

# Honorable Mention

## 2025



**Scholastic  
Art & Writing  
Awards**

Alliance for  
Young Artists  
& Writers

Dear Amazing, Young Writers,

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

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

Keep on telling your stories!

With warm regards,

Mary Beth Rich

Editor

Youth Program Coordinator, Greater Kansas City Writing Project



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# Penina Adam

Grade 12, Homeschool  
Portfolio



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## “Closed Curtains”

### Chapter 1

Thomas Nee didn't actually like watching the TV.

On the channel a woman showed graphs of COVID-19 rising like steam from a kettle.

“...as the death toll greatly increases, the government would like to inform everyone that they are working as hard as they can towards a vaccine that will save us from this virus...”

He grabbed the remote next to him and pressed the mute button. The woman still talked, unaware that Thomas couldn't hear her anymore.

*Why do I waste brain cells watching this?*

“Thomas?”

Thomas started, a hand clutching his chest. He took a few deep breaths, calming his heart rate down, then wheeled over and unlocked the door.

Mary walked in, carrying a book bag in one hand. Her black glasses slipped down her nose as she smoothed her bright green skirt with the other hand.

“Phew,” Mary said, setting her bag down on the couch next to him and pushing her glasses back up. Her blonde hair seemed to turn darker in the room as the dimness enveloped her. She took her mask off and smiled.

Thomas felt his face grow warm. He turned his attention to the floor.

“Well, how is everything?”

Thomas gripped the arms of his wheelchair. Mary always started with that question. Thomas never gave her an answer.

He glanced up at Mary. She was staring at his useless legs, a hand poised over the stethoscope hanging out of her bag.

“Don’t pity me,” Thomas said gruffly, turning his head away to glance at the rows upon rows of books in the living room.

There was a table in the middle of the bookshelves with a wilted flower in a glass jar. He had tried to save the flower, but all things must die in the end, he supposed.

Mary sat down next to the book bag and carefully slid a book out. Her eyes stared at the cover. He began to wonder if she had turned into a stone statue.

Finally, she spoke.

“Sunlight would do you good.”

“No,” Thomas whispered. He wiped his hands across his pants, head spinning at the thought.

The curtains gently pushed away from the window, urged on by the air-conditioning. They revealed a window, covered from head to toe in newspapers, construction paper, receipts, and every other paper-like object Thomas had in his apartment.

“You should open them,” Mary said, pulling out another book with a bright red cover.

Thomas shivered and pulled a blanket over him. Thoughts about the wreck came washing over him. Then images came. He felt the blanket slip from his hands as the figure of the drunk man came swimming into his head. It was his fault Thomas didn’t want to see the world. His fault that he got himself drunk and then drove. Everyone knew that was illegal.

Everyone.

Her hand laid on his, warming his cold skin. Thomas let out a long breath. Her hand looked small against his own. It looked stronger, somehow.

Mary pushed the books she’d brought towards him. “You can pick. I love them all.”

Thomas glanced down at the covers. There was *Great Expectations*, by Charles Dickens, *Treasure Island* by Robert Louis Stevenson, and *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen.

Thomas thought for a moment, then said, “Great Expectations. I’ll make tea.”

Mary grinned, her eyes lighting up like fireflies. “Great pick.”

Thomas went over to the kitchen and pulled down two white mugs. They always used these mugs when Mary came over to read. Thomas made sure to hand wash them the instant Mary left for the day, so that they’d always be clean for the next time she came over.

As the water boiled, Mary talked about how her day had gone, all the traffic she'd had to fight, and lots of things that Thomas really couldn't care less about. But, he did like hearing her voice.

He wondered what it would be like having Mary as a wife. It wasn't a half bad idea, but he shoved it away. It made him feel confused and muddled.

Once the tea was ready, Thomas took Mary's mug over first, then went back to grab his own.

*Used to be able to do this without having to make two trips,* he thought, his heart squeezing painfully.

Mary began to read.

Thomas snuggled down in his blankets and closed his eyes, breathing in the smell of mint.

*This is happiness. This is safety.*

*Away from the world. Away from the dangers.*

Thomas leaned his head back against his wheelchair. He wanted to stay in this apartment forever.

Mary's voice was clear and alluring, dancing with the silence surrounding them.

## **Chapter 2**

"Goodnight, Thomas." Mary said, swinging her book bag and pushing her glasses back onto the bridge of her nose. Her eyes were shining as she hoisted the bag onto her shoulders. "Oh! And don't worry about sleeping in your bed tonight. You can just adjust the wheelchair and sleep in that."

"Goodnight," Thomas said as she closed the door behind her.

The kitchen was quiet and cold. Thomas shivered and pulled his blanket over his pajamas.

*Thank goodness she didn't have to help me into bed.*

Thomas grabbed a pillow from the living room couch and stuffed it under his head. He turned off the lamp and went to sleep.

## **Chapter 3**

A bird woke Thomas from his dreams. He sucked in a breath as his hands touched his face. They were ice cold.

He wheeled into his bedroom and replaced his shirt with a black sweatshirt, stuffing his hands in the warm pocket in front. He sighed.

A bottle of cologne sat on the wardrobe's top. It was full to the brim. Thomas hoped his mother wouldn't find it, for fear of hurting her feelings.

*I'm not going to impress anyone. No use wearing it.*

He moved into the living room, grabbing the remote and pressing the *on* button.

“And reporting live,” the woman on the screen said. She gave a very wide smile, showing all her front teeth. “Woman gets stabbed in a fatal fight with actor...”

Thomas spun the wheels on his chair with ease. He pushed himself over to the counter and made his usual cup of warm, dark coffee.

The brown liquid sloshed around inside its cup as he moved over to the TV.

Mary and I had gone to a cafe before the accident. Every week.

His phone vibrated in his pocket. It was Mary.

*Can I come over? I want to talk to you about something. It's important, and it's not about the curtains.*

Thomas frowned, suspicion and doubt flooding his mind. *What would be so important that she has to come and talk to him face to face?*

Sure, Thomas replied back. The text took a few seconds to load, building his confusion more.

Thomas sat, watching the screen, hoping that this visit was over nothing.

Mary didn't take long to come to the apartment. After a few minutes of commercials, a loud, sharp rap sounded on the door. He opened it, wheeling out of the way as she flew into the room.

Thomas fidgeted with his sweatshirt laces, unsure what to say.

“Did you sleep well?” Mary asked, out of breath.

“I slept well enough.” He glanced at the curtains. He'd had a nightmare that they'd opened.

There was silence. Mary just stood there, biting her lip.

“I might go to a college in North Carolina next year.”

There. The important thing had been spoken.

Thomas felt his stomach jolt. He stared at her. It was as if the very idea of time had frozen.

Mary shuffled her feet. Her phone case faced him, showing the bright, pink sticker that read *Today is going to be great!*

Time snapped back into existence.

Thomas turned his face away, setting his coffee on the counter.

“Please understand why I'm considering joining,” Mary begged, sitting down on the couch and laying a hand on his knee. “The classes and lodging fit my budget. And the teachers sound amazing.”

Thomas nodded. He wasn't about to tell her she shouldn't go. Mary had always wanted to become a history teacher.



She stared at him for a moment. Tears were forming in her eyes. Her hand appeared to be holding his leg in an iron-like grip. He studied that hand, trying to memorize every single detail so that he'd still remember it when she was gone.

"I can't leave you like this," she whispered. She stared at the curtains, trembling.

"Why not?"

"You have to open those curtains." Mary stood up. She pointed a shaking finger at the TV. "You live such an empty life. The news is never going to heal you."

"Heal?" Thomas looked at her like she had three heads. His palms felt sweaty.

"Heal? Mary, are you blind? Nothing can heal me."

"I'm not talking about your stupid legs!" Mary said, her voice high. She started to cry. "I'm talking about you. You're so bitter. It's-it's." She broke off, pursing her lips.

Thomas pinched the bridge of his nose. *What kind of a guy does she think I am? And what does this have to do with my health?*

"Seeing the world is important." Mary said, her voice cracking. "It's what windows are for."

"What does that have to do with the curtains?" Thomas yelled.

"Opening these curtains will help you get outside again. Help you to live again. And I need you to live." She crouched down in front of him. Her face was tilted up towards his. She laid her head on his knee.

Thomas put a hand over his eyes. He didn't want to deal with this. He could already feel a headache coming on.

"Thomas--"

"Mary," he said, his tone dangling on the cliffs of losing control.

"I don't know why I wasted my time coming here," Mary whispered, getting to her feet and grabbing her purse with both hands. Her footsteps were heavier than normal as she walked over to the door. "You're never going to listen to me."

"You know, if you actually did love me, you would try to fix your life," she added, standing next to the door.

"I guess that means I don't love you, then."

Mary stood still, staring at him.

And then she was gone.

#### **Chapter 4**

All he could hear was his shout at Mary.

All he could see was the expression on her beautiful face.

She was leaving. She would leave and he'd still be right here. Always.

*How selfish can you get?* A voice in his mind asked. *She was worried about you. You, of all people.*

“Stop,” Thomas whispered. He put his face in his hands. “Please stop.”

He knew why he had lost his temper. It was because of his fear of opening the curtains. Of seeing the world.

He wiped his eyes with his sleeve, trying to block the flood of tears.

*Do you know how normal the world looks without you in it?* His mind pressed. *Not much would change, you know.*

Thomas picked up the remote and pointed it at the TV. It shook in his hands.

The news would drown out his thoughts.

It always did.

The screen flashed to life. Thomas pulled a blanket over his legs.

*Tap! Tap! Tap!*

Thomas gasped, the remote falling onto the table and making the blooming flower quiver in its pot. He wheeled around to face the curtains. The noise had seemed to come from there.

Thomas hesitated, then went a bit closer to the curtains, staring at the papers that covered the windows.

The tapping intensified, as if something was banging itself against the window.

“I wonder,” Thomas whispered, taking a cautious move forward, hands clenching the wheels tightly. The tapping motivated his movements and he pushed forward. His stomach gave a lurch. Thomas felt dizzy as sickness washed over him.

Another tap.

Thomas wheeled forward. The tears blurred his vision. He tried to wipe them away as something inside of him asked, *What on earth are you doing?*

The window made an odd crackling noise. Thomas saw a little bit of newspaper fall through the bottom of the curtain, making a tiny shard of light burn through the thick, black fabric.

*Sunlight!*

Thomas squeezed his eyes shut, backing away from the windows.

He couldn’t open them. Of course he couldn’t. What had he been thinking?

*But I want to see the light.*

The little voice sounded familiar to Thomas. Sounded like Mary’s voice. He felt something heavy rest on his heart.

*Do it for Mary,* the voice whispered.

And then it struck him.

It didn't matter whether *he* wanted to open these curtains or not. None of that ever mattered. Others wanted him to. *Needed* him to.

A wave of adrenaline washed over him and filled up his lungs.

*Tap! Tap!*

Thomas listened. He wheeled as fast as he could over to the curtains, grabbing hold of the coarse fabric. He let out a gasp as the curtains were yanked to either side of him. He grabbed a piece of newspaper on the window, pausing a second before ripping it from the glass. The sound of crinkling paper rang in Thomas's ears.

His actions went faster, more frantic, as more light began to seep into the room. He could feel his fingers being cut by the paper.

The tape holding the most paper was torn away. Light blinded his eyes. Thomas covered them with his cut and dirty hands. His heart was racing and the sickness was making him dizzy.

Thomas forced his hands down into his lap. He looked at the window. He had to blink a couple times before his eyes adjusted. When they cleared, the first thing that he saw was a tiny robin, peering in through the window, feathers slightly ruffled.

*Oh, thought Thomas. A bird.*

The bird pecked at a little hole in the glass and chirped in a loud, shrill note before flying away.

And then Thomas noticed the blue sky.

*Has it ever been that blue before?*

He looked down to see the purple and pink flowers scattered all over a neighbor's porch. His eyes saw the lush, green trees, planted daintily all over the ground.

How the world seemed so beautiful. Almost too beautiful for him to look at...

His phone vibrated in his pocket. Thomas lifted his head, eyes scanning his surroundings. He waited for the light that had been seeping into his room to appear. For the beautiful scene.

Nothing happened. He stared at the curtains moving slightly by the air conditioning.

They were closed. Sealed up, as they had been for months.

On the table, the flower was still wilted, its petals drooping.

Thomas stared at the curtains.

The curtains stared back.

## **“A Coworker’s Worldview on Christmas”**

The break room in Marshalls isn’t immaculate. You can smell the faint aroma of freezer food wafting through the air and the scent of newly shipped materials. This is what I inhale as I open my locker and stuff my purse and jacket into the empty space. I wonder what the time is, and if I have enough to use the restroom one last time before I clock in and stand behind the fitting room counter for the next five and a half hours.

That is my biggest concern at the moment. My only concern.

The door opens, and a favorite coworker of mine walks in, carrying a water bottle. She is in her sixties, with a slightly hunched back and blonde hair, highlighted with a dark brown dye. I began to enjoy her presence from the first conversation we had, finding her much more attractive than the younger employees. She was intelligent, and, even better, didn’t curse. At least, most of the time.

Her face lights up when she sees me, and I can’t help but smile back. Her greeting meets my ears.

“Hi. Good morning.”

“Good morning, Clara,” I reply. Small-talk ensues for a minute or so, and then I bring up the fact that the holiday season is coming up.

It’s a commonly known fact that retail stores get as good as licked during the holiday season, namely, Christmas. People want things to give to others or keep for themselves, and therefore any associate that works in retail gets paid more because there’s more work to be done.

I am excited about that. The fitting room can be, and usually is, a very dull job, with not much to do except stand and wait for someone to come. The thought-premonition—that it would always be that way exploded at the mention of the holiday bustle.

“Money, money, money,” Clara says, grinning.

She laughs. I copy her, heart warming at the sound. Clara’s laugh is low compared to my own, and it has a certain hoarseness that makes the noise sound more honest. Like she means it when she does laugh.

“That’s all I see with the holidays. Money.”

Her tone sounds serious. Friendly, don’t get me wrong, but serious.

I feel my stomach give a jolt. No response comes to my mind. I just smile, focusing on clicking the safe lock back into place

As we both left for our stations around the store, I wondered what about Clara's comment was wrong, because something was wrong.

