana Grande have been accused of Asianfishing: attempting to look Asian, whether through makeup or surgery. While appreciating other cultures should be encouraged, purposely attempting to look like another race crosses the line into appropriation. When non-Asian influencers decide to co-opt almond-shaped eyes or monolids just to be fashionable, they too are dehumanizing Asian women to just an aesthetic, a fun new “look” to try on. Although a silly movie or TikTok video may seem harmless, these sentiments bleed into bars, street corners, and everyday interactions. Since 2020, Stop AAPI Hate has recorded over 4000 incidents of Asian American women facing harassment. The pandemic exacerbated the issue, but Asian women have long dealt with catcalling that often references their race. Often times, these unsavory comments directly reference popular culture quotes such as “me so horny” — courtesy of “Full Metal Jacket.”

The normalization of this rampant sexualization has deadly consequences. In 2021, a shooter killed eight people across three massage parlors in Atlanta, GA. Six of his victims were Asian American women. The perpetrator blamed his sexual addiction, stating that he hoped the attacks would eliminate his “temptation.” Area police drew nationwide criticism for their initial denial that the crime was racially motivated. Perhaps their stance came from a lack of understanding: Asian American women do not face racism or sexism independently from each other. Rather, our history of marginalization in this country has yielded a unique concoction of both: a form of oppression that reduces Asian American women to “temptations.”

The stereotype of Asian American women as submissive often leaves us vulnerable to violence by promoting the message that we are defenseless and weak. While the Atlanta shooting is perhaps the most well-known incident, Stop AAPI Hate has noted at least 400 occasions of racially motivated physical violence against Asian American women. Christina Yuna Lee was stabbed 40 times by an attacker in her apartment. Michelle Go was shoved into the path of a subway train.

In a world where life often imitates what we see on our screens, we cannot afford to keep perpetuating the same age-old narrative of Asian American women as sexual objects. As consumers of popular culture, we cannot revise history, and it would be futile to try to rewrite every ignorant, antiquated joke. But we can choose to support female Asian American filmmakers, writers and actresses. We can celebrate inclusive stories that feature realistic, complex Asian characters. And we can choose to see Asian American women as real people.

Adelina Lopez

Grade 12, St. Teresa's Academy

Educators: Dianne Hirner, Jazzmin Earl

Personal Essay



A Performance in Three Acts

Drooping Roman archways, rows of plush red velvet seats, the slight smell of a rosy perfume, the scattered chatter amongst the audience as they fix their gaze on the grand stage that sits in front of them

... this is not any ordinary theater: this is actually the music hall of my mind.

"Life is like a play," I once heard my grade school drama director explain. "Your life is categorized into acts; take every moment with stride; you are the main character of your life after all!"

I was about 12 when I heard this pep talk one night during an after-school rehearsal as I was tearing down the set for the night, and even though I wasn't the target demographic for those words, that didn't stop my little childhood brain from taking them a little too literally.

I was in 8th grade then, and even as I now approach the halfway point in my senior year of high school, these words still haunt the venue of my mind as I prepare for the next big act in my life: college. As I rustle through the old masks and identities of my youth kept backstage, adorned with memories—both good and bad—it gives me time to truly reminisce on the past and reflect on how much my identity has changed over the years, as I evolved from a confused and self-conscious child to a confident and optimistic young adult.

Act One: Middle School.

The first time I recall ever wearing a mask to seal my identity was in grade school; I always felt as if I didn't belong in my school due to two major characteristics: I was brown and queer.

"You're disgusting."

"God made a mistake making you."

"Go back where you came from!"

Through the harsh bullying I suffered through, I felt as if I was a rabbit in the eye of a pack of lions, so to blend in, I clung to my mask. The light beige tweed mask burned my skin while the pink ruffled edge cut like a blade across my cheeks: but I had to continue wearing it, praying that if I did, I would finally be normal, loved—and maybe even accepted. As I left my classroom on the final day of 8th grade, mangled beyond recognition, I vowed to give myself a chance to heal and find out who I truly was, all while not even noticing that I had lost my mask in the process.

Act Two: Art Room.

While the majority of my grade school experience was minimized—yet plagued—by my masks, there was one place where I didn't need one: my school art room. cramped corner room with a black and white tiled floor, a water faucet that never seemed to turn off, and one tall window which—to my childhood self—felt as if it reached the heavens. To all teachers, it was the throw-away room, but to me, it was a home.

"This is beautiful, Adelina," my art teacher, Mrs. Schmidt, told me one day as I showed her my latest art project, the sunlight from the window bouncing off her tired eyes and sincere smile. "Have you ever thought about pursuing a career in art? You would be good at it!"

With the drop of those words, I could feel a new mask appear on my face: the saran-wrap-like texture tightening around my nose, muffling my breath, and crunching my ears, only allowing me to hear my racing inner thoughts.

"What would they say?" I thought, "Art is stupid; no one likes art! Plus I'm no good at it."

My mask obstructed everything, and I would've succumbed to it if it was not for Mrs. Schmidt gently placing her hand on my shoulder and slowly turning me towards the window.

"You have a whole world out there, dear," she whispered quietly to me. Instead of gazing outside though, I was instead focused on the reflection I saw in the glass; it was me, without my dreadful mask—without any mask actually—just a little Hispanic girl, with jet black hair, dressed in a plaid skirt

and a black polo, blanketed in sunlight. “You are talented, Adelina—don’t let anyone tell you differently.”

Act Three: The Interview.

“How did I even get myself into this mess?” I thought as I sat in my office chair, looking at the empty canvas I just opened on my computer. It was a crisp September morning; I was dressed in my dusty brown overalls and a technicolor striped sweater, which I thought made me look super duper artsy—it did not—with my freshly bleached hair. I had to look my best after all; it was the day of my interview with the local news channel and to say I was nervous would be an understatement. I had recently met the lady who would change my life forever, Deanna Munoz, and even though I was one artist in the sea of others she had met in the past, she chose me to be the artist to represent her foundation for Hispanic Heritage Month.

“I love their enthusiasm when it comes to their work,” Deanna explained to my parents, her face exuding joy and excitement, “they’re perfect for this interview!”

Those words echoed through my mind as I stared at my computer pen. “Am I really perfect for this?” I started to wonder as I went to dawn my mask. It was my favorite one, full-faced with a huge, gaping smile painted along it and half-covered eyes. I always put it on when I felt any emotion I didn’t like, whether it was deep sadness or high anxiety; it worked for everything, but as soon as I was going to put it on, my mom came into my room.

“Are you ready, honey? Deanna just finished filming her part,” my mom whispered. She could clearly tell I was anxious because she came and put her hand on my shoulder the way that my art teacher had done years before, “You do deserve this. I hope you know that; just be yourself and everything will be okay.”

For the first time ever, I allowed the world to see me without a mask: I allowed the world to see my imperfections, how I stumbled over my words and how I fidgeted with my jewelry, how I said my age was 14 even though I was clearly 15, and how I snorted after I laughed—but that is all okay because it was all normal! I am a unique type of normal, loved by my family and friends, and finally, accepted by both my community and myself, just like that little Hispanic girl wanted years ago.

In the music hall of my mind, there are drooping Roman archways, rows of plush red velvet seats, slight smells of rosy perfumes, and—now—standing ovations and applause as I finally begin to close out this major act of my life:

my youth. But this doesn't mean my curtain call is here: far from it, actually. I am still growing up, and change is inevitable, but there will always be one thing that will never change: I will never put on another mask again

Hannah Mathew

Grade 11, Parkway Central High School

Educators: Christian Schaeffer and

Jason Lovera

Personal Essay



“How Many Paper Cranes Does it Take to Disarm Nuclear Weapons.”

The Shinkansen, or bullet train, gradually accelerated on the rails.

“Next stop, Hiroshima Central Station,” the intercom announced. I cannot believe it, I think as the Shinkansen leaves Tokyo. I am finally going to the Hiroshima Peace Memorial. I am going to see Sadako Sasaki. As my scene blurred outside, my mind drifted to the moment I first met Sadako.

I stumbled on Sadako’s story a few years earlier after paying my respects to the fallen soldiers of Pearl Harbor. Over two thousand soldiers lost their lives on December 7th, 1941 as the US awoke to a ruthless military raid on the harbor by the Japanese military. The US joined World War II to bring justice to the soldiers who had died that day. After paying my respects to the soldiers, I naturally felt sad that Japan had launched an unprovoked attack against the US just to gain an empire in the Pacific. As I walked out of the memorial, my eyes landed on a book: Sadako and a Thousand Paper Cranes.

The book describes the Japanese suffering after the US dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki on August 6th and 9th, 1945, respectively, to force Japan’s surrender. Thousands of Japanese people lost their lives and many more suffered from the after-effects of the radiation. One such victim was Sadako Sasaki, a 12-year-old girl who died of leukemia 10 years after the atomic bomb was dropped. While suffering from leukemia, Sadako followed an ancient Japanese legend that stated that if a sick person

folded a thousand paper cranes, the gods would grant the folder a wish. In her determination to live, Sadako folded over a thousand paper cranes. After her death, Sadako's determination to live inspired her friends and family, and they created a monument in the Hiroshima Peace Memorial, a memorial for all the victims of the atomic bomb, for all the children who lost their lives to the bomb.

The PA interrupted my thoughts: "Now arriving at Hiroshima Central Station."

As my family and I disembarked from the train and followed the people on the platform, I heard children laughing and friends walking together as they looked for the correct platform. As I stepped out of the station, I looked around. The people of Hiroshima, I saw, built a cosmopolitan city remarkably like Tokyo. Yet, as we got closer to the Hiroshima Peace Memorial, the modern buildings gave way to a crumbling skeletal structure.

"What's that?" my younger sister pointed to the crumbling structure that loomed against the blue sky.

"The atomic bomb(A-Bomb) Dome," my mom replied. "It is the only structure that survived the atomic bomb blast."

"The A-Bomb Dome," I murmured as I looked at the skeletal dome. All that remained was twisted pieces of wire and a graying facade; a skeleton amongst the fancy buildings.

The A-Bomb Dome is like a gateway to another world. I cannot even hear the city, I realized as I stepped on the lawn. As tourists milled about, my family walked to the Peace Memorial Museum, dedicated to preserving the history of the survivors of the atomic bomb.

The first room gave the historical context of the atomic bombing. In the room, there was a circular panorama of the destruction of Hiroshima right after the bombing. This room sets the stage for the civilian stories that come in the next room: The Cry of Souls.

Warning, the sign read, some pictures are graphic. Parental guidance is required. Suddenly, a bad feeling rose in my stomach.

"Mama, are you sure we should go?" I pointed to the sign.

"It is completely normal to feel scared, but nobody can tell you about the horrors of the atomic bomb better than the victims themselves. It takes courage to see the horrors of war and learn from it. There is a lot of hope and healing in this place," my mom told me.

I nodded and followed the group into the hall. The walls and floor were painted black, with white spotlights on the belongings of the victims.

“Why is the room so dark?” I heard a girl ask her mom in front of me. “I only see lights focusing on the pictures.”

“The room is dark, so we focus on the belongings and lives of these victims. They were ordinary citizens. They were going about their lives when the bomb was dropped. We are here to respect them and reflect on their lives.”

As my eyes adjusted to the dim light, the first thing I saw were ordinary objects encased in glass. These pieces were donated by survivors, or hibakusha, of the atomic bomb. Thousands of victims of the bombing were children. One object I remember clearly was a lunchbox, as ordinary as the one I brought to school. The description wrote:

‘Shigeru Orimen (13), a first-year student at Second Hiroshima Prefectural Junior High School, was exposed to the A-bomb and died at his building demolition worksite. This scorched lunch box and water bottle were found beneath his burned, skeletal remains by his mother. In the lunch box was a mixture of rice and barley, soybeans, and sautéed shredded potato. Shigeru left home looking forward to this lunch, but never got to eat it.’

How ordinary a lunch box is, I thought. However, this lunch box means so much more now; it is the simple things that these family members cherish.

Another glass case held a burnt tricycle and metal helmet. The sign read: ‘Shinichi Tetsutani (3 years, 11 months) was riding this tricycle when the A-bomb exploded. Suffering serious injuries and severe burns all over his body, he died that night groaning, "Water, water..." His father Nobuo put this metal helmet on Shinichi's body in the backyard so he could ride it even after his death.’

My thoughts drifted back to my bicycle sitting in the garage at home. I am so lucky, I thought, to ride a bicycle in a free country. I could not help but feel an overwhelming sense of sadness at the random nature of war and the victims it claimed. Some of these children were no older than me, I thought, and yet they were condemned to die because they were on the ‘wrong side’ of a war. What were their dreams? What were their hopes and ambitions; I wondered as I stared at a girl’s half-melted water bottle. What did she wish to become?

As I slowly continued through the exhibits, the pain of the victims also continued to linger. It appeared their pain was encased in the glass surrounding the exhibits. The feeling of sadness engulfed me. On the wall, I

saw a picture of a lady's back in full view. Her skin was peeling off, and pus was oozing out of her burns. I turned my head away, terrified to look, but then saw paintings of victims desperately trying to drink the black rain (formed by the chemicals and radiations of the atomic bomb) that stained their hands and feet. One lady, whose skin is peeling off in the painting, tilted her head desperately for the water. Water was deadly to the victims, but many died asking for some water. In their last moments, their plea was "Mizu... mizu o kudasai" which means "Water...Water please." Water was supposed to be a symbol of life, but on August 6th and 9th, water meant death. On that day, humankind changed the very meaning of life.

In a different painting, the victims stretched their arms in front of them, their skin grotesquely peeling off. There was a plea in their half-burnt eyes, a silent cry for help. I felt the urge to cry out, "I can't." The realization hit me with a pang of shame—"I cannot help you."

I came across an image of a deceased man. Despite his lifeless state, his eyes seemed to penetrate through the camera, leaving an enduring impact on my soul. He might have been a son, a husband, or a father. However, a somber realization dawned on me—he lived on the "wrong side" of the war.

In one testimony, a mother found her daughter and a group of her friends. As the mother said:

"Their skin was peeling off, and they were lying on the ground. My daughter asked me to find water; I promised her I would find some quickly. I searched along the river and finally found some. When I came back, she and her friends had died.

'I am sorry I could not do more,' I [the mother] said, as I poured the water onto their lips.'"

That girl was no older than me, I realized as the tears started to fall. They had lives, dreams, and ambitions, and now they are gone. I squeezed my fist and eyes tightly. They were gone.

I wanted to weep and run away from this place, but I had no other option but to travel through the black maze with the ghosts who writhed in agony. My frustrations now turned towards the United States government. I thought, could there have been alternative methods for the US to compel Japan's surrender? Do the history books have an answer to this question?

Before leaving the park, visitors passed by the eternal flame, a symbol of defiance against nuclear war. The structure is two hands pressed together at the wrist, their palms pointing skyward. The palms hold a flame in its center.

The flame was designed to give solace to the souls of those who perished begging for water. The flame has been burning since August 1, 1964, and will only be quenched when the last nuclear weapon is disarmed. Fancy that happening, I thought. We have created a new monster by dropping an atomic weapon. As soon as we leave, most of us will forget the victims, I realized with sadness. These testimonies and victims will forever be encased in glass while the rest of us move on. How much will we remember the victims?

Then, I saw her: Sadako Sasaki; the girl from the book that I had read about in *Sadako and a Thousand Paper Cranes*. I gazed up at Sadako's image, her arms holding a giant crane. Underneath the statue of Sadako, a plaque reads: "This is our cry, this is our prayer: for building peace in the world." Sadako's cranes became a symbol of peace and hope for a better future. Every year, children across the globe fold paper cranes and send them to Hiroshima, where they are placed around her statue. As I gazed up at Sadako, I reflected on her life. Sadako has indeed made a difference in the world. My mom was right when she told me that nobody could tell me about the horrors of the atomic bomb better than the victims themselves. The stories of the victims transcend time, and no textbook can accurately describe the sufferings of the victims of the bombing.

Upon returning to the US, I gradually overcame my initial sorrow. When I returned to school, thoughts of Sadako and her unrealized aspirations still lingered. Last June, I came across an article reporting the establishment of a sister park between the Hiroshima Peace Memorial and Pearl Harbor. This revelation has allowed me to find hope and forgiveness in the context of war. I also learned to find beauty in the small things: the daily sight of the blue sky and the warmth of the sun on my face. After visiting the Peace Memorial, I have developed a deeper appreciation for what Hiroshima represents. Beyond being a city ravaged by the atomic bomb, Hiroshima has transformed into something more—a bustling metropolis like Tokyo.

The people of Hiroshima have ingeniously integrated the A-Bomb Dome into a profound symbol. It is not only a reminder of the atrocious impact of the atomic weapon but also a testament to human resilience. Writing this, I find myself in awe of the unwavering strength of the Japanese people. The survivors have devoted their lives to keeping the memories of the victims alive and teaching future generations the devastation of nuclear weapons. Yet, the images of victims encased in glass, forever separated from their families, persist in my thoughts.

Nevertheless, I will continue to fold my paper cranes and pray for world peace. For the survivors of the atomic bomb, for the victims forever encased in glass, for the new generation of Japanese citizens who have revitalized their country, and for Sadako and all the innocent children, my paper cranes carry wishes that no one will endure the threat of nuclear war again.

The question remains:

How many paper cranes will it take?

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Short Story



When Black Girls Disappear

Six days after my sister went missing, a brown body is found stuffed between rocks and dirt. Blue and black paint the canvas of her skin, contorting her gray lips into a pained grimace. Her braids lay splayed across the mud, unraveled and matted. The moon's glow caresses her lifeless body, its light embracing her cold skin. Screams echo the forest but all of it fades to silence as my ears ring from my own cries.

Five days after my sister went missing, aunties, uncles, cousins, nieces and nephews gather in front of our house to search for Sienna. Momma and Daddy stand on our porch. Both of them look smaller than ever. Momma's hair that is usually sharply pulled back into a neat bun, falls loosely on her shoulders. Her painted eyes, always vibrant with colorful eyeshadow, now seem dulled and sunken in. Daddy's powerful voice is reduced to barely a murmur as he directs us where to search, his whispers matching the world's silence. Aunties, uncles, cousins, nieces and nephews are here to search for my sister, but not a single police officer.

Four days after my sister went missing, I peer from behind the living room's leathered pillows as Daddy hisses into the speaker of his phone.

"It's been days," he pleads. A muffled response comes from his phone. "Please—" his voice snags, "we've lost so much time." The voice responds again as he runs his fingers over the bridge of his nose. His pacing quickens as the voice's responses grow shorter. "You have to understand. This isn't like her." Daddy comes to an abrupt stop at the end of the room. His hand clenches into a fist. Clench. Unclench. Clench. "No. No. No. She didn't run away. We are

positive of it. You all are waiting for her to miraculously show up at our door when you should be out there looking for her.” Each syllable grows thicker with desperation until his pleas are interrupted by his fist slamming against the wall, “This is your job. Please.” The beep of the phone echoes throughout the room. The phone slips from his hands, and shards of the screen litter the floor. His broad shoulders sag and shiver as tremors rip through his body and muffled sobs escape from behind his hands. My knees shake beneath me as I retreat upstairs. Daughters aren’t supposed to see their fathers cry. Fathers aren’t supposed to beg cops to search for their missing daughters.

Three days after my sister went missing, a girl with pearly white skin’s picture is broadcasted, with “Found Safe” printed underneath. I lunge for the remote and pause the TV on the girl’s image. Her green eyes penetrate my chest. Her grin reminds me of the smiles my sister and I shared only days before. The girl didn’t return home the same day Sienna hadn’t and was found at a friend’s house a day later with her phone powered off. My heart beats faster as I inch closer to the TV. The police had launched an investigation just 7 hours after she was reported missing, while my family was still waiting days later. I press my finger against the screen, scanning for my sister’s name anywhere on it. It feels like hours go by as I scour each inch but find it nowhere. I wonder what about the girl with the ashen skin made my city mourn for her, care for her— trust her. They trusted that she wasn’t a delinquent runaway, trusted that she was a girl that needed searching for. What about my sister was so easy to neglect?

Two days after my sister went missing, the lingering smell of Sienna’s perfume wafts up my nostrils as I stand in front of her dresser. An empty cup stands right where she left it, along with a half-burned candle. Beside them is a neat row of picture frames. I hold each photo up to my nose and examine every part of it. I analyze her smile, study each pore, and scrutinize each curl to ensure perfection. Anything to lighten the black that etches warning signs in her skin. My hand stops at a picture of Sienna and me sitting in a tree. Sometimes, we go in our backyard to climb the highest tree branch we see and watch the sky. The chill of the wind nips at our cheeks and turns them a dark crimson. But we ignore the bitter cold and talk for hours and hours. Sienna was only four years older than me but infinitely wiser. Look at my hand, Deb. You see it, right? Even though it’s pitch black out here, and my hand is black, too, you can still see it. You can thank the moon for that— and the stars, obviously— but I give all the credit to the moon. Without the moon, white

people wouldn't be able to tell our skin from the dark. But the moon makes us glow. It makes us seen. At least, that's what I tell myself. When they don't see us, we gotta find what makes us glow. The hushed ticking of her clock synchronizes with my own heavy heart. My throat goes dry while I flip the picture face-down on the countertop. Sienna always glows, always illuminates everything around her. We all bask in her light. But they still don't see her; they still don't look for her.

One day after my sister went missing, a police officer sits in our living room. She glances around, noting Momma, Daddy, and I, but never meets our gaze. Her partner sits beside her, fidgeting with a wrinkle in his pants. My voice trembles while I explain to the officer that I haven't seen Sienna since she left for school the morning before. Momma squeezes my hand while Daddy sits with his head in his hands. Sometime between the beginning and end of the explanation, my voice rises to a plea, begging for the officers to care. My eyes penetrate her wandering ones, but she continues to look right past me as if I'm only a silhouette. Silence settles in the space between us. A million more words sit on the tip of my tongue, but before they fall, the officer's indifferent voice pierces through the stillness.

"Call us when it's been 48 hours." She quickly rises to her feet and signals for her partner to do the same.

"What?" I jump to my feet as well, scrambling to follow them.

"We can't report a missing person until we're positive the person is missing. Your sister— Stella, was it?— is most likely causing trouble with a friend somewhere. She'll show up, knocking at your door sooner or later." She ends her sentence with a grimace and a brisk wave of her hand as if ridding the air of Sienna's remnants. I swallow down a shout that scrapes like broken glass against my throat. "That's what teens like her do," she adds with an accusatory glare. Before I can interject, the officer and her partner are already out the door. The metallic taste of blood fills my mouth as my teeth grind against the inside of my cheeks. Teens like her. Teens like Sienna go to school in the mornings and come home before the streetlights turn on. When they don't, teens like her are immediately reported missing. But the cop doesn't know Sienna— much less care to know. She meant that Sienna was just another black girl who wasn't worth the police department's time. I throw my head back as frustration courses through my fingertips, and a sigh escapes my gritted teeth. The hot blood pumping through my veins cools when I see the moon casting its silvery glow upon the night. The words Sienna whispered in

the tree months ago dance through my mind like a flame, sparking an ember of hope. Without the moon, white people wouldn't be able to tell our skin from the dark. But the moon makes us glow. It makes us seen. A smile tugs at the corner of my lips, and for a moment, I'm positive that my sister and I will sit under the moonlight together again. But when I look back down, the cop car that was parked in our driveway speeds away, leaving my parents and I watching in the grass. As I listen to the whir of the engine blend in with the panting breath of the wind, the moon only illuminates my glistening tears.

The day my sister goes missing, I sit with her while the sun begins to rise from the clouds and bathes the sky in a pastel orange hue. I gently fold her coily strands side to side and breathe in her scent of coconut butter and sugar. As I cornrow her hair, she observes my hands in the mirror, focused on my motions. Once I secure the last braid with a rubber band, she beams down at me. It's perfect, Deb. You're amazing. I roll my eyes at her while giggles bubble between us. Sienna whips around to swipe a rose from Momma's vase. A gift for my talented little sister. She gently hands me the rose, and I hold it firmly against my chest. I gotta hurry and catch the early bus. I'll see you after school! Sienna squeezes my hand, and in the next moment, she shuts the door behind her. I couldn't see it then, but a trail of light leaves with her, to never return. Before Sienna was a lifeless body, she was my sister who sparkled in her brown skin. Six days later, when she's found, all dull and gray, condolences flow from police officers' lips like a somber melody, gracing Sienna's grave with flowers, prayers, and promises to find the perpetrator. When the cops finally look my sister in her eyes, they are shut. That's when she finally glows bright enough.

Alexa Newsom

Grade 12, Blue Valley North High School

Educator: Maria Worthington

Portfolio



On Loss

“The Last Sunset”

I watch the tree stand still, ordinary against the sunset. Its dying branches turn from a healthy brown to an ash black, while the sky behind it is striped with all of the blues, pinks, oranges, and yellows of the world. The air is so thick with the plague. The sand surrounding the tree, too, is even more black ash than grey dust. The air and the sand and the particles that now fill them feed on the colors and life of the world.

A girl sits on the ground below, studying the decay at her feet. An air mask around her nose and mouth is tightly sealed to her skin, the faded blue fabric the only thing keeping the dust from her lungs. The girl looks out across the sunset, its colors the last of the blues, pinks, oranges, and yellows. The only colorful hues surrounding this area are the greys and, of course, the black of the plague. The wasteland the tree is dying in used to be a prosperous city; the point of steel beneath my feet used to be a skyscraper. The girl sits on the somewhat flat edge of the exposed building, her chin resting in her cupped hands.

She and her friend had started in an abandoned blue Subaru, although even the richness of its metallic color slowly faded until the surface underneath the sand was dark grey. Not that you could see it, of course—the dust covered every inch of the exterior of the car until it found its way to the engine, silencing its soft hum forever.