Then it hits me.

That's all she sees during the holidays. Nothing else. Only money on Thanksgiving, the patriotic holiday that is centered on being thankful for the things you already have, or Christmas, for God sending his Son down to earth for the whole of humanity. Even if you aren't a believer, Christmas is still the holiday that brings families together to give and laugh and love.

It's all about joy, after all.

It's not very hard to wonder how America has gotten to think like that. Stores all over the U.S advertise and market their materials, and you can't escape the ads and commercials when you watch the TV or turn on your phone.

Don't have a blow up snowman? Go straight down to Lowe's and get it. Your friends tell you that you need to have a red pair of leggings for the Christmas spirit, you simply obey and go down to Walmart, or, if you're like me and work at a retail store already, just check what the aisles you walk by carry.

I begin to wonder how many of the customers in Marshalls think like that. Have that toxic mentality-that utter ignorance from the true meanings of these celebrations. From the things I've already heard and discussed while helping people in the fitting room, I know it's more than I was initially aware of.

I barely notice my feet hurting from standing as I think. I hope no customer looks at my face and thinks that I'm staring at them like a maniac. When I think, I sometimes lose track of what my gaze is focused on.

What I see about these holidays are almost the complete opposite. Sure, I love opening up gifts, but giving gifts brings a special kind of light in my heart that I know I need. I always admire the 'fancy' Christmas meals that not only cost a fortune of your income but also take an eternity to make, but I prefer the fresh bread my mom bakes, a good variety of cheese from Aldi, and some fruit, usually grapes, for breakfast.

My memories are filled with the things that my family and I do together. They are filled with things that I cherish closely, things that I will never forget.

You can buy things that make you happy. It only lasts for a moment. The one thing you can't buy with money is people who you can make memories and share experiences with.

We don't have a lot of presents on Christmas morning, though certainly more than children receive in third-world countries. My mother taught my sister and I that we don't need all of the things the world tells you that you should need.

Unfortunately, I do not think this way all the time. We are all human, so I give myself some small slack.

If someone took a match to your money or your family, what would be worse? I hope that losing your family would be worse. Why is it that we think along that line when it comes to losing those things, but on living life and having those things with you in the moment, we strive for the money instead of the people in our lives?

I am glad that I was able to witness this kind of thinking, for not only have I learned a good lesson that strengthens my beliefs, but my eyes have been opened to all the traps the world puts out for us, every single day.

## **“Colosseo”**

I have seen the ages.

Watched the largest empire rise, their hands building my very being, only to be taken by someone else.

I’ve witnessed the slaughter of human beings; I’ve watched a little girl play in my ruins, her dress covered in pink bows.

Humans have cursed me. Others have praised me.

“Majestic!” they whisper, shaking their head and gazing up at me.

“Horrible,” they murmur, shivering.

Of course, that never stops their curiosity.

How they look at me.

In a way, I am comforted by their ignorance of all the things that happened here.

Humans are emotional creatures, rather frail.

They couldn’t handle it.

Imagine if that man down there knew that he was sitting right where Trajan sat, planning out his games that would end up lasting more than one hundred days, killing eleven thousand animals in the process.

Could that young girl down there in the pink raincoat stay calm if I told her that a poor civilian, who was sitting in that same exact spot, was thrown into the gladiatorial games because Emperor Caligula had run out of criminals to watch fight?

None of these humans could stomach all of the things I have seen. It would be too much for their minds to take.

Not that I have only seen blood and death.



I heard the conspiracies and plans to terminate the insane Emperor Commodus, some whispered by his very own sister.

I have witnessed Rome celebrating the fall of Mussolini, a man who was just as evil as the emperors of old.

Italians discussed the Olympics and its ups and downs while lounging around me not too long ago.

I remember when people of power wore laurel wreaths around their heads. Such power and authority. Funny, though, how those same people ended up being so vulnerable at times. They were in a more dangerous situation than Hitler.

Many were afraid of those wreaths. The earthquakes were another frequent fear, since their knowledge of why and how they occurred was very poor.

My entire south side was knocked violently down in an earthquake around the thirteenth century.

What an earthquake. The kind that makes people wonder if there really is a God. One man in a red cloak ran around, screaming that it was the end of the world. Silly fool. How utterly blind he was.

I still stand.

But people are the same, in the same way as the weather. Time only changes the setting of a place.

History repeats itself.

Take Emperor Domitian, for example.

He was one of the most ruthless people to rule Rome. He didn't live very long, but long enough for me to remember how his eyes looked as he saw his wealth and power.

They seemed to grow dark and bright, all at the same time, sparkling; Full of ambition.

I saw the same look in Marcus Aurelius's face as he sat, watching the games. And in Hitler, when a journalist escorted him around my premises.

People really don't change too much. Only the structures are ruined and changed. Like me.

Not that I expected you to realize that. It's really quite obvious once you do see history. Besides..

You haven't seen the ages.

Hopkins, Keith. Beard, Mary. *The Colosseum*. Harvard University Press, 2005.

Note: The historical events mentioned in Colosseo were taken from the non-fiction book above.

## “The Tree in the Fall”

The breeze was a clean breeze, as it always was.

Of course, it always would be. I found pleasure in thinking how everything was clean here. Pure. It helped to balance out my knowledge of the other things.

Balance was everything, after all.

The breeze giggled and laughed as it flew away. Voices sounded nearby. The voices were not talking about me, but I didn't mind. As long as they left me alone, they would not die. That was a good thing, because I didn't want them to.

*I want them to live forever,* I thought. Wished. Whispered.

They didn't hear me, of course. They didn't understand my language. That was strictly between my Creator, the animals, and I.

Two toucans fondly sat on my branches, careful not to dig their claws into me.

*You were created by Him, and he said you are good,* I whispered to the toucans. They squawked in reply, bobbing their heads.

*“We know, Tree,” they said.*

*I love His creation, for it is good.*

“Indeed, we all are,” the toucans said.

*I just hope that they never eat my wretched fruit.*

I didn't say this last part aloud, for these thoughts were only between my Creator and I, but I couldn't help thinking them.

The toucans suddenly gave a loud *squawk!* They flew over to the two people who had come out of the treeline.

One was a man, the other a woman. Both were smiling. The woman gave out a laugh as her partner told her a story.

They were, both of them, naked. No one minded.

I watched them with pleasure, happy to see that they were not paying attention to me.

The animals around my trunk went to meet the couple, for both the man and the woman were gentle and kind.

A Breeze tickled and swayed my branches, but this time, it wasn't just the breeze.

*They are my beloved, Tree,* He said, His voice as soft as the tread of an elephant's feet in the grass.

*I know,* I said. The breeze wrapped around me once more, then flew over to the group of animals, cooling them. With a last gust, it took to the sky, and disappeared.

The freshness of the breeze that had swept through my branches suddenly left.

Something with harsh, thick scales ran along my trunk. It wove up into my branches, and hissed, “Hello, Tree.”

I shivered. *You do not belong here, Serpent!*

“You're a tree,” Serpent snapped, “You cannot keep me out.”

Serpent was unwelcome here, and I knew it.



“Besides,” Serpent added, “these humans are fickle and easily tempted.”

*You’re not welcome here! Go back to the ground where you belong!*

“No,” Serpent growled before half sliding, half crawling towards the forefront of the branches, stopping right above a branch with especially big, enticing fruit.

I shook my branches in anger, hoping to knock Serpent to the ground, but he just dug his sharp claws down into my bark mercilessly.

The party of animals and people had left the clearing, and all was silent. The woman was the only one who had remained.

“She’s the one,” Serpent muttered. His tongue slithered out, and he gave a little chuckle of delight. “Oh dear, this is exciting.”

I panicked, trying desperately to shake the creature off me. But all attempts were in vain, for Serpent had the sharpest claws I’d ever felt.

The woman walked over to me, staring curiously at my fruit. I noticed how she kept a few feet away from me, and held onto the hope the Creator had gifted us.

Serpent suddenly slithered into sight, making the woman start back.

“Do you want to eat this tree’s fruit, Eve?” he asked, his claws scraping me. It hurt, though not nearly as much as the pain I felt in my very being at the question posed.

“Creator said that we may eat from any tree in this place aside from this one,” the woman said.

“Why not this one?”

“We will die.”

Death. I stared at the woman. She didn’t even truly realize what death meant. All the better for her, for what horrible thing death is.

Serpent gave a chuckle, and said, “You won’t die if you eat this! Why, the only reason He doesn’t want you to eat this fruit is because you’d know good and evil, and become like Him. He wouldn’t want you to become like Him.”

The woman blinked, seemed to think for a moment, then muttered to herself, “I suppose-well-it wouldn’t hurt anything, right?”

*Oh no!* I cried, my heart cracking. *Please don’t!*

But, as I have said before, the woman could not understand me, and took the fruit off the branch nearest her. The fruit was about the size of her palm, and appeared lush and beautiful.

She gazed at it for a while; I saw the fruit reflecting in her eyes.

*Creator, save her from this!* I said. A little voice inside me whispered, *I shall not, Tree. Choice is the essence of my beloved.*

*But they’ll die,* I groaned, watching in grief as she raised the fruit to her lips and took a small, discerning bite out of it.

The birds suddenly hushed their singing. The mammals stopped romping and glorifying their Creator. Everything was still.

The man suddenly walked into the clearing, and the woman called out to him. Her voice was high with excitement. He came over, looking confused.

"Here, eat this," she told him, offering the fruit.

The man took it from her, and bit into it.

All of a sudden, they both gasped, staring at each other.

Both of their faces flushed as they saw their nakedness.

Serpent gave a hiss of pleasure. "You see, Tree? I won after all."

I ignored him, watching the two humans.

"There they go; they're going to sew clothes for themselves," Serpent hissed, his tongue licking my branch.

"Indeed," he added, hopping off my branch and crawling back down me, "I must get going as well. I hope you enjoy the rest of today, for it will probably be the last happy one."

I felt his body brush once more against my trunk, then Serpent walked away, looking very pleased with himself.

I felt my Creator begin to walk on this garden's ground, and realized that He already knew what had happened.

*I'm sorry, Creator,* I said, letting the words fall soft and carry on the breeze.

*I'm truly sorry. I think we've lost them.*

I was unaware of what happened next. All I knew was that the people of this garden had been cursed, and that they must leave. The breeze had told me of the first, and the toucans had told me of the other.

Never, in all of history, has a tree mourned as I did that day.

My Creator left after banishing them. He no longer could be with the humans, since they had eaten the fruit.

The man and the woman passed by me as they walked towards the exit in the garden. As they both set eyes on me, tears sprang into their dark depths, and they sobbed. The woman threw out her arms to me, and fell onto her knees. The man had to help her back onto her feet.

A squirrel crawled into my branches and whispered in a frightened voice, "They are wearing animal skins. Blood has been shed here."

An angel with a fiery sword suddenly came over to the exit. Once the man and woman were safely outside the garden, the angel barred their way back in, and said in a voice that sounded as loud as thunder, "You shall never return."

The angel blocked my view of the two humans. I cried out in anguish as the squirrel repeated what the angel had said.

"You shall never return."

*Why did this have to happen, Creator?* I cried, knowing that His heart was just as broken as mine. *Why couldn't they just stay here forever? Why did you put me in here in the first place?*

The breeze whistled through my branches.  
*Humans have the ability to choose, Tree. Without choice, they wouldn't be human.*  
*That doesn't make me feel any better,* I said gloomily.  
*Do not fear, Tree, Creator whispered softly. I will give them Him. Not now, but soon.*  
*Who is Him?* I asked curiously.  
The breeze grew tense at the question.  
*The Way, my dear Tree,* was His reply

**Sources: Holy Bible. New American Standard Bible Updated Edition, Foundation Publications, INC., 1998, Genesis, ch. 1-3.**

## “The Committal”

### Part One

The knock at the door was unexpected, as all knocks at four in the morning generally are.

His hand strayed to the nearby gun, fingers wrapping around the handle. With the other, he threw off the blankets and rose out of bed.

James stumbled into the kitchen, wrapped in his trench coat, the gun stored in the large pocket. The floorboards underneath him creaked. The wood brought no warmth to his bare feet.

*Who on earth could this be?* James wondered. He cracked the door.

A woman wearing a ragged dress stood on the porch, the shawl wrapped around her head slipping to reveal bloodshot eyes. In her arms was a toddler wrapped in an equally tattered garment.

“Please,” she gasped, face pinched as if in pain. “Can you help us? We don’t have anywhere else to go.”

James stood, frozen. Certain words were floating in his mind, yelling at him.

*Danger.*

*Trap.*

James forced himself to breathe. He kept his voice cool as he inquired,

“Whereabouts do you come from?”

“From a town a few miles from here.” Her eyes were pleading. “My owner turned me away after I attempted to stop him from beating my daughter, Shye. She’s not even five yet, and I couldn’t just stand there and let him whip her!”

*Don’t trust her,* a quiet voice warned. James examined the little girl-Shye-noticing the way her hair was matted and wet. Had it rained tonight?

The young woman began to cry. She couldn't have been more than twenty years old. She held her shaking arms out, lifting up her daughter's shirt and revealing a big, ugly lashing. The skin around the wound was pink. James hoped it wasn't infected.

"Please--"

"Did anyone follow you?"

The woman's face paled. She hesitated, then shook her head. James took a deep breath.

*Was it worth it to risk his life to help these two?*

James took a few steps backward and opened the door wide. He invited her to sit in his kitchen, and then went into his bedroom to look for a few blankets for his guests.

*Please don't stay long. I don't know how to take care of you and your daughter.*

James was, however, extremely experienced in killing escaping convicts at the prison he worked at. Some had left him scarred for life.

James handed the blankets to the woman. He opened up his closet and took out the only glass cup from the shelf and filled it with water from a pitcher.

"Thank you," the woman said when James offered her the glass. She took it in a shaky hand and let Shye drink first before she herself did.

James sat down on the chair facing her.

The wind from outside was beating the abandoned Mine's many buildings, creating loud creakings from the rusty walls and frames. Shye's attention was caught at every loud noise, her little head snapping in the direction of each sound.

"I'm sorry, I never asked your name." She set the cup down on the table and pushed a strand of hair out of her face. Her grimy face was covered in the light brown dust of the Mine, but James noted that the skin underneath the layers was a rich, deep brown.

"James," James replied.

The woman nodded. "Well, thank you, James. My name is Blandina."

The woman gave a sudden violent shiver, her shawl around her head falling to her shoulders and revealing a head of brown curls.

James instantly got to his feet. "Ma'am--?"

The woman swiftly told Shye to go wait over by the counter and then, looking up at him, managed to say, "I have a fit sometimes," before falling to the floor, convulsing as if some person had slipped her poison.

James stood still. He glanced over to the little girl, who had listened to her mother's order. Her hand was in her mouth, and she watched the fit with big, brown eyes.

Blandina's own eyes were open, but there was something off about them. They didn't see the world surrounding them. They were just open.

*Like the people in this world,* James thought.

The table rattled as Blandina's head bonked against one of the legs. Her shoes were making faint thudding noises every time they hit the floor. James hurried over to her writhing form and put his hand in between her head and the table. She didn't react to his touch.

Was she even conscious?

He watched her face, void of emotion, waiting. Minutes dragged by.

Blandina's convulsions began to lessen, her eyes blinking. She looked up into James's face, chest heaving as if she'd run a mile. Her eyes widened, and she asked, "Where am I?"

That had not been the question he had expected. James heard soft footsteps from behind him, and then Shye's small form plopped down next to her mother.

Blandina reached for her daughter's body, finding one of the little girl's legs.

"Who are you?"

"James," James said. He frowned. "You don't remember our conversation from a few minutes ago?"

The woman shook her head.

"Can you stand?"

Blandina didn't speak. She closed her eyes and nodded. James grabbed a hand and a shoulder, and lifted the woman to her feet. Blandina's whole body quaked at the motion, and she gasped as if in pain. James held her in his arms, supporting most of her weight. She tried to speak, and then her body went limp in his arms.

"Oh d-" James caught himself just in time. "Drat."

There was a faint pulse on her wrist when James checked. He hoisted the lady into his arms, and then looked down at Shye.

"Follow me."

Shye stared up at her mother, then at James. Her eyebrows were creased together, and James could practically feel the fear radiating from her in waves.

Nevertheless, she nodded.

*Rather a calm child for being so frightened.*

**Part Two**

James laid Blandina on his bed. Her body was still twitching every few seconds, eyes closed, and James got the feeling that she was fast asleep. Maybe even in a coma...

He dismissed the thought, kneeling down to Shye's eye level and asking in the softest voice he could muster, "Do you want to be on the bed with her?"

Shye stared at the ground, hands gripping her dress. She nodded.

James put his hands around her waist and set her beside Blandina. The little girl instantly snuggled against her mother's form, pressing her face into Blandina's dress.

*She needs to be warmer. That outfit is a piece of garbage.* The dresser was behind him, so James was able to pull out a long-sleeved shirt in a matter of seconds, fingering the thick cloth.

"I'm just going to put this on her," James explained to Shye as he pushed the shirt down over the woman's head, then lifted her up, her body tilting at an angle. He dragged the rest of the shirt down and slipped each arm through. He felt the bones that jut out of her skin.

James threw the blankets over both of the girls, then sank heavily into a wooden rocking chair. The wood was still as smooth as when it had been newly crafted. James watched Blandina's chest rise and fall in small breaths.

How fragile human life was. The human body needed so much. Too much. James had often wished that he was a bird or a mammal, who's only problems and concerns were eating, drinking, and when the next mating season was.

They didn't wish for their children to have better futures. Or for loved ones to come back. They didn't get murdered or chained, one by one, by their corrupt government.

James got stiffly to his feet. He didn't need to waste time wishing.

Shye was rubbing her runny nose, eyes turning in his direction. She chanced a peek, and quickly averted them the moment she realized he was looking at her.

*Shye is an accurate name.*

"Shye?" James asked, going to stand by her.

Silence. The child clutched the blankets on her, pressing them over half of her face.

"Are you hungry?" James knew the answer before she nodded her head. He quietly slipped out of the room and made his way into the kitchen. One glance at the clock on the wall told him that the sun wouldn't be up any time soon.

The pantry doors creaked on their rusty hinges as James extracted a package of breakfast oatmeal.

The United Assembly gave every one of their citizens weekly food rations, and the meals for breakfast this week were not the worst, but certainly not the best. A train brought the food and officers distributed the meals every Sunday. James had discovered, as had the other lower-class citizens, the breakfast meals for the whole week were the same: oatmeal.

They had lucked out this week. Last week only provided four breakfast meals. One citizen, a young man carrying a toddler, asked one of the agents why there hadn't been enough. The serviceman brought his baton down on the man's head and ordered him to leave.

James had thought the man silly to ask. Why risk injury over food? Then again, he didn't have a child, and most likely a wife, to consider.

*Maybe he hadn't been so silly, after all,* James thought, biting his lip as he thought about his two additional guests.

He poured the dry oats into a small bowl, filling it with water from the faucet. The microwave turned the bowl around noisily. James, a spoon twirling in one hand, checked the front door to make sure it was locked soundly.

With a few good mixes to the brown batter, James walked back through the dim hallway and into the bedroom once more, the aura of dull oatmeal walking with him.

The little girl was familiar with a spoon, and began to dump large amounts into her mouth. James almost told her to slow down, but decided against it. He knew what it was like to starve.

The food was gone in a matter of minutes, and Shye licked the bowl and the spoon clean before setting it down in her lap.

James reached for the bowl, planning to take it from her, but froze as he noticed Shye pressed it against her chest and looked up at his face with wide, alert eyes. *Comfort.*

James retreated back into the rocking chair, grim realization hitting him. *She finds comfort in having an empty bowl. Within her reach.*

"When your mother wakes up, she can eat, too," James said.

*You better wake up.*

### **Part Three**

"On drugs?" James asked. He wanted to get down to the reason for these so-called fits. If she did say yes...

"No," Blandina gasped. The words seemed to take a great deal of effort to form. She closed her eyes. "Never had any."

James felt relief flood his mind. He was fully aware of what drugs could do to a human. Blandina probably knew, as well.

"Where do you work?" She asked after a silence, interrupted only by the wind outside. It was getting harder, louder.

James chose to keep his gaze on his desk as he answered. "At the prison in town. I'm a correctional officer."

An intake of breath sounded from Blandina's place on the bed. He could imagine what she was thinking of right now. Her husband could have been one of the convicts he'd had to beat down. He could have his blood on his hands.

"You poor man," Blandina said.

*What?*

James locked eyes with her. There was no sarcasm in the words. Not even a tiny bit. She was being 100% real with him.

Blandina suddenly gasped aloud, face pinched. James was at her side in an instant, letting her hold his hand. She had a much stronger grip than one would think.

"What's hurting?" James asked, ignoring her fingernails digging into his hand.

"Head--"

"Just focus on gripping my hand." James bit his lip. He glanced at Shye, and noticed that she was still asleep.

*Good, James thought. Hopefully she won't wake up during this fit.*

#### **Part Four**

James watched the woman's body shake. Little Shye was in his arms, crying and clutching his shirt with both hands.

*What a horrible way to wake up,* James thought, shivering

It was worse this time. James could tell. Even Shye was aware. She hadn't made a noise when any of the other fits occurred.

This one was different.

"It'll be over soon," James said, patting the little girl's back. He hoped he sounded reassuring.

Shye wasn't the only one who needed it.

The wind had picked up outside, banging violently against the walls.

They waited. The only sounds coming from Shye were quiet sniffles. James could feel her beating heart against his chest.

*It's going on for longer. Is this normal? Is she okay?*



James moved to Blandina's side and sat down on the edge of the bed. His arms were starting to feel the weight of the child he was holding. She became heavier as his anxiety grew.

The lamp cast odd shadows on Blandina's writhing form. She looked like a ghost-another version of herself.

*Please don't go*, James suddenly found himself wishing. He felt bile rising in his throat. *Don't leave her. I don't know how to help her. How can I help Shye?*

James reached out and held Blandina's hand, squeezing her palm gently. Maybe, just maybe, she could feel it.

There was no point in burying Blandina during the night. James held onto the dead woman's hand, Shye in his arms. She had fallen asleep, no doubt from sheer exhaustion, her head against his shoulder.

He only got up once to take Shye to the bathroom.

James marveled at life; death occurred, and human beings' bodies still had the regular, daily needs they required.

He still needed water.

Shye had to have food.

Why couldn't the body understand that the soul was broken and hurting?

The mine was quiet when James carried the still body of Blandina .

The sheet he'd wrapped her in was moving at requests from the breeze.

Shye, wrapped in a blanket, walked closely behind him. Her little face was serious, as if she was contemplating life's big questions.

James examined his surroundings. *Not here*, the trees seemed to whisper as they rustled their branches. *Don't bury her here*.

Where was the right place to bury her? James frowned, looking out at the green forest to his right.

A tug brought James's attention down to Shye. Her big, brown eyes looked up into his.

She pointed to an open space a few feet away from the nearest building, where a small tree stood.

"There?" James asked, shifting the body in his arms. Shye nodded.

James dug the grave. Shye sat next to her mother's body, eyes fastened on the place her mother's face was.

The dirt was hard. James was relieved to discover this, as it meant her body wouldn't drift off in the heavy rainfalls.

Reality began to sink in with each shovel-full of dirt.

Shye was his responsibility now. He'd have to feed more than just himself.

If he didn't, this three year old would be sent off to the factories. To be worked to death.

James grit his teeth. *Never, for as long as I'm still alive, will Shye have to go there.*

Once the hole was deep enough, James kneeled down to Shye's eye-level. He removed the sheet covering her mother's face so that Shye could look. He knew he had to tell her. Let her know that this would be the last time she would see Blandina's face.

"Shye, this is the last time you'll see your mother's face." He paused as the sky sent a powerful blast of wind around them. Shye's hair bounced at the gust. "Do you understand?" Then, without knowing why, he found himself add, "It's okay to be scared."

Shye just stared at her mother's face. She stumbled to her feet, tightening the blanket around her shoulders. She looked at James.

James lifted the woman and carefully laid her in the grave. He considered grabbing the sheet, then shook his head, climbing out of the hole. Dirt was covering his jeans, especially at the knees.

He took a moment to stare down at the woman who had, in desperation, come only yesterday morning in search of help.

She had wanted a better world for her daughter.

*I will help Shye*, James thought, wishing she could hear him. *I'll try my best.*

Then James picked up the shovel and began to throw the dirt over Blandina's corpse.

This part had always been the easiest to do at the prison, and this was no different.

After ten minutes, a freshly turned mound of dirt stood next to a beautiful red bud tree.

James wiped the sweat on his brow with his hand, his back protesting.

He and Shye went to sit under a nearby oak tree, James leaning against the trunk.

There was nothing to say, so both let silence speak in their stead. James knew how it was to lose someone. His presence spoke much louder than words.

"Would you like to stay here?" he asked.

Shye pointed at the grave. "Stay?"

A dull feeling seeped into James's bones. He shivered. "Yeah, she'll stay."

Shye folded her knees to her chest, resting her chin on top of them.

A nod.

*Just another person I could lose. There's no way to stop myself from getting close to her. She's so helpless.*

James lifted his head to the heavens, fighting back the ache in his heart.

*Why me?*

But the Mine was quiet today, and didn't answer.

## **“Referring to Dreams: An Essay”**

According to my mother, I began my passion of reading when I was six months old. Although I can't remember those memories, I am not surprised. Books have been a way of life for me since I can remember. I read books to escape this world and its constant problems or to journey with a beloved character. Eventually, I began to write my own stories. It took me a long time afterwards to realize that I could do just that: write stories for a career. It's still a dream; I haven't been published by an organization or signed a book contract. I hope that something may come of my passions. I hope I can glorify God with the stories I write and give people books full of hope and courage, even in the dark places.

My mom was the person who taught me how to read; the only skill that I have never stopped loving. I was the kid who read books late at night when I was supposed to be in bed. My town's public library allowed my sister and I to borrow more books than the maximum limit allowed when we were young. Sadly, I grew up without a friend who loved reading as much as I did, so I was pretty alone when it came to this craving of mine. That didn't phase me. I've always marveled at a book's purpose, its physicality. Isn't it funny to think that a book is just papers with words, smashed into binding and a cover, yet can provoke such amazing feelings and thoughts and changes? Just words made with black ink. Just pages waiting to be flipped and torn and faded. Just a book. The world is so busy nowadays that we are losing the wonderful love of reading books. Of taking time out of your day to sit down and read someone's story. Throwing myself into other worlds and facing problems alongside a character are some of the best therapy sessions I've ever had, very much so when I dive into a Kate DiCamillo novel or a book by Charles Dickens. The amount of lessons I have learned from reading novels, short stories, and even poems is unbelievable.

Just before Covid-19 occurred, locking the whole world down and isolating every human being, I discovered that I could, in fact, create stories. So I wrote a fantasy novel, the first book in a trilogy, and worked on that for a number of years. I stumbled upon the hardships every writer deals with, including the fact that starting out with a complex plot and world was not the way to go about writing your first novel. I did eventually finish it, though, and ran it through edits twice

before giving it as a Christmas present to my mother. I've discovered over the years the genres and stories that appease me the most, and I have been blessed to be with an online writing community for two years now.

Although that fantasy book is now collecting dust, it still sits there, in my mother's bedroom. My first novel. And I realize something important as I write this essay. I realize that without her, I wouldn't have started writing, because I wouldn't have loved to read as much as I do. If my mother had not known God, she wouldn't have taught me the most important, amazing story of all time. I wouldn't have found my desire to give the world good stories, like authors in the past. I am so very grateful to Him, my mother, all of those amazing librarians, and to everyone else who has shaped my life in such amazing ways. I pray that I shall be able to build and use these aspects of my life in the future, not only for God and His kingdom, but for all those who have influenced and encouraged me to never give up on doing the things I feel passionate about.