After that, they walked. The two girls found an abandoned modern city, one that—unlike this one—had not yet sunk beneath the rising levels of grey dust and black disintegration. Their hands entangled in each other’s as they

looked around the silent streets. There was no food to be found, nor any people. A dusty television showed a graph expressing the death of 99 percent of humankind and all other life. The reporter had on a dark blue dress, similar to the Subaru car color. Her glasses were patterned with tortoiseshell and her white pearl necklace was a reflection of such a distant past that it seemed like a ghostly illusion, looking out of place with everything of the modern era. The friends watched the screen. They watched the black particles slip through the reporter's faded green mask, and they watched the reporter fall still in death.

The broadcast was over. One of the girls reached through the broken glass that stood in front of the television—a weak attempt to protect the vulnerable inside—turning it off. I watched from the shadow of the building as the edge of the girl's mask snagged the jagged edge of the pane as she eased back through the window.

The two friends huddled in front of the dusted, darkened television, before breaking apart suddenly. The first—who had climbed through the glass—now crouched, brought her hands to her mask, covering it in a futile attempt to field her mouth against the pollutants hanging in the air. A gap between her fingers exposed a small hole in her mask to me, although it was quickly covered again by her friend. The second girl felt frantically for the fabric of the other's mask, trying to pinch the hole closed, trying and failing.

Her friend's body shivered and fell still.

The second girl lowered the fresh corpse to the ground. Tears streamed down her cheeks in rivers as she reached out, wanting to touch the other's skin for the last time—but she recoiled, her fingers just missing her dead friend. The girl sat down on the ground, covering her face in her hands, as choking sobs filled the empty city.

Day turned to night, although there wasn't much of a difference; the pollutant specks plagued the entire transition, coating the sinking sun a muddled grey. The weeping girl rose, her friend's shirt thoroughly soaked with tears. As the girl moved away, the hole in the dead friend's mask became visible to me once more. It had begun to fray, salty remnants of the girl's sadness staining the fabric. With one last, wistful glance at the remains, the girl turned and walked away.

I followed her out of the city and across the endless ash-black sand, never in her sight, but always there. I followed her to this spot by the tree, stopping abruptly as she sat down.

After some time, she tilts her face towards the setting sun, watching the vibrancy of the colors dim. The magnificence is over then, the sky weeping nothing more than shades of grey. I watch as the girl's hand moves to the side of her mask. Still gazing out over the horizon, she rips away the sealed fabric, welcoming the particles into her open mouth.

Her body trembles for a moment, but she holds strong, her face staring into the graveyard that stretches ahead and into the dead sky. And as her corpse sinks into the blackened sand below, I am left alone.

“The Scavengers”

Plague deaths are increasing. Stay safe. Stay inside. The projection stands stark white against the brick of the old building, faded because the projector's all clogged with dust. But it's there, advertising luxuries of another time. Imagine, I think, because I can't.

A shout sounds somewhere down the street. There's a girl—young, but more importantly green—rotting against the curb. The Harvesters must've missed her yesterday; that, or their truck was already too full. But us scavengers, we can't afford to miss. A little boy shouts again and waves until a little pack of five or six creeps from the shadows to join him. They're hardly clothed in dirty and torn rags, but their little hands are already gloved. The once-colorful rubber is coated in such a thick coat of dirt it's black. I'm almost impressed. So soon they've learned to keep their fresh skin away from the green victims of the plague; so soon they know the routine set by thirteen-year-olds like me. Their four-year-old sized hands dart in and out of the dead girl's dusty old sweater and skirts, pulling out a few coins, a crumpled dollar bill, and a piece of old-world candy they hoard like golden treasure. One of the scavengers finds a mouthful of bread and swallows it quickly, before the others can see.

I look down at the corpse at my feet. My focus turns from his green skin to the thin strand of beads weighing heavily in my cupped, gloved hands. My thumb swipes across one to clear the brown grime, revealing a perfect off-white, and I almost gasp. How much could I trade for this? I look around to see if anyone else is watching and almost let out a relieved sigh before

movement catches my eye. I hurriedly stuff the necklace into my wrinkled pocket.

There's a boy a few yards away, maybe nine, leaning against another disintegrating building and hugging his knees to his chest. His face is red, and I wonder if he's been crying. Another scavenger? The boy stares at me but says nothing, just rocks back and forth, back and forth, with his knees to his chest. I look for a knife, but he's just watching, and I turn back to my work.

Dead skin squelches familiarly beneath my fingers as I continue to empty the victim's pockets: a tissue, some breadcrumbs, a single quarter. I may live to see tomorrow, I think, gathering the miscellaneous items, and my chapped lips pull painfully into a tight smile. The boy is still watching me.

A shrill whistle pierces the air, and I freeze. The kids down the street run into a nearby alleyway. The Harvesters. The door to the building across from me is broken, barely hanging by its hinges, and I think, I can make it. I watch through the broken glass as the Harvesters lift the dead body onto their truck, and exhale slowly. As they pull away, I see the boy just outside the shadow of the building, still rocking back and forth. He isn't a scavenger; scavengers hide. I'm not sure what he is.

"A mourner," says a voice behind me, and I spin, vaguely aware of how close my back is to broken glass. There's a girl facing back at me, her black hair cut roughly to her chin and her eyes—her eyes are blue, the color some of the elders said the sky was eleven years ago. Somehow her color hasn't been dyed gray by the dust. "That's what he is."

What has she done to stay so alive? My hands move slowly to the strip of leather around my waist and the knife resting comfortably against my hip. I scan the girl for the glint of a blade or the point of an arrow, but my search comes up empty. I tighten my hold on the knife's hilt, trying to ignore the places where the tape is fraying.

"What's a mourner?" I ask, telling myself it's to buy time. The girl twists her head, then holds out a grimy hand. An old piece of string is tied around her wrist, as lively and blue as her strange eyes.

"Lena," she says.

"Are you a mourner?"

The girl—Lena—shakes her head, as if disappointed. For some reason, I feel bad enough to let go of the knife and follow her through the broken glass, back into the world of dust.

It's night when we finally reach the center of the city. The cobblestones here aren't fully torn up, and wooden carts sit in the shadows of the buildings. When the plague first hit, I remember my mother taking me into the temporary market to shop among the wares that filled all those wooden carts. Of course, that was back when there was food. Back before everyone gave up trying to control their little city and succumbed to survival.

I blink away the memories of a flowery and clean market. Lena's rubbing two sticks together—skinny and dusty, like us—faster and faster, and I stare.

“What're you trying to do?”

Lena shushes me and keeps moving the sticks, back and forth, back and forth. I think of the boy from earlier, holding his knees to his chest. A spark lights, and the sticks are engulfed in a red and orange blaze. Lena lifts her hands close to the fire and sighs.

Hesitantly, I copy her and startle at the sudden warmth. How does she know to do this?

“Because I'm amazing,” she says, and throws back her head. A light and airy sound erupts from her throat. I wish I had a word for that, I think, transfixed by the smile across her face: wide and so unlike the toothy sneers some of the elders give in the city's dark alleyways.

As she looks back at me, I try to mimic her smile, stretching my chapped lips until they bleed. It feels good, and I almost tell her so, but Lena's gaze has traveled past my shoulder. Her face is flat for the first time that day; her vivid blue eyes are now a stormy gray, almost as lifeless as mine. There's an old woman, maybe twenty, further down the street. We watch as she shakes and shakes and shakes and falls still, slumping into the shadows at the entrance to an alleyway.

“We should take her money, before others get here,” I say. Before the other scavengers robbed her; before the Harvesters took her body away. It takes half a second for me to register that I tasted the word “we” for perhaps the first time, but the slight downturn of Lena's lips are too distracting. She nods slowly, staring at that green skin and dead eyes. I feel a strange urge to squeeze her hand and add, “I can do it, if you want.”

She nods again and whispers “I'm sorry” to the body limp against the old brick. I don't know what the words mean, but they sound pretty. Her hand leaves mine to the cold air, and I pull on my gloves to begin my work. We may get enough to trade for food for a week, I think, once more marveling at the comfort of “we.”

As black ink starts to spread across the sky, we curl against the curb of the street. I expect Lena to start pointing out shapes in the stars—conserllations or stellations or something like that—but she turns away from me and says nothing. We fall asleep like that, back to back against the hard rock of the cobblestones and broken pavement of the sidewalk, under a starry sky.

The stench of death hangs in the air. It's heavy, nearly palpable in my hands, and my eyes startle open. The Harvesters are here, their old and nearly full truck parked a few feet away in the street. The sun shines brightly on the cobblestones around me, like a spotlight, and my legs scramble backward on instinct, far into the shadows of the nearest building.

Lena. I look back from my escape, back to that too-bright patch of gravestone pathway, and feel the air rush from my lungs. Lena? The Harvester truck begins to pull away, and I finally spot her small body nestled tightly against the side of the street, probably asleep.

"Lena," I hiss, waiting for her to stir, but there's nothing beyond the cough of an old engine and the creak of rusty wheels. As the Harvesters' truck begins to roll away, I step lightly along the building's shadow until her sleeping body is a hand's length away. I reach out to shake her, but she finally awakens and snaps up to face me, just as the cartload of death rolls by.

The Harvesters weren't careful this time, or maybe the sheer weight of the bodies pushed an arm out through the gaps in the sides. The limp limb flaps in the wind. The dangling fingers stroke the back of Lena's chin-length hair. Maybe it missed her. But I know it didn't.

Green drips from the corners of her face like poison, but I keep staring.

"What is it?" she asks in her musical lilt, but her hand begins to jerk, and understanding recolors her vivid blue eyes until they're gray as dust, like mine. The shaking spreads then, from her hand to her wrist until her entire body is writhing: back and forth, back and forth, back and forth.

Silence falls across the street as Lena stills against the cobblestones.

It takes a few minutes before others notice we're here. I watch as scavengers gather around Lena—the corpse—their boots walking on weak skin. From ages six to fifteen, they bend over her body. Thin hands, little more than flesh and bone, take the cash from her pocket that I couldn't bear to, take the jacket from her shoulders, take the bracelet from her wrist. You never got around to telling me about the string, did you? They take and take and take—to wear or to sell I do not know. I do not care, I tell myself on repeat, like a

mantra, but I still turn away a minute later. You've made it 13 years—don't start crying now.

There's a bell behind me. It still has a bronze-like color, and on other days, I marveled that something—anything—had yet to succumb to the dust; a crack runs from the edge to its center. I heard someone call it 'the liberty bell' once, back at the onset of the plague when people knew stuff like that, but I don't see any liberty here.

A few hours pass before other Harvesters arrive. They take Lena's body from my side to the pile of green skin as infected as she is. I watch their work and lean and fall. There's empty air where her shoulder should be, and cold dust where her warmth should be. As the sun sets over the horizon, the Harvesters drive away. I pick a strip of rubber from the sole of my shoe and tie it around my wrist. I remember what Lena said a long while ago, some random words I didn't understand, and whisper them to what's left of the Harvesters' truck: I'm sorry. They don't sound nearly as pretty in my mouth. The sounds are ugly and twisted and altogether wrong. But I think I know what they mean now. I feel my first few tears slip down my cheeks and onto bare palms.

My mind travels back to the boy from yesterday, and my hand finds the string of pearls deep within my pocket. The gold clasp feels cool against the back of my neck as I fasten it, and when I look up again, I see a patch of blue sky overhead. I throw back my head and force a sound through my throat, something wild and pained and free.

“To My Grandfather”

i remember your love as
the chill of sunset, when
you'd pull me by my
six-year-old hands.
and outside, we'd wait
for night's ink and glitter, by
the telescope
permanently on your mind.
when the chill set in my bones, and
the house lights finally dimmed, we'd
look through the glass lens to watch
as stars burned millions of miles away—alone.

i wonder if they could watch time pull you by your wrinkled hands
into the empty space between the stars you loved, taking
grandma's memory with you. or if the stars knew i was left
to stand beside your old telescope alone.

i wonder if i will find you
within this too-hot day,
but you took some of my
intergalactic curiosity away with you.

at least, that's what
i think in this lonely world
as i scan the fiery horizon through
the glass lens of your beloved telescope

“The Ghost”

1 a.m.

It's dark when the ghost finally stumbles his way out of the old wooden bar. Only ten minutes from town, the forest here feels alien, secluded. Trees stretch nearly to the sky, as if forming a wall around that wooden bar, so only small slight rays of moonlight manage to land on the metal hoods of three colorful SUVs in the small parking lot beside the bar. The ghost thinks he should be sad, and he tries—squeezing his eyes shut to force a tear—but his cheeks remain dry. He gives up and goes down a stair toward the concrete and his rusted, black sedan in the back corner of the lot. His foot snags on a rogue tree root sticking out of the steps. There's a weightless feeling before his hands and knees and chin feel the rough gravel of the parking lot.

“Liam, right? Liam Williams—you forgot your jacket,” a feminine voice calls from somewhere behind him. The ghost ponders just laying messily across the three front steps of the bar and the parking lot. He ponders pulling himself up and does so, turning on his hands and knees to face the bartender. She stands in the doorway, a black coat in hand. “Are you okay?”

The ghost stares back and says nothing. His gaze travels past the bartender and through the open door, to the mirror at the back of the establishment. His reflection stares back. Hazelnut brown hair lays knotted and askew, green eyes sunken and dull; the clothes look as though they've been worn for days. Amid the blotchy skin of his face is a red gash on his chin. The ghost moves his hand to swipe across his face and studies his fingers.

Blood. He wipes it off on his trousers and looks back at the bartender, who shivers and exhales into cupped palms, his supposed coat pinned to her side with her elbow. The ghost considers leaving the coat with her.

“It’s almost one—in the morning,” the bartender clarifies, really slowly, as if afraid he wouldn’t understand, and passes over his jacket. “Go home, Liam. It’s time.” Again, the ghost says nothing. But he turns toward the parking lot and his rusty black sedan and wipes more blood off his face with the jacket sleeve. He’s almost to the car, and the keys somehow appear in his hand, in the car door lock, in his pocket once more, when the bartender calls out from her place in the doorway. “I recognize you from the TV. I’m truly sorry about... well, you know...” she trails off, then runs inside.

The air turns cold. Through the thick haze of a few hours’ worth of alcohol, the ghost’s hand grabs at empty space before landing on a Leo’s Brewery bottle. He drinks until it’s almost empty and throws the glass to watch the lion mascot, in the middle of a roar, shatter on the ground a few feet away. The ghost marvels with a wide, sloppy smile about where the cold went. The smile fades to nothing, and everything is normal again.

6 a.m.

The ghost is on the road again, leaving from some hotel downtown. He doesn’t remember the name of it, just that the staff let him sleep on the couch and understood when he pushed away the tray of cookies they offered him (the ones supposed to be for kids). A little later, they gave him a stiff drink “to keep the demons away.” Then they kicked him out before any of the guests could see him, and he went back to that old sedan, thinking he’d drive home again. Home... He hopes the address will spontaneously come to him and thinks instead, heaven. The ghost pulls his phone from the cup holder beside him and tries typing heaven into Google Maps, before noting an address listed as “home” in the app and clicking on that instead. The guidance begins: “Starting route to 142 Liberty Avenue. Six hours.”

The ghost’s hands grip the wheel, his foot presses in the shoe, and the shoe presses the gas. The car lurches forward and accelerates toward the winding road out of town. The double-story buildings give way to open fields. The ghost is left alone.

A little down the road, another black and rusty sedan drives in the opposite direction, heading west. The ghost watches through the window and looks at the driver, whose face morphs into sunken green eyes, a blotchy red face, and messy brown hair. It’s the face of the ghost, yesterday, when he drove

to the wooden bar. There isn't blood on his chin yet, and a black jacket is zippered tight to keep out the February cold. His cheeks are wet from hours worth of crying, and the ghost wonders if the other driver is out of Leo's Brewery beer. He thinks about offering the man one of the bottles in his passenger's seat before hazily remembering they're all empty. The other car drives past and disappears into the ghost's rearview mirror.

Ahead of him, the sun starts to rise, fanning yellow rays across the horizon and sending ribbons of pink, orange, and teal across the sky to push the night away. Perhaps the other driver is running from this—the color, the light.

Perhaps I can catch the sun, the ghost thinks, and presses harder on the gas pedal.

8 a.m.

Clouds stretch across the sky, hiding the sun from view. But the ghost is looking and looking and looking, through the haze in the sky and the beer-induced haze in his mind. And while the ghost concentrates all of his effort on keeping the sedan within its lane and searching for a lost sun, he sees a green car, even smaller than his, driving west on the other side of the road. That driver's face, too, morphs into a reflection on his own. But this time, sheer terror is apparent in the green eyes—more lively than the ghost has seen his green eyes in a long time. The hospital's that way, in the west, he realizes. The other driver is the man the ghost was, a month before. I'd gotten a call from the doctors watching over my son. Dim sunlight starts peeking through the cloud coverage above. The ghost snaps his eyes shut and imagines drinking another Leo's Brewery beer until the lion's head is clear and innocent again. When he's brave enough to glance at the road, the sun is gone, and the other car disappears into the horizon in the rearview. The ghost thinks he should feel relieved and exhales, but he isn't sure why.

10 a.m.

Overhead, the clouds begin to part. The sun is still blocked—when isn't it?—but more light escapes to the road than before, and the ghost considers flipping down the car's visor. He doesn't. Instead, he glances at the fields on each side of the road: Everything is still dead. The ghost looks forward again, at a little patch of blue sky ahead.

There's a bend in the street, and when the ghost swings around, he faces the bright headlights of a navy SUV and swerves off the paved concrete. The other car is flying, but time slows, and the ghost catches sight of the driver.

Again? he thinks, expecting the face to change into his own, but only cold, blue eyes stare back. This driver is younger—maybe sixteen or seventeen—with curls the color of the dead grass surrounding the street. The end of a gun sticks up from behind the kid's head. The ghost remembers that Liberty Elementary School, too, is in the west. The adolescent accelerates—75, 80, 90 miles per hour—toward classrooms full of little kids. He has an AR-15. The ghost is fixated. Gun, kids. Gun, kids. Gun, kids. The lion logo of Leo's Brewery flashes through the haze, and the ghost wants to feel angry. But he just watches as the monster SUV fades in the rearview mirror, toward the fall of the sun. Once it disappears, the ghost returns to the road, his hands shaking. Six minutes pass before the sedan swerves across the center line as its driver leans over the passenger seat, blindly searching the ground for another Leo's Brewery bottle, but they're all empty. The last ounce of beer, he distantly remembers, lays with shattered glass in the parking lot of a wooden bar, 240 miles away.

12 p.m.

The sun glares down on the dark pavement, the sedan's hood, and the collection of empty Leo's Brewery bottles in the passenger's seat. The reflection is bright—so bright it hurts, even through the heavy cloud of alcohol and something else in his head—and the ghost hurriedly opens the window to throw out the now too-bright beer bottles. Then he slams on the breaks and picks each of the broken shards from the side of the road until they're all piled onto the passenger seat again.

When he's back in the car, the ghost manages to briefly squint through the haze. Rows and rows of stone rise over the hills. There's a metal fence around them, stepping up and up and up to follow the curve of the hill. The incline leaves gaps under the black iron, and the ghost feels a strong urge to plug them all with beer bottles. He looks to the passenger seat, but right—they're all broken, and keeps driving.

The stakes finally end and leave an empty space before the black iron starts again, falling down the hill and disappearing somewhere in the east. A marble sign covers part of the gap. The sun spotlights the words inscribed in the hard rock: Sweet Heavens Cemetery. There's a square of black pavement in front of the gap, and the ghost can now see a dirt path leading from the sign to the rest of the peaceful fields.

The sedan's tires screech to a halt, blocking the road, as its driver kicks the rusty door open and runs through the fence. He runs and runs and runs,

sneakers kicking up clouds of dirt and leaving all of the haziness in his wake, his past, until the ghost reaches a small gravestone in the middle of a sunlit grove.

Here lies Leo Williams
Dearly loved son
Liberty Elementary School shooting victim
June 20, 2017 to December 21, 2023

The ghost pulls a bouquet of dead flowers from the stand next to the grave. Without anything else, he puts an empty Leo's Brewery bottle in their place, turning it so the lion's head faces outwards, ready to take on the world.

"To who you would've become," he croaks, throat made scratchy by the tears and drink. Liam kisses his fingers and takes off his jacket—blood crusted on the sleeve—spreading it across the ground where his son lays six feet below. "Sleep now, my little lion."

He turns from the small grave and shivers, uncrossing his arms to welcome the painful cold as it kisses his skin. The sedan is still messily stopped in the street, Liam notices and pulls into the parking lot so the vehicle perfectly fills one of the cemetery's empty spaces. He sits for a while, maybe an hour or two, before managing a small smile and slowly backing away. The Sweet Heavens Cemetery sign and black iron disappear into the rearview as he begins to drive west, searching for somewhere to watch the sun lay down to rest.

"Stars and Scars"

Little Girl dreamed
She could touch the stars, pick up
The black threads between and weave constellations
New and old with her child-sized fingertips.
Her mother would say,
Shoot for the moon—yet
All Little Girl wanted was to land amidst the dancing stars
And forget the spotlight-like moonlight altogether.
Glitter, she would say, not glow.

Her feet learned to carry her
Her body, her heart, her mind
Open and flowing and strong.

The world was constantly in motion, and so
So was she, the fallen star on the earth, still
Dancing to her people's pricks of light in the dark sky, her
Flaming candle growing into fire.
Little Girl thought that stars and glitter
Were like scattered happiness, moments—
Small, but plural. Strength from numbers like
When the sprout flowered with the hint of Spring
In school, she saw endless things:
Make-up and hair-up and pink/purple defining
The already barren landscape of femininity.
Little Girl grew a head taller from her stargazing days, but not a third eye
The future still out of grasp like the stars she reaches to, aspires to
So close, and yet so, so far. Truly
Unknown and unexpected, as unexpected as the day, when
Her feet no longer carried her, when
Her legs could not stop the crowd from huddling around her, their
Assumptions more dangerous than the spotlight-moonlight
Little Girl had hid from for so long.
His child-like fingertips reaching for her arm like she did for the stars, but
She was not like the stars. Or the future. Or even the past.
She was in reach of his grubby hands, his
Nails—clipped to his skin—
Claws—cut and jagged—
Enough for his thumbnails to leave tiny crescent moons in her arms,
Enough for the rest to poke cruel scars into her flesh, his
Dreams forever engraved into her skin but more so into her nightmares, his
Laughs forever saved in his predatory smiles but more so in her ears, his
Joy forever hanging—
In the air (or lack of) between them.
Joy saved in the wind, but more so in her heart, forever
Digging, digging, digging
Away.
She learned to feel another's tongue on her teeth under
The spotlight moon, the pitch-black night,
The glittering stars of another blinding her
Into submission. Without hesitation,

She's gone—into a void, a hole
The scream in her mind crying
Stop
Stop
Stop!

Somewhere far away, like her own stars—
Hidden and unreachable. Heart hollow and empty,
Stars less like glitter and more like flickers,
Tiny flames biding their time before they are
Blown out. Still a dancing candle, but
Without hope of becoming fire.

Little Girl awakes, the third night in a row,
A year after the incident, soaked in a mix of sweat and tears,
Crystallized so it wouldn't just leave her skin, as
The mental retelling of that day wouldn't just leave her mind.
A re-run of fear. In bed, she sits up straight,
Eyes staring into the ghost of her past she
Has longed to forget for a long time.
She closes her eyes, tight, tells herself:
Deep breath in—
Deep breath out.
And again.
And again.
And again and again and again
To soothe the what if exaggerations, the
Repetitive tangent coming from
One nightmare. One memory.
'Cause unlike red marks on skin that disappear, Memory
Does not, Memory
Stays, asks for a cup of tea, a box of tissues. Memory
Manifests into something more

Until many, many years after, when
Her clouds above cleared and her stars blinked brilliantly, the
Moon hidden and only her constellations in sight.
Her fingers reached to the sky and plucked

One inky strand by her pointer, and
One by her middle, and
One by her pinky
To weave her own Spring.
Finally touching the stars, her
Fingertips catching on their light to
Relight her flame, and
Hair coloring in their warmth to red.
Strong red. Bold, like her
Brave red. Feared, like her
Blood red. Scarred, like her
True red. Beautiful, like her
Stars forever glittering overhead

“Drowning in Purple Ink”

KINDERGARTEN

No one ever mentioned the white walls. Endless voids, endless fields of unknown. The snow sang as it streamed across the walls, leaving stains of white blood that soaked the plaster until it hardened. It was as cold as it was outside, cold enough to keep the little flakes that dropped from pink overcoats intact on the linoleum floor, for blue boots to grind them into microscopic shards as sharp as glass.

The walls were largely ignored. Mr. Q always told Kaylie and her colleagues to look straight as they walked down the hall, keeping the left-right-left of their march silent and pushing the cold to the periphery. They simply focused on the step ahead, closer to the warmth of the room where they did their math and spelling and pulled on lab coats like little scientists.

Sometimes the teacher would wheel in a '70s tv on a little cart, and they would try to watch videos through the glare of the windows and the static that broke the pictures like lightning. Then the teacher would turn the magic box off and pass out books for Kaylie's colleagues to tear out sheets of addition problems. The books, unlike the tv, were new, and Kaylie didn't understand why they had to pull them apart, or why the other kids tore the paper down the center to say they only had half the homework. Kaylie was proud of her homework, the sheets she cut cleanly from the margins of the book and

brought home to say, “Mama, Dada—look! I have to work.” Standing between her two child-sized mirrors, opposite so that there were thousands of her in each direction, she pretended to straighten a little blazer that looked like the black suit Dada and the lawyers in the magic box wore to work.