# Sumlina Alam

Grade 11, Blue Valley Northwest High  
School  
*Flash Fiction*



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## The Doctor's Appointment

My feet bounced as I waited in the dimly lit examination room. The dark curtains blocked out any hints of sunlight, the only light source being the single fluorescent lamp standing in the center of the room. The wrinkled leather chair was colored a faded brown (more like in between orange and mustard; I wasn't too sure), and the chair squeaked as I shifted my seating, creasing in the same aged folds. Outside, it was raining drearily, the raindrops pittering and pattering against the roof. I wanted to go home now, but I knew I couldn't. My head had been pounding for days and felt heavy as a rock. Something was throbbing inside my head; I could feel my forehead and the bags under my eyes tighten as I tried to sit upright. The doorknob rattled, breaking the long silence, and I saw the Doctor enter, barely glancing at me as she sat on a short, spinny chair with a deflated top. The Doctor tightened her sandy ponytail, pushed up her thick, dark, rounded glasses, and drew out her scratched, tan clipboard. "How are you today?" she asked, her head facing the other way while she scoured through the worn drawers and pulled out a pair of oft-white gloves.

I replied with my instantaneous and programmed response of "I'm fine" and ended with my signature smile, my body straight and still. The Doctor paused, turning her head to the side as if she was listening carefully before swiveling abruptly. I blinked. She blinked. I frowned at her peculiar, piercing stare. "I mean, my head hurts a little," I added. The Doctor swiftly rose, grabbed the lamp, and shined it on my face. Surprisingly, I didn't flinch at the blinding light, but the intense heat penetrated my face. My skin screamed in agony as the individual muscles loosened and melted into mushy clumps, dropping onto the dusty floor with a satisfying splat. The weight of my face grew lighter and lighter, and I clenched my fists at the sizzling burns.

“Just as I thought,” the Doctor remarked with a sigh. She retrieved a facial mirror from the drawers and handed it to me. I gasped and almost dropped the mirror in shock. My face was a void filled with small, slimy tapeworms crawling and squirming over one another. The worms jabbered and fought with each other; their tiny voices rang in my ears. I dared not to touch the churning pot of muck, and my arms froze in horror. Like a magician, the Doctor produced a pair of tweezers from the cuffs of her sleeves and delicately plucked the worms from my face. She dropped the unwanted chatterboxes on a metal plate before crushing them to their inevitable deaths. I closed my eyes and grimaced at their last cries.

Plop.

*She must hate me.*

Crush.

Silence.

Plop.

*Am I good enough?*

Crush.

Silence.

Plop.

*No one would care if I had disappeared.*

Crush.

Silence.

The Doctor did not even repulse, did not even wrinkle her nose in disgust as she plucked—it was almost as if she had been cleaning worms from people’s faces all her life. And so, the Doctor tidied my face and repeated this cycle of plop, cry, crush, silence for what seemed like an eternity. I finally opened my eyes when I no longer heard the tapeworms. The Doctor handed me the mirror again, and I sighed in relief. My face was just a dark, empty hole. I raised my hand and attempted to touch the gap, grasping nothing but sheer air. Moving my head felt odd, as my head already felt light as a feather.

“You should be able to rest easy tonight,” the Doctor said. “Those gibbering worms are long gone now, and you won’t have to hear their insults anymore.” I nodded.

“What about my face?” I asked.

“Oh, your face? Don’t worry about it. In time, you’ll grow a new one—a natural one this time,” the Doctor chuckled and grinned. It was the first time I had seen her smile.

I gazed at the mirror again, hunching over to analyze my face. It was strange to feel empty; I was so used to feeling bombarded. My head no longer felt packed and ached; the strain along my skull eased. A feeling of solace washed over me like the peace one would receive when a cacophony subdued. No more squirming, crawling, churning. No more yaps, cries, and shrieks inside. No more fear, anger, hopelessness. A calm ocean, a quiet forest, a silent mountain filled inside me. The past no longer haunted me; instead, I could now move forward—I was free.

THE END

# Priya Antony

Grade 11, Blue Valley Northwest High  
School  
*Poetry*



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## The Sleeping Pill

The Sleeping Pill rested on my dirty desk, toppled with papers, eraser dust, and whatnot.

I widened my eyes and stared at it,  
Feeling the red veins in my eyes stretch and contort.  
*Keep your eyes awake.*  
*Don't go to sleep. Don't go to sleep. Don't go to sleep.*

My phone chimes.  
*"Renew overdue books"*  
(a reminder I set but never do)

*"Can't wait to hang this week"*  
(the girls' group chat I should respond to before I fall out of touch again)

*"Thanks for attending today's club meeting!"*  
(that one after-school club I keep forgetting to attend. . .)

I yawned, I yawned, I yawned.  
My pinky grazed the tiny imprint on the oblong pill,  
The weight in my cheeks growing heavier.

*You promised, you promised, you promised*  
Your teacher to finish that assignment you were too confused on,  
Your friend to hang out often,  
Your doctor to exercise daily,



Yourself to finish the essays for that summer program you want to attend that's due tonight.

My vision blurs, but I blink to stay up, rubbing my eyes.  
My brain feels mush, my creative juices sloshing around my skull.  
*No, no, you're not done. . . Stop, you're not done. . .*  
What about the short story you said you would finish?  
What about the classic book you said you would read?  
What about the SAT you said you would study for?

My head falls back before I lurch myself forward,  
My hands grab the desk's edges to keep me upright.  
*Don't go to sleep. Don't go to sleep. Don't go to sleep.*  
I swallow my dry saliva as I gaze at the pretty blue pill,  
Staring back at me with its enticing call,  
"You can end it now, you know?"

*Don't do it. Don't do it. Don't do it.*  
I flop my hand on the pill, limp and weak,  
Ready to end it all,  
But my vision flickers, in and out,  
Before the world goes completely dark.  
*Hush.*

The next morning, I woke up,  
Finding the Sleeping Pill held tightly in my hand.

# Piya Antony

Grade 11, John Burroughs School

Educators: Katairna Fernandez

Poetry



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## All I Used To Do Was Pray

Painful pinching as I inhale, and the exhalation's exaltation as I look upward  
To the night sky. I can only pray, now, under dark's guard,  
when no one will hear what I beg for.  
Too much, I know I ask for.

Breathe out—the sound should satisfy a sermon.  
Breathe in—Christ settles on your windowsill, awaiting  
a proper promise of piety.  
A true Christian woman would never do what I've done.

I'm sorry, God, I'm sorry every time  
That I fall, face-first, fighting the feeling.  
But my burden, bestowed by Your benevolent hand  
Is to love, never leave, yet be left where I stand.

I can only pray so many times  
For him to return: lean lavishly  
Against the wall, no cares, none at all—  
Except, as I once believed, about me—  
How was I to know? There's no name I could call  
To which he'd respond; Nothing I could bawl  
That didn't make him turn on his heel, balk.

I can only beseech You so often

To make me lovable once more—  
What kind of a name is mine, “beloved”  
When I’ve got nothing of the sort to be borne?

I still believe, instinct inherent,  
That I amount to nothing more  
Than that man’s eschewing of my heart  
Once in his hands, now shattered on the floor.  
If Amma were still here, the only thing she’d tell me:  
“If you want to heal from him, pray.”

And, God, all I used to do was pray.

# Piya Antony

Grade 11, John Burroughs School

Educators: Katairna Fernandez

Poetry



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## Cup of Coins

My mother's telling the same old tale once more;  
We've heard it to her heart's content, our ears sore  
But if I'd known this would be the last time I'd hear it,  
I wouldn't have been so bored.

She's pulling in through the gate, marveling at Dad's splendor  
—she's *stunned* that he's become such a big spender.  
I have a skip and twirl in my walk, clinking coins  
So I cover the cup with my hands to stop escaping noise.

We reach, reacquaint, remember the good times.  
I set the cup in her lap when she's distracted by phone's chime.  
“Look, Mommy! I have enough for you to buy a home,  
This way you won't have to take out a loan!”

She looks between us a couple times, a slow smile  
Spreads across her face. Then, she laughs for a while.  
Her all-consuming disbelief that God's given something  
Following year after year of sacrificing.

# Piya Antony

Grade 11, John Burroughs School

Educators: Katairna Fernandez

Poetry



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## Daughter

How do you freeze time? Because, crystalline  
Is this moment, when I realize  
That her hands can barely grip a dime.

Before she learns to form words,  
And coherent thoughts she lords  
Over me: I'm the one she crawls toward.

To be trusted so faithfully, faultless  
For once in one's eyes, a willingness  
To be held and loved and taught to suppress  
In the way woman always is, her fury down-dressed.

How will I raise her? How do I save  
Her from fate—her hunched figure, deprived  
Of all joy, a stove-top-tied slave  
Subject to her half-hearted lover's crave?

I want to preserve her as she is now:  
No blouse to look down,  
No one to whom she bows,  
No argument to be cowed,  
No transgressions to allow.

But for right now, there's nothing to fear—

I look down and she's right here,  
Rosy, grinning ear to ear, eyes shining clear—  
And for all my hope, they won't age beyond their years.

# Piya Antony

Grade 11, John Burroughs School

Educators: Katairna Fernandez

Poetry



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## Little Might

Hands widened, but not wide enough.  
She pretends she's a hero, to mask her fear:  
She thinks of the movies, Iron Man with his palms of power;  
Fingers of desperation, she has, flexed to deflect  
Parents' screams, which bounce and reflect  
Off the table she stands on, to assert a little one's dominance.

Arms outstretched, but not far enough—  
There's not enough space you could put between these two—  
She finds herself wondering how she came to be here,  
Why she feels so heavy, exhausted, standing up here,  
When the supposed love which created her feels ephemeral  
But their hate is so threatening, deafening, real.

Eyes closed, but not tight enough;  
Every time she opens them, she sees more fear.  
Sibling eyes mirror hers, glassy and drained, though respective bodies  
Spring into motion, dragging combatants apart.  
You take Mom, I'll take Dad, and before she falls,  
Someone get the baby off the dinner table.

# Piya Antony

Grade 11, John Burroughs School

Educators: Katairna Fernandez

Poetry



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## Snow in L.A.

Coming home  
Will take a bravery I don't know if I possess.  
I drifted around the continent  
Before I even thought of it:  
I immersed myself in Floridian waters, trying to break into parks we never got to see;  
Clawed my way up to L.A. to see where Josh burrowed away from the pain,  
Looped back 'round to Philly, just to sit under the LOVE sign and wait,  
Then to wait some more for someone to come find me.  
Escapades to the hotspots undertaken before I knew  
How much I'd missed your warmth.

The penultimate place I went on my world tour was Chicago;  
The same place you thought you could bike,  
Learned you couldn't, flew through the air  
And landed at your last week of life.  
The same place my sister almost died, but rejuvenated  
Hers, and subsequently fell once more  
Knowing she couldn't save yours.

Now, St. Louis isn't anything special, not after you've seen snow in L.A.  
Josh says it was a mirage; I say it was God telling me to come back to you.  
Neither of us two were ever at peace with you, and we wondered, if ghosts exist,



Whether you'd even bother coming back to visit. But we knew you when we saw you:

Something in that overcast sky—the way the energy of the city slowed to a tepid heartbeat told us you'd taken it from them.

Chins raised up, just our luck, would you look at that: the cars on the highway  
Have never seen traffic this bad. Stopped just like they are in La La Land;  
On the overpasses, the children climb to the edges, sticking out their tongues  
To try and catch you, to memorize you as the phenomenon you were.

I see it in a snowglobe I shake in my head:

Burnt into my mind is every flake, fractal, and fracture you did.

Josh and I looked at each other, looked up at you, and stared, and stared,  
unprepared, as mystified and rare

As snow in L.A.

# Piya Antony

Grade 11, John Burroughs School  
Educators: Katairna Fernandez  
*Poetry*



## Was There Ever Love?

In the days before we left the old house, I found myself searching for treasure  
—not sure what you'd call it. Maybe, love. But to me, it was precious and rare,  
Little shared in this, our little lair. I knock on walls,

Stomp on floors,

Trace the crevices and corners

of our fever dream.

We're awake now. How—

How did we ever believe this could ever work out?

When they act like children, fight like dogs?

Till we pull them apart, magnets

grind

themselves

to dust.

Perhaps there's hope in surrendering the facade

(We're no longer faded, some image of a family)

We accept that we're fractured and flawed. Like a head nod—

We bid routines and rituals goodbye, we say we'll make anew

—we never do—

As some things

aren't meant for everyone; to be

A happy family?

Just wasn't meant for me.

All this to say, this makes the escapade more noble, a great

Journey which I undertake. Caverning, careening into the past

Of which I know so little—examining videos, photos,

Diaries and dilemmas and dresses and decencies,  
 The very same which told us to cede.  
 One begins to wonder: is there a meaning I can fashion out of these bits?  
 Was there ever love in this? In the very first kiss?  
 In the kitchen, where  
 Mother makes our grocery lists?  
 In the office, where  
 Father carves a living out of this?  
 In the bedroom, where my sister  
 cries, yet persists?  
 In the driveway, where my  
 brother steps to bat?  
 And I yell at him, *you've got this!*  
 The adventure is treacherous, the hours long;  
 This endeavor fleeting, futile in the eyes of loved ones,  
 But I hope, (how does one survive without it?),  
 and stomp again,  
  
 shake these walls,  
  
 with words, and songs;  
  
 my ear to the floor,  
  
 eyes to the  
 ceiling,  
  
 vigilant for any feeling,  
 Realize that this house—  
 This home, haunt, whatever you're calling it currently—  
 Is unyielding.  
 But neither am I, my mother's daughter to the core.  
 This mission isn't over yet; just another what-for?  
 For just one more crack in the mirror, one more sparking light,  
 One more hand-off clock, one more hole-in-the-wall (our latest fight),  
 One more water break, one more creak this floor can bear,  
 And I swear it, disbelievers be aware  
 —I'll find love somewhere.

# Abishek Aravinda Kumar

Grade 10, Parkway South High School  
*Poetry*



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## A Trip Down Memory Lane

I take a trip down memory lane,  
A field of love, and endless pain.  
Running wild, my feelings shake—  
Oh, what joy, oh, what ache.

Yet now I cry, a tear of bliss,  
For peace and grief, I reminisce.  
A time of warmth, I run through now,  
But my heart is cold—I wonder how.