Kaylie brought in the homework sheet the next day; she’d waited to do it until she was home, sitting straight at the cardboard-box “desk” in the corner of her room, little lines drawn in black marker (not a Sharpie, she wasn’t allowed to use those) to look like the oak wood at school. Her other colleagues had written $4+4+4$ in the corner, $8+4$, 12. Kaylie’s paper only had answers, and the others didn’t compare work with her. She straightened her black t-shirt as the paper stretched up towards her, erasing the notes on caterpillars and butterflies, the ABCs, until it was all white and there! there were her colleagues, sitting at the oak wood table, visible through a small window in the endless snow. Kaylie smiled in her island of walls, feeling special because she didn’t need to look straight anymore. But then everything came back, the caterpillars and butterflies and ABCs. The paper was just paper.

“It doesn’t need to be perfect,” Mr. Q said when he came around to her table. “Trying like you did is what’s important.” He marked a little A+ in the corner of the finished multiplication sheet, in purple pen. She was the only one to get such an honor, so even after he had walked away, she could only focus on the straight edge of the paper, the perfect grade in pretty pen, and the fact that she hadn’t tried at all.

It was snowing outside. In front of the windows was a counter and on that counter, the class hamster, Kee, was running on his wheel. Mr. Q had told them at the beginning of the year that Kee was nocturnal, but Kaylie had known before because of a show she’d seen on her family’s tv. It wasn’t a box like at school, and it missed the static, and the pictures were too clear, too easy to see. So later that day, she took a cardboard box and cut out the front and back and moved the tv to the floor so they would line up. Kaylie shone Dada’s desk lamp through the opening for the glare and found that clicking the power button on the remote caused static to run across the screen.

“What’re you doing, Kaylie Kat?” Dada asked, shrugging out of his black suit coat. He turned to hug Mama, who had come home from work an hour ago and was still in her scrubs. The circles under her eyes never went away.

“This is how they do it at school. They share magic boxes on wheeled carts, and the sun makes them too bright, and there’s static. Mr. Q told me that it mattered if I tried.” Kaylie gestured to the tv. “I tried.”

Dada chuckled and pulled a blue pen from his pocket. “You did so well, my smart little girl.” Kaylie giggled. Still beaming, he wrote an A on the cardboard.

Kaylie’s smile wavered; she wanted an A+. What had she done wrong? But she didn’t ask that; she would figure it out. “I want juice.” Kaylie walked to the fridge, pulling out the grape juice, dyed to look like purple ink. Mama said that wasn’t why; she was a doctor, she would know, drinking ink isn’t healthy. Some things just happen to be purple. But Kaylie believed in plus things, not somethings, and both the ink and juice made her feel healthy.

Tomorrow, I’ll get a cart.

SIXTH GRADE

Boot heels clicked on the linoleum floor, like a training heel. Kaylie hated the word “training,” but her parents wouldn’t let her wear real boots, the ones with wedges or high heels. Kaylie suffered through; she liked the sound, even of training boots, that echoed down the hallway like a shadow stretching far ahead.

It was Monday. It was also the day of a history test.

Kaylie had reviewed her answers three times, and although they seemed right, her hands trembled. For a moment there was a ghost of a paper, a blue A at the top, until the jittering chased it away. This was why Ms. R let her go to the water fountain: to chase away the blue A and its ensuing earthquake. She leaned over, letting the warm water flow into her mouth. 1, 2, 3. The trembling stopped.

Loose sneaker soles flapped on the linoleum school floor down the hall.

It was Monday. It was also a day for skipping class.

“Kaylie!” Ben shouted, acting as if there was a massive crowd he needed to be heard over.

“Keep your voice down,” she said, in case Ms. R heard, and then the paper and its earthquake would stay, trapped in the history classroom. That sounded terrifying. Her colleagues didn’t deserve that. But none of the teachers came outside to tell Ben to shut up, to go to class, so maybe they hadn’t heard. Ben didn’t care, his shadow now overlapping with hers. It felt cold. “Come on, hold up a minute. Class can wait.”

Kaylie was incredulous.

“It’ll only take a minute.” Ben was close now, very close. “Just a minute, okay? Stay still.” His hands hovered by her arms, grazing the edges of her

raised hairs. “That’s it, good girl.” His hands touched her arms, stroked them, pet them.

“I’m not your dog,” she said, trying to sound as fierce as the click-click-click of her boots, but her mouth was dry, her voice was barely above a whisper. She looked around at the water fountain and the lines of lockers, ice blue.

“But you’re mine,” he said, and Ben’s mouth closed on hers. Kaylie could no longer breathe, eyes open; Ben’s eyes were closed, his mouth flapping like it belonged to a loose soul.

Stop. “Stop.” (a whisper) “Stop.” (a little louder) “Stop—”

Ben shushed her, pushed Kaylie against a locker. “People do this in high school,” he said into her mouth. “Enjoy it.” She inhaled his sweat, his CO₂. The lock dug into her back.

“Stop!” Kaylie finally tore her face away, keeping it turned as his fingers clawed at it, willing it back into obedience. That way was silence. That way was high school. Kaylie really hated the training boots.

Doors started to open, and there were shouts, and there was someone—Ms. R?—pulling him off of her, pulling him away. The world was blurry, and distantly, Kaylie heard someone ask if she was okay. Patches narrowed into focus: the blue lockers, the water fountain, open doors, children, teachers. Ben was the only one with a shadow. Through an open door, the one to Ms. L’s room, she saw students laughing or mouthing sorry. Some had the decency to look at their desks as if nothing had happened.

When the world stopped spinning, there was simply the principal’s office. Ben was sitting in a chair at the desk. He used phrases like “she wanted to.”

“Kaylie,” Ms. R said, outside the door. “You don’t have to go in there if you don’t want to; we’ll handle Ben. You can go to the nurse until your parents get here.”

Ms. R was missing the point. Kaylie still didn’t have a shadow.

A month ago, when talking with Dada about the students who didn’t listen or care, he said that in the real world, people have to work with people they don’t like. What about people they hate? They fear?

But Dada wasn’t here to tell her the best answer, so wordlessly, Kaylie stepped into the ice-cold room, filled with the shadows of everyone but her.

The door closed.

Through the rectangular window behind her, Kaylie saw her dad, in his pajamas, beckoning her to leave the room that smelled like sweaty running shoes and silenced tears.

She turned back to the principal, in his suit and tie.

ELEVENTH GRADE

The planner was full. There were four tests the next day and hours of homework due, all written in blue ink. The sixth-grade earthquakes began to shake her fingers, then her room. They turned her vision black. Made Kaylie throw up. Her parents had found her passed out on the floor the night prior.

“I can’t miss school today.” Yes, you can. “No, I can’t.” Kaylie didn’t care what they said; today was a debate tournament. Today, she wore a blazer.

“You can’t go today, Kaylie,” her dad said, then left for work. The world pulsed—once, twice—and then there were salty drops on her hands, rivers on her cheeks. Her mom, halfway out the door in her scrubs and black eyebags, paused.

“Leave me alone,” Kaylie said. Her mom did nothing. “You think I’m crazy, don’t you?”

“Never. Kaylie—”

She ran upstairs, soleless slippers slapping on the stairs. “CRAZY CRAZY CRAZY!” Closed the door of her room and glared into the twin child-sized mirrors. Thousands of Kaylies in each direction shouted: “CRAZY!” The tears were coming harder now. Kaylie couldn’t breathe. “CRAZY!”

The opening garage door a floor below replaced the earthquake. Another tremor, the door closed again. Kaylie was grounded by this, her mom working while she stayed home. Lazy—even your mom thinks you’re broken.

Kaylie looked into the twin child-sized mirrors, at the tear-stained faces of her thousands of selves. Shadows, broken by glass. “I’m going to fix you,” she said.

Breath returned to her, but she inhaled CO₂. That night, she didn’t eat, she wasn’t hungry; her mind supplied the fuel, burning embers, painfully simple. She didn’t eat the next night either, or the next, or the night when the world went entirely black.

Kaylie threw up when she ate again, under warm hospital lights that illuminated her shadow, pieced together like a stained-glass window.

BEYOND

Most days Kaylie spent on Floor 4. At 27, she was the youngest editor, and as editor, she had an office, with glass windows and a glass ceiling under

the Executives' Lounge and glass panels looking onto a sea of cubicles, the sea she'd come from. Her colleagues called Kaylie "A-level," and Kaylie always called them "A-level" back like a little game. A-level, what's the next story? muffled through the glass, but Kaylie had learned to listen, truly listen, a long time ago. The men in black suits that relaxed above her said the promotion came with better fantasies and writing, yet Kaylie didn't know if she believed that. At its core, every draft was an escape. And maybe she only thought the stories were better because the men above the glass ceiling said so.

Kaylie looked through the glass office to Nina, whose quiet voice had been made even quieter through the glass, said: A-level, when you're here, you let me know. Kaylie lowered her head to the digital manuscript. She always wanted to print stories, feel the paper in her hands, imagine the success of having it in hardcover and paperback and advertised on little paper fliers in bookstore windows, but the men upstairs said no. The only thing printed in her office was the picture of Liam, a mathematician she'd married four years ago.

As she made to resume her work, the oak-wood + on the door caught her eye, and Kaylie stared at it, asking where it was from and when she'd hung it up and why she couldn't look away. These questions had no answers; these things she didn't know.

She didn't know many things, like why a stray hand in the city made her flinch and think Ben! like it was a person, like it was a boy, like the hand had even existed. She didn't know why watching tv was something she could get lost in and why she worked on cardboard boxes at home. She didn't know why her husband always kept her close at night, so close, as if afraid she might slip—slip down into Hell—sleep.

Nina started calling again, something about subjects, and Kaylie consciously avoided the +. Nina's question was answered, another hero did the right thing. And there, next to Nina's desk, was Andy's; he would have gotten her promotion if he hadn't moved away. However everyone told Kaylie a different story: the promotion was hers, she deserved it; she worked hard, and Andy's work was always late. But Kaylie missed a deadline five years ago and Andy hadn't been late to that one.

The glass room broke. Shards flew into the air, held by time. Distantly, she felt something slide across her arm and then a different something slide down. If she looked to the right, Kaylie knew, there would be blood. The shard must have cut her shirt—fuck—and her blazer—FUCK. There was no air and where there was life there was only a white hole, a white hole, a white—

The glass was back. The shards were gone. There was no pinch, no blood. There was no hole in her shirt, in her blazer (thank god). There was air and there was life, and it was just an office, an ordinary office, with its glass ceiling and walls, and floors colored like steam. Crazy she thought, then shied away from the word, looking at the second hand tick on the wall clock. The word was gone, and the time was gone; the hands and their faux-gold arrows read 5:00. The men upstairs always made her leave at 5:00.

Just a little longer. She lost herself again in the electronic sea of black words and purple marks and white space.

It was 7:00 when Kaylie closed her laptop and opened the door, locked it from the inside, shut it again. The city streets outside were cold and dangerous, but her boots clicked on the pavement anyway. The thought of cars and engines both attracted and repelled her, like the ghost of something far ahead. Anyways, there was a steady click-click-click that came with walking, a little rhythm like checking off a list: edits, a meeting, Nina's question, Nina's second question ... Kaylie paused. She felt like she was covered in a velvet blanket. There! A tingle in her mind—maybe—yes!—an itch, a shout—a sticky name tag—oak wood— $3*4=12$ —paper—plus—

There was a little magic box, and the tingle went away.

At home, Liam asked if her day was okay and if she was alright, and she started to tell him about Nina's question and the work she'd finished and how tired she was, but a little voice whispered arrogant. It sounded like her, then it sounded like him. Maybe it was Liam? Sorry. How are you, Honey? He frowned. He said that he was good. I'm going to get juice Kaylie said. Dinner was over. The two crawled into bed that night, rushing under the blankets because the heater was broken, and Kaylie buried herself in Liam's arms to escape the white walls of their room. He kissed her forehead; he told her to sleep well and that he was there if she needed anything. Kaylie didn't know what "anything" would be, so she told him the same.

Kaylie dreamed of Mr. Quen, her kindergarten teacher, telling her to try. Dreamed of the cardboard magic box with an A. Dreamed of the metal clang of blue lockers and lips that were not Liam's. Dreamed of pajamas in a window, and a suit and tie behind a cardboard box. Dreamed of tears and two endless mirrors. Dreamed of + signs, always + signs. CRAZY CRAZY CRAZY—

“CRAZY!”

It was dark. Liam was asleep; the walls were white. It was 5:00. Kaylie stumbled into the bathroom, the tile lit by moonlight. She examined herself in

the mirror, noting the dark circles under her eyes and the pajama shorts that revealed her gooseflesh because she had broken the heater in a panic attack.

“I’m so sorry,” she said to her husband, who probably, secretly, thought she was another problem to be solved. “I’m going to fix myself. I’m going to fix myself. I’m going to fix myself.” Kaylie held up a shaky hand, counting in the reflection: 0, 6, 11. Hesitantly, she added infinity. Her hand stopped shaking. “Just a dream. It was just a dream.”

Kaylie hurried back into Liam’s arms to escape the four white walls, but she didn’t know why. She never knew why.

Madee Omran

Grade 11, John Burroughs School

Personal Essay



Mockingbirds and Cardboard Boxes

“WEEIAWEEIAWEEIAWEEIAWEEIA”! My brain was suddenly on alert; if my ears could swivel they would have. The sound was loud and piercing, waking me from a lazy dream, but I didn’t care. My excitement took over my legs, which jumped me out of bed and carried me to my downstairs window. My pupils adjusted to the bright, morning light as my eyes focused on the opening on the back of the shiny, silver grill. I could feel my nose getting hot from being pressed against the sun-exposed glass, but I was more worried about clouding the window with my breath; I had to witness what was about to happen! But as time passed without seeing the characteristic flutter of wings, I became worried. Then, I became confused when I heard the “WEEIA” again. I stepped outside and took a closer look at the grill, my heart sank..

They were dead. The Carolina Wren babies that I watched grow up were dead. The precious souls that were about to fly for the first time were dead, boiled in the summer heat. The sound I heard was a Mockingbird, mimicking the mother’s desperate words, her cry to her dying babies. I had thought the “WEEIA” meant the babies were leaving the nest, but really it meant they were remaining there forever. For the rest of the day, I heard the wails, over and over again, as the Mockingbird continued to mimic the wrens. It was poignant and beautiful all at once, an homage to the lives lost, but a reminder of what was lost.

For some reason, the Mockingbird decided to stay in my yard, and every day when I heard a “Carolina Wren”, I would run to my bag of dried mealworms and throw some outside for the Mockingbird, who would gobble

them up. Eventually, the European Starlings discovered the mealworms and would flock in the dozens. As you can imagine, with such large gatherings of fairly juicy birds, the hawks soon caught on, and a couple of European Starlings were eaten. The birds soon learned the “Keeyawww” of the Red-Tailed Hawk and would fly away whenever they heard it. Well, one day, when there was a particularly large gathering of Starlings, the Keeyawww blasted through the air, and all of the Starlings took off immediately. The second they were out of sight, a triumphant Mockingbird daintily floated to the ground and ate the rest of the mealworms. When the Starlings came back, the Mockingbird flew into the honeysuckle and bellowed, “KEEYAWWW”! It had been mimicking the predatory cries to scare the Starlings away!

Why does everyone always say that they’re like a chameleon? A chameleon’s skin changes color to blend in with the environment. It is a way to avoid predators and keep prey from noticing them. If someone was a chameleon, then they would manufacture their appearance to become unnoticeable amongst their surroundings. That’s not really what anyone does. But, people do modify how they talk. They switch languages, accents, intonations, and word choice to meet their goal. If their goal is to blend in, then they can do that, and if their goal is to manipulate people, then they can do that too; it all comes down to language, not appearance.

I can relate to the Mockingbird. In different social situations, I change the formality, content, speed, openness, and warmth of my language. Subconsciously, I become a different person, and that’s because I mirror the people I’m talking to, similar to the mimicking nature of the Mockingbird. I tend to stay quiet and observe before striking up a conversation, and that’s because my brain needs time to weigh all the options of what to say and why. I’m not being fake, I’m still me, but the “me” I become is tailored to the person I’m talking to. I think this is incredibly common. I admire the few who can uncompromisingly be themselves with everyone. They have one personality. They know who they are.

I remember this one day in seventh grade. Everyone was new to school, and I didn’t necessarily want to make friends, but I wanted to make an impression on people. Typically, I am a reserved, quiet person who will avoid socializing if given the chance, but something changed that day. I was in art class, and I was being my focused self, working on a ball of clay diligently, listening to the conversations around me, when I decided I wanted some fun. I acted really silly. I pretended not to know things that I definitely knew just so

people would laugh and then explain. By making other people laugh and then feel good about themselves—because they knew something I didn't—I felt giddy. My heart was tied to their hearts. When I got home, I became very serious. I wasn't some blabbering Mockingbird anymore; I was more mature and controlled. On the inside, that's what I am. Even if I'm all over the place on the outside, on the inside I'm a tempered, slightly chaotic metal, and my external behavior is planned by my metallic interior.

I don't have the desire to fit in. I never have. In fact, I enjoy it when people let me know that I'm different. All of my mimicking and tailoring comes from my genuine desire to make other people happy. My dad told me that when I was little I hated all team sports because I thought I might have to bump into people and hurt them. He said that when I was in soccer lessons, instead of playing, I would move little insects off the field so people wouldn't step on them. I'm not saying that I'm a superior person with extraordinary levels of empathy; I'm saying that I am complicated. We all are.

My friends will tell you that I'm the most confident people pleaser they know. It's a bit strange to think that someone who needs to make others happy all the time is confident, but I think it's representative of humanity; not that most people are confident people-pleasers, but that people don't fit into the neat, little, cardboard boxes others make for them. It's possible to shy away from attention but inside always desire it. It's possible to love people and hate humanity, just like it's possible to hate people and love humanity. It's possible that being myself means being everyone else; that my identity is a mixtape of songs I learned from other people. The fact that paradoxes don't make sense is a paradox in itself because everyone is a paradox, and by accepting that, no one is a paradox. Did that make sense?

Unfortunately, I'm not as enlightened as I just pretended to be. I don't understand myself. I've never even met myself.

In all of the Mockingbird's time living in my yard, I never heard its song once. It hummed the tunes of cardinals, wrens, hawks, woodpeckers, warblers, owls, etc. But, it only knew how to sing what it had heard before, and it had never heard its own heart sing. My heart has drummed to the beat of the hearts around me all of my life; I guess it's only when I'm sleeping that it pumps at its own rate.

I think what I've been working up to all of this time is realizing that the Mockingbird's ability is what makes it special. Its tendency to be everyone is its heart. And after all, its beak can tear a cardboard box to shreds.

I—am—unique. Just like everyone else.

Naomi Pearson

Grade 8, Parkway West Middle School

Educator: Tracy Bouslog

Personal Essay



The Eraser Heist

Thud. Ms. Alto put down a large Target bag on her desk which was so full it looked like it would burst. I sat at my desk, which was close to the back of the room, near the small rectangular cubbies holding our backpacks. Ooh...I think we might get a prize or something! I thought to myself, curious about what Ms. Alto could have gotten that seemed so heavy. “I recently heard you all were so good for the substitute, so I got some little erasers for the class!” Ms. Alto told us, as she took out some clear boxes of small animal shaped erasers, carefully opening each case, and emptying them onto her desk. All in sync, we got out of our desks and sprinted to Ms. Alto’s desk at the front of the room, shoving each other to get the best pick of our animal eraser, we were like hyenas competing for leftovers. Yes! We get prizes! I need to get a good eraser...I thought to myself, squeezing through the wall of students blocking the desk. “Excuse me! Coming through!” I exclaimed. I knew I had to get the best eraser. I grabbed the first eraser I could find and headed back to my seat, trying to beat the large hoard of students who were going back to their desks, too. Once I sat down, I realized the eraser I had gotten was a tiger with yellow fur and crooked black stripes wrapping around its back, plus a little bit of a malformed face to top it all off. Why is it so weird? Aw man, I should’ve paid attention to what eraser I picked, I thought, wondering if there was a way for me to get a different eraser instead of this one. As I looked around the room, I noticed other students were playing with their erasers, seemingly happy and grateful for the animals they had chosen. But I was not. And I needed to change my selection.

That's when it came to me; I could borrow a few of my classmates' erasers, see which one I like, then trade my tiger for the one I liked. Simple. I nervously looked around the classroom, searching for any erasers left unattended since it was the beginning of class, and we got 5 minutes of free-time before we started. That's when I saw a few desks left unattended, with erasers placed neatly on top of them. The students who sit there are probably in the bathroom, I told myself, realizing that this was probably the only chance I had to take their erasers. I crafted a plan; I'll grab the empty plastic bag in my desk left from snack time and go around the room, swiftly taking each eraser as I go. Once I see the students come into the classroom, I'll put the erasers in my backpack, and no one will know who took them. A perfect plan—at least that's what I had initially thought. Now was my chance. I grabbed the plastic bag and started my heist. I spotted the first eraser and snatched it from one of my classmate's desks, feeling the rubbery texture on my fingers as I quickly stuffed it into my plastic bag. I then went over and emptied it into my backpack, my heart pounding from the worry of anyone seeing me. Since we still had a bit of free-time left, I decided to grab any more erasers that were left. I shuffled around the room, secretly looking for any animal shaped erasers I could find. I'm like a spy in the movies! I thought to myself, completely oblivious of the fact that I was stealing. Once I had collected the majority of the erasers in the classroom, I walked to my backpack at the back of the room and emptied the rest of the erasers, like a robber emptying their stolen treasures into their buddy's van. As I headed back to my seat, a sudden flood of guilt washed over me. Is this right? I asked myself. I was just borrowing the erasers after all, what could go wrong? But I shook those thoughts out of my head and sat back in my seat, feeling like I've achieved my goal, but also have done something wrong, too.

As one of my fellow students, Chloe, walked into the classroom, I saw her eyes widen. "Ms. Alto! My eraser is gone! I had it right here, on the edge of my desk, and I...I..." she exclaimed, her lip starting to quiver as if she was holding back tears. "What? How can it be gone? Everyone, can you all look for Chloe's eraser please?" Ms. Alto replied, scanning the room for any rogue erasers that might be Chloe's. "Oh no. They found out," I muttered to myself. I needed to find a way to return the erasers in a way no one would notice. As everyone got on their knees genuinely looking for Chole's eraser, I knew what I had to do. I went to my backpack and took out a few of the erasers I had stolen, including Chloe's, and slipped them into my sleeve. Then, I crawled towards Chloe's desk

and put her little yellow and green turtle eraser by one of the legs of her chair, which left some of its waxy remains on my finger tips. “Is this yours?” I remarked, as I picked the eraser back up and stood up proudly, acting like I had just found it on my own. “Yes! Thank you so much, Naomi!” Chloe rejoiced, coming over to me to give me a hug. I flinched for a moment but accepted the hug, starting to feel my guts twist. As we looked for the other student’s erasers, I did the same, with a crocodile, a blue and white penguin, and many more. But this time, I didn’t claim I had found them, leaving them for other students to find. We then started class, and I felt a bit better.

At the end of the day as I packed my belongings, I realized that I hadn’t returned all of the erasers. I wanted to tell the teacher but didn’t want to get into trouble. Once I had collected all of my stuff, we headed in a single file line out towards the buses, and once I got into my bus, I immediately heard the angel on my shoulder nagging me for my terrible mistake. What have I done? This is all my fault, I thought to myself.

“Hey Naomi, you okay?” Gwen, one of my best friends asked, seeming to notice my slightly droopy smile.

“Yep, all good,” I blurted, forcing myself to have a smile from ear-to-ear.

Once I got home, I didn’t want to think about this problem anymore. I took the bag of erasers and shoved them to the bottom of the trash can, where no one could find out what I had done. But I knew.

(Names in this essay are fictional)

Farrin Rahaman

Grade 9, Parkway West High School

Critical Essay



Hope or Fear: What is Stronger?

Fear is prevalent in many aspects of our lives, even more so than hope; fear grasps what we're afraid of losing, whether it relates to our lives being in jeopardy, to even being as simple as losing an A in a class. As seen in the mini-documentary, *A Virus Called Fear* by Ben Fama Jr., Christine Dargon describes why fear is connate, and why it is so ingrained in the human mind. One's instinct to a perceived danger often comes as a form of fear, which is supported when Dargon states, "These are fears [that] are just actually natural, innate [fears], that are there to kick in the fight or flight response so that we are on guard, we are prepared for something." Contrasting from innate fear, which would've helped people's survival, learned fear can be fears that may threaten someone in the modern age, for example, our careers being endangered. Whether innate or learned, fear can drive us to take actions that our conscious minds would have resisted. For instance, in *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck, Curley's wife attempts to comfort Lennie, however, it turns into a tragedy by an accident because fear took over Lennie's conscious mind, prompting his body to take action that his mind would've resisted. On the contrary, fear can also make people too afraid to take risks, to enjoy life, which can be seen in A.E Stallings' *Fear of Happiness*. In her poem, she describes in what ways she's afraid of heights; she describes that when she was younger, she used to be afraid of what most people use to enjoy life; even the thought of airplanes is enough to scare her: she's consumed by fear. As seen in *A Virus Called Fear* by Ben Fama Jr., John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, and A.E. Stallings' *Fear of Happiness*, fear, which is ingrained in human nature, is

stronger than hope because it can drive us to take actions that our conscious minds would have resisted, and if we're consumed by fear, it can prevent us from enjoying life because we'd be too afraid to take risks; therefore, fear is stronger than hope.