Oh, how I long for those times of thrill,  
When life was awe, full of gentle still.  
Before the storm of guilt and fear,  
Lie my innocent echoes, the ones I hold so dear.

But while time may pass, and years may fade,  
My memories made will be forever splayed.  
And in my heart, nostalgia will reign,  
For I have taken a trip down memory lane.

# Abishek Aravinda Kumar

Grade 10, Parkway South High School  
*Personal Essay & Memoir*



## Not the End

I sit on my front doorstep twirling a leaf around my finger– watching it whirl in a mesmerizing pattern as the warm golden rays from the sunset bounce off the smooth surface. It only stops twirling when I close my eyes and sigh. It had been two weeks since I had found out. Two weeks since I learned the devastating truth. Yet I still didn't have the slightest idea on what to do. I continue to contemplate while anxiously tapping my foot on the concrete, but quickly stop when I see the headlights of a car materialize in front of my house.

My breath hitches and my heart races.

Was this finally it?

I start to stand, but then sigh as I watch the car continue to barrel past.

This was not it.

Groaning, I sit back down and cover my head with my hands as I try to envision the scene where it all happened...

*"Shall we begin the fifth round of me destroying you?" I laugh, setting my controller down and turning toward my friend.*

*My friend only laughs back, a sly grin on his face, "Oh, bring it on! That was actually just my warm-up... you'll see my true power in just a second!"*

*I roll my eyes, "Whatever you say... it is your death wish after all."*

*"Hey!" He throws a pillow at me that I only narrowly dodge. "You're gonna be wishing you hadn't said that!"*

*I laugh as I pick up my controller, checking to make sure my controls are working. Satisfied, I looked over to my friend, who was staring off toward the windows.*

*"Hey! No stalling. You ready or not?"*

*My friend blinks rapidly, before smiling in embarrassment, "Oh yeah sorry. I'm ready."*

*I nod, and press start on my controller. We then sit in silence for several tense minutes— our attention solely focused on the TV and the fast-paced action of fighting characters. The silence is only broken once my friend gets pushed to the edge, where I then land a game-ending attack.*

*"Well, at least you tried." I grin, looking toward my friend.*

*He starts to smile but quickly stops as uneasiness starts to fill his face.*

*I put my controller down, looking at him in confusion, "Something up?"*

*"I-I'm moving."*

*I stare at him for several seconds before setting down my controller, bursting into laughter, "Just cause you're this bad at the game, doesn't mean you have to switch homes in shame."*

*I start to pick up my controller again waiting for a reply, but I quickly stop when I don't get one. Instead, I look up at him in disbelief,*

*"You're kidding. There's no way you're actually moving." I say shaking my head, waiting for the confirmation.*

*My friend stares at me sadly, "Austin Texas to be exact."*

*I look up at him once more, waiting with every ounce of my body for the "I'm just kidding"... yet it never comes.*

*"W-when did you learn about this?"*

*He looks down, "A month ago."*

*"And you're just now telling me?" I stare in shock, a little feeling of hurt starting to sink in.*

*"I-I didn't want to change anything between us... I'd rather have spent time together normally like we always do."*

*My vision starts to blur, "You can't just... just leave! We've been friends for almost six years! Six years!" My eyes began to well up, and I could feel a tear escaping, "Who am I supposed to hang out with now?"*

*He averts my gaze and looks down, "My dad got a new job. I tried convincing them but they wouldn't budge," He looks back up, "I'm sorry Abishek. I-I tried my best."*

*The scene suddenly vanishes and I wince at the memory. Even though it had only been two weeks since my friend had told me, I knew that memory would always leave an empty hole inside me. Sighing, I rub my eyes and take a deep breath. It's only after I remove my hands from my eyes do I realize a car parked on my driveway. Instantly standing up in shock, I see my friend sitting in the passenger seat.*

It was finally it.

Smiling, I wave and then quickly turn to call my parents through the front door. Turning back around just as quickly, I immediately sprint to the car where my friend jumps out and gives me a bone-crushing hug.

We pull apart, and he frowns at me, "Oh c'mon, what's with the sad face," He attempts a try at a cheery smile, "Just cause I'm moving doesn't mean you can't kick my butt in video games anymore."

I laugh, fake punching his shoulder, "The last time I'll see you for a while, and you're out here cracking jokes?"

He shrugs, "Better that than crying tears."

"Yeah yeah, whatever you say. Just make sure you don't forget me when you're over in Texas."

"Nah, you don't gotta worry about that, my dad says we'll visit pretty often."

"Yeah, you better visit. You're not gonna be able to get rid of me that easily." I laugh, grinning. He starts to laugh with me but then slowly stops and frowns as he looks over my shoulder. I turn around and grimace as I follow his glance. Our parents were done talking, and they were now on their goodbyes. I whirl back around and he nods at me, his eyes cloudy.

"I won't be getting rid of you anytime soon."

I give him one last hug, and then quietly say bye to his parents, before watching them slowly walk away to their car. Tears begin to fill my eyes, and memories start to rapidly flash through my head.

*I was at the top of the neighborhood hill, sitting on my bike alongside my friend— howling in excitement as we fist-bumped and then launched down the hill, racing each other to the end of the neighborhood.*

*The memory switches, and now I'm at my 10th birthday party— my friend was once again beside me, grinning ear to ear as he sang Happy Birthday, chocolate smeared all over his lips.*

*A tear falls down my cheek as the memory switches once more. Now I was in my room, holding a controller— laughing with my friend as we slayed zombies in Minecraft together. The first time I would ever play a videogame with him.*

*And then the memory switches one last time, and I'm suddenly brought to the place where it all started. My first day at school in my new neighborhood, where I would spot a little kid in mismatched socks, messy black hair, and a Jurassic Park backpack. Walking up to him, I say hi— completely unaware that this one word would change my future years to come.*

I hear a sudden honk, and the memory fades– now replaced by my friend leaning out his window, waving as his car slowly pulls out from the driveway.

“I’ll cya on the other side!... This is not the end!”

I wave in silence, unable to form words, forced to watch as my friend gives one final wave before driving off into the now dark unlit night.

Tears begin to flow down my cheek, yet I smile and close my eyes– his last sentence still running through my head.

“This is not the end.”



# Abishek Aravinda Kumar

Grade 10, Parkway South High School  
*Personal Essay & Memoir*



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## The Hill

“We’ve put it off too long.” My friend points his hand upward, his eyes sparkling in the fiery sun. “We’re climbing the hill today.”

Today? The hill?

The hill doesn’t seem too bad. Or at least at first glance it doesn’t. It’s only after a couple more glances and then a really hard one.

*The hill, the hill.*

He’s trying to get somebody to climb with him. He says it’s not difficult. Only a short hike. Nothing more.

“Just to the top,” he pleads. “It’s worth it, I swear!”

Don’t listen to him, shouts my friend’s brother– a little ways away. “Can’t you see how dangerous it is! He’s as crazy as the hill!”

I turn around, squinting under the bright sunlight. The hill overlooks our little neighborhood, tall and green. Its sharp slopes painted with ditches and holes and bushes and weeds. Once a landfill, now a work of art– the hill all lopsided and tilted.

“C’mon,” my friend begs. “Just to the top.”

His brother glances up, starting to shake his head at me, “There’s a reason why we’ve never climbed the hill before... who knows what’s up there!” He begins to turn around, and gestures for me to follow, “Let’s head back home. The sun is starting to set– and I don’t want to stay here any longer than I have to.”

I look downwards and hesitate before eventually lifting my gaze to my friend, “Your brother might have a point.” I pause as I see his smile droop and his eyes dim, “We can always come back another day– it’s not like we’re giving up or anyth–”

“Whatever,” my friend cuts me off. “It’s not like I wanted to climb the hill that bad anyway.” He kicks at the ground, his action saying otherwise.

Turning, I glance toward his brother, who gives me a shrug before making his way across the grassy meadow and back into our neighborhood.

“How many more times are you guys gonna give excuses?” I whirl toward my friend— his eyes focused on the hill, a glum expression on his face.

“We’re not giving any excu—”

“Yes, you are,” My friend pivots his focus on me, “This is at least the fifth time I’ve asked— and every time, you guys come up with an excuse.”

“We don’t come up with any excu— “

“Last time, it was that your stomach was hurting— the time before that was because a storm was coming— and the time before that wa—”

“Fine! You caught us— we are giving excuses!” Yelling, I pause to catch my breath, “But maybe it’s because we’re not reckless idiots, taking up pointless risks to get ourselves hurt!”

A sudden look of hurt flashes across my friend’s face. “You think I’m a reckless idiot?”

Several seconds pass.

“That’s not what I meant. What I meant to say wa—”

“You don’t have to explain yourself. You can think I’m a reckless idiot for all I care,” My friend pauses, his arms hanging loosely at his side, “Just know that maybe sometimes... sometimes you actually have to take pointless risks if you want to live life.”

Several more seconds pass.

He coughs before swiveling around to face the neighborhood, “I-I think I have to go now— my brother is probably wondering where I am.”

“I didn’t mean what I said before, okay? I’m sorry.”

My friend stills, and then slowly turns around, “If you really are sorry— then.. then you can meet me here at the hill again tomorrow.”

“O-okay yeah. Of course I’ll meet you here,” I try to smile encouragingly, but my friend just tilts his head downwards and walks away— his figure casting a dark shadow behind him.

Sighing, I sit down on the stiff patch of grass below me and cock my head toward the sky. I watch the sun, its radiant brightness slowly dimming, as it falls below the hill. I continue watching the sky even after the sun sets— even after my eyes get blurry and tears begin to slide down my cheek. It’s only after I finish crying, that I stand up and wipe my cheek, preparing to leave the hill behind and head back home.

\*\*\*

I grunt as I push aside the ivy and bushes- trying to pass into the entrance of the meadow beside my neighborhood. After several failed tries, and pricked fingers, I finally manage to cross the shrouded boundary, and into the grassy field- where I see my friend standing at the bottom of the hill, a long stick in his hand, and his brother beside him. I wipe some dust off of my shoes, before beginning to trek over to them, humming as I follow the small weathered dirt path.

Trying to think of what I would say once I reached my friend, I stop humming. I usually wasn't one lost for words, but the conversation I had with my friend yesterday hadn't been left on good terms. After reaching home, I had spent most of my night awake in bed, contemplating what my friend had said- about taking risks- and if it really was the way to live life. I never had really taken any risks, so was I not living life? I tended to stick to my comfort zone- the stuff I was comfortable with. At school, I only had a few friends. I was never really the one to speak up and start a conversation.

That's when the thought suddenly crosses my mind.

Maybe... maybe my friend was right.

Maybe you did have to take risks to live life.

I continue to think about this, even as my friend shouts, waving his stick at me.

"Abishek! You came!"

I grin, high-fiving my friend, "Of course I did!"

His brother slides up beside him, "Great! You can convince my brother now of how stupid his idea is!" He turns around, pointing behind him, "He still hasn't given up on trying to climb the dang- ouch!"

I laugh as I watch my friend wack his brother with the stick.

"Ouch- quit that. I'm serious." He dances around, dodging my friend's attempted slashes. "Okay fine- ouch- fine you win... but either way, I doubt Abishek's going to agree... right?" He stops dancing, and looks up at me, a hopeful smile on his face.

"Actually... I was thinking about it and..." I took a deep breath, knowing what I would say next would break me out of my comfort zone.

"Let's do it."

My friend howls, raising his hands to the sky in excitement- while his brother groans, rubbing his eyes in disappointment.

I walk over and pat his shoulder, “You know... sometimes in life... you have to actually take risks if you want to live life to its fullest.” I then sneak a glance toward my friend, and can’t help but smile when I notice his joyful glee.

“Well someone certainly had a change of heart.”

Rolling my eyes at my friend, I turn and point toward the top of the hill, “Last one up... is a rotten egg!”

Adrenaline then surges through me, and before I know it, I begin to sprint up the hill. Taking a quick look behind me, I laugh as I notice my friend and his brother scrambling up behind me, trying to catch up. However, the laugh quickly turns into a frown as I whirl back to the front and see the landscape in front of me. Ditches. Bushes. And weeds. Taking a deep breath, I vault over the ditches. I swerve around the bushes. I dive through the weeds. And I fly and fly and fly. I suddenly think about my parents— who I knew would be furious if they saw me climbing the hill. But at that moment I didn’t care. Reckless idiot or not, right now I was flying, the cold breath of early autumn against my eyes, my nose, and my lips, refreshing as a polar plunge on a hot summer day. But then I suddenly fall— a single ditch poised to attack. My lungs and legs searing in pain, I only laugh as I pick myself back up and continue to fly. This time stopping only at the top to watch. Watch as my friend scrambles up, his brother behind him. And watch toward the sky as the bright orange sun slowly fades below the forest horizon— setting a faint warm glow cascading over the hill and onto the sweaty boys at the top.

“Maybe you were right about that whole risk thing,” my friend’s brother announces, gasping for breath.

And then we laugh, our loud voices floating up and over the hill down into the quiet little neighborhood below.

# Addison Avena

Grade 10, Olathe North High School

Educator: Deirdre Zongker

*Short Story*



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## Girlyism'

I had never considered myself to be any different than my brother. I thought I would grow to be just like him, brushing the doorways I walked through and looking down on the world from above. When I turned ten, I grabbed and held on for my life to a tomboy phase as if my age had stripped me bare and the first thing I seized was an orange sweatshirt and shorts that touched my knees.

Boys and girls first became separated in my mind when I was denied a sleepover with my two friends, one of whom was a boy. I hardly understood why he couldn't spend the night. Like Santa, or the Easter Bunny, the possibility of us being treated as equals began to fade from reality. We were only seven or eight, and they were my best friends and next-door neighbors, but when I asked my mom, she said, "No, Natalie. We don't spend the night with boys," but never explained why. In our eight years of friendship, we never had a sleepover.

In the past, I went to cheer camps to spend one special football game on the sidelines, pom-poms in hand, while helmets clashed and bodies fell on the field. My brother was in there somewhere, and I hadn't wanted to be like him, instead content with the knowledge that I one day would simply end up the same. Age ten, and I began to fiercely despise being a girl. Despite everything I would forget, it felt as though the disappointment of being a girl would never leave me.