Furthermore, *A Virus Called Fear* shows that fear is ingrained in human nature, hence that it takes extra effort to overcome it. Christine Dargon explains the reason why fear is so ingrained in humans; we used to utilize fear to ensure that we were ready to defend ourselves or flee if it was necessary, to be aware of our surroundings and environment, as described when she states, "If you think back to caveman days, hearing noises, [you would] fear for your life: Are you in danger of any kind? These are fears [that] are just actually natural, innate [fears], that are there to kick in the fight or flight response so that we are on guard, we are prepared for something." However, this ancient fear doesn't pertain to the modern age. We aren't in constant danger, like being mauled by a tiger; society is now more organized and orderly, so this connate fear is impractical. As a result, it's logical to make an effort to overcome it, although it takes significantly more effort to do it because of how deep-rooted it is, than for example, having one's hope being crushed. This advances to what Karly Way says and is supplemented by Dargon, "[Way]: I think an antivirus program for helping people to overcome their fears and think is simply awareness...And I think there is no way around a person just growing in their awareness, becoming more aware of their stereotypical thinking... [Dargon]: Until we're given something else to substitute it, we are going to do the things we know how to do." This quote shows that to overcome fear, we would have to become aware and make sense of it, otherwise, we'd return to just fearing it. An example to illustrate this is when a person is afraid of the dark, they would have to become aware of the reason that they're afraid. In this case, they would have to become aware that they're afraid of the dark and what lies within it, without their knowledge. Once the person recognizes it and substitutes this fear with a more familiar item, such as having the room layout already in their mind, it becomes easier to overcome this fear. On the contrary, if the person doesn't substitute it, and is only aware of why they're afraid of the dark, they'd only continue fearing. As is demonstrated here, overcoming fears is challenging, but someone can lose hope quicker. For instance, one can have the hope of climbing the economic ladder through hard work. Yet, one can lose hope by a setback, whether minor or major, such as not

having enough opportunities given or all the hard work done previously going to waste because of a mistake.

Furthermore, in *Of Mice and Men*, the concept that fear can control us to take actions that our unclouded minds would have resisted can be demonstrated on page 41; George talks to Slim about what Lennie did in Weed to make them have to switch jobs and move. George describes that they were in Weed working, then says, "...he [Lennie] wants to touch ever' thing he likes... So he reaches out to feel this red dress an' the girl lets out a squawk, and that gets Lennie all mixed up, and he holds on 'cause that's the only thing he can think to do...He was so scairt he couldn't let go of that dress." (Steinbeck 41) This quote describes what happened when Lennie held onto the girl's dress. As described, Lennie holds onto the girl's dress, and she gets frightened, which prompts her to start screaming. This causes him to be bewildered, and to continue to clutch onto the dress, which displays Lennie's intelligence— he couldn't think of letting go and instead kept holding onto the dress. This would also augment the concept of fear controlling a person. As a result of Lennie being startled by the girl's screaming, fear engulfed Lennie's ability to think, and provoked fear to control him. If Lennie didn't have fear clouding his ability to think, he most likely would have released sooner, and wouldn't have needed George to "sock him over the head with a fence picket to make him let go." (Steinbeck 41) Lennie's lack of clear thinking is what prompted fear to manipulate him, resulting in him doing an action he most likely wouldn't have done.

Additionally, *Fear of Happiness* showcases that if fear consumes one, then it can prevent one from enjoying life as a result of being resistant to taking any sort of risk; even having a feature that can be somehow associated with the fear can affect them. As stated in the poem, A.E. Stallings writes, "The high-dive at the pool, the tree-house perch, Ferris wheels, balconies, cliffs, a penthouse view, the merest thought of airplanes... But it isn't the unfathomable fall that makes me giddy, makes my stomach lurch, it's that the ledge itself invents the leap." This quote illustrates the author's fear of heights, as in the high dive at the pool, or the Ferris wheel. These are most commonly used as entertainment and enjoyment in people's lives, but in this case, it's a source of fear and anxiety. However, the second part of the quote, "But it isn't the unfathomable fall that makes me giddy, makes my stomach lurch, it's that the ledge itself invents the leap," shows that the risk of falling is more terrifying than the actual fall to the author. The possibility of falling

consumes the author so much that even everyday, entertainment activities that, in some fashion, are associated with the fear of heights make her apprehensive. This fear of heights can even affect her daily life, as seen when she states, “As a kid, it was a glass-floored elevator I crouched at the bottom of, my eyes squinched tight, or staircase whose gaps I was afraid I’d slip through,” The fear is so intense inside of her that the chance of not focusing on fear doesn’t even cross her mind. Fear overpowered the author so much that the hope of not falling didn’t even present itself to her.

Overall, fear is stronger than hope because fear is innate in human beings, and can become an unwanted driving force in us as a result of performing actions that our conscious mind would resist; if fear consumes us, then it may lead to us not being able to enjoy life, but instead have anxiety because we’d be too afraid to take risks. Fear can be beneficial in humans, such as sensing danger and keeping ourselves safe. However, unnecessary fear may lead to the inability to experience happiness and enjoyment. Hope can only take us so far before it gets brutally shattered by adversity, unlike fear, which may build from hardships experienced.

Farrin Rahaman

Grade 9, Parkway West High School

Personal Essay



Melanin

I remember the scorching summer afternoon, as hot as chilies on one's tongue, in the bustling, crowded city of Dhaka. I sat on the lap of my nanumuni, her fan made of dried palm leaves swinging in front of both of our faces, temporarily salvaging us from the oppressing heat. My ears picked up the sound of the congested street, people trying to get to their destination through the unorganized road with a plethora of pedestrians, cars, rickshaws, and CNGs.

My eyes made their way to the open window, observing the people, people who look like me. Eyes, the color of dark chocolate and skin, the color of caramel, their features, shaped by inhabiting the mild winter and humid, tropical summer climate for generations: far from what I was used to in my small town in the US, many with fair, porcelain skin and eyes, the color of the deep ocean, as well as their features, adapted to the cold winter and temperate summer climate.

I reminisce of third grade, when I first moved to southern Indiana, to a school made up of people that all had the slightest touch of melanin in their skin and various shades of blonde and brown hair. There, I met a girl in my class, and the first thing she said was, "I never saw black hair before," then, "Can I touch it?" So I stood there, letting her touch my curly, frizzy, black hair, wondering how this was so foreign to her, wondering why a bit of melanin changed what the first thing she said to me was.

I remember my seventh grade geography class as well. We were discussing the reason for darker complexions, and my teacher explained that when humans inhabit latitudes closer to the equator, their skin becomes darker than those closer to the poles. As if I was an animal in a zoo, piercing

eyes flocked to me. I felt their gaze study every part of me, from my cocoa brown eyes to my caramel hands: everything; I felt like an unerasable discolored brown dot on a perfectly uniform white piece of paper. I looked down, ashamed of my skin color, and I began to resent my complexion, envy overthrew my thoughts. Why did I have to have melanin? Why couldn't I be like them? Why couldn't I be seen as normal? Then, my most dangerous thought: I'd be better with white skin. I began to avoid sunny places, cooped up inside in hopes that the sun won't ruin me. Months spent running away from something I couldn't change.

In December, the sun spent less time antagonizing me. Days became shorter and less bright. In that same month, my family relocated near a big city. My first time walking around the many stores with seemingly endless products at the mall, my eyes glazed over the many women strolling around; the brightly colored hijabs of a flock of women, like various colors of flowers in a garden, others with the skin of milk chocolate and eyes rivaling the dark night, a few more with the tight, intricate curls of an afro. As my eyes took in the sight of these individual women, my envy of fair skin began to thaw away, and for the first time, let in room for an epiphany: having more melanin than others is normal.

As snow fell and melted, to flowers blooming in Spring, to feeling the scorching heat in the Summer, to the leaves falling in Autumn, I found myself once again standing in front of my reflection, studying my features— my features that were shaped by my ancestors inhabiting the mild winter and humid, tropical summer climate. My past resentment for my melanin became practically nonexistent as I realized that melanin was abundant in me, not because it was trying to make me feel inferior to those whose ancestors adapted to the cold winter and temperate summer climate, but because it's me.

My melanin is me.

Isabel Sapp

Grade 11, Smithville High School

Educator: Angela Perkins

Poetry



Cassandra's Curse

When I am twelve, I will learn that spit tastes of sun and ash / when I am fifteen, blood will dry on my thighs and tears on my cheeks and no one will speak / when I am seventeen, I will die with thousands of words spoken and none of them heard / my name is Cassandra and I have a curse

The curse came to me the same day the spit did, and in the same way: swathed in gold from the mouth of the man who swore he loved me / "I'll give you anything," he'd say, hollowly, hallowly / in a house where children ran afoot the way that fish swam in a stream, there was only one thing I ever wanted / "Promise me," I said, twelve and naïve / "Promise me I'll be heard. Promise me I'll be believed." / "Darling, I promise," he said with a Chesire grin / "on one condition."

His hand slipped down between my legs / I was a child / He brought his lips to mine / I was a child / saliva oozed into my open mouth / I was a child / I was a child, and I ran / to my mother, who held me as I shuttered / shivered as though I was dying of cold / through trembling lips I told her my terrified truth and-- "There must have been a misunderstanding," she said. "He would never do such a thing. He's a good man"

With hammers and steel, my mother built a cage for my words to live in / she did not believe me, nor did my father when he heard, nor my brothers and no one believed me ever again / I became a ghost, still alive and breathing, but skin translucent with a heart chained to silence / but even ghosts are not immune to the impulses of monsters / and three years later, one moved to town

His name was Adam and he spent two tours in Iraq / how he boasted of kills,
how he flexed his mighty muscles, how his eyes followed me like hungry
wolves thirsting for another conquest / my mother called him a hero, my
father said he was noble, but the night he raped me, I knew he was a devil
I was fifteen, trying to fit in, I went to a party with a friend / she ushered me
over to the hero in the corner, and he offered me some liquor / I'd never gotten
drunk before so I didn't watch my drink or my back / and soon I was hazy as
morning fog and his arm wrapped around my waist to tug me into an
unfamiliar bedroom / "mercy," I cried I realized / "mercy, please" / but mercy
was a thing of dreams and I was a thing of sorrows
He ripped the clothes from my body in a frenzy / his mouth sucked bruises into
my skin, boisterous blue and plum purple / he was never a farmer, but he
plowed me well enough / I tried to fight but I was so, so tired / then he left me,
quick as the wind, to my broken heart and broken hymen
When I stumbled out of that room, crying and bleeding, I heard cheers,
hurrahs, high-fives / people congratulated me for banging him, like it was
something I wanted / congratulated him for catching me, like I was some sort
of prey / my friend screamed at me, me, when I accused him of rape / "Adam's
a good man," she said, "he'd never do such a thing." / but he did / why didn't
anyone believe me? / were my lips sewn shut? were their eyes closed? were my
words just a meaningless echo?
No one was surprised I ended my life soon after / the knife's cold kiss was
sweeter than any I'd ever received / my blood was the color of the roses I
clutched in my hand as they laid me in the ground / they say I killed myself / I
disagree / but then, if not me what did? / rape? depression? a selfish desire to
be different, to be believed? / I don't know / all I know is that:
When I was twelve, I learned that spit tastes of sun and ash / when I was
fifteen, blood dried on my thighs and tears on my cheeks but I didn't hear
anyone speak / when I was seventeen, I died with thousands of words spoken
and I hope that someone heard

Gillian Sellet

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Humor



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, a big round belly, and a chipper smile. Sure, he didn't spend much time in town, instead preferring to tend to his quality carrot garden, but he was still popular and well-liked, 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, her inability to take a joke, and her strange popularity with the other smallfolk in town made her absolutely unbearable! And even worse, her scraggly, undertended turnips stole attention away 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 market stall and saw Mathilda already 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 who was duplicitous enough to commit such a deed. He turned towards Mathilda, to either 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 remarked.

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 from this perilous event.

Snoot ignored them. He was more 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 the 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 for a moment, then burst out laughing. After her wrathful cackles rang out across the square for at least 3 minutes, she sobered suddenly and sighed.

“Yeah. Okay.”

Snoot blinked. “Wait, really?”

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

As she turned and started walking out of town, toward the direction the smoke had come from, 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, towards the foreboding wooded hills. As they finished a grueling hike up to the ridge of the hills (interspersed with many stops so that Snoot could massage his aching feet and Mathilda could watch impatiently), a peculiar sign caught their attention.

The winding trail leading down into the mountainous valley. At the crest 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 mused.

“Not like you can talk,” Mathilda pointed out.

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!" He sang. 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 mysterious, 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 to catch their breath once they had 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?” Mathilda snapped.

“I’m just saying. There’s no reason we have to probably die in search of our lost crops. No one’s forcing us to do this, and I’m starting to think that the risk isn’t worth the reward,” Snoot spread his hands appeasingly.

“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 blinked, as if surprised by the volume of her own voice. Then her shoulders slumped and she massaged her temples.

“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 just 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 of the maze, as the passageways became more cramped and the torches lighting the way became few and far between. Snoot revved himself up: this was it. 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 towns person 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! It’s why I invited you to find me here!” Findelius cried.

“No, I don’t think so. I think there might be 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.

Grace Shanahan

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Short Story



Ailments; Among Other Things

The drive to the Huxville DMV was never particularly arduous, but it was long. The route required passing through the crux of some neighboring marshlands—or the bayou—if you prefer. The landscape of this bayou itself was not remarkable, definitely not worth a photograph or even a passing glance to many. Thick trees lazily scatter along the river beneath the highway bridge. Gnarled and bare-branched, they jut out of the water and line flush against the pale green mucus surrounding their bases. The whole landscape appeared obnoxiously plain, seemingly unfinished by nature. Yet, there were too many evident bursts of life for this to be declared dead land, so it stayed as one of the many aesthetic casualties of Huxville's underwhelming scenery.

However, one notable fact about the bayou was that it thoroughly unnerved Antone each time he traversed the highway bridge connecting Huxville Downtown and North Huxville. The bayou under the bridge was wholly responsible for Antone's aversion to traveling into town. But of course, coming to town cannot be entirely avoided. He and his father were not self-sufficient in that manner, they would need to run errands every now and then. Antone's father was in no place to drive that far alone anyhow, so he'd make the journey.

So, it was unclear why Antone avoided the bayou. Perhaps a traumatic event occurred there, or maybe he feared unknown waters. Both would be reasonable conclusions. But these are not true. The truth is far less interesting. Each time he drove across this land, a compulsive fantasy would completely overcome Antone's mind. He'd begin to think of bending down, kneeling right

at the silty shore. The nearest tree would beckon him forward, arm outstretched. He'd lower his arm down the base and carefully unfurl his palm flat against the surface algae, just barely making an indent as he pushed his hand further down, delicately lacing his fingers together with the flat mass. Then, he'd wonder what it felt like to be carried along by the river. 'Would I feel helpless?' He'd wonder if that even mattered.

Becoming wholly absorbed by such a foreign lifeform enthralled Antone, but of course, he'd eventually return to his eyes on the road. Like routine, he'd believe himself to be disturbed and once again lodge the fantasy deep in the back of his mind. But this is not to say he didn't also detest Downtown Huxville for separate reasons. Every inch of the area swarming with county cops and do-gooders looking to catch any stranger or teenage miscreants didn't exactly appeal to Antone. Although he wasn't a stranger nor a miscreant, it didn't mean he liked those folks. But he finally had to readjust himself to these neuroses, just for the day. After all this time, Antone needed his state driver's license.

Even though he had been an excellent and frequent driver since his freshman year, Antone never turned up at the DMV to register himself and his truck with the state of Louisiana. When he was a teenager, he would push the visit off just to avoid the arbitrary test-taking and assessments. But truthfully, he also had no idea where his birth certificate was and didn't want to strain his Dad's mobility out. Having to wheel from the hallway closet to the bedroom dresser to his old office cabinet, looking through each shelf and cabinet of indecipherable paperwork seemed a lot to ask of his father back then. So Antone kept pushing and pushing the visit off until he crept out of adolescence and sunk further into the outskirts of Huxville.

Stepping into the DMV wasn't as torturous as he had assumed. Perhaps he thought there would be an overwhelming stench of stomach acid, and the walls painted a sickening yellow, glowing against the fluorescent lights. Instead, he was met with a quaint room and a cornucopia of grey shapes, bland but not appalling. Older women clacking at their desks lined the wall furthest from the door, and closer to the door was a half-filled waiting section. Upon taking a seat, he felt the frayed, mothy fabric beneath himself. He thought the fabric felt like the pews of his old Sunday school. It had been years since he'd been to Church, let alone Sunday school, but the simplicity of the thought made him smirk. How long had it been since he'd colored? Used crayons or

read a book? It's funny how parts of life leave without you even realizing you need to say goodbye.

Antone determined he had to busy himself somehow while waiting. The best he could do was study the other inhabitants of this foreign building, so he began to study the others alongside him in line. Just in front of him was a polite-looking middle-aged woman. Her eyes were pouty and avoidant, with a light pink eyeshadow pressed haphazardly into her eyelids. Her posture leaned her top half forward at an uncomfortable angle. Antone determined her to be skittish but not anxious, fast reflexed. Moving forward, Antone's eyes landed on a man— no older than seventy— dozing in his chair with a newspaper blanketed over his chest. Drool was running out of his mouth onto the shoulder he slumped upon. Antone felt shame for staring at him while he slept, but he was addicted to his curiosity. So he fixed his eyes on the framed picture above the man while keeping his attention on the sight. You must understand how the pressures of competence drove Antone so severely, even in the privacy of his own mind.

Peeking out underneath the sleeping man's tartan shirt was a speckling of sunspots and welts only on his left forearm— driver's maladies, presumably. Dad's best friend, Tim, had been a truck driver since he was nineteen and sported a similar look. Skin washed in the sun so often it wrung out the life, Antone thought. He had some sort of medical device hooked to his chest, creating a protruding bump on his left collarbone. Antone found this whole sleeping ordeal overwhelmingly bizarre. How could someone let their guard down in public in this way? What if someone robbed the man or cut him in line? Did he not care?

This line of thought became overwhelming. Antone's eyes now focused entirely on the framed painting—a lone terrier in a field. What a freeing picture. Antone thought of bare land. Land without shade, without fear of burnt crops, blossoming land for him and himself only. The ball of his foot's hard landing on the soil and its spring off again and again as he sprinted through tall weeds of grass granted him such pleasure. Honey ochre hues of straw warped around him, bending and leaning a path for his dance through the wild. Antone spun and freed his body's tension, swinging his arms wide. He faced the Sun and let its soft heat greet his face beneath his hat. The field never ended, curving with the Earth, Antone thought. He didn't feel it then, but he was smiling incredibly—a snaggly, toothy smile that made his rosy cheeks tense. He frolicked and danced until the world around him and the sun above

were just colors and shapes. Pausing, he found a clearing and sat to rest. Inhaling, he closed his eyes and faced heavenward.

Antone blinked. Shapes and colors molded back into grey-washed people and office supplies. His mind, again, always wandering off. Useless. He reminded himself what he was staring at again, the picture frame. But as soon as he took a second glance, the painting was so utterly disinteresting he sat to twiddle his thumbs.

After about fifteen minutes, Antone began wondering why he didn't bring something to busy himself with. He could have brought in his father's newspaper, but what good was that anyhow? The paper was grueling when read alone, and he only really liked the home-living tips they offered...and the obituaries. On Sunday evenings, Antone and his Dad would sit at supper, and Antone would read the week's obituary column aloud. When Antone was younger, they would also read the marriage column together, but they stopped when Antone began to recognize more names from his childhood. The obituaries always offered a glimpse into Dad's past, before the accident and long before Antone's own birth. It was selfish, but those names in the paper created flashes of emotion his apathetic father never offered him. Someday, either one of them could be a name in the obituaries. Had the tree that would provide his entry already been cut down? Maybe its roots are still in the Earth.

Antone despised waiting. Perhaps it was because he never felt he had control of his mind, always rushing from one place to another without reason. His memory was the same way, inconsistent at best and irrelevant at worst. From his childhood, he barely remembers his mother's presence. He'll remember her dark midnight blue nail polish-adorned hand flipping a baby book for him, the same hands playing with his toys, too. But he can't remember her laugh or voice the same way he can remember that nighttime blue. He hated his mind for that, for focusing on the irrelevant. His Dad's mind was sharper than steel, composed of lists and plans Antone could never recall. He wondered how well his father remembered his accident.

Near-death experiences are some of the clearest memories anyone can have. Since Antone returned from the hospital, he has replayed the events of that October evening before bed nightly. Last fall, Antone spent most of his time working on the Outskirts Ranch cleaning the Ranch shoppe rather than training horses as he wished. He didn't work as much as he does now, working only in the latter half of the day. This particular evening, Antone was in to fill

the stable stall's water trough and close the shoppe. After treating the horses to their water, he closed up the stable and trekked over the hill to the main barn building. He began to turn over how to prove himself capable of more and bypass whatever disappointment he was now. Head hung low. He threw his hand to the nape of his neck and rubbed at the low lump. Doing this, he looked up and saw the sunset over the Ranch's land. Violet clouds powdered with magenta dipped and peaked above his head. The clouds were puffy and full, like globs of paint streaked in waves, pushing Northbound. Antone stood alone, watching the sky, letting gusts of wind hit his back and whip his shirt forward between his arms. His face was hot. Indulging in this beauty could not be for him. He didn't deserve it yet.

He continued on to the shoppe after the clouds passed the Ranch's treeline. Pushing through the shoppe doors, Antone was assaulted by the telephone's incessant chirping. The ancient thing could barely pick up anyone's voice and no less make a resounding ring. Answering the phone made him nervous. Hearing his voice speak longer than he felt necessary was mostly uncharted lands. His voice reminded him of a weak animal bleating, with its cracks and awkward emphasis. He had to think about speaking and keeping his words under his reins. They even managed to call right when he was settling into the night.

He answered, annoyed and insecure.

"Hullo, this is Uncle Ford's Ranch Shoppe. We're closed right now, but if you call back tomorrow at--"

"Hello, this is Nurse Ottessa Rynright at Saint Muir Medical Center and ER-Baton Rouge. I'm looking for a Mr. Antone Carver. Is this his place of employment?"

He saw the nightlight outside the window, its midnight blue shining.

"Yes, this is he."

Atop the cash register next to the phone sat a miniature carousel horse on a spring. It was an antique of some sort, one of those machines that kept time for pianists. It rocked back and forth if you pushed a slot in the ornate base. The horse dropped and sprung, its one black glossy eye fixed on Antone's own.

"Your father, Jameston E. Carver, was in a motorcycle crash around five o'clock this evening...."

Drop.

“...He was found responsive and was transported to St. Muir – Surgical by ambulance. He has significant trauma in the back of his skull and right pelvis...”

Spring.

“ ...He is currently undergoing overnight operations on both. Your place of employment was registered as his emergency contact.”

Drop. The horse’s mouth was open in an endless scream. A second passed.

“What’s the Hospital address?”

That night, Antone closed up early. He left for home and grabbed his cash from the past eight months of work out from under his bed. The money was for trade school. He took the cash in an envelope and drove the hour to Baton Rouge with the sticky note address on his dash.

In the St. Muir hospital waiting lobby, time moved differently. It swirled and tightened around Antone. The same nurses would walk the same route, the wooden cross on the wall would glow hot amber, and Antone’s hands would expand and shrink between bursts of color streaming across his vision. He didn’t know how many wavers he signed, who he talked to, what time it was. The windowless room kept him captive that night. His father would live if he endured this, he thought. Occasionally, Antone would shuffle from the lobby to the bathroom to throw up and once to the cafeteria for pudding. Soon, he would stare out hallway windows to avoid thinking and dry heaving more. Under his gaze, the breeze pushed the hospital courtyard’s willow trees. He thought of the paper cut to print his father’s obituary.

After six hours and twenty-three minutes spent between operation updates and nurse consultation, his father’s condition stabilized. His brain was in better condition than the doctors initially presumed. Only his pelvis was shattered upon impact and needed further internal stabilization. His father would never be able to walk or stand again.

Antone often wonders what his father remembers about the crash. He’s told the story before, of course. But Antone can tell he’s withholding information. You can see it in how his lips iron out across his face after each sentence. Could he see the other driver’s face as his body flung into the bayou below? Did he look at him and forgive him? How could he ever love the world the same, if not more? If not for his strange landing circumstances, where would he be now? Was the sunset a sign?

“Number nine, Antone Carver, appointment four o’clock?”

He looked up. He was in line at the DMV. Antone was at the Huxville DMV getting his license at twenty years old. The man across from him had woken up to read the newspaper previously his blanket. He brought his face up over the paper and smiled an honest, toothy smile.

After half an hour of sitting with the woman administering the test, Antone walked out of the DMV expecting his license in the mail within the next two weeks. His face met the balmy air, and he breathed a sigh of relief.

Bristol Sparks

Grade 8, Parkway West Middle School

Educator: Tracy Bouslog

Personal Essay



The Bracelet of Thorns

“Can you pass me a pink bead?” I asked my best friend, *Penny. She nodded and grabbed a bead from the big pile messily dumped in the center of the table, her long brown hair falling into her blue eyes.

“Here you go!” she smiled as she handed it over before returning to her bracelet. I threaded the bead on the string and tied the ends together, holding it up to the light to admire my work.

“I’m finished! Do you like it?” I announced, waving the bracelet in the air.

“It’s so pretty!” she gasped, taking the bracelet from my hand and slipping it on her wrist. Her eyes shimmered with wonder before she turned to grab her bracelet from the table. “Here, mine’s done!” she slipped it on my wrist, and I smiled so wide my cheeks hurt. It was a beautiful combination of red, green, and blue beads, my favorite colors.

“Oh my gosh, I love it! I’m never taking this off!” I squealed, my heart swelling with joy. “Best friends forever?”

“Best friends forever!” Penny answered, smiling.

In second grade, besides making friendship bracelets, my friends and I loved to play creative games where we would come up with our own characters and fight off evil together. This recess, we decided we were going to play unicorns.

“Okay, so I’m Spirit, which means I have all the elements,” I said, running through the plan in my head as we walked down the field. The beautiful beads of the bracelet Penny made for me last week sparkled on my

wrist in the bright spring sun, bringing a smile to my face despite her not walking with us. I didn't know why, but I knew she would always be my friend, so it didn't bother me much.

"Yeah, and I'll be Rainbow Sparkle! I have rainbow powers," my friend Annie chimed in from beside me. Her dark brown hair was pulled into a ponytail that swished behind her in tune with her bouncy gait.

"I wanna have fire powers!" my other friend Holly announced, excitement evident in her sparkling blue eyes. "I'm gonna be named Ash!"

Suddenly, a loud buzzing interrupted our planning and I shrieked, jumping away from the source of the noise. A blur of yellow and black bobbed a few feet in front of me, zipping around in a terrifying, unorganized path.

Fear gripped my heart with icy claws as I watched the insect wobble closer, its loud buzzing locking me in place. My palms began to sweat in anticipation as I remembered the sharp pain that tiny needle of death could cause. But instead of stinging me, the bee circled my head once, the sound rattling my skull before it flew off to the playground behind us.

"Are you okay?" Annie asked, and I let out a slow breath, my tense muscles relaxing.

"Y-yeah, I'm good," I nodded shakily, attempting a weak smile.

"You sure?" A voice from behind startled me. I whipped around and was taken aback by whom I saw. Penny and the class bully, Jenna, had walked up behind us, standing with their arms crossed and malicious smirks on their faces.

Cold dread pooled into the pit of my stomach, chilling me to the bone as multiple questions raced through my mind. What's going on? Why's Penny with Jenna? Did I do something wrong? I searched Penny's face for an answer, but her once sparkling eyes had become matte like all the kindness had been drained from them.

"Aww, are you scared of bees?" Jenna sneered, her grin getting wider by the second. She twirled a black braid around her fingers as her midnight eyes stared me down.

I swallowed hard and looked at Penny pleadingly. You're my best friend, I thought. Why are you doing this? I saw a flicker of doubt cross Penny's face before she hardened her expression and pulled her lips up into a smirk. The friendship bracelet dug into my wrist like thorns.

"Hey, bee!" Penny yelled, turning toward the playground the bee had flown off to. "Come back!"

“Yeah, come back! Come sting her!” Jenna joined in on the taunting, snickering malevolently as she watched their words stab me in the heart like knives. But after a few seconds, I had had enough. I glared at Penny with hatred, channeling all of the hurt she was causing me into anger.

“Stop!” I yelled, fuming. My face was on fire as I clenched my fists at my sides and stared Penny down. She was shocked by my sudden outburst for a second before she quickly regained her composure.

“Stop! Stop!” she mocked, further fanning the flames of my fury.

“Hey, leave her alone!” Holly demanded, stepping up to my side.

“The bee can sting Holly and Annie, too!” Penny added and turned to laugh with Jenna, who was pointing a taunting finger at our group.

Without thinking, I made a split-second decision that I would come to greatly regret. I raised my right hand and swung as hard as I could at her arm, the sound splitting the air like a crack of thunder.

“OW!” Penny wailed, holding her arm with her other hand.

Time slowed down and I felt myself grow unsteady, the noise around me turning to static. What had I done?

“I’m telling the teacher!” Jenna cried out, grabbing hold of Penny’s good hand and yanking her toward the blacktop where the recess teacher stood.

I watched them run off, my heart sinking into my stomach. I couldn’t believe I just hit my best friend. I had never hurt someone before, and the guilt felt like a swarm of flies was eating me alive.

The teacher calling my name shook me from my stupor. After giving Annie and Holly a frightened look, I shakily made my way over to where she was standing with Jenna and Penny, who was showing off a nasty red mark on her arm.

“Did you hit her?” the teacher demanded, staring down at me in disdain. She had her arms crossed and a scowl on her face that made my chest feel tight with anxiety.

“Well, yes, but I—” I tried to say but was cut off.

“No, I don’t want to hear your excuses. You two need to go to the principal,” the teacher said, pulling a walkie-talkie from her back pocket and pressing a button. “Mr. Hawkin, I have two girls being sent to your office,” she spoke into the device, eyeing me as if I was going to try to hit Penny again.

I hung my head as we walked to the principal's office, letting my feet drag behind me. When we got there, I didn’t say a word, just sat down in one of the scratchy chairs around the long table and stared down at the dull beads of

my bracelet, letting their voices fade into the background. I had to bite my tongue to keep the sobs from escaping my throat.

“Apologize to Penny for hitting her,” the sound of the principal's stern voice caused me to flinch, and I snapped my head up to look at him. His expression was more disapproving than angry, which I decided was even worse.

The guilt finally won and I let the salty cascade streak down my cheeks. My body shook with the sobs like a violent earthquake as I turned my head to look at Penny, who was staring at me. Through my sobs, I just barely managed to choke out, “I’m sorry.”

Penny’s expression was unreadable. There was no emotion in her eyes. She just watched coldly as I broke apart in front of her, not even bothering to respond to my apology.

“I’ve contacted your parents,” the principal interjected, putting his phone down. “You’re free to go back to class now.”

I wiped the tears from my face and stood up from the chair, heading toward the door. When I got to my classroom, I noticed all of the kids were scattered around, playing games and laughing with their friends. It made me feel even more alone.

I tried to decide what to do before I noticed something out of the corner of my eye. My behavior clip on the whiteboard was still up in the green, which caused guilt to stab me in the stomach. I didn’t deserve that after what I had done. My arm felt like a hundred pounds as I lifted it to grab my clip, dragging it down into the red for bad behavior.

Something shiny caught my attention again, and I looked down at my wrist at the bracelet. The sight caused a flood of anger and sadness to wash over me and I ripped the bracelet from my wrist, throwing it into my backpack. I sank into the chair at my desk and buried my head in my arms, just wishing the day would end. Dread weighed on my chest like a ton of bricks as I thought of my other friends. Surely they would hate me now, right?

“Are you okay?” I looked up to see Holly and Annie standing by my desk with worried frowns. Why were they talking to me after what I’d done?

“No,” I admitted after a second, dropping my head back into my arms. “I’m a bad friend.”

“No, you’re a good friend. Penny’s the bad one,” Annie insisted.

“But I hit her,” I looked back up, my eyebrows knitted together in confusion. Why couldn't they see that I was a bad kid?

“Only because she was being mean to you,” Holly pointed out.

“So... you guys aren't mad at me?” I asked, standing up so we were face-to-face.

“Of course not!” Annie wrapped her arms around me, burying her head into my shoulder before I could react. The pressure in my chest dissipated, and I melted into her arms, letting out a slow sigh of relief. I felt Holly wrap her arms around us both and we stood that way for a while before the teacher made us return to our desks.

When the bell rang at the end of class, I dug deep into my backpack and pulled out the bracelet, letting it dangle from my fingers. I considered the pretty beads before tossing them into the trash, smiling as a sensation of relief washed over me. I had freed myself of my chains, my wrist now an empty canvas for the people that matter most.

*All names in this essay have been altered to protect the privacy of the individuals

Isabella Wang

Grade 9, John Burroughs School

Poetry



Clarity

I.

Blurry days: shattered, scattered, on repeat.

Pressing stress of hazy deadlines,
all the expectations that I'll fail to meet.

II.

Was I ever like them? What I am right now, was I always like this?

I see the rising sun encapsulated in his eyes,
nothing hidden beneath the lazy clouds that amble by, only an expanse of
honest sky.

I can not believe him, when he says rain will always clear,
I don't want to believe him because that would mean
something's off about the way I am, so blue all the time, brewing storms and
thunderheads.

He's always smiling, laughing, hugging everyone in sight
pushing tears back from his eyes. When he lets them loose, they don't sting us.

My tears burn
they say stay away, look away, leave me alone.
And they come too often,

like they are always waiting to spill,
always on the brink of rushing down.

III.

I am peering at the people on the ground,
who are so far
down.

I can barely make out
the people

everywhere, thrumming with tenacious life, vibrant and dynamic, while I am
in the still atmosphere, suspended in wind.

They can't hear me calling to join them.

Maybe what I need to do is fall,
but I can't,
I've been up for so long that I don't even remember
that I was once sure-footed on the solid Earth,
and never craned my neck upward to watch the stars.

They think I am so different.
They do not know that it is cold up here.
and I can not breathe
because the air is so thin,
and I can only look up,
the way everyone else says I should
because while I am very high up,
I am not at the top.

The people above me jeer down derisively.
Why can they ascend to the heavens, but I am stuck,
not quite on the ground
and not quite in the sky?
Why haven't I
figured out the secret to going any higher?
Should I turn around and head back down?
Join the people on the ground?
I see how happy they are.

But it is too late. I just
continue to climb higher,
and higher.

IV.

The coaches don't know what happens
when they warn us not to hold the team back,
that every medal counts, and every event counts.
Don't be the one that limps behind,
they say.

They don't know that I'm already the one trying to catch up,
running after everyone else,
wait,
wait,
please wait for me.

They don't know how long I stare at the spreadsheets and logistical
information they send out,
figuring my chances,
wondering if no matter what I do, I will always be the one left behind,
the one that doesn't get it,
the one that couldn't do it.

Why the long face, she says. Practice won't be that hard today, she says.
I was not worried about the number of laps
we would have to accomplish
I was thinking:
Thinking about how I could be using the time to study,
not swim.
Thinking about how many meets I needed to attend.
Thinking about how many seconds I needed to drop.
Thinking, thinking, thinking.

Until I'm not, until I'm in the water,
until the biting cold splits me open
and fills me up again.

Here,
my lungs filled with water,
is where I can breathe.

Cut through, like a knife through butter,
girl through water.
Sore, sore all over,
but not in a bad way,
not cramping up or feeling dizzy,
no,
here the soreness is only because of the pounding rhythm
of my heart,
the matching tempo
of my kick,
the slow crescent arcs,
of my arms,
sweeping across,
dipping in,
then out again.

In the water,
everything is clear.

Isabella Wang

Grade 9, John Burroughs School

Poetry



Storyteller's Nostalgia

Storyteller,
Were you born the way you are,
or did you grow into your lofty title
the same way a child fits into hand-me downs a size too big?
Do you remember the first stories you drank up like ambrosia,
built of words descended from the bottomless sky like unmoored stars?
Before you ever thought to create,
you got yourself drunk on words, you gluttonous girl.
Maybe it was inevitable you turned out this way.
They say "you are what you eat,"
and all you ate was story after story after story.
Or maybe you couldn't help it, and you've never known a life without that
innate craving
for honeyed pages of mellifluous sentences. Whisked away to a sanctuary
better than any amusement park, birthday party, or playdate.
How could you resist that allure?
That gravitational pull? Like if every life you were born in,
you'd always come back to your stories.
Storyteller,
Those days they called you a bookworm.
They always saw you with books checked out from the public library,

(Your parents always said, “Why buy a book you’re only going to read once? If you borrow them, you can read a thousand books for free!”)

And a thousand books you did read.

It was only natural that they permeated your brain.

Soon enough, stories sprung from your head, lively and coy musings of a child, delightful as cool spring wind, entertained you like playmates; nymphs that would lead you in a dance and then vanish when you turn around again, giggling and unseen.

Sometimes they left your head—

flew out like hopeful letters

into the bustling world. Which, for the most part, didn’t notice. Trampled, creased, ended up folded in someone’s backpack, someone who probably stuffed it

there in a rush.

But you were sated with just their presence. You might not have even noticed how often they roamed throughout your head, and you plucked them off and rolled it over your tongue like dollar-store candy or the smallest sugar plum in the bag.

Your brother noticed your sweet tooth, and he helped you spin and weave innumerable stories, crafted with raw imagination, melded into things that you could finally

touch and feel, see how from nothing, all of a sudden, you had created.

Storyteller,

Remember when you read so many books

that you became nearsighted by only first-grade,

had to get a pair of ugly pink prescription glasses that your brother said made you look like an old lady? It was then that your parents started teaching

you math,

heaped pile on pile of textbooks on your desk, and told you to sit there as they explained addition, subtraction, multiplication, division

and the numbers swam before your eyes, meaningless marks on the paper.

Oh, how you longed for the comfort of black Times New Roman text to

sweep you away into some fantasy land, or a fiery opinion article to ignite your thoughts,

you just wanted to be back in the safe embrace of page after page of inviting words.

When your parents lamented your incompetence, you wanted to shrink away

and disappear into a shameful abyss, wanted to make it all stop,
to fix what was wrong with your brain. You always cried when your mother
tried to tutor you in math.
She would cry, too, exasperated with the child she gave birth to, couldn't
understand you.
How come your brother always understood those twisting numbers that wound
around you
like befuddling snakes, problems that were impervious hydras looming above
you
never-ending, with no purpose, no story, the heads just grew back every time
you slayed one,
always your family kept you caged in those confusing math problems.
They meant the best, really, and tried to hammer a sense and feel of each
equation
into your head, but perhaps it was because you already had a passion so
fervent,
nothing could ever take the place of your first love, your love of stories.
Storyteller,
You made tired peace with the fact that numbers were not your friend,
but simply a haughty classmate you had to be civil with.
Your relationship was born out of necessity, and your parents always harped
on the importance
of navigating your world using manipulating the world of numbers. But that
world was not yours,
never did you feel more stupid and lost than when they served as your guide,
and what was the point
you already had your North Star? But you did not know all these nuances yet,
because your parents perceived your love to be a disease, an addiction, a
time-waster,
frustrated that if you were dilly-dallying your time away with silly books,
asking
why didn't you at least read the greats, the classics? You were never
entertained by them,
they were too full of densely packed symbolism and deeper meaning with no
real shape,
and so you never got the thrill from those; you stuck to your silly novels.
Storyteller,

You were always surrounded by people who breathed a different atmosphere than you, whose brains seemed to always be a step ahead. It was only when you struck stories from the sky and sowed them into the soil, waiting to blossom, that you felt you were worth something, that you had shine, just like they did, that maybe you weren't just an ugly pebble tossed on the pavement, but a geode, a rock an unassuming gray-brown color that hid streaks of gemstones deep inside, that there was some worth indeed hidden in you, no matter how much you doubted it as you watched everyone else glow, while you were always so dull, and soon enough you didn't even have time for your little stories anymore. You turned away, looked at math and science, devoted yourself to become like them. To rewire your brain and your nature, to forget your love. Storyteller, Do you miss those times? Before you were weighed down with ACT prep books and science competitions that replaced those vibrant stories you loved so much? Or is it your own fault that the very thing you breathed in everyday became something so shameful, that when you looked at your words spilled over on a page, you felt such repulsion at the imperfection, frustrated that you couldn't be everything they expected of you, that even here, where you were supposed to be untethered, somehow, you had lost your footing? That you gave up on your love, believed your worth was tied to the amount of medals, trophies, and plaques you brought home, believed your best bet was to follow what they all said, the safe, reliable route, to live a gray life of numbers. Don't you want to fly free again, to let words loose from your mouth and onto paper, let them glide across and gild your documents, boundlessly existing in a world that you are the master of? The world you were born in was never for you, you never took to it like your brother and your mother and your father did, but you know you would never trade away you first love

for a life with less tears, one where you fit right into your family, one where you never wondered something was inherently wrong with you, one where you weren't tattooed with all those labels-- stupid, dumb, idiotic. No, you wouldn't give it up for anything, after all, you're a storyteller.

Isabella Wang

Grade 9, John Burroughs School

Short Story



Hotpot Night

The sky is dark, the moon is full, and the houses radiate orange light. In a small suburban neighborhood, there is a large, stately house, separated from its neighbor by a massive and neat row of towering evergreen trees, on top of a well-manicured lawn. It's no mansion, but it is still a very nice house. Two stories plus basement, four bedrooms, chandeliers and a cavernous foyer.

The family that lives inside is composed of: A small girl, at this point still found with a smile often on her chubby-cheeked face, yet to lose her baby-fat and twinkling eyes matched with her instinctive, content resting expression. A lanky, skinny middle-school boy, her older brother, who sports a home-cut buzz paired with rectangular glasses and looks like he's always pondering something deep. A middle-aged mother, who, from afar, could pass as someone ten or even fifteen years younger than her true age. A middle-aged father, short black hair peppered with white, who looks sour when he is in a bad mood but comes alive with laughter.

It is dinnertime. Specifically, it is hotpot night. Many, many, hotpots and even more dinners have been cooked, served, and enjoyed in this room. It's a multi-purpose room that contains both the actual kitchen, where the food is made, and the dining area with the sturdy wooden table.

The stove is whirring, heartily announcing to the whole house that dinner is in progress. The big metal pot has been lugged out of a cabinet and placed on the end of the dinner table. For a hotpot, you need a faithful pot, and this pot has served the family well— it's at least six years old and will continue serving the family for many more years.

The pot is quieter, not making its presence known until you are actually seated at the dinner table, able to hear the soft bubbling and sloshing of the soup inside. It is the silent hero of hotpot night, quietly carrying out its duties of bringing the shrimp and potatoes and noodles and numerous other foods piled in the broth to a gurgling boil in its metal walls.

The girl is in her bedroom, reading a thick book, probably about cats. If she isn't, then she is playing with her beloved dolls and stuffed animals. The mother and father are both in the kitchen, busy at work tending to the pot and chopping tofu.

The brother is most definitely sitting at his desk in the home office, fingers flying away at the keyboard— rapid-fire clickity-clack-click-click. He is probably not doing what he is supposed to do, homework or studying. The brother has not been introduced to and been taught coding yet (which will later shape his life as it becomes his passion and favorite pastime), so it is likely he is typing away on some forum.

Meanwhile, back in the kitchen, the mother is wearing an apron patterned with an array of vegetables— carrots, mushrooms, bell peppers, radishes— as she rushes about, bringing platters of chopped food to the pot. But, she is not upset and grumbling like she might be on some other night, maybe a regular weekday when she is rushing to cook, alone, while her husband is glued to his computer and her children need to get to their dance classes, swim meets, and karate lessons.

But today there is no rush. It's a relaxed Saturday night. The mother and father work together to cook, laughing and chatting entirely in Mandarin. It's on evenings like these that the girl remembers that her parents are married, despite their worst fights and the petty arguments in between. Here, she forgets about her mom's nagging, her dad's explosive temper, and her brother's panic attacks.

The mom yells, in Mandarin, "It's time for dinner," like she does almost every night to signal to her children to come running to the table to eat. In Mandarin, both will yell back, "Coming," although the brother will actually arrive five minutes after he has done so.

The table is set, a china plate with a glob of dipping sauce in front of each person's seat. The sauce is homemade by the mother. It's a mix of broth, spices, herbs, and get this: peanut butter, which you can barely taste once it all comes together.

The potatoes are first; set on the table on a large plate. The brother joins his sister at the table and begins to pick up potato slices the size of the sister's palm with his chopsticks. The sister does the same, savoring the taste of each smooth, golden slice. She prefers to eat the potatoes without dipping them in the sauce.

The father is third to eat: he spoons out noodles, tofu, and boiled beef strips onto a plate even larger than the one used to hold the potatoes. The girl eyes the beef suspiciously; she suspects the "beef" is actually mutton. She's loved sheep since she was three and vowed never to eat mutton, but she has a hunch that her parents are passing the mutton off as "beef."

The father and sister run to the pantry and rummage through the bulk packs of cans and water bottles to find the sister's favorite sparkling water, which they both grab a can of: blackberry for the girl, green apple or clementine for her father.

The sister eats very little of the meat, but digs into the tofu, noodles, and potatoes, dipping the tofu in the spread. She finds comfort in the food, it warms her soul. The brother is also eating plenty, as hotpot is one of the few foods that he, a very picky eater, enjoys. Today there will be no arguments over the brother's appetite ("He needs to eat more! A growing teenage boy eating this little? Unheard of! Your sister eats more than you; why can't you just eat like her? Your mother and I made this. Stop acting like it's poison! If you don't want to eat, cook for yourself!" from the dad, and "Leave him alone! He's just picky. That's just how he is. If it upsets you, just look away," as a response from the mom. The sister quietly eating while observing it all, wishing it would all stop.)

No, today the arguments are forgotten and there is only laughter and chatter. Some conversations are between only the brother and sister. These are entirely in English, while conversations between the mother and father are entirely in Mandarin. Sometimes the brother will become intrigued in his parent's conversation and join in, or vice versa. The various conversations weave in and out of each other, looping between different family members, Mandarin and English mixing and matching throughout.

The brother and sister often find some topic unbearably amusing and begin roaring with laughter, both adding comments that only exponentially increase the hilarity of the original joke. Their mother watches them, amused as well. The father may enthrall the family with some story from his childhood in Ningbo, the mother laughing at the ridiculousness of some of his anecdotes.

Amber light from the glowing chandelier grows blurry and dissipates into darkness at the edges of the room. The table is the spotlight, filled with light and warmth and peace. It's full of platters of cooked food, and the pot is still cooking another serving of food, an abundant buffet that will result in enough leftovers for the parents to eat for lunch for the next week.

The father, who would normally be grumpy and complaining about how his children leave so many leftovers, is in a jovial mood, smiling and chuckling.

The sister, her stomach full, declares she is finished, which the parents scoff at (Eat more noodles! Here, have some shrimp; they're giant. Wait until the oats get cooked and then have some!) She declines their offers of more food, repeating that she is full. She stays at the table, though, wanting to savor the perfection of the moment, to chat with her brother, who continues eating for a while longer before he, too, declares that he is finished.

And because it is hotpot night, his dad doesn't remark on the amount of food he ate, meaning that he is satisfied with his son's appetite. The mother and father continued eating, as they began dinner much later than their children. They talk quietly in Mandarin about the latest gossip about their extended families or friends.

The sister and brother may go upstairs to make up stories about their room of Lego sets, a sprawling, colorful world filled with various nations, cities, oceans, and mountains, all built out of Legos and designed by the brother. Or, they may lie on the brown leather couches in the living room, sated. They will probably watch a movie together. The parents may join in as well if it's a classic.

At this moment, the girl feels like she is wrapped in a comfortable blanket. She is content and happy to be alive in this time in which she doesn't need to think about her worries and troubles. This moment when her entire family is truly together. When her father isn't yelling at her brother or mother when she inevitably defends their son. When her mother isn't lecturing her to do more math. When her parents aren't stressed, nursing headaches from thinking about their hopeless, sensitive daughter, who spends her time daydreaming and reading instead of doing math.

Many years from this one hotpot night of many, the family will still be eating hotpot. They wait until winter, spring, or summer break when the brother returns home to eat hotpot, as if they subconsciously realize the magic of the night requires all family members to be present. And when they do sit

down and eat, it will still be just as delicious and the siblings will be crying tears of laughter, their faces flushed.

The young girl is a teenager now, the middle-school boy is now in college, the mother has taken up fitness as a hobby and is living her forties in quiet joy, the father is much more likely to smile and less prone to his temper outbursts. The mother and sister suspect it is because he got a new, more well-paying and mentally challenging job.

The girl will spend much of middle-school with an invisible pressure to succeed, to always do better than before. Due to online learning, she will develop a habit of procrastinating, which she will later curb in seventh-grade and almost entirely stop in eighth-grade. In seventh-grade, she will look at herself and feel the urge to better herself, to make her profile and list of achievements more appealing. Eighth-grade will be full of stress, a tightly-packed, self-imposed schedule. The girl's insecurities will consume her. Her twinkling smile will only make rare appearances; her resting face will become that of irritation, apathy, and sometimes sadness. She will still be wary of her parents, unable to confide in them her struggles, afraid because they've burned her before. Her bond with her brother is one of comrades, partners-in-crime, people who laugh together, play together. But not confidants or emotional support for one another.

The girl is an Icarus; she will almost destroy herself with her perfectionism, as she will inevitably push herself to study harder, never satisfied. She will emerge from middle-school reborn, still deeply flawed and full of small sorrows, but also full of hope for the things to come. On hotpot night, the girl remembers why she lives. The cracks and holes in her tight knit family disappear for just one luminous dinnertime, where they can savor the simple pleasure of being completely, incandescently happy.

She wrote this to immortalize those nights so she could read through it and revel in the beauty of her joy when times got tough. So she could pass it on to her future self, to help herself get through high-school intact. So that she could read it and hear the comforting voice of a girl who has lived through so much in so little time and wants so badly to succeed. This was written for a girl who first feared death, then pined for it, then made peace with it. She is determined to focus on life for once, instead of constantly worrying about its antithesis. Her reason to keep living is not some grandiose purpose or a vague, empty goal, but simply to live as many of those simple moments before she meets her end, as all humans must do.

Matthew Wehling

Grade 12, Parkway Central High School

Educator: Jason Lovera

Critical Essay



Don't Worry About an A Plus in the Class of Evil

“Why did you tell them? Seriously, there’s no way I’ll get in over Felicity.”

I sat dumbfounded as my friend Sasha accosted me for sharing my plans to test for MEGSSS, a summer math camp, advertised as a program for gifted math students. Honestly, I didn’t know what to say. I couldn’t comprehend how the potential competition made his eyes bloodshot, his voice rise, and his hand grip the corner of my desk so hard his knuckles turned white.

“I don’t know... wouldn’t it be fun if we could do it with more friends?”

He scoffed, gave the desk a final grip, and went back to his corner of our windowless, beige-painted sixth grade classroom.

Reeling from the encounter, I couldn’t help but think, crap, maybe I really shouldn’t have told her. This type of cutthroat competition was an isolating, everyday experience for me since I joined the MOSAICS Academy in second grade. Our way of life consisted of “friends” hacking my Infinite Campus or peeking at the teacher’s desk to figure out my grades, constantly comparing the lengths of our essays, or even hiding summer camp opportunities from each other to get a leg up.