It made me uncomfortable. I felt gross, tied to a certain obligation to deny any femininity. I glared and argued. My favorite color was blue. Once when I was wearing a hand-me-down pair of dark, swishing basketball shorts, my friend--a boy, wearing nearly the same thing--asked why I was wearing 'boy shorts.' It embarrassed me, why it was any different on me than on him, but still, I looked at him straight and said it was because I can. After school, I would walk beneath bridges with my two friends and their older brother and come home dripping in

mud. We played tackle football in their backyard, not stopping for blood or bruises. It was how we had always been, but now it felt fake; I was trying to prove something. I showed how much I wasn't a girl by how hard I shoved or how dirty I got. It was disgusting. I was disgusted.

I was in seventh grade when I met Dakota. "Can I sit here?" She asked. We were somehow the only girls in our class.

"Yeah," I squeaked, caught off guard, raising my eyebrows. "I'm Dakota," she said. I knew who she was, as did most students at the school, and I was surprised to see her ignore her friends to sit with the only other girl. I acknowledged her with a nod. "Natalie. Good to meet you." She smiled at me. When I got to know her, I understood why Dakota was popular. She was smart, funny, and owned products that I gaped at the price of. The first time she came to my house, my brother looked almost surprised, as if he couldn't believe I would hang out with such a girl. But she was my friend. I admired her.

That year, my shirts were sometimes shorter and my face in pictures sometimes softer. I wore high-waisted jeans that hid my skin and jackets that covered my arms, but it was different. Dakota was so confident--she did her makeup nearly every day, and her smile held everything I lacked. It was as if all the girliness I had pushed down had found an outlet in my sea of hatred and rushed along in a river to her, connecting us.

Once, she was doing her makeup, with powders and colorful vials spread about the floor. She applied pink blush to the apples of her cheeks. I wondered what the brush felt like--if it would scratch my skin or be as undetectable as a cloud--and I giggled at the thought, then frowned. Why was I thinking about that? It was an abnormality, me wanting to try makeup. I convinced myself that it would hurt and leave bloody red marks on my face instead of the soft pink on Dakota's.

If I knew that wasn't true, I could have been brave. I could have asked to try, ask how to do it, and learn. But I was convinced something horrible would happen, that I just simply should not do it.

My mother brought me home that night, and as we walked in the door I ignored my brother's quips about if I had enjoyed my conversion to 'girlyism' and if he was the next victim. All I gave him was an irritated look; I knew he didn't mean it. My feet padded on the soft stairs all the way to my bathroom. When I had gotten ready for sleep, I threw my sheets over my body and tucked my hand under my head, curled on my side. A mountain of blankets displaced my unease with warmth.



\*

My deep refusal to be 'girly' carried into my eighth-grade year. I began to warm up to shorts that showed my thighs and looking polite in pictures, but anything else I tried was overwhelming. Once, I snuck into my mother's bathroom and shuffled through her drawers, on high alert for any sound of my brother, and took out her black makeup bag. It was hardly secure, barely buttoned and dirty with pigment, but I held it like a forgotten relic. My hands hovered before I picked out her mascara--I knew what it was; I wasn't oblivious, just uninclined to use my knowledge--and unscrewed the cap. I inspected the weird shape and slathered bristles. While studying my lashes and girlish face in the mirror in front of me, a creak on the stairs sent me into a panic to return everything to exactly how it was. I tried to hide what I had done, ashamed and sick that I had ever considered touching makeup. But the dust was disturbed, and like a broken vase, I could never be the same.

\*

A month after sneaking into my mother's bathroom, Dakota and I decided to see a movie in theatres, a popular chick flick that had just come out. Dakota approached me at school and greeted me, excitedly asking, "Do you want to do matching makeup looks for the movie?" I froze, as I wasn't expecting this, but found myself answering in a hesitant voice.

"Sure... but I don't know how to do makeup."

"That's okay," she answered, "I can teach you!"

"Okay. Do you want to come to my house, like, an hour before we need to leave?"

She smiled and agreed.

\*

That Sunday became the first day I ever wore makeup. We were in my room, and Dakota pulled a collection of makeup from her tote bag and spread the items across my carpeted floor. She opened a pallet and pushed a brush against the powder inside.

"Ok, Nat," she began, "We're gonna start with eyeshadow. Look how I do it." I watched how she painted her eyelids. It didn't scare me anymore. I picked up another brush and followed suit, and though mine wasn't as perfect as hers and I felt odd, I didn't mind it at all. Eventually, we got to mascara, and I thought back to how I had snuck into my mother's bathroom only a month ago--it seemed like much longer than a month. Then, it was daunting and felt like poison, but now it

was casual and seemed as if I had uncovered something buried deep underneath my ribs. I smiled.

My mother called up the stairs to tell us that it was time to go. When I walked down the stairs, Dakota behind me, I didn't know how my mother would react to my newly painted face. My brother, however, reacted exactly as I'd expected--A slew of obnoxious exclamations that made my cheeks burn brighter. Hearing my brother, my mother entered the room to see why he was calling me a clown. She looked at me, stunned for a second, and said I was beautiful.

My mother's compliment was a common one, but it was relieving to see that it hadn't changed because I did something different. I might have imagined it, but it seemed to me there was a new recognition in her eyes, as if she saw the little girl I used to be. That girl was only hidden away, covered by a cloak of insults and expectations I hurled at myself--but here she was, walking out of my house into the daylight with a flawlessly imperfect face of makeup.

\*

It took some time to build up the courage, but I eventually found myself asking my mother to buy me mascara. When it came, I raked the wand through my lashes before school. Doubts flooded my mind as I entered the building--What if it looks bad? I thought. What if I'm made fun of?--but the doubts quieted down and were replaced with a buzzing anticipation as I walked to Dakota, sitting where we did every morning.

"Hi." I sat down next to her and dropped my bag on the table.

"Hey," she responded, glancing at me. She did a double-take, eyes widening, and exclaimed, "Nat! Are you wearing mascara?"

I looked to the side, embarrassed but smiling. "Yeah. It arrived this morning."

"It looks amazing! I love it!"

This time, I looked straight at her, relief flooding me. "Thanks, Dakota," I said, "I really appreciate it."

The day passed with only a few people commenting on the change around my eyes, all compliments that increased my confidence with every step. Even my brother left me alone. I slept well that night, grateful to have dusted off and reconstructed another side of me.



# Violet Bacott

Grade 8, Parkway West Middle School

*Poetry*



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## Words

Words

Sharp lines

Soft curves

The rounded edge of an o

The sharp corners of a V

Mold together into

letters

Combinations of sharp edges

Soft easy edges jumble together to make

Words

Words can babble together

Flowing like a gentle brook

Full of excitement,

Love

Joy

Soft gentle flow of positivity.

But in a few sharp words

Babbling brooks can surge into

Raging rivers

Pulling you under in a flurry

Of syllables and sounds

Strong current steals your excitement,

Love

Joy

Really no different from letters  
Soft curved edges  
Sharp pointed angles  
    Sweet  
    Cruel  
    Sappy  
    Mad  
All at the same time  
Like a golden sword  
Pretty basking encased in glass  
Mesmerizing you in its beauty  
You forget  
It can easily be used  
To slit your throat  
Stealing life away from you as easily as you  
Flick your wrist  
A slight change of intent  
Can make a relic  
Into a weapon  
In the blink of an eye.  
Words  
Just as likely to be used  
To make a smile  
As it is  
to create a tear.

# Laureen Baddoo

Grade 12, St. Teresa's Academy

Educator: Sarah Taber

*Personal Essay & Memoir*



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## Return on Investment (R.O.I)

As a kid growing up I was taught that I was an "investment". To make each sacrifice worth its while. It was no secret that my parents gave up a lot (leaving Ghana, foregoing their college dreams) to give me and my siblings the life we have now. My mom never got the opportunity to go to college, and as "Mommy's mini-me," I felt the responsibility to make her sacrifice worthwhile, so I gave a hundred in everything I did. I made every sacrifice and spent any free time contributing to the family business, not because I felt it was right but because I couldn't fail, couldn't be a capital loss.

This worked perfectly until middle school. This was the time when real friend groups were forming, parties were being thrown and I felt like an outsider. I could never go or really be a part of anything because I had my responsibility: contributing to the family business. However, as I began to get older I started separating myself from my family and their expectations. I would avoid them altogether and have an attitude when asked to help out.

But then sophomore year, reading the novel *You Exist Too Much* by Zania Arafat changed my views on everything. Seeing another first generation separate herself from external expectations made me reflect on my own life and question who I was living it for.

That summer I found myself behind the register of my mother's small grocery store which specialized in West African products. I not only checked out customers but also dealt with food shipments coming in.

"Goya is here" I had run back to check the pallets and sign an invoice for the incoming goods.

"I'm ready!" A customer called from the store.

“These pallets need to be unloaded,” one of the downstairs workers called out. *I couldn't be in two places at once, could I ?* (They say what doesn't kill us makes us stronger, right?). My mom had just had a major surgery and several tumors removed. She couldn't work, but as “Mommy's mini-me,” I ran the store by myself. Now my resentment faded and this was me, doing something because I wanted to, out of nothing but love and appreciation for all the sacrifices she made for me.

My days of sacrifice that summer looked a little like this. Hour 1: Ten clock, opening. This is the slowest it'll be all day, so it's best to get daily restock out of the way. That way, there will be less running back and forth with the customers. Hours 2-4: this is the busiest it will get, even worse when there's a shipment to be delivered but I learned a trick. Keep my summer reading book by the register, I can knock out two things at once. Then the comedown, hours 5-6: handle the stragglers, refill fridges, sweep, mop, then it's on home. All to do it again the next day. And the next. And the next. And the next.

For six weeks I stood in the shoes my mother wore every day. Helping out was no longer something I viewed as an obligation but as an opportunity to give back to someone who gave up so much for me. I began to see that the difference between my life and those around me is not bad just because it's different. I could now see the difference between what my parents gave to me and what I wanted and if I needed a night off, I told them. I learned that I was not an investment to my parents but rather someone they are invested in. Success is subjective to an individual's goals so my return on investment (R.O.I) is anything I want it to be.

# Toni Bamimore

Grade 8, John Burroughs School

*Short Story*



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## Cocaine

He had been ugly in every sense of the word. Irredeemably so. Boulders for eyebrows. Rivers for hair. A beak for a nose. A rat for a beard. Every second of their sex was odd. Not bad. Not good. Just odd. Like him. He dressed well. It was the one thing he could do with incontrovertible excellence. Every Wednesday afternoon, Edmond would crawl to her stagnant corner on Pique Street and discuss the perfection of her breasts with Redd before handing him his share of her paycheck and stuffing the left-over bills in her bra cup. She would always first notice his face, then wince and turn to his suit. Blue and booming, he resembled the unexplored depths of the ocean so overwhelmingly that for a minute or an hour or even a week, Edmond was attractive. It didn't help much in bed, but mentally, it was a relief, soothing the side of her brain devoted to reminding her of her whore status. For a second, she saw a world where she made love. And then she would follow the map of his face to his inevitable repulsiveness, and everything would fall back into line.

Often when he led her away back to his home—blindingly suburban, annoyingly symmetrical—Edmond would try, out of some unknown and unnatural politeness, to pretend that he was interested in her for anything other than her body, which came off as rather offensive.

“What are you passionate about?” he had asked one time.

“Sex.”

“Right. But what else?”

“Money.”

And that would be the end of things, for Edmond also loved sex and money. But sometimes, when her nail-biting and thigh scratching grew to heights so enormous that she truly considered calling a therapist, she wanted to hear him

speak. And from these nights, she learned some things: Edmond liked jazz. Edmond liked art. Edmond liked Larry Bird and Magic Johnson and anything from any point in the '80s. He liked classics like Frankenstein but thought Dracula was a bore. And he enjoyed his frequent visits to Cuba not because of the art but because of the women. Edmond had a wife. Edmond had two kids. And Edmond was not opposed to a double-life. He hated the name considerably more than anything else surrounding it.

"A double-life," Edmond would say, "implies that I'm some conflicted, broken, cut in half man. A cripple." His Brooklyn accent, thick like stew, made everything slightly more humorous than intended. "I'm not. I know what I'm doing. And if that makes me a bad person, I hope I'm hung next to you." And she would laugh and cling to his neck and request champaign and drink until she considered herself a decent woman. She had quite liked these nights, laying on him and falling, just for a moment, into his nuclear life.

His walls were pure, devoid of stains. They were a fleshy shade of pink, one she often got lost in when Edmond decided to declare whatever screed had been stirring in his head the night prior—the Yankees almost always made an appearance. And on the nights when Edmond truly wanted what he paid for, searching for it with all the vigor of a doberman, and her rear crashed clumsily into the previously-untouched wallpaper, she would mutter under her breath an odd sort of apology for allowing something so disgusting, so distasteful to puncture its child-like innocence. And on the nights when said apologies were muttered, Edmond would batter her with even more force, equating her confession of guilt to a cry of awful, Edmond-induced pleasure.

She had never been disgusted by him. Not once. Not even when Edmond propped her up on the counter of the master bathroom in a flurry of morally-incorrect passion, catapulting her thigh into Mrs. Hill's perfume and sentencing the rose-shaped glass to eternity in pieces. Edmond had freed his lips from hers for no more than three surprisingly cold seconds to tell her that he would "fix it," and then continued to lead her to the bedroom for an evening of enjoyment, smelling her neck almost mockingly. Morally, it was evil. But that was the joy of Edmond. No matter what mess she made, he would always vow to fix it. The price for repair, however, was the weight of owing him. Notably, the following week, she had been particularly anxious, the rose smell seizing her body like a toxin, clinging to her like a verdict to a thief. She'd had nothing to distract her that week—she could visit no other men, for Edmond had paid extra to ensure she was celibate outside of his house. Redd had suggested she do

cocaine “like the rest of us” which she had swiftly shot down. She had never taken cocaine in her life, though she had had many opportunities. She puzzled herself. *Why?* It wasn’t like being clean could atone for every awful act—every awful position—she had carried out in her life thus far. But, somewhere in her deep subconscious, she had acknowledged that the day she took cocaine would be the day she *truly* became a bad person. Because at least sex was *legal*. And as long as she was innocent to the law, there was still hope of convincing her mind of her *overall* innocence.