Academic competition, though a powerful motivator for mastery, turns into a perpetual evil when the classroom environment demands it. A classroom with the same ten “exceptionally gifted” students from across the district, corralled together for five years, offers the perfect environment by which

healthy competition fattens and boils into evil. “Human communities impose their own oughts” (Kluger 58), norms that the group intensely follows, on their individual members. The academic aptitude of gifted students, paired with constant pressure from a zealous teacher, set perfection as the norm through competition at any cost. Under such pressure, the habit of striving for perfection becomes a natural evil, a scourge “which may affect any of us and over which we have limited control” (Shattuck 76). Natural evil, unlike moral evil, has no malevolent anger. Rather, the environment creates suffering without seeming design; it simply releases a force that destroys, often unexpectedly and without a person’s anticipation or ability to prepare. My classmates in the academy didn’t understand the vice of their obsession with grades and comparison. Nonetheless, the competitive spirit we saw as drive and passion took away our reason, our compassion, our delight in learning, and we descended into a battle to better each other’s successes.

“You’re acting stupid! Seriously, you’re old enough to know how to fucking behave.”

My teacher grabbed my hand, yanking me and my friend Sophia out of our chairs and into the hall. He hurried us to an empty classroom, shut the door on us, and left. We didn’t say a word to each other, scared of secret cameras that would hear our questioning complaints. It was independent work time and he caught us whispering to each other about our plan to get BreadCo after school. With no warning, we were whisked away into a quiet hell in a stale, empty classroom with only three desks.

He came back in after a few minutes with a counselor to play witness and continued his berserker fury about our irresponsibility. My eyes stung with tears as the insults flowed from his lips: “worthless,” “a waste of district money!” I refused to cry in that room but the second he left, I sobbed to my friend. The sixth grade me couldn’t understand how inappropriate and unwarranted his comments were. All I knew was that I failed to be the perfect student the academy endorsed. The evil competitive spirit had infected me just as it had my classmates, and despite a berating of insults, I still craved my teacher’s approval and wanted only to redeem my place.

My appetite for approval and cravings for attention fostered a smug self-admiration of my membership in the evil environment. “In the ideal of cool complicity... lurks the suggestion... of greatness in evil and of evil” (Shattuck 78). Unknowingly, I had glamorized the harsh silence of independent work as integral to my success. I believed my whispered

conversation and the ensuing reprimands meant I had failed to be completely complicit in evil. Like a heroin user, my brain thirsted for the unhealthy intensity and the overt, tangible feeling of triumph. And in my brief, mutinous whispers, I experienced the painful withdrawal from immersion in the complacency of my prior competitive victories. That pain shocked me into a growing awareness of the threat of vulnerability in that classroom; I sobbed to my dad when he picked me up, and a grinding stomach-ache lasted for weeks after. In *Oedipus the King*, after Jocasta encourages Oedipus to move on from his quest to find the truth about his origins, he exclaims, “Let it burst! Whatever will, whatever must! / ... / I will never betray it, / never fail to search and learn my birth!” (Sophocles 1183-1194). Oedipus exhibits a clear case of unknowing complacency in a natural evil, stemming from his curiosity and need to know the truth. He refused Jocasta’s concerns and pursued knowledge even though it ultimately led to his wife’s suicide and his own blinding exile. Therein lies the greatness of evil’s power: one suffers in complacency and resistance.

It took four meetings with a youth counselor to even consider leaving the academy. Six years in the same classroom, with the same people, had scared me from the intense, big, and bold school I could return to. At first, after skipping swim practice for the third time in a week to do homework, I resisted the idea my parents presented to me: that I should just get the hell out. Staying continued to be an attractive option because of the status of a place we called, “The Academy.” I had grown to value my identity as a part of the academy over my identity as a learner and student, the reason I was accepted in the first place. Of course I knew that the workload would work me through family dinners and activities, that the teacher would give me lunch detention for talking with friends, and that the cutthroat competition would give me a daily neck rash, but those were just the measures of suffering necessary to be a part of the environment I thought was elite, not evil.

When faced with the question of a change in environment, like leaving the academy, “natural evils give to us the knowledge to make a range of choices between good and evil” (Swinburne 32). However, when the environment prevents one from understanding its true nature of evil, it equally hinders one’s understanding of the actual range of choice available. Even though leaving the academy was an option, the natural evil that exploited my perfectionism and competition made leaving seem ridiculous. The only real option seemed to stay. Without knowledge, I could only choose evil. Important

to the choice between good and evil is the idea that “evil is charismatic... the human mind romances the idea of evil” (Morrow 51). Evil’s manipulation and charisma pair together to make it almost impossible to change one’s mind to good while people still act under a naturally evil environment. People put all their faith into news anchors and social media pages that are attractive or well-designed, even if the content they consume manipulates them. Currently, people put all their faith into news anchors and social media pages that are attractive or well-designed, even if the content they consume manipulates them. Similarly, the status and specialness of being in the academy enticed me, trapping me in a toxic relationship that made leaving the academy seem like an act of failure.

I sat down at the lunch table with a luke-warm slice of pizza and a soft apple. After months of urging from my parents to look at coming to Central Middle, I finally agreed to shadow for a day with a friend of mine from the swim team. I got to see classes with more than 15 people, students talking across tables collaborating on work; I got to sit at a lunch table in a full cafeteria and talk to new people. It was like waking up from a hazy dream.

To brush the crust of the academy’s evil off my eyes, I looked around at the table. There was chatter, laughter, smiles and sharing. At first I was perplexed, even tentative. But then I began to shed my wariness and joined in the conversations. I realized that there was more to a school day than the worry about who was sneaking up on my back or anticipating and planning for the best way to finish the homework. It felt like a gentle rain shower or running through a sprinkler in the hot summer. I got to know the people that would end up being some of my closest friends. I went home that night and sat down to dinner with my family and told them I thought I was ready. I finally gained the knowledge I needed to identify the problems with the academy that made it evil, and it was enough to make the choice to leave.

My choice was an example of “the other way in which natural evil operates to give humans their freedom... that it makes possible certain kinds of action towards it... which allow us to perform at our best and interact with our fellows at the deepest level” (Swinburne 31). The natural evil of the academy made possible the choice to act against it. My choice to leave was the result of exposure to the possibility of a different feel for education. Positive interaction with those outside the naturally evil environment gave me the power of interaction that enlightened my best performance, the choice to leave it all behind. It was a triumph even better than any of the perfect scores I had

earned at the academy. Of course, I will never forget the late nights of homework, crying, and social angst, but “you can have a few minutes of pain... which will have (unknown to you at the time of pain) considerable good effects” (Swinburne 34). What I thought was an exceptional status was actually a dog-eat-dog pain, yet that pain led to one of the most positive choices of my life.

My first day at Central in eighth grade, I quickly found the people I had met when I shadowed and also the friends I had met at summer school. I was confident in my choice, any anxiety about a new school was quickly replaced with conversations in class and back at the same lunch table.

Then, those conversations quickly developed into finding the academic crowd at Central. It was a new school, and though the viciousness of my competitive spirit had all but disappeared, I still wanted to learn. I quickly got close to the academic crowd in all my classes, and suddenly my conversations turned back into the same grade-obsessed fierceness I had in the academy.

“What did you get on the algebra test?”

“Oh my God, I’m so upset, I missed two points, I only got a 96”

“Well... that’s fine, that’s fine. I got a 100, but a 96 is still good.” These back-and-forths turned daily and I found myself immersed in the same evil I experienced at the academy.

The evil I thought was completely gone from my natural environment at the academy had too strong a sense of habit; it seeped into my mindset without me knowing. Satan, arguably the greatest example of evil, “wanders. Evil is a seepage across borders, across great distances” (Morrow 52). The border of the human brain, resistant to changing opinions and trying new things for its own survival, fails to resist the overwhelming power and charm of the self-satisfaction in the power of evil. My one day of shadowing was a brief look at what could’ve been, but the evil that traveled with me from the academy stuck with me. My relationships were just as competitive and evil as before. In *Paradise Lost*, when Satan sees Eden and reflects towards the sun, he despairs, “Which way shall I fly / Infinite wrath, and infinite despair? / Which way I fly is Hell; myself am Hell” (Milton IV.73-75). Although Satan was a creature of moral evil, not a victim of his environment, the principle still stands. The evil within him could never leave him, even in such a holy, perfect place like the Garden of Eden. Like Satan, I brought my corruption with me, and my competitiveness seeped into my relationships and my academic intensity only increased in the face of new opposition.

Over time, though, the absence of overt evil in the new, calmer learning environment at Central helped me settle into the mutualistic, sharing and collaborative relationships that characterized classroom activity. Then, as a freshman during COVID, I took classes with sophomores and juniors, and my forced solitude, both physically and in my classes, gave me the chance to change how I viewed academia. In essays, I wrote about my favorite characters, my favorite subjects, my passions, not what I thought would get me the best grade. Further, now that I wasn't in classes with my friends, those relationships shifted from academic to social. I spent late nights on FaceTime talking about everything from the new Boba place down the street to the 2020 election. The evil of my upbringing had shifted into a newfound peace in school and with friends. When the last fumes of my competition released into the atmosphere, I noticed my friends shifted as well. The evil I had brought with me loosened its grip, and I felt a more comfortable positivity not only in myself but also my environment.

Unlike at the academy, I found new joy in my connections with others, not competition. After finally settling into my new environment, "greatness is less in and of evil than in overcoming evil and attaining wisdom" (Shattuck 78). At the academy, the absence of understanding made me think of competition and intensity as great. I had gained a new degree of wisdom.

In overcoming the evil that charmed me by moving to Central, my ideas about greatness changed. Similarly, at the end of *Paradise Lost* when Michael explains humanity's fall, he tells Adam and Eve, "wilt thou not be loath / To leave this Paradise, but shalt possess / A paradise within thee, happier far" (Milton XII.585-587). Adam and Eve rejoice in a new understanding that despite their exile from Eden, humanity, themselves included, would find even greater happiness in their climb from sin. While the academy made me suffer, and its evil stayed with me for almost a year after leaving, experiencing how harsh competition can be led me to an increased wisdom about the value of true connection and friendship. Any doubt about my decision is overcome by a true understanding about human emotion and value.

Now, as the end of senior year approaches, I experience the most joy and goodness when I feel connected, rather than competitive. Leaving the academy was not giving up, but rather growing up, recognizing when an environment, no matter how competitive, is unhealthy. When I'm faced with a new teacher, a new assignment, or a new job, I focus on my internal value and abilities rather than on the status or title. While my transcript reflects an array of difficult

classes, I ultimately chose them based on interest rather than difficulty or potential status. In my social life, I take pride in the way my friend Natalie lights up the room when she speaks, the passion with which my friend Sadie talks about “Star Wars,” or the genuine curiosity my friend Rohan has for robotics.

I had the chance to meet with a few of my friends from the academy last week at the St. Louis All Suburban Orchestra concert. During a break from our nine-hour rehearsal, I went over just to say hello. In a moment, I was back in sixth grade.

“Have you heard back from any colleges?”

“How many tries did it take you to get that ACT score?”

“Is Central easier? I feel like that’s the reason your grades would be good.”

The stench of vicious competition smoldered in front of me, but with the wisdom and power of goodness behind me, I simply smiled, politely answered their questions, and wished them well. I went back over to my friends from school and we sat down on the floor of the concert venue to talk about anything except school.

The power of freedom, escaping from an evil environment, “doing a just act when it is difficult--when it goes against our natural inclination” made “it easier to do a just act next time” (Swinburne 22). Leaving the academy, even though six years ago, made it easier for me to reject the toxic competition when in other environments. College applications offer a unique environmental chance for competition, but my change in values allows me to leave for a conversation, to distract myself with a new subject, or just flat out avoid situations I can tell are stained with evil.

The evil that the media glamorizes as “great,” is miniscule compared to the greatness of creation. In *Paradise Lost*, God explains his decision to give free will to man because “By me upheld, that he may know how frail / His fallen condition is, and to me owe / All his deliverance” (Milton III.180-182). The freedom to fall into temptation of sin allows humans to understand the true benefit of goodness. Something as simple as spending a day in a new environment can offer the wisdom needed to recognize evil. Once one obtains that knowledge, they have the chance to choose good, and if they do, their thoughts, environments, and the chance to do good in the future will all improve because of it.

Adler Wheatly

Grade 8, City of Fountains School

SciFi/Fantasy



Red

I open up my backpack and pull out my University of Sacramento application—the one my adviser printed out for me. She thinks that I only want to go there because it’s close to home, and she couldn’t be more right. I’ve had social anxiety for as long as I can remember, so my social life is limited to my family and some relatively close friends. I know I’d be too homesick to do well academically if I went somewhere far.

I dig through my backpack to grab my lucky red pencil case, but I can’t find it. Even after emptying everything out of my backpack, it’s nowhere to be seen. I let out a disappointed sigh as the realization hits me that I must have left my pencil case at school. There’s no way I’m going to fill out my college application without my lucky pencil case. The one time I forgot it at home junior year, I had a math test, and I ended up failing it. I just know I won’t get accepted to any college without it in hand. Being a Friday, though, I decide to just head back to the school to go get it, instead of waiting all weekend.

After growing so used to driving to school in early morning, it feels strange to drive there during twilight. As I drive, I begin to think back to when I had first found my red pencil case—back during my freshman year. I was having an anxiety attack in a bathroom stall after history class. Once the bell rang, calling the beginning of the next class, I waited to hear the chatter of students quiet down and the sound of classroom doors closing before I could step out of the bathroom. Just when I had started to walk to my next class, I realized I was mistakenly on the first floor. I remember being extremely confused, because my history class was on the second floor. Right outside that

history classroom there was even a bathroom, and I had sworn that was the bathroom I ran into as soon as the bell rang to dismiss students. But looking back on it, my brain must have just been scrambled after having such a bad anxiety attack. Just as I got back up to the second floor, I then saw a little red bag lying on the floor across the hall. I remember how neatly it was sitting there, right in front of my next class's door. When I picked it up to look at it, I was stunned to see it had a name on it reading "Will."

My name.

It could be nothing but fate, and from then on it was my lucky charm—my lucky red pencil case.

It's fully dark out by the time I reach the school's empty parking lot. As I get out of my car, a sudden, bittersweet feeling comes over me, like the end of a really good, sad movie, but the feeling isn't mine—it's more like I'm feeling it for someone else. It's so oddly divine that I get goosebumps. The feeling just as quickly leaves, and its absence is filled by a terrible fear. Every bone in my body wants to get back in the car and drive back home out of panic, but I know that this is me just scaring myself. I used to do this to myself all the time—scare myself and then have an anxiety attack for no reason.

I'm too old for this now. I'm an adult now. I'm 18. Nobody is gonna put up with an adult who has a fit every other day.

I take a deep breath and walk towards the main entrance of the school.

As I walk through the halls, I realize just how lonely an empty school is. You get so used to the sound of bells ringing and students rushing through the halls, but I much prefer the more calming quiet of the lights buzzing and clocks ticking. I enter my math class where I remember leaving my pencil case on my desk, and when it isn't there, I let out a groan of impatience. I start heading to the second floor to check my other classes I had today. While I walk through the second floor hallway, I notice the hands of the clock across the hall start spinning faster. Startled, I begin jogging closer to see if it was just me imagining things, but as I approach, I'm reassured that it's real.

And it just spins faster, and faster, and faster.

It's just a broken clock. There's no reason to be afraid of it. It's far more likely to be a faulty gear rather than a haunted clock, I reassure myself after feeling myself getting scared.

I walk back through the halls to check my history class. When I open the door, though, I immediately notice the grinding tick of a clock speeding up. Terrified, I take a few steps into the classroom and force my eyes to look right at the clock hanging on the wall next to my desk. It spins just as fast as the last clock, if not faster.

Horrorified, I run out of the classroom and over to where the nearest staircase should be, but isn't. Shocked, I stand there staring wide-eyed at a blank wall where the staircase was not even five minutes ago. I touch the cold, white wall in disbelief.

How could the staircase just disappear? It's as though it were never there.

With growing horror, I sprint to another staircase on the other side of the hall. Sighing in relief to see this one is still there, I sprint downward, praying the exit will be at the bottom to save me.

It isn't.

I'm dreaming. I'm in a dream. This isn't real, I repeat to myself. I start to sprint through the halls to find another exit, but I notice that certain classrooms seem to be in the wrong place—halls leading to more halls where they should lead to an exit.

I keep running in terror, just searching for an exit—any exit. As I run, though, the building feels less and less familiar and more and more like an infinite maze.

Finally, when I turn another corner, expecting to see yet another hallway, I get dizzy with relief. To my shock, I see a window on the other end of the hall.

I feel as though I just snapped out of a terrible dream.

As I move towards the window, I gaze into the grass and trees. The tall street lights stand over an empty road, and the beautiful night sky is littered with stars.

When I open the window, though, I immediately grow suspicious. I'm not hit with a breath of fresh air. Quickly, I reach out a hand to confirm that I can climb through the window back into the normal familiar world, but my hand instead hits a brick wall.

A painted wall.

I suddenly notice all of the strokes of paint, all of the inaccurate details in the trees and grass, all of the texture in the splattered paint imitating bricks and stars.

I'm filled with a horrible defeat. I am trapped. There is no way out.

I fall onto my knees, then onto my stomach as I begin to sob. As I cry there on the floor, I notice the floor start slowly turning red. Confused, I roll over and sit up to see all the walls and doors and even the window that betrayed me all begin slowly turning red.

As everything changes colors, the hallway morphs into a perfect square room, but then the doorknobs sink into the classroom doors, the cracks between the doors and the wall disappear, as the doors and walls sink into each other like a cut healing. The lights recede back into the ceiling, and the texture in the walls dulls to perfect flatness.

As if I wasn't already confused enough, the little red room suddenly expands to an incomprehensible size.

And before I know it, I am looking at a horizon of red—nothing else, just red.

Livia Willey

Grade 12, John Burroughs School
Educators: Jeanne Gillanders and
Eleanor DesPrez and Donya Allison
Short Story



Twenty Years

The drive to work was always long. I remember asking you about a million times for us to move closer to the station, but you loved that house and I loved you, so we stayed. I still love you. Even when you ask me to paint the bedroom that ugly shade of red. Even when I don't get to see you for the night. Even when you hound me to empty my trunk and clean the car, I still love you. I like my car rides quiet, because the thoughts in my head are all the company I need. Every morning on the way to work, I passed fields that decayed more with each day. The crows would flock from farm to farm, chased by something invisible to the human eye. Sometimes, every stoplight I neared would flash to red, even when there were no other cars around. That day I stared at the gleaming red light, knowing that I was going to be late for work.

Twenty years. That's how long the town had gone without a murder, twenty years. When I got to the station, it was clear that the towns' streak was over. Cops bustled around the room, perplexed by the crime. My eye's met Chief Nelson's across the room. The chief had been in the game a long time, I remembered him from when I was a kid and used to live in town. He was a very serious man, with graying hair and deadening eyes, eyes that looked like they had seen too much. "What's going on?" I asked.

"A woman was found dead in a warehouse," he responded, "three shots to the back..."

I kept questioning him, "Can I see?" The chief shrugged.

"We already checked out the crime scene. It's pretty clear it was a murder. No hits yet, but lemme tell you... we found everything there was to

find.” In the corner of the station, a father sat with his son in his lap, grabbing and squeezing him tightly, tears flooding down his face. They ached silently in a room full of busy people.

“Where is it?” I demanded.

“Down on Seymour,” he replied, “why?” Before I could answer, I was striding across the room to the parking lot.

When I got back to the station, after deeply analyzing every inch of the crime scene, I reached into my pocket and unveiled the one piece of evidence they had missed. Displaying the clear plastic bag in the air, Chief Nelson gazed and squinted at it. “My God...” he blurted, loud enough for the others to turn their heads in my direction. In the plastic bag was a bloody tooth. The chief snatched the bag and brought it to forensics. It wasn’t for another couple hours when I was pacing around my office that he squeezed through the door. He shook his head, “Nothin’.” He said, dropping the tooth on my desk. I watched him leave the room before I slipped the tooth into my pocket.

I remember the drive the next morning being a lot faster. There were no crows that day. The fields were paler and the air was drier, frostier. I knew that somewhere, along the roads I drove every morning and night, there was a killer. And I needed to find him. Back at the station, it was like everyone had forgotten what was happening. Twenty years. The two words chimed in my head. Everything was a lot quieter at work that day. “I’m gonna head to the scene again, should I take someone with me?” I asked.

The chief shot me down, “No... you’re needed here anyway. Already had enough people at the scene,” he explained. “why don’t you go help out forensics?” I nodded, waiting for him to turn away before sliding out the back door.

The cruiser was parked across the street while I searched through a camera’s viewfinder. The sign on the corner read “Seymour Rd”. Click. A man on a bicycle sped through the frame. Click. A woman talking on the phone strolled. Click. A teenage girl. An old man. A college student with his headphones in. Click. An elderly woman walking a dog. Click. A mother. Click. Her toddler son. Click. A whistling young man. Click. Click. Click. Click. Before I knew it it was dark out, and my eyes were sore from darting back and forth.

I don’t remember much about the drive to work the day after, but I could tell the murder of crows was stalking me. They turned their heads to see me disappear into the distance. My thoughts got louder and LOUDER; why were so many people walking by a crime scene? How could there be no other leads?

There had to be someone out there, someone I could find who killed this woman. At the police station, I headed straight to the printer. Every person who walked past that warehouse the day after the crime had their faces pasted on my office walls. I stared at them, longing for something to click. Chief Nelson burst in, raising his eyebrows while studying the walls. With his mouth agape, he slowly said, "I think we need to talk.."

That was the moment I knew something was wrong. I tried to breathe to make my thoughts quieter. Shut eyes, inhale, exhale, relief. But somehow when I closed my eyes, I saw my mother's face. Nothing should have gotten in my way of saving the next woman. Nelson taking me off the case only made me more eager and determined. No one else needed to get hurt. I shoved open the door titled "Chief of Police". The murder file laid on his desk, and when I opened it, two words stared at me in big black ink: "NO LEADS". I peered at the walls of my office for the rest of the night. A man. A woman. A college student. An elderly woman. A mother. A toddler. A young man. Back and forth I looked, searching for something, some kind of fact to appear out of nowhere, until I passed out on the office floor.

I woke up when you called me. It was the morning and you were worried about me since I didn't come home the night before. I was so sorry. I told you how much I loved you. I could feel your voice calm over the phone. You said to take the paint cans out of my trunk. I smiled and waited on the phone until you hung up. When Chief Nelson strolled into my room, he studied the pictures again. He looked back down at me sympathetically. "You know I've been thinking about you," He told me. I stayed quiet, not knowing how to respond. "and I think maybe what you could use is a little time off."

"No- no sir. I'm per-" I argued before he interrupted.

"This is not for me its for you!" he said. I countered back.

"Perfectly fine! I'm perfectly fine, sir. I'm just trying to save them." The chief sighed and stared at his shoes. He shook his head a bit, and searched around the room for something to change the subject to.

"What's that doin' here?" he asked, gesturing to a framed picture on my desk.

"That's my dad." I told him. The chief interrogated me.

"No, I know who it is. But what're you doing with that here?"

"I look up to him. I'm proud to be related to him."

"Proud," He muttered. He shook his head and scoffed quietly. Thoughts pounded in my brain. I got lost in my head for a second. It pulled me back to

when we first got married. You weren't afraid to ask me about my parents. I told you all about how warm my mother was, and about how when she died, it felt like the world was a little bit colder. I knew that my dad felt it too. You understood how sometimes I thought I was still a little kid; the ten year old I was when she was murdered. I guess when she died, the house was too cold for my dad. I didn't blame him for leaving, sometimes I thought I would do the same thing.

"My father was a great man, and you should have nothing to say against him!" I shouted at Chief Nelson, ripping the papers off the walls of my office and storming out to my car.

A pounding at the car window woke me up. It was you. You were sobbing asking why I didn't come home anymore. I didn't know what to say. You were so panicked and scared, the only thing I could do was hug you. I remember what you said into my chest, between sniffles. "Will you take the red paint out please?" Nelson could hear you shouting from his window, so he came outside to calm you down. He took us back in the station and brought you in his office for tea. After some minutes passed by, he tapped me on the shoulder and asked me to talk with him.

"Listen... getting wrapped up in cases like this, it's not good for you." The chief insisted.

"I'm just doing my job," I refuted, "I'm doing what nobody else seems to be able to do."

"I know you're doing your job but it's not healthy. Not for you, your coworkers, your boss..." When I squinted at his face hard enough, I could see a smirk twitching from his mouth. He leered down at me and arose out of his chair. "I'm sorry but I don't think you can work with us anymore," He explained, "if you can't seem to respect me and my orders, I'm gonna have to let you go." As the chief passed me by, he patted me on the shoulder and whispered with that uncanny voice of his, "Stay outta trouble."

I slammed my car door shut. I was the only one who cared enough to actually try to solve this case. I striked my fist against the window in anger and threw the crime scene pictures all around the car. It was all over, and it was his fault. He called himself a chief, but I knew what he really was. As I drove away from the police station, I didn't go home. I made my way to a nearby motel. My heart pounded and thoughts jabbed my head. I could hear the THUD THUD THUD. It practically shook the car. With each turn of the wheel and acceleration of the gas, my heart thumped.

I waited for dark before I came back to the station. Chief Nelson was the last of his shift to leave. I watched him get in his car and tracked him from a careful distance. The nighttime frost brought with it the cool kind of wind, numbing your nose and fingertips— the frost engulfed my car windows. I could still hear the pounding as I drove. The sky was dark and the moon was nowhere to be found when Nelson finally came to a stop at the park. I observed as he pulled to the side of the road.

There was a knock at the window. It startled me awake, and the light of morning was too bright for me to fully open my eyes. A crowd of police officers encircled my car, staring at me curiously. The cop knocked on my window again. I was at the station parking lot. I got out of the car and asked him what was going on. “What’re you doin’ here man? You don’t work here anymore.” He questioned. I opened my mouth and turned to see the full crowd of my former coworkers. “Did you sleep here?” I was just as confused as he was. Other cops began to squawk at me.