There was only one time she had ever come close to hating Edmond. *Times*, she supposed. After sex. They would both collapse on his bed, high still but falling. She would sail over his sheets, silk painted an absorbing shade of black that felt like the sea to lay on, moving like a rockette and smiling like one too. The fan, dazzling in its simplicity, had a pretty hum to it, flushing her with cozy, orange light and singing her to sleep. Her eyes would wander to the far right corner of the room where a record would be spinning gracefully, oblivious to the fact that their moment had ended. *Tchaikovsky: Swan Lake*. This was Edmond’s request. He explained to her one night after she finally built up the interest to ask that he had gone to see it live in New York when he was eight, a week before his mother passed away. Two things occurred to her in that moment. The first, that Edmond was not just a void of a man. He had a mother and a father. He had triumph and tragedy. He had a life before their sex. She didn’t know why, but it hurt. And the second, that she and Edmond viewed sex through very different lenses. When she was on top of Edmond, her thoughts were disgracefully simple. They were all snapshots of him. Eyes. Beak. Beard. Her thoughts, she discovered, could not go very far at all.

But *Edmond?* The songs from his day with his dead mother? How could he have something as surface level and vile as sex while hearing such beautiful, sentimental tones? When she ventured across the silk to meet his body, allowing his pelvis to sculpt her lower half and his hands to mold the blond clay of her hair; when she listened to him sweetly whisper “Norma” in her ear, her name sounding so beautiful that it was difficult to imagine the awful lips that marked her with it; when she heard his breath catch in his mouth as he remembered the name she asked he call her— “Carmen,” he’d say apologetically—not knowing that he could call her a dirty temptress if he wanted and it would still sound magical coming from his heart-shaped mouth, she truly considered the possibility that Edmond might love her. That all those minutes ago, while she

was simply having sex, Edmond might have been making love. Making love to her.

Then.

“You should go now. Donna’s coming home soon.”

How dare Edmond. How *dare* he? She would be thrown into a blind rage, drunk on betrayal after only one sip. How *dare* he make her think she was lovable if not for a moment than for a lifetime? Fill her with his kindness, his brilliance, his charm. How *dare* he whisper “Norma” so softly into her ear as if he were her lover. As if anyone could love her. How *dare* he sing to her of mountains and paint them in her hair just to lock her up inside the cell of her self-indulgence, casting the key out of his undying love? How *dare* he walk up Pique street to the first sad hooker he saw and infiltrate her heart to such a startling degree that he made her believe, *truly believe*, that she was worth more than the dirt that gave her purpose?

And then, as an aftertaste, she would be swept away by the overwhelming magma of her envy.

*Donna.*

She had never once laid eyes on her, but it didn’t matter. She could bend herself into as many shapes as she liked, pronounce her curves to any degree, use whatever lipstick shade to mark his body—*every* inch—but she would *never* be Donna. She would *never* be the wife. Edmond *would never* come to her to cry. Would never break down at her feet, exhausted from carrying the innate stress of being human. Would never congratulate her on her successes or throw her parties just because. Would never place his keys on the counter and squeeze her from behind as she boiled his eggs. She was there for sex and sex only, a fool for believing anything otherwise.

And then, she would enter a state of numbness. Not quite of acceptance but of exhaustion from fighting. These times were the closest she would ever come to hating Edmond. But, as she was forced to learn time and time again, she simply wasn’t capable.

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It was a cold afternoon, a Wednesday of course. Edmond had done the exact same routine—adored her for a few stolen minutes before substituting her out for his wife. It was now the time reserved for packing herself quietly, for gathering herself ever-so-slightly. She would leave him with a kiss on the cheek or, if she was really shaken, a pat on the thigh, a weak alternative to smacking him across



the face. But that night, she really couldn't take it anymore. Her mind was rattled and her hands quivered as she said, looking him in the eye,

"Do you love me?"

Her gaze quickly left his, in part because of the shame she suddenly felt, but also because of how ridiculous the situation was. Edmond was *ugly*! Oh how ugly he was. Short. Penguin like. Awfully arrogant. Unbelievably stubborn. She could think of a hundred things she hated about him. And yet, here she was, willing him to love her. His face was blank, his eyes puncturing every part of her body. She began shifting, swaying awkwardly to the beat he was creating on her body, until finally, she couldn't handle his indecision any longer. "Forget it." she said and slammed the door behind her, not caring if she ever saw Edmond again.

Leaving through the back door, the air hit her like a bat, punishing her for leaving. Almost to the stars, she muttered, "He made me." The wind gripped her and refused to let her go, taking her curls for ransom. Normally, she would trace the sidewalks with her heels until she found a main road large enough for a taxi to be pinned down. But the mere idea of raising her arm to get a cab was overwhelmingly exhausting. She instead found herself walking along the border of the neighborhood. Her right hand rested on her phone like a finger to a pistol as she dueled with the idea of calling Redd. He had a car—a rusty old thing he received for his 16th birthday from his foster family at the time who, he suspected, had used it as a sad apology for their soon-to-be-executed decision to "return" him—and loved her enough to drive an hour to save her from her Edmond-inflicted misery. Of course, it would still be an hour of sitting with herself, an act she couldn't even imagine doing without blubbering like a cheap fountain, so she walked. Most of the houses were dark with only a few golden outliers. She was thankful nobody was there to witness the crime that was her presence in the neighborhood. The scene felt like a cruel form of juxtaposition. The sky jeered at her: *"Look here at the hooker in the land of doctors and lawyers and important men! The wench in the land of women who allow penetration only to serve the honorable purpose of bringing life into their perfect worlds! They will never wonder who the father is or cry themselves to sleep over their stomachs. They throw baby showers and are adored by all for getting larger in the name of their husbands. Their babies are jr's and future shareholders. Their bedrooms are clean, for reading and dreaming. Here comes the hooker who thought she could be a wife! If she's listening with her corrupt ears, let her hear our suburban message: you may infiltrate the minds of our men, but never will you find their respect!"*

Every lawn was lush and trimmed, each mocking her as she walked by. “*I bet you wish you were still this clean! I bet you wish you weren’t a whore!*” If only they knew: she was *never* that clean. Their words followed her until she reached a cul-de-sac lined with houses she surely would never own. She traced its perimeter once...then twice...then again and again. She couldn’t stop herself. Around and around she went, staring at the ground, avoiding the grass. Her thoughts matched the pace of her legs perfectly.

First lap: *I am Norma.*

Second lap: *I am Carmen.*

Third lap: *I am both.*

Fourth lap: *No, I’m Carmen.*

On the eleventh lap, she stopped, though not by choice. Her mind was rapidly thrown into a desert, one she had never once bothered to explore: life before Edmond. She had recognized long ago her odd habit of considering Edmond a void, oblivious to the fact that she used the same formula on herself as long as she could remember. She had a mother just like Edmond, although she was almost certain that Mrs. Hill was *not* a sixteen year old addict with a white nose and red eyes when she gave birth. And she had a father as well, though she never met him. She liked to imagine he was some Warbucks type who would one day remember his long lost daughter and give her the world, the same one he had taken from her when he slipped out the door. She had a grandmother, one who was nice enough to take her in after her own daughter overdosed but not generous enough to put down her beer to change the baby’s diaper. She had had friends when she was younger too, for foster care never lacked young girls desperate for attention, even if the source was an equally pathetic “friend.” She had known triumph—the first time a man told her she was pretty—and tragedy—the first time a man bought her for sex. In summary, she should’ve been dead. Buried by needles or an angry boyfriend. So *why wasn’t she?* The only explanation for her unlikely survival was her constant desire for something greater. As a child, it was her dream of stardom. As a teen, of true love. Now what was it?

Or *who?*

*Edmond*, she thought. *My dream is Edmond.* Her palms quivered violently. If Edmond ever left, she knew, she would *truly* die. It was the law of the universe. *Her* universe. Never before had she felt such fear.

“Eddy?” She moaned into the darkness, trembling. “Eddy?” she cried again. She walked, jogged, *ran* towards his house. Running, running, running away

from her fears and towards his fortress. *That orange light*, she attempted to soothe herself. *If I find that light, surely I'll survive. Surely I will—*

She stopped where the sidewalk met his lawn. The sight was horrific. She couldn't look away. For on the front lawn, a woman sat with two children—a beak-nosed boy and a thick-eyebrowed girl. The woman let her golden hair fall as she impishly clawed at the delighted little girl. The boy skipped merrily around them both, taking playful jabs at the “monster.” The grass enveloped them in a cozy, green hug, the yellow haze from the porch lights covering them like a blanket. Laugh after laugh, their howls succeeded each predecessor by an octave. A fresh pie smell hovered over their painting. Fireflies crept in from every corner. One even landed on the little girl's nose. She failed to catch it, but it didn't matter. It was perfect. *They* were perfect. Her eyes wandered upward to the bedroom window overlooking it all. There, engulfed in an orange light, stood Edmond, deflated. He looked straight at her, his eyes burdened. She wanted to say something, mouth her love to him.

Another giggle.

He looked tired, his eyes pleading. Passion burned in yet leaked from her at the same time in such an exhausting array. She knew what formation her lips needed to take.

“Bye, Eddie.”

She was never an expert at reading lips, but she swore she saw him push out a shaky “thank you.”

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Redd had taken his sweet time, but when he finally arrived, she collapsed onto the front seat. He thankfully had the decency to keep his mouth shut. *I surely owe him an answer*, she thought. And yet, she bathed in the silence. Inexplicably, she felt like a liar. It took her the full ride to understand why. But when she did, it all made sense: She swore she'd never touched cocaine.

Lie.

She touched him plenty.

# Deaven Barlow

Grade 12, Blue Springs South High School

*Short Story*



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## The Captain's Dream

The once still waters rammed into the hull of the most dazzling yet daunting ship of the seven seas: The Elegance. Another wave hit the ship, startling its captain out of his nightly slumber. He looked at his pocket watch, it was too early to be up at this hour, so he tried to return to sleep. A few moments later, however, the waves once again banged on the ship, almost knocking the tired captain out of his soft lavish bed. He angrily but groggily marched out of his private quarters and onto the empty deck; his crew was still asleep. As he looked at the sky, he knew that something was amiss.

The clear red sky he gazed at cast a haze over the atmosphere, the ocean seemed to turn to blood, her waves continued to knock the ship side to side, barrels of rum and gunpowder began to slide back and forth with each whip of the waves. The captain was used to rough seas, but usually he was wide awake to resist the force of the collisions, but now being half asleep, the task of standing was no longer trivial.

Struggling to keep balance, the captain clasped the silver handrails and climbed up the spiral deck stairs to check on the helmsman. When he reached the top, he found that the sleep-deprived helmsman was still at the wheel. He had been stationed there all night; he must have been too tired to care or to even notice the queer weather that surrounded him. After a hand gesture to his weary crewmate to have a break, he took hold of the smooth handles, warmed by the dedicated helmsman's hands, not that he needed the warmth, of course, for the temperature was well above 27 degrees (Celsius), it was no surprise that all the handles were of an equal heat.

Now that he was behind the wheel maintaining the large brigantine's course north-westbound, he was finally able to acknowledge the rest of his senses. He first noticed that the humid air didn't smell of the salty sea water he so often sails upon, it was a thick smell, as if he were breathing through a thin, worn-out rag that had been used to wash the dirt off precious stones.

The taste was no different either, he was half convinced that if he opened his mouth, a cloud of dust would enter uninvited. Not believing in any sort of superstition, however, he inhaled and exhaled a large, musty breath of the air despite his own thoughts.

The captain never let anything, or anyone tell him what to do. He began to listen to the violet waves thudding the boat over and over, relentlessly, seemingly with the motivation of capsizing the boat, but not strong enough to do so. He listened to the gentle snores of his crew, glad but slightly annoyed that he was the only one to have been aroused by the sudden turbulence. The captain often whistles when he is alone, this time was no different. As the pleasant melodies of classical symphonies fill the air, he heard something call back to him. He looked at his surroundings, finding that no one was there.

The captain then drew his eyes to the sky, he saw a seagull flying overhead, deciding to rest on the railings of the crow's nest, along with a few others, that's when he noticed the most peculiar thing; Despite the lack of wind, the purple-dyed silk sails were fully extended out, as if it were just an ordinary day. The captain knew, however, that this morning was anything but ordinary.

"Red sky at night, sailor's delight; red sky at morning, sailors take warning." A voice he didn't recognize said aloud behind him, he spun around whilst instinctively reaching for his embroidered cutlass. It was an old fellow of short stature with colorful red hair. He was smiling as he made eye-contact with the captain, not fazed by the sword now directly in front of his chest, his head tilting slightly.

"How did you get aboard my ship?" the captain asked, accidentally revealing a bit of worry in his notorious low, appalling voice.

"I flew here, Cap'n Charles." The man said, with a tone of utmost sincerity.

"Fly? What kind of man are you?" the captain was more bewildered than before the old man answered.

"Not a man am I, Cap'n, but I come to warn you; great riches are awa'in you, but great danger too. I's been told that when yous all find the treasures, to never touch the Morning Star." The captain woke up in a cold sweat, his head pounding harder than the waves crashing upon the shore; it was a dream.

“Cap’n, are ya feeling alright? Ever since we’ve been on this island you’ve been feeling sick.” The captain’s first mate said, sitting beside the captain’s hammock. Before the captain could answer, one of the crewmates barged into the room, exhausted.

“Cap’n, come quick, we’ve found it.” After arriving at the scene, the captain gazed in wonder at the multitude of riches before him. Piles and piles of doubloons, precious stones and silver trinkets, and at the center was the biggest ruby he had ever seen, larger than his own skull.

“Shall we take it all, Cap’n?” asked one of the crew members excitedly, eager to get his hands on the valuables. He pondered this question, then nodded his head once. As the crew began transferring all the loot back to the ship, he remembered his strange dream, and the short old man who flew to his ship to warn him. He looked at the sky; it was a clear shade of blue, without any signs of bad weather incoming. He looked at the large ruby glowing in the sun’s splendor and noticed letters engraved into it. MS is what it said. *Could this be the Morning Star that old man spoke of?* The captain thought it had to be. One of the crew members was looking around for something to pick up, eyeing the giant ruby. Something shot up in the back of the captain’s mind as the mate got closer and closer to the rock which only could have been the curse that would bring the great dange-

“Halt!” Bellowed the captain, time itself seemed to stop as the crew dared not move a muscle in pure and utter terror. He pointed with his finger at the ruby.