“You can’t be here anymore...I think you should get home...Do you know where you are?” they asked me. I murmured unintelligible words back. I grabbed the sides of my head and looked at all of my old friends. “Your car was spotted on a surveillance camera of a nearby park last night. Do you understand?” the cop commented. “There was another murder there. Someone was killed. So do you think you could come inside? Maybe talk to us a bit?”

“No. No! No! It was Nelson! It was the chief! No!” I hollered into the frozen air that seemed dense enough to swallow my words whole. Pushing my way through the mob, I rushed back to my car and sped away from the policemen. My mind was finally quiet. This time the thumping kept me company on the way home. It beat rhythmically with all the curves of the road. With every bump on the ground. Every break before a stoplight. All of the crows I saw fled in the opposite direction. The fields and farms were all dead. The wind was foggy and suffocated my car. The car was engulfed in a mess of case files and suspect pictures. When I finally pulled into the driveway, the pounding of my heart had stopped. But sirens started. I shut the car door and walked towards my house. The cruisers zoomed in the driveway, surrounding me and my car.

“PUT YOUR HANDS UP... EMPTY YOUR POCKETS...GET ON YOUR KNEES, NOW... HANDS ON YOUR HEAD...” I followed every command that echoed throughout the neighborhood. The tooth trickled down my quaking hand and dropped on the ground. But I watched as their eyes shifted elsewhere, to

something behind me. They all seemed to gawk at the same thing. I turned around and saw the red paint seeping out of the trunk. My knees shuffled to the trunk of my car, which popped open. The paint cans had spilled all over the interior. But there you were. You were drowning in it, it enveloped your body. I hugged you, getting the red paint all over me. I buried my head into your body, like a little kid, closing my eyes and feeling the chills spread across my skin.

This time, you didn't hug me back.

I'm writing this to tell you it wasn't me, and all I ever wanted to do was save her. Twenty years. It took me twenty years to realize that I could never save her. And now I'm trapped in this frozen deteriorating cell, knowing I will do whatever it takes to catch the chief until the day I die. And I know I still miss you. And I still love you. **I'm gonna paint the bedroom red when we get back home.**

Jonathan Windsor Jr.

Grade 9, Daniel Academy

SciFi/Fantasy



Remember the Slain

Sirius stared out his window. He was slender and tall and looked out at the fruitful and rich land with slate patches of soil. The mountain's black granite reflected the white sun over his planet.

He had woken from a disturbing dream of seven strong eagles flying high in the sky. Beautifully, the eagles soared, prospered, and multiplied. But one eagle left the Seven. Jealous and proud, he searched for power and found none, and in that state of pride, he turned into a vulture. The Vulture thought how he could kill the remaining eagles. How am I to kill six eagles when just one is mightier than I? For I shall gain thirteen disciples, and fourteen surely shall take six.

He deceived thirteen of the eagles' descendants with manipulation and torture and gained thirteen vultures.

A war broke out between the vultures and the eagles, both paying great prices; five more eagles were slain, but they brought defeat on the vultures. However, the vultures survived in darkness, growing in number.

Sirius was now battling the idea of telling the king of his planet, The Elder. He knew that the ability to decipher dreams and visions lay with The Anointed, the telepathic and telekinetic warriors of his race: the Wilcrons. Sirius was not as strong as a fully grown Anointed yet because he needed to be apprenticed by one who was Anointed. The Elder had what seemed to be limitless wisdom. Sirius was very fond of him, and the Elder was, likewise, fond of Sirius.

Sirius knew little of his people's history. His educators had refused to teach him history without explanation.

Still pondering, Sirius made his way through his home meandering down the stairs and into the base floor of the house. Sirius continued his stroll, no longer wandering.

His decision was set. He turned from the road and retreated back to his sheltered, peaceful environment and sat back against the windowsill, enjoying the beauty of the mountains and discarding his worries as of little concern.

Sirius brushed his ash colored hair out of his amber eyes. His father burst into his room.

"You need to leave," his father started, "Go! You need to go to the Elder now!" His father's voice was urgent and anxious, but what startled Sirius was he had never seen his father this way under any circumstance.

Before Sirius could depart, his father and mother embraced him heavily and then ushered him down the street.

Looking all around him, he saw common citizens armed with swords, spears, and rifles. His people, his home, his race were all preparing for war.

Once Sirius had reached the Elder's home, the sky was roaring with thousands of legions of warcrafts entering up into the atmosphere.

Then Sirius saw the Elder waiting for him.

The Elder hastily rummaged in his cabinets and brought four items and set them before Sirius.

The first item was a wooden flask that The Elder had already begun to open pouring the liquid on Sirius's head.

"Sirius, today, I bestow upon you the oil of my grandfather's father."

The cool oil dripped down his flushed face.

He then picked up a steel flask unhinging the lid, a flame proceeding from the throat.

"I give to you the fire of the one true God of our ancestors."

He then poured the liquid fire on his head, igniting the oil. Sirius's screams filled the room, but he felt no pain. He thought the Elder was on top of him but astounded that he was on his stomach feeling an invisible weight.

After he had regained control of his screaming and the electricity fading, the Elder lifted him off the floor.

"Now I give you my sword and ring," he declared, placing the ring on Sirius's forefinger. Sirius was startled by the cold gold and the heavy sword hilt in his hand. Curiously pulling the trigger on the sword hilt, pointing the hilt in

front of him, out sprang the blade of the sword, too quick for his eye to see. Then pulling it again, the blade retracted back into the hilt.

“My king!” cried a voice from the window, alerting Sirius. It was the King’s Guard that contained about twenty men.

“Proditor!” the Elder replied, “I need you to escort Sirius to the outskirts of the city. There you will find a shuttle that will be able to send him to a remote destination.”

Proditor was a sturdy young soldier who wore navy clad armor resembling authority on the battlefield.

“I am designated to protect the King of the Wilcrons, my King! I will not abandon you to be slaughtered!” Proditor stubbornly ordered.

“Which you will, Proditor, as it is fortunate for me I am no longer king. I have chosen Sirius,” the Elder remarked.

All stared at Sirius.

“Elder. No, no, no. I can't. You can't. I'm only-” Sirius protested.

The Elder cut him off. “It is done and over and can not be undone, Sirius. Whether you want it or not, you will be king.”

Then thunder rang out, and Sirius witnessed the thousands of warships soaring in the sky being shot down by the cannons on the ground.

“We have been infiltrated!” Proditor declared. “Lang, you stay with him!”

Lang tore Sirius from the window. The sirens sounded mournful, propelling people to safety, and the engines of enemy warcrafts speeding toward the surface from the sky sounded like cruel glee to him.

Proditor yanked Sirius out of the house and into the street, surrounding him with the members of the guard. Then the shooting started. The King's Guard continued to move down the street taking out attackers as they moved to protect Sirius. They had entered a cobblestone street filled with a mix of infiltrators and soldiers.

The attackers were dressed in entirely black uniforms, concealing their faces with masked helmets, scorned with malice.

The Guard arrived at the gates of the outskirts, and a soldier unfastened the latch. His helmet shattered, spreading a red haze over the rest of the Guard.

Lang shoved Sirius against the outer wall of the gate as the Guard fired their weapons, annihilating the attackers, but one of the other guards had been shot and lay bleeding in the gate’s entrance.

“We’re clear!” Lang yelled.

Sirius observed one of the bodies of the attackers and realized that these were members of the empire, the allies of the Wilcrons! While a group of soldiers sealed the gate, a deafening explosion blew the gate off its hinges. Sirius could no longer see the soldiers.

In the clearing, there were shadows moving in the smoke. The imperials, still persistent and stubborn, continued firing at Sirius' guard.

The guard strategically moved into a subsection of the city, but, sadly, this was the most violent of firefights. Imperials were storming houses, killing sheltered children. What Sirius was witnessing was appalling: the Imperials were not only killing the children that Sirius had grown up knowing but dragging them from their homes and forcing them to be held in front of the attackers. They were creating body shields and making the youth the center of the carnage.

"Sirius," Lang got his attention through the chaos. "We need to move."

Sirius nodded in confirmation, and he and Lang ran after Proditor through the carnage. Running faster than Sirius, Lang followed his commander into an open-roof hangar. Sirius, catching up with them, paused at the entryway, waiting for the other soldiers to arrive. He felt his stomach churn and squeeze with guilt as he saw no one else coming.

"Sirius!" He heard Lang cry, but he could not move. He sat there, staring at the hundreds of bodies spread on his street.

He then turned and proceeded to run to Lang who was perched on a small vehicle, gesturing him to move. He was blinded by a powerful, bright light and thrown backward by a powerful force.

Sirius tried to push himself up but was pulled back to the ground. He tried several times before he was able to sit up. Struggling, focusing on the scene in front of him, there was wreckage and twisted iron littered in the soil of the hanger. Remembering Lang was on top of the shuttle, he attempted to get on his feet and staggered drunkenly. Shaking his head, like a dog shakes its body when it is wet, he regained a sober-state quickly and was able to walk through the burning wreckage.

Sirius found Lang in the midst of mutilated metal. Lang's legs were severed as well as his left arm, leaving crimson blood scattered where he lay. Sirius then sat down next to him, shifting his body, so he was cradling Lang.

"Sirius?" Lang's voice was vague and his expression blank.

"Lang. It's going to be alright, we just need-" his voice broke.

Sirius' tears flowed down his cheeks as he held his friend who gave everything to protect him.

He reached with his right hand and put it on Sirius' cheek. Lang exhaled sharply and stopped breathing, his arm falling to his side.

"Lang? Lang?!" he screamed, "No, don't leave me, Lang!"

His cheek felt unusually warm and wet, so he felt with his hand and saw Lang's blood on his fingers.

He stood helplessly as he looked at his friend.

"Well done, Sirius. Very valiant!"

Sirius spun around, facing the voice behind him.

There stood a man clad in iron armor and a black cloak. The hood of the cloak was draping over his face, and he stood with crossed arms proudly.

"Who are you?" Sirius demanded.

The man ignored him and started to speak again, "I know what it's like to be defeated."

The man started pacing back and forth, not looking at Sirius.

"I was a young man like you are, Sirius, noble, valiant, and peaceful. But I was young and foolish. I was... weak," he paused, savoring each word he said, steadily swaying with glee.

The man continued speaking, "I was weak. But now I have found a path to power. Don't you think, Sirius?"

He stretched out his arm and pointed at Sirius. Sirius struggled to breathe, feeling as though he was being choked. The pressure intensified, and Sirius stumbled, trying to fill his lungs with air but was unable to do so.

"Who are you?" Sirius cried, wanting to lash out at him, finally being able to breathe.

"I am Arrogans. I am a soldier of the Marians," he said, bursting with pride as Sirius stood to his feet.

"I am a soldier of Wilcron," he stated.

"I could have killed you, but I'm sparing you, Sirius!" Arrogans spat with a venomous glare.

"You expect me to owe you a debt for your false mercy?" he said with a hysterical laugh. "I owe you nothing!" he yelled, initiating his sword and lashing at Arrogans.

Sirius then regained an offensive position and faced Arrogans.

He charged toward Arrogans again and was thrown back by an unknown force. Sirius lay in the soil, exhausted, as Arrogans loomed over him, triumphant.

He observed Arrogans's armor, knowing he wouldn't be able to penetrate it. He grabbed his sword, retracted the blade into Arrogans's outstretched hand, and pierced it through.

The hangar filled with Arrogans' shrieks of pain. During the mayhem, Sirius stood yet again and faced him. Arrogans's right hand split and openly bled down his arm as he cradled it.

Sirius pressed the point of his blade on Arrogans's throat. He angrily retracted the sword back into the hilt and glared at Arrogans.

"Too cowardly to take a life, Sirius?" he taunted.

He first punched his armor, but then he found a weak spot under Arrogans's arm, throwing his fists into his exposed ribs, which broke as his knuckles made contact.

He drew back after slamming Arrogans' head into the dirt with his heel and watched him kneeling.

Sirius threw back the hood of his enemy.

Arrogans' eyes were a muddied yellow.

He felt he should kill Arrogans, but something held him back.

"Do you believe in mercy?" Arrogans grunted weakly.

"No." Sirius stated.

I should kill him, Sirius thought. But another thought came to mind. What profit would you gain from killing an injured man? What would vengeance provide, Sirius?

Shocked, Sirius drew his sword back and retracted it into the hilt. He felt guilty for longing to kill Arrogans.

Sirius felt a stinging pain rise from the base of his ribcage climbing into his left lung. He looked down and saw Arrogans' hand and wrist thrusting the hilt of a dagger into his stomach.

Staggering slightly, Arrogans slowly stood.

"You are weak!" he jeered.

He pushed the dagger deeper into Sirius.

Blurry-eyed, Sirius brought the sword hilt to Arrogans' forehead and pulled the trigger. The sword initiated the blade piercing his skull with a horrific crack.

Sirius collapsed the blade, and Arrogans' body fell face-forward in the dirt.

He felt disoriented, staggering around the hanger field, clutching the hilt of the dagger. He gripped the hilt in his stomach and pulled out a six-inch dagger.

He sank to his knees, his blood dripping on the soil, and his vision dimming.

Ask me for help, a thought came to his mind, but then he decided that it wasn't just a thought.

Sirius started hearing his heartbeat louder and louder until the sound was roaring in his ears.

Swaying, he weakly said, "Help."

Then he faded into darkness.

...

Sirius jerked awake with a violent grunt.

Sirius looked down at his stomach and was astonished. His shirt was ripped and bloodstained, but his abdomen was thinly scarred and as good as it was before the wound.

How did I do that? he thought.

You didn't, a voice replied in his head, I healed you.

"How?" he said aloud.

You asked me for help. And I gave it to you.

"But why?"

You heard me, Sirius, and you obeyed.

"But why me?" he cried.

Because you listened! he heard the voice in an equal cry.

Sirius then listened for any enemies. The city was eerily silent.

He then cautiously walked down toward the center of the city.

Silent tears streamed down his face as he peered at the neighbors, friends, and classmates lying inanimate, riddled with bullet and sword wounds alike.

He spotted a corpse. His stomach churned seeing her elegant blonde hair from behind hoping with all his life that it wasn't who he thought it was.

When he arrived at the slain woman, he gently rolled her to her back and stared into his mother's empty eyes.

Sirius felt hot; his stomach boiled with guilt. Then he heard a noise not far from where he stood.

An Imperial soldier crouched, dragging the corpse of an elderly man.

Sirius cautiously followed from a distance. The mounds of bodies started to be less compact. He paused, confused, as snow started gliding down with the wind. It had been nearing the beginning of summer, which, in Sirius's expectancy, he did not predict snow nor rain for a season.

The smell of smoke invaded his nose, and he watched as a flake of snow landed in his bare hand. The snow was warm and turned out not to be snow at all: it was raining ash.

Curious, Sirius peered at the soldier and watched him straddling the corpse, tossing it into the fire.

Horrified, Sirius felt the disrespect the Empire had put on his people. As if it was not enough to swoop in and stab them all in the back but also to burn the bodies instead of giving a proper burial.

Furious and raving, Sirius fumed, longing to attack the single soldier.

As he was walking toward the fire, a glint caught his eye, pulling him from all his hate and capturing his interest. The glint was caused by an Imperial's fallen shoulder pad.

Grabbing and weighing the armor in his hands, he noticed a dark jade green insignia on the black gleaming iron. As Sirius continued to examine the pad, he angled the armor and discovered that the insignia was a vulture.

The armor hit the dirt with a metallic ping.

Sirius couldn't breathe, his tears burned his cheeks like fire.

"It's my fault," he choked.

He realized that if he had only told his dream to the Elder earlier that hundreds of thousands would be alive right now. It hurt enough knowing that dozens of men had sacrificed for Sirius, but knowing that his very hesitancy had cost the lives of children, weighed him down with grief.

His eyes filled with tears, and his mind filled with sorrow and regret.

Sirius.

"What?" he cried rashly, ignoring the soldier in front of him. "Isn't enough knowing that the blood of my people have drenched my hands, but to know that I could have -"

His voice was broken by his own sobbing.

He had woken that morning with a dream that could have saved tens of thousands, but now he was alone with a spirit he did not understand and wore the mantle of a king.

Sirius. I know; I warned you.

“Warned me? Your warning cost me my very soul!” he screamed.

Sirius, you did not listen to me then, but I need you to listen to me now. No matter what you do, evil or good, no matter how severe your faults, I will always be with you. Through the light, and through the darkness, through the storm, and through the fire.

Sirius felt sudden peace. For he knew he was not alone.

“Halt!” He heard a voice command from behind.

Sirius obeyed the soldier behind him, discerning violence and danger in the man. Before Sirius could react, the soldier slammed the butt of the gun into the back of his skull. Stars appeared in his vision as his brain smacked into the front of his forehead.

Then he knew no more as unconsciousness claimed him.

Yiding Ye

Grade 11, Ladue Horton Watkins HS

Educator: Jon Frank

Personal Essay



My Brightest Star

The late afternoon sun casts long shadows across the dashboard as my hands, steady on the wheel, navigate the car almost automatically through the neighborhood streets. My friend perches next to me, deep in thought, scrolling through my phone's Spotify. After a few moments, she taps a song and places my phone back into its holder, satisfied with her choice. The warm sound of a guitar fills the car, followed soon by a familiar voice singing lyrics I haven't heard since I started wearing a mask...

"The brightest star in the night sky, do you remember..."

The radiance of the sun suddenly disappears as I recall the corridor leading to my grandparents' apartment, seemingly a mile long. Outside the lone window, the polluted Shenzhen night was dark save for a single bright star casting its light onto the door. My legs felt heavy and my back ached from sleeping on the plane, but the heavenly aroma of freshly cooked fried rice carried me toward the entrance. The familiar sound of the doorbell echoed across the hall. Thumps of rushed footsteps approached, and the door burst open. Warm light exploded into the dark corridor, revealing the glowing silhouettes of my grandparents grinning from ear to ear. The exhaustion evaporated from my body, and I seemed to float as they pulled me in for a hearty embrace. "Look at our little boy," my grandpa remarked as he patted my head. "You've grown so much since we last saw you!"

"Now lost in the wind, the figures that once journeyed with me..."

The lights dim and I am transported to my bedroom. My stomach grumbling, I let myself sink into the familiar softness of the mattress with a yawn and looked outside, past the half-open blinds, to the solitary star painting my bedroom wall with streaks of soft light. As my attention followed the lines of starlight to the clock, which read 12:05 A.M., the same doorbell echoed throughout the house. I immediately leaped out of my bed and rushed down the stairs, salivating at the anticipation of a midnight snack. As I made my way into the dining room, my eyes landed on the white malatang takeout bag that sat at the center of the table. At that moment, I seemed to forget how to walk and just stared at it, imagining the savory quail eggs, the tender crab sticks, and the burn of the spice on my tongue. My fantasy was broken, however, as the soft strumming of a guitar filled the room, followed soon by a gentle voice. My attention turned to the source of the sound, it was my aunt's phone on the table with her standing beside it, grinning at me expectantly.

"What song is that?" I was intrigued. "I like it."

"It's called 'The Brightest Star in the Night Sky,'" my aunt replied with a radiant smile. "Isn't it wonderful?"

"Give me the courage to believe again..."

I begin to feel the warm rays of the midday sun hitting the back of my neck as I find myself sitting in the corner of a small restaurant, sparsely furnished with paint peeling off on the edges of the walls and an old fan on the ceiling that squeaked when it spun. As I sipped on a glass bottle of Sprite, the waitress came over with three bowls on her tray: Two bowls of regular Lanzhou noodles for me and my mom, and a bowl of extra thin noodles for my dad; it was what he always got. I looked down at my noodles, which seemed to pop out from the plain background of the restaurant with its subtle golden glow. Ravenous, I dug in with my chopsticks and let the chewy noodles, rich broth, crispy green onions, and delicate beef come together in my mouth. "This is the good stuff." I thought to myself as I remembered all the times I ate these noodles with my parents. Sometimes, the most beautiful things can be hidden within an ordinary exterior.

"Whenever I can't find a reason for existence..."

The warmth of the sun and the noodles vanishes as I am transported to the couch in my grandparents' living room, dark from the cloudy sky outside that signaled impending rain. My parents sat across from me, trying to hide the concern on their faces.

“Hey kiddo,” My dad sighed, “So as you know, we did a check-in, and it turns out that mom has lung cancer.”

The world seemed to freeze around me. I didn't want to scream. I didn't want to cry. I was just confused. Confused because the word cancer had always been a foreign concept to me, something impossibly far away. Confused because my mom, someone who had always seemed so strong, who had always been able to do anything, was now the one in need of help. Suddenly, I didn't care that she stayed up all night to wash the bedsheets when I got sick and threw up in bed. I didn't care that she spent every evening of my childhood answering my endless questions. She is my mom, and that's why I cared.

Droplets of rain began to silently creep onto the windows. It did so slowly at first, but in just a few moments the drizzle became a shower, and the shower, a storm. The sudden and thunderous pelt of the rain outside soon muffled the rest of my dad's words. “Early stages...”, “quick surgery...”, “back to the US with me...”, “stay for recovery...”. All I could manage to mutter was, “OK.”

“Whenever I'm lost in the darkness of the night...”

The sharp glow of the overhead fluorescent lights fills my vision as I find myself on the travelators of Seattle airport with my dad, passing by one restaurant after another. My stomach growled at me furiously, but I was overwhelmed by all the options. Seemingly sensing my stress, the airport announcer, following a gentle chime, reminded me with her soothing, motherly voice that everything was functioning as intended. I took a deep breath and scanned the expansive hallways for an ideal dinner location. Eventually, after almost a full loop around the terminal, I caught sight of something familiar: A giant glowing golden M. I glanced at my dad, and he glanced back, a silent agreement forming between us. Our bodies stiff from a thirteen-hour flight, we trudged over and got the usual: A double quarter-pounder with cheese for me, and a filet-o-fish for him. We took a seat with our food in the corner, and I, still tense, decided to distract myself by looking out the window. The peaceful night sky was dotted with stars, but one in particular stood out to me with its brightness. As I examined it, I noticed the reflection of a familiar figure on the glass. In a moment of realization, I looked back inside and my eyes landed on the same figure across the table, calmly unpacking his sandwich. At that moment, even though we were drained and alone in a foreign place, I didn't feel the least bit scared as I knew he would have my back no matter what happened. With that reassuring sense of

security, I stuffed the burger into my mouth. Right then, I must have tasted the juiciest patties, most perfectly melted cheese, crispiest onions, and fluffiest buns, because all I could remember was that it was the best burger I'd ever had in my life.

"This is really good!" I exclaimed with a mouthful of food.

"As long as you're enjoying it." My dad replied, his eyes twinkling at my delight.

"The brightest star in the night sky, please light up my way."

"Adam, ADAM!"

"Huh?" I snap around, a deer in the headlights, startled away from my memories.

"The light's green, what are you doing?" My friend asks, clearly confused by my dramatic reaction.

"Oh shoot, sorry, I zoned out for a bit." My face burns with embarrassment as I press the gas a little too hard. I once again notice the shadows on the dashboard, now made a little bit longer by the setting sun.

I open the door to the house to be greeted by my mom, her eyes sparkling from the last rays of the sun.

"Your dad and I are gonna watch a movie, care to join us?"

"Actually, I-" I stop in my tracks as my memories flash by once again. Homework can wait.

"Sure, I'll be with you in a bit."

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Critical Essay



Torture and Trauma: Therapy Within the Troubled Teen Industry

Introduction

In the famous photograph *Migrant Mother* by Dorothea Lange, the audience is presented with the scene of a disheveled mother looking into the distance with two children buried in her shoulders. The photograph was taken during the era of The Great Depression, giving context that this mother is probably poor and without a home, however, she bears a look of determination, as though she is detailing how she must provide for her children. It is truly saddening that such a woman be placed in such harsh conditions to where she must fight to escape. This photograph has a heavily related theme structure with *A Long Walk to Freedom* written by Nelson Mandela. In the book, Mandela details how he is a political prisoner, and how prison is attempting to break his spirit, so that he might forfeit and give in. What is special however is Mandela's willpower, he details how he knows he must fight and not let those who imprisoned him break down his will. Comparing both of these works in the contemporary world, it might seem ludicrous, one might think that there is no such situation in which people are placed in situations where they are struggling viciously, or in which their will is broken down. However, this is not true.

Context

In an age of rising rates of mental health issues among adolescents, it may seem to be common sense to provide basic quality care for struggling

teens. Unfortunately, the fact remains this large industry is monopolizing these troubled teens, and at the same time offers false treatment. Victims of the Troubled Teen Industry (TTI) have detailed various factors of abuse, neglect, and trauma. The “therapy” provided to these struggling teens includes sleep deprivation, hunger, humiliation, and physical abuse. There are extreme cases in which teens were put through sexual abuse, and even killed. Yet, with all of this, these industries manage to profit \$1.2 billion (NYRA, 23). This epidemic might seem minuscule, mainly due to the fact that there is minute media coverage of the TTI, however, according to the American Bar Association, “120,000 - 200,000 young people reside in some type of group home, residential treatment center, boot camp, or correctional facility” (ABA, 21). Unfortunately, this issue is currently not garnering nearly as much attention as it needs, this is truly America’s hidden issue. While these problems go unnoticed, parents continue to send their children to these harmful correctional facilities in hopes that it will fix their child or teen. In addition, there are strong proponents of the troubled teen industry. This falsely promised treatment and continued harm begs the question: is the Troubled Teen Industry (TTI) a quality route for mental health care? It can be observed that the Troubled Teen Industry is in fact not a quality route for mental health care. To come to this conclusion, there are many aspects to consider and analyze.

Transportation

Before these teenagers are subjected to the treatment centers themselves, they must first experience the transportation process. It might seem simple, but why would the transportation process matter? It’s because, during the process, the teenagers get the first sense of what they might endure at these facilities. According to a study done in 2014 by Dr. Ira Robbins, Professor of Law at American University Washington College of Law, the transportation process is uncannily similar to kidnapping. It constitutes the transporters going into the bedroom of an unsuspecting teen during their sleep, dragging them out of bed, handcuffing them, and dragging them crying and screaming into a van where they are then shipped off to a distant location. It seems like a simple case of kidnapping, however, these parents not only authorize this interaction, but they actually pay for it (Robbins, 14). This unprecedented sequence of actions opens up multiple opportunities for the victim to be traumatized. This process also usually occurs without the victim's prior knowledge, and more often, without their consent (Harper, 21). This

collection of events creates an unfortunate unique opportunity for multiple instances of abuse to occur, as well as trauma to occur in the victim. All of this occurs before the teen is even brought to the camp. The transport process is simply a sinister precursor, to what awaits the teenager at whatever facility they are brought to.

Types of Camps

After the transportation process, the teenagers are then brought to one of the three main camps that the National Youth Rights Association identifies. The first one is a Boot Camp, which usually utilizes a militaristic style methodology within their treatments. The second one is Conversion Therapy Camp, these are better known. Conversion Therapy Camps usually utilize religious methodology and doctrine in order to treat their patients, however, these patients are usually those of the LGBTQ+ community. These camps prey on vulnerable teens of the LGBTQ+ community in order to try and “pray the gay away.” These camps are extremely harmful and propagate negative stereotypes and notions that those of the LGBTQ+ community aren’t valid. The third type of camp is wilderness therapy camps, otherwise known as Outdoor Behavioral Healthcare (OBH). These camps involve therapy that requires the teen to participate in therapy that is interactive with their natural environment. OBH usually utilizes extreme physical labor in order to tire their patients (NYRA, 23).

Treatment

After the teen arrives at one of the aforementioned facilities, they will then face perhaps the most troubling part of the TTI: the treatment. To further investigate the treatment aspect of the TTI, it is helpful to look at an actual example: the Bethel Boys Academy (BBA), which was a correctional home for troubled male teenagers. In a 2022 study conducted by Andrew Brown, Ph.D. in Philosophy at Arizona State University, Brown found that “the staff members at BBA would resort to extreme physical violence against the children held captive there for even minor infractions” (Brown, 22). This example of the Bethel Boys Academy corroborates a study conducted in 2021 by Law Clerk Yasmin Younis that claims that the troubled teen industry actually increases the likelihood of teen recidivism which is extremely damaging to not only the teen, but to the teen’s family (Younis 21). Brown and Younis both outline the extreme faults of a major aspect of the TTI. In the healthcare industry, undoubtedly the most important part of being involved is the treatment. Seeing as how the Troubled Teen Industry is handling the mental healthcare of

teenagers, common sense would say to take care of them, and nurture them. However, the TTI tramples on these ideals and further harms the kids. This treatment, through all of the abuse and assault, has troubling effects, however, some people argue the TTI is extremely effective at treating teens with addiction problems or mental illnesses.

Efficacy

In 2013, Michael Hoag released a report in which he heralds the TTI, claiming that the unique methodology the TTI utilizes is extremely effective for treating teens struggling with addiction and/or mental illness. However, what's interesting about this report is that it was published in a journal called Residential Treatment for Children & Youth (Hoag, 13). This journal is a part of the TTI, "residential treatment" is just another term for the Troubled Teen Industry. Another study by Mark Widmer corroborates Hoag's findings specifically with wilderness therapy, stating that it helps with academic efficacy and self-efficiency (Widmer, 14). These studies both claim that specifically, wilderness therapy is extremely effective through the usage of unique methodology on troubled teens. While these views may be extremely biased, Lesley Kopsick, PhD in Philosophy at Barry University, reveals the extreme effects that trail the victims of the TTI. After returning from the TTI, parents of the teens reported extreme academic and social/emotional barriers and challenges even years after the teen's admittance (Kopsick, 22). This evidence of academic with social/emotional hindrance, with the aforementioned trauma mentioned by Harper, furthers the idea that the Troubled Teen Industry is in no way effective. In fact, this study contradicts those of Hoag and Widmer by showing the extreme academic damage the TTI causes. With all of this mounting evidence, parents still send their children to these facilities with false hopes that they will receive quality healthcare, perhaps it is because of the studies like Michael Hoag and Mark Widmer published. This is where an interesting dichotomy within the Troubled Teen Industry occurs, on one hand, you have studies by Hoag and Widmer, that herald the TTI and convince parents to send their children to these facilities with hopes of the treatment doing wonders on their child. On the other hand, you have the horrifying reality of the TTI, which is the abuse and the assault that the children experience. But there are other reasons that the TTI remains prosperous and withstands all the allegations of sexual assault, abuse, and death.

Faults

Throughout all of the abuse and trauma these kids have to endure within the Troubled Teen Industry, it begs a secondary question: How are these facilities still in operation? Studies by both the American Bar Association and the National Youth Rights Association both concluded that the Troubled Teen Industry has a cardinal characteristic of having an extreme lack of governmental oversight (NYRA, 23) (ABA, 21), with little to no bureaucratic agencies examining or investigating the claims made by survivors of the TTI. This lack of oversight is not only extremely negligent, but it also allows the TTI to continue to impose and utilize its harmful treatment. Coupled with the fact that there are zero regulations in place for the TTI, it creates a large opportunity for abuse of power. Along with the lack of governmental oversight, the TTI also brings in a massive profit, bringing in an astounding \$1.2 billion every year (NYRA, 23). This helps the TTI industry be prosperous despite lawsuits from upset clients they have. It also helps the Troubled Teen Industry pay for research reports like the one from Michael Hoag. This astonishing profit also contributes to advertising expenses for the TTI so that they are able to reach more families. The last confounding fault of the TTI is the major exploitation of legal loopholes (ABA, 21). The TTI industry is able to take advantage of legal loopholes that involve labor laws and the victim's ages in order to get away with their heinous industry.

Conclusion

Migrant Mother, A Long Walk To Freedom, and the Troubled Teen Industry. What do they have in common? They all involve innocent people, forced into a situation where they are beaten down, where people try to shatter their souls. In all three situations, everyone has to fight and claw their way out of the horrible situation in order to survive. From the traumatic transportation process, which occurs without consent, to the assault and abuse endured within the treatment process. It can be confidently concluded that the Troubled Teen Industry is in fact not a quality route for mental health care. The TTI is disastrous for the mental health of teenagers and even hinders them down the line far after they've been admitted to one of these terrifying facilities. While this issue is in nature hidden within America, all hope is not lost, programs like BREAKING CODE SILENCE are giving voices to victims of "institutionalized child abuse," and sharing their stories across the country. This organization is fighting to pass legislation to regulate this harmful industry (BCS, 23). The future doesn't have to be bleak, the truth is spreading, and hope is spreading along with it.

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Flash Fiction



Objects in the Mirror

Four months after her older brother's death, Irene decides the world is much emptier without him in it.

It wasn't that he'd been particularly involved in her life, but he was someone who took up space, whose presence had been impossible to ignore, insistent and demanding — like he was always saying look at me, look at me, listen, listen. She'd taken something about it for granted, she realized, standing alone in her kitchen, steaming coffee in hand, early morning sunlight slipping through the fraying curtains.

The house is too quiet, her coffee too warm. Adrian had always woken with the dawn.

Irene sips from her mug, not tasting the bitterness, only the heat. The clock ticks, fractured from the time they'd played catch in the kitchen as kids and jumped a little too hard. It hadn't shattered when it fell, but the crack stretched across the surface far enough that their mother had lectured them for it. Adrian, mostly. She'd scolded him fiercely and then fussed over him to make sure he hadn't gotten scratched, while Irene lingered in the doorway uncertainly.

It's 9:06 when the doorbell rings. Irene flicks up the peephole cover to check, even though she knows who's outside. She opens it.

"You're late," she says, without ceremony.

"I know," Holly says. She has flowers in her hands — chrysanthemums. Irene's lip curls. She takes them wordlessly and walks back to the kitchen with steps just a little louder than they have to be. They don't have any unbroken

vases in the house, so she just lays them haphazardly on the counter, snagging the keys on the hook by the window as she returns to the doorway.

“Let’s go,” Irene says.

Holly inclines her head. “Lead the way.”

The gray Subaru is parked on the driveway; the garage has always been too full to fit a car into, cluttered with boxes of old clothes and half-priced Costco bowls from before their parents even bought it on Adrian’s seventeenth birthday. It doesn’t smell like his cologne anymore, but Irene’s nose still wrinkles as she slips into the driver’s seat, palming her driver’s permit in her jacket pocket.

She doesn’t look up as Holly takes shotgun. She just slots in the key and lets the engine whir to life, checking the gas monitor as she does. Twisting to peer behind her, Irene backs out of the driveway and onto the street, bouncing her thigh in an old, absentminded habit.

They drive for a few minutes through the suburbs, maybe ten, before either of them speaks.

“I hate this car,” Irene says.

Holly doesn’t so much as glance at her. “He left it to you, and it’s the only one you’ve got.”

Her teeth grit. Let Irene have the car, he’d said in the letter. Tell her to take it wherever she needs to go. He didn’t think their parents would let her read it, but what else were they supposed to do?

Awful, perfect, pitiful fucker.

“I don’t know why you’re here,” Irene says in place of a response, feeling like a petulant child, unable to let go. Her grip tightens on the wheel.

“Because the law says you can’t drive alone until you have a license,” Holly says evenly, “and you need a way to get to school.”

Irene can’t help the sound that leaves her throat, half-feral with something that isn’t quite anger.

“You know what I meant,” she snaps. “Why — why are you here, when none of it was real?”

Holly finally looks at her then in the rearview mirror, and Irene revels a little in the way her expression shifts. Her brother’s pretty, clever, flawless girlfriend, finally breaking at the seams. Irene knew she’d seen the texts, caught wind of the rumors — she might have even heard it from Adrian himself. She might have known before they’d even begun their little facade.

Holly, I kissed a boy. Holly, what will my parents say? Holly, I’m scared.

“I loved him,” Holly says slowly, studying her in the mirror, her eyes narrowed above the little line of etched text — objects in the mirror are closer than they appear.

Irene barks a humorless laugh. “Poor you.”

She can almost see the way Holly’s jaw grinds. “I loved him,” she repeats, “like a brother. And I’m allowed to grieve for him. Just like you are.”

Irene laughs again, and it should be caustic but it comes out quiet.

“I’m sure you did,” she says. “I’m sure you do.”

Holly closes her eyes like she’s in pain and turns her face away. Her voice is softer than before with an emotion Irene refuses to place when she says, “Just drive, Irene.”

Celina Zhou

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Educator: Abigail Eisenberg

Personal Essay



An Eight-Step Guide to Growing into a Name

— // ONE: Learn what it is

Totter after your parents as a child, talk and talk and never shut up, because this is the easiest way to learn a language — this, living and breathing the sound of it, the joy of it, in the four walls of your little apartment with its red door, pretending like you never left your motherland in the first place. Mispronounce all the words you learn at least once, but mostly your name — you haven't learned how to be harsh yet, or how to be quiet, so replace your K's with T's, and your S's with Th's. Make a couple silly mistakes that will grow into a couple silly nicknames that your dad will tease you with forever, as close to forever as you can go.

二 // TWO: Learn how to write it

When you huíguó, watch Yéyé take a brush to paper with his wrinkled, ink-stained hands, sketching out your name. 周思贤. Zhōu Sixián. Xián, like your sister, like your cousin, the name of a generation, the name he gave you. Copy him clumsily, flash sheepish grins when you knock over the inkstone or splash water on the paper or his old oak table. He always forgives you. Go to Chinese school instead of Sunday school and sneer right back at the boys at daycare who mock you for it, chase them across the playground and the blacktop until the poor daycare workers have to stop you. Skip two grades in Chinese classes, then three, then four. Dress up all pretty to recite poems and

essays at the end of year gala beneath the theater's blinding lights, your smile toothy, relentless, triumphant.

三 // THREE : Forget how to write it

Take the bus to kindergarten, with Māmā trailing behind in her old Honda just to make sure you get to school safe. Slowly, slowly, bring home novels and chapbooks, smooth out all the dimples in your voice until peh-llow finally sounds like pillow, neet like knit; sharpen your N's and your R's and your V's until your teachers smile and praise you— “Your English is so good, Celina!” Once, you learned that outside of the warmth of your home you were alien. Now, you shake off the alien-ness and it shifts, viciously, so viciously, to the little house on the corner of the street your parents worked so hard to buy. Start to forget before you know it. In shouting matches in the kitchen, bleed your languages together, losing grip of both in your rage.

四 // FOUR: Mourn and relearn

Realize that part of your anger is shame. Realize that part of your anger is grief. Take your older sister's jabs quietly — “I can't believe you forgot how to write your name —” and bite down on your instinct to snap back with twice as much venom. You've never learned to shut up, but what right do you have? What right do you have, when you were the one who killed Sīxián in the first place? Would Yéyé forgive you for this? When you give in to the guilt, ask your parents to teach you again and ignore their questioning, critical eyes over the dinner table. Just — breathe. Write. Pretend like you can move on.

五 // FIVE: Repeat 三 and 四 until you remember

Your life is all circles, so this should be familiar. Forget, over and over and over, when you read Prevert, Kafka, Shelley, Atwood: all the pretentious bullshit that gives you an excuse to smother yourself out of foreignness, into whiteness. Relearn, over and over and over, have your parents write it out for you until the scraps of napkins and backsides of paperwork build up on your desk. 思贤. 6.1 — Conic Sections: Hyperbolas & Parabolas. 思贤. Charles Darwin, Eugenics & Feminism: An Essay. 思贤. 2/17/23 — Adv. Bio Unit 4 Notes. 思贤. short story wip (draft). 思贤. It'll stick eventually.

六 // SIX: Learn what it means

It will take time, so much time. Fifteen years. You'll be afraid, because you're only human, and you'll be ashamed, because you'll always have that voice in your head going — do you really deserve to know? You do. You do. It's a friend in a crowded school cafeteria asking over the din, “Yīsī de Sī?” It's a quiet question on a long car ride in the dark, “Bàbà, what does my name mean?” It's

on your own, after drawing up all your courage to pull out that old Chinese-English dictionary from the living room bookshelf and flip through the yellowed, dog-eared pages with the kind of care, the kind of caution, that you'd give a wounded animal. A stranger.

思 (sī) — to long for, to grieve, to want

贤 (xián) — worthiness, wisdom, virtue

七 // SEVEN: Struggle with it

Dig out Yéyé's old brushes from Māmā's drawers, experiment with computer paper and sketchbooks and acrylics and old watercolors until you can conjure up even the faintest memory. Scrawl it across notebook pages until they fill up with scratchy characters; on whiteboard tables alongside your friends' names; at the tops of quizzes, lightly erased and rewritten. In time, accept that you might never relearn how to be a storyteller like you used to be, never stand on that stage again under those blinding lights, dressed up all pretty and feeling like the perfect daughter. But at least you'll have this. Say it again and again to fit the shape of the words in your mouth until it finally sounds like the name Yéyé gave you. His name, their names. Yours.

八 // EIGHT: Realize you grew into it a long time ago

Because your name means yearning for wisdom just as much as it means grieving for wisdom, and that's what you've been doing for all this time, isn't it?

Celina Zhou

Grade 10, Ladue Horton Watkins HS

Educator: Abigail Eisenberg

Personal Essay



Remembering Wings

I learn origami from my grandmother, Laolao, hunched over together in our little yellow kitchen, back when neither of our feet touch the floor when we sit in the dark-stained chairs Baba had picked up from the neighbor's garage sale. The table's littered with discarded scraps of paper I threw away in frustration, unable to mimic the movements of Laolao's wrinkled, clever hands.

I'm six and she's seventy-six, only visiting for the summer. It's mid-July, and the air conditioning is off by her insistence, leaving the whole house heaving with heat and breath, the communal, lively sort of warmth that I can't bring myself to be upset at.

"Cranes bring longevity," she says, so quietly I have to strain to hear. "I folded these to be hung in your nursery when your mom was pregnant. She might still have them."

Laolao takes a sheet of paper in her hands, and with slow, delicate folds, she gives it form. Wings first, then a tail, then a slender neck and a pointed beak. It's like magic, and I drink in the sight hungrily as she places it gently in my open palm.

In return, I can only offer her sloppy imitations of the cranes she'd folded, with crooked beaks and crumpled wings. She smiles fondly and smooths them out gently, but they're still not quite as beautiful as hers are.

"It's alright," she says, tugging the head and tail at once so the wings flap. "They'll still fly."

When Mama walks in on us, she laughs, turning my creations over in her hands to examine them in all their imperfection. Still humming with amusement, she presses a kiss to my head, then to Laolao's.

"They're beautiful," she says, dark eyes alight with laughter, and she sets to kneading dough for mantou that we would devour in a day.

I would forget so many things about Laolao in time — the sound of her thin voice and the lines of her face — but this much I would remember.

//

In Mandarin, there's a term: huiguo. It's a term for when Chinese diaspora visit their motherland. It means, literally, return to the country. Colloquially, it means, go home.

When I huiguo for the first time, I get lost in the airport. I'm four, a little cleverer than I let on, lazy and curious. Mama and my sister Iris held each of my hands as I tottered through security, but the moment they got distracted, I wandered off on my own.

They find me next to a terminal window, eyes wide with awe as I drink in the sight of the winged metal beasts outside, roaring down the runway only to lift off like they were weightless.

"Xiao bao," Mama sighs, plucking me from my perch, "don't scare me like that."

When we board the plane, I insist on the window seat. Between my short naps and snacks, I spend the whole flight peering out the tiny window, pressing my hands against the glass as we took off, leaving fingerprints on my view of the sky.

Beside me, Mama smooths out the fabric of her pants again and again, her hands knitted tightly together in her lap. She speaks quietly to Iris in Mandarin, but her accent is strange, like she's trying to fit words in her mouth in a way that she no longer really remembers.

We land early in the morning and take a taxi to Dayi's apartment in the heart of the city, arriving just in time for breakfast. I don't get to eat, though, too busy being passed from person to person while my relatives marvel at my shock of dark hair, my wide, babyish face, and soft, uncalloused hands. I barely notice the way Mama and Dayi embrace, awkwardly but desperately, like strangers and soulmates all at once.

Still, Laolao smiles at the sight of it, links arms with her daughters, and says, "It's good to have everyone home."

The city passes in a blur of high rise balconies and taxi rides. Slowly, slowly, Mama slips back into herself, her voice sharpening out into the city-bred tones of a Beijing accent, tagging r's on the ends of her words. She haggles with sellers in the farmer's market, bickers with Dayi in the kitchen with the dog pawing at their feet for scraps. Iris and I bicker at her hip in English, wandering through the city with our American clothes and American accents and American smiles.

Later, I'll think of this, of them and us, two pairs of sisters in our mothers' land, and I'll think of Laolao, smoothing out the imperfections of my paper crane's wings. I'll think of the fragility of it all: how Mama has to ask for directions in her own hometown, how even under Laolao's hands the creases never quite disappear.

//

There's a robin's nest outside my window, in the corner where my room meets Mama's. It's easier to see from her end where the sunlight hits it in the afternoons.

When I was nine, I would creep into her bedroom and watch it, rock up onto the balls of my feet and hook my chin on the windowsill to smile at the tiny, chirping balls of fluff, bickering for their mother's attention.

In the weeks that Laolao spends here that summer, she joins me often. Sometimes she'll bring fruit for us to munch on; other times we'll drag over Mama's ottoman and just watch the chicks grow. The room is quiet, the summer warm.

One day Laolao finds me crying on the ottoman. She dabs at the tears streaking down my cheeks and asks what's wrong, but I'm inconsolable: the nest is empty, the mother mourning.

"They're gone," I say miserably, when I finally calm down enough to speak. "There — there was a hawk, and it kept coming back — and now they're all gone."

It had been so sudden, so fast. The chicks were so frail, so easy to tear from this plane to the next. Laolao's face softens, and she shushes me when I start to cry again. They'd only just begun to grow into their wings. None of them had flown yet.

"Oh, baobei," she says. "It's alright."

Her eyes crease thoughtfully then, as if she's looking for the right words. "Sometimes," Laolao says finally, "we lose things. People, friendships, pets, little treasures. Things that we love. And it hurts here."

She taps my chest.

“It hurts, doesn’t it?” she says. “I know it does. But let me tell you something — when it hurts, that means it’s not the end.”

My mouth quivers. “How is it not?” I ask, a little petulantly.

“It hurts because you still love what you lost,” she says. “You still remember it. And in this way, you gather up little bits of memory of the things you have lost and the things you still have, and they fill up your heart so you can love again.”

I blink, open my mouth, pause, close it again. The words tangle in my throat.

“But what happens if I forget?” I ask finally, my voice small.

Laolao smiles, but it’s a little bitter. A little sad.

“Well,” she says softly, “by then, it won’t hurt anymore.”

//

We’re on a flight to visit Iris at Stanford when Mama says to me, “I miss my sister.”

I’m fourteen, three months into the fall semester of my freshman year, still very much in the throes of my teenage girlhood — awful and emotional and severe, with a penchant for walking two steps ahead and wishing I were taller, wishing I were closer to the sky. When she speaks, I have to tear my gaze away from the window to blink at her. Some habits die hard.

I hum softly. I don’t really know how to respond to that. It’s not as if I understand how she feels — not when she’s a twin, as close as humans can get to one half of a soul. It’s been three years since she’s last seen Dayi, but I’m sure it feels like much longer.

Mama has a story she likes to tell. She was getting a cyst removed from her breast, a surgery that had gotten rescheduled last minute, and she hadn’t had time to tell her family in China that she was going under.

After the surgery, Dayi called her. She was worried, she said. Her chest hurt.

“I hope you and Iris stay close,” Mama says, and there’s something like regret in her voice. I look at her and I think she looks grounded, terribly so, even thousands of feet in the sky, like a spine without wings. I wonder who she’s really talking about between us — us, two pairs of sisters, far from our mother’s land.

“Okay,” I say. “I’ll try.”

//

When Laolao dies, I'm fifteen, and Mama rushes back to China for the funeral without me. My grief looks like this:

I call Dayi through WeChat video, my Mandarin distant and her English stilted. I try to say I'm sorry but I can't find the right words in either language. We talk, and we cry, and eventually we fall silent.

I get clingier, I think, towards Iris. When we visit Palo Alto for the summer, my hands are always laced with hers, her fingers lightly tracing the ridges of my knuckles, my chin hooked on her shoulder. We hold each other as if we'll drift off into the wind at any moment. I'm always warm, she says. Sometimes it feels as if I'm burning.

While I wait for Mama's return, I find myself staring up at the sky, pressing against windows like I can give my body back to time, devolve it into wings. I want to be a bird. Not just to migrate, to cross the ocean between us; I think I'd hold on to the memories better if I had fewer of them, if life were more fleeting.

//

In Utah in December, there's a trail Iris wants to hike.

I'm sixteen, still temperamental, but we gravitate to each other like twin stars. She's been walking ahead of us the whole trip, and I've been lengthening my strides to keep up — trailing behind but still in earshot.

"I wanna see the sunset," she calls, her voice a little drowned out by the wind.

The trail she's talking about is close to the sky, but by the time we reach the head twilight has already set in. She wants to hike it, but our parents argue about safety at the base of the trail until it's too dark to climb up, not even just to see the stars.

We fight in the car as Baba drives, loudly and brutally. Iris calls the rest of us selfish and I call her selfish and soon all of us are shouting — No one ever fucking listens to what I want — When was the last time you ever apologized to me? Never! — I have been compromising for so long!

"You two will break your relationship like this," Mama finally says, a little viciously, and it feels like a blow. Like my spine giving in, like my own clumsy fingers crumpling paper into wings.

Iris starts arguing with her again — You have no right to fucking say that — and I shrink back into myself. I've always been the mellowest of the family,

the first to go quiet and the first to forgive. I've never been able to stay angry for long, and especially not at Iris.

They're still arguing when I reach over to lace my fingers in hers, trying to stifle the way they tremble like I'm six again and breaking cranes in my hands. Mama's seething and Baba's frustrated as all hell, but eventually we all quiet down.

Iris leans over, and in the dark, in the quiet, I can almost hear Mama's words echoing in her skull. You'll break your relationship like this. Her grip on my hand tightens.

She presses her forehead to mine, rubs away the salt of lingering tears, and she murmurs, so lowly that only we can hear, "You and I, we'll never break. No matter what happens with them. Never."

I swallow and blink rapidly, my eyelashes brushing against her skin in little butterfly kisses just like we used to do when we were kids, giggling in the backseat — and God, I want to believe her.

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Four months after Laolao's death, when I'd drawn up the courage, I dug out the box in the basement and hauled it up to my room, unraveling the tiny paper cranes strung on a thread, and counting them one by one. She'd folded hundreds of them, one by one, hoping they'd bring me a long life.

They were fragile in my hands; when I tugged at the heads and tails, their wings gave way. Still — inexplicably, uselessly, I started adding my own. After all these years, Laolao, I'm still folding cranes for you.

Celina Zhou

Grade 10, Ladue Horton Watkins HS

Educator: Abigail Eisenberg

Poetry



Morphology

In another life, I skip six grades at Chinese school.
My mother's tongue gleams alabaster in my dreams.
In this life, I skip four. An omen, in the way 四 sounds like 死.
Red pools in the cradle of my throat. Like I can stitch
 back together a world. Like I know the distance
between yì. Peony roots break upon concrete. A bird
remembers feathers but forgets its wings.
I tremble under light, chafed bare. Wind
 in the dark for stones I'll never find, stars I'll
never weep. Bridges I'll never burn. Because being
alive is being slave to madness. Because fear
and love burn the same. Three men become
 a tiger and twin daughters kill a ghost.
His grave in the space between knowing
and not-knowing, where speaking
feels like dying. In another life,
 I am changeling. I bleed from one throat
and speak from two mouths. In this life,
I drown a girl. Three. A dozen.
Their names are all my own.