“That one, be mine to carry.” The captain slowly passed each one of the crew members, an eerie silence fell upon the atmosphere when he approached the illustrious gem. Without a moment of hesitation, he squatted down and picked up the Morning Star.

# Jasmine Bautista

Grade 8, Parkway West Middle School

Educator: Tracy Bouslog

*Personal Essay & Memoir*



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## You Only Live Once

*"We were both young when I first saw you—"* The opening notes of Taylor Swift's *Love Story* blared through my phone speaker, muffled under the mountain of clothes stacked up on my mattress. I rooted through the clothes frantically, searching for my phone, which rang with my boyfriend's specialized ringtone. I picked up without checking the caller ID—I already knew it was him. "Hey, Jazzy. Basketball practice isn't for another few hours, d'you want to go Target with me?" Messiah asked. My heart jumped, a mix of excitement and elation swirling in my chest.

"Of course! I'll be right there," I replied immediately, not considering whether I could actually go. It took a moment for me to realize what I had just agreed to. My jaw dropped. *What would my parents think if I asked?* I wondered while I lay on top of my mountain of clothes as I debated whether I should cancel at the last minute. There was no way my parents would approve, considering I'm not even allowed to walk to Target. Worse, I'm not even allowed to have a boyfriend. My emotions got the better of me; I paid no mind to my thoughts, figuring it wouldn't be a big deal if they never found out. *Taking a risk is never bad, right? You only live once.*

"I'm on my way!" I texted my boyfriend while I pressed the atomizer of my newly purchased Burberry Her perfume exactly 7 times onto my clothes. Inhaling the rich and floral scent, I daydreamed about the fun we would have while I kicked my feet in the air. I knocked on my sister's freshly painted bedroom door, informing her I would walk to Target to see my boyfriend; she

shrugged as she returned to scrolling on TikTok on her phone. *It's time for me to sneak out.* I slipped my worn-out New Balance shoes on and exited the door stealthily, taking soft, deliberate steps as I descended the stairs so that no neighbors heard me. With AirPods stuck to my ears, playing 90s love music, I glanced at the kids outside their houses playing basketball together.

Once I reached the neighborhood, I heard cars honking and felt the ground shake like the speedy cars caused an earthquake. That was when I saw Messiah laughing around with his friends on the way to cross the road. My eyes glistened as I ran up to him, throwing my arms around him. "I've missed you so much!" I exclaimed, even though we had seen each other at school an hour ago. My stomach fluttered like it was filled with a thousand restless birds; I never got to hang out with him outside of school. I felt the breeze during the windy afternoon as we walked through the parking lot, making our way to the sliding doors of Target as all the worries got off my head. All I thought about was just him and me.

We walked around Target as if it were Paris or some other city we'd never visited, laughing until we couldn't breathe and our lips dried up like the Sahara desert, talking until our voices were hoarse, and just acting like little kids again. It felt like I was in a dream when I was with him. Every step with Messiah felt like I was floating; my worries dissolved into the Target aisles. The only sensation that filled me up was euphoria. It felt as if everyone in the world had disappeared, leaving just me and him together, with no care whatsoever. *I reached the peak of my happiness; I thought to myself. There is no way any negative emotions could undermine the joy I'm feeling right now.*

*Buzz, buzz!* My sister texted me that my mom was nearby. She was 5 minutes away. Time ran out faster than it ever had; *I could've sworn she was 20 minutes away the last time I checked her location.* My vision blanked, and the world suddenly stopped moving around me. It dawned on me that I could not reach my house without my mom's car coincidentally running into me crossing the road. Despite my hesitation, I reluctantly let go of my boyfriend's clasped hands in mine. I pulled him into a tight embrace, hoping he would absorb my panic before I bolted out of Target, to the parking lot, desperately trying to get back home. *Thump, thump!* My heart pounded in my chest like a drum, each beat louder than the last. My worn-out New Balances creased further, my Burberry Her perfume wafted off, and the windy breeze whipped my hair across my face. How could I reach home quickly? What would my mom say if she saw me crossing the road? Should I call her to pick me up? Should I take the risk? What would I say to my



mom? These questions raced through my mind as I panted heavily, sounding like a steaming kettle, struggling to reach home.

As I approached the stoplight, her location illuminated on the tiny pixels of my phone, forming a clear picture that showed she was on the road where the pedestrian lane I was on would intersect. *She would catch me no matter what, whether it was her spotting me running home or her mother's instincts. Why don't I just say I went to get food at Target by myself to lessen the chances of getting in trouble?* I gave my mom a call. "Can you pick me up from Target, po?" I muttered into the phone, my voice trembling but still carrying a hint of defiance. My mom asked who I was with. Her tone tingled with suspicion.

"Kasama mo ba si Messiah?" My heart sank like I was on a roller-coaster. It felt as though my soul had left my body. Goosebumps appeared on my arms, and the hairs on my neck stood on end. *How could she just come to that conclusion?* I wondered, as there was no mention of him anywhere. She hung up without giving me a chance to respond, clearly planning to discuss it with me later.

As I waited for my mom's white Ford Explorer to pull up, my mind rattled through a variety of excuses. *Could I say I was meeting with a friend? Grabbing an acai bowl?* Each lie felt flimsier than the last. My knees buckled like rubber as I struggled to keep my composure, tapping my foot nervously on the ground with each passing second. My mom drove slowly, scanning the area around Target, looking for a loophole in my lies. When she finally reached me, her car loomed like a silent judge. Its headlights stared through me. I climbed into the passenger seat, greeting my mom but unable to meet her gaze. The silence was deafening throughout the car ride until I arrived in my room. My fingers fidgeted and my leg shook with anxiety, wondering if she would say anything. *I really hope that she would just think it was a silly mistake.*

*Knock, knock!* I knew that sound all too well—it was my mom. "Jasmine, we need to talk," she demanded. Of course, I wouldn't get away that easily. *I already started the lie; what's the point of stopping now?* I collected my emotions and mentally rehearsed every lie I was going to tell while I kept my head held high. She began by asking the same question. "Kasama mo ba si Messiah?" She repeated it 3 times, her voice growing harsher. Her eyes bore into mine, searching for the truth I couldn't give. Just as my lips parted, urging to spill everything I had bottled up inside—my secret boyfriend, the reason I snuck out, what I did at Target—something stopped me. The voice in my head warned me not to. I couldn't bear to experience the consequences she might give; *what if she grounds*

*me and checks my messages with Messiah? Then she would find out that I'm actually dating him. These lies I made up would just go to waste!*

"No, I was by myself; " all I did was deny, deny, deny. She sighed with utter disappointment, shaking her head slowly back and forth.

My chest tightened, and I felt the weight of every lie I'd told pressing down on me. She gave me that look of pity, knowing that I lied but said nothing about it. She stood from the edge of the bed and gave me the warmest hug I didn't deserve. My mom said in dissatisfaction, "This will be the first and last time this ever happens." I'd lost all the trust she had left towards me. Tears welled up in the inner corners of my eyes. It flowed like a river as they streamed down my face, reaching my mouth's corners; the saltiness of my tears reminded me of the salty relationship that I just stirred up with my mom. "You only live once," I had told myself earlier. It's still true, but I see it differently now. My arms tightened around her body, gripping her with a force that spoke of regret and longing, because there was no way I could take everything I said back.

# Madelyn Bell

Grade 8, Basehor-Linwood Middle School

Educator: Erin Tegtmeier

*Personal Essay & Memoir*



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## The Weight of Diet Culture

For as long as I can remember, diet culture has informed me that thinness is equivalent to health, beauty, happiness, and success. I wake up each morning with an empty stomach and the same relentless pressure. As my eyes flicker open, I ask myself, *What will I eat today?* This question won't just determine what I eat, it will determine my mood, plans, and how I see myself as I look into the reflective piece of glass hanging on my wall. I hear my phone buzzing with notifications from social media - new posts filled with perfectly sculpted bodies, vibrant salads, and the newest diet trends.

I get up from bed, prepared to have a full day of trying to meet the unrealistic standards that I have been taught to live by. It's a full time job, but I'm always reminding myself that it has the best pay. That's what I've always been informed of, so it must be true, right? My vision becomes blurred as I stand, grasping for something to hold on to. I go to the bathroom and step on the scale of which will determine my happiness today. I look in the mirror and see someone of whom I don't know. A mix of disgust and determination fills my mind as she stares back with lifeless eyes, a pale face, and hair falling out, but that's what pretty looks like in society's eyes.

Breakfast is not a meal anymore, it's a decision that has the same resolution each day. Would I rather feel sick but thin or fulfilled but guilty? I choose to feel sick if that's what it takes to feel good about myself. I open an energy drink that will get me through the day. It's five whole calories, but I still have to track it. I've been taught that tracking calories is the best thing to do. It helps you be mindful about what you are consuming. That's not a problem for me, though, because in reality, it consumes my every thought.

The day drags by, and I'm sitting in math class with my fingers wrapped around my wrist. Math class has been an easier subject recently; after all, numbers do take over my life. But, I can't focus or think straight. All I can think about is how hungry I am and how my pinky finger doesn't fit around my wrist yet. I sit there, wishing I could eat, while my stomach growls in protest. I ignore it, because it's my job to do so. My worth feels tied to my restraint.

It's finally lunch time. I allow myself to have something small so I don't pass out and have people noticing. I carefully measured out  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup of cheerios into a small baggie. I feel like a detective analyzing each bite and crumb passing my lips. I count each cheerio as if they hold the power to define my worth. It's 44 calories. Social media has taught me that you should always make sure your calorie tracking is exact. They've taught me to spend my money on a food scale and my limited time counting each calorie, worrying how it's going to affect me. I finish my "meal" and diet soda. I thought diet soda was great because it's 0 calories. That's until I became painfully aware that it causes bloating, something I'm terrified of. Nothing we consume is good, I suppose. I put down the can.

I'm starving—not just for food, but for freedom. You would never catch me dead admitting it though. It's a crime in my mind to still be hungry after eating a meal that's not enough for a baby. It's something I've learned to feel guilty about. Being hungry is a sign of weakness. I'm just bored; I'm not hungry. I put a piece of gum in my mouth and sit there staring at everyone else's desirable food until lunch is over.

The rest of the school day grinds on, and I head home. When I walk through the door, I feed my dog instantly. I can't let him be hungry. He's just a puppy, and he deserves to eat. I often think about how lucky he is to not have his life revolve around food and beauty standards. He doesn't have a clue about the nutrition facts in his food and doesn't feel guilty for not only eating a treat, but begging. He doesn't understand the words of the universe spilling diet culture constantly.

I run out of energy due to the lack of nutrition. I lay down, and as I wake up, I smell something coming from the kitchen. I look at my phone and see that it's 6:15, dinnertime. I sit down at the table, my heart racing. My mom and sister are having a diverting dinner while I'm completely lost in my head, calculating the calories of everything on the table. While my mother's dinner is tempting, I feel as if I'm a puppet controlled by diet culture. I get the smallest fork and a tall glass of water that I hope will fill me up before the food can. I've been educated that a lot of the time, we aren't hungry, but thirsty. I figure that's the case for my unnourished body as well. I cut my chicken into small pieces, "smaller bites help

you eat less, the less you have, the skinnier you get,” they say. I have a couple bites with ruminating thoughts running through my head with guilt. I push my plate away, pretending I’m full, while battling the shame and guilt of those bites.

Before bed I watch something on my phone because it helps me fall asleep. It allows me to focus on something other than hunger. The first thing I come across is an ad for weight loss medication. They say it’s worth the deadly side effects. I’ve learned that it can in fact be deadly, even without the medication. I look into it and consider until I get interrupted, replaying my day and fixating on every perceived failure. Did I eat too much? Am I weak for being too tired to exercise? The thoughts swirl like a never-ending storm. I’m exhausted and sleep sounds like a good distraction since I can’t be hungry, eat, or think while sleeping. It’s hard to go to sleep on an empty stomach, but I’m supposed to feel accomplished. I finally fall asleep and have a nightmare about this cycle of me getting caught up in diet culture repeating. I wake up on an empty stomach, once again, ready to repeat the cycle.

# Phoebe Boomershine

Grade 8, Congress Middle School

Educator: Alyssa Contreras

*Poetry*



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## Where Silence Lies

Within the house where silence screams,  
A child is lost in fractured dreams  
The walls hold secrets, sharp as knives,  
A fragile soul fights to survive.

The morning dawns with muted cries,  
Behind the door, where sunlight dies.  
A Fathers rage, a daughters tears,  
The echoes linger through the years.

The table set, the food untouched,  
A family bound but never much.  
Conversations fraught with dread,  
words like daggers pierce instead

Beneath the roof that shelters pain,  
The sky remains a ceaseless rain.  
No shelter found in tender arms,  
Only shadows and alarms.

The little hands that try to mend,  
A broken bond that will not bend.  
The child learns to tiptoe light,  
Through endless days and endless nights.

The hallway whispers tales of shame,  
Each door a portal, each room the same.  
A corner claimed, a refuge sought,  
In battered toys and quiet thought.

The outside world might seem to glow,  
But inside darkness seeds will grow.  
The laughter fades, replaced by fear,  
A love withheld, a voice unclear.

A sibling hides behind a chair,  
Eyes wide and vacant, too much to bear.  
Another bruise, another scar.  
The wound of words cut just as far.

In this house unspun thread,  
Dreams unravel, Hope lies dead.  
The child learns to weave a mask,  
To hide the hurt is a daily task.

Books become a safe retreat,  
A quiet place where wolds compete.  
Heroes rise, Villains fall,  
Behind these walls the child feels tall.

But every page must turn back home,  
To that cursed place where spirits roam.  
The child learns to read the air,  
predicting tempers everywhere.

Broken plate, a slammed door,  
Familiar scenes that scream for more.  
The loudest fights that end in despair,  
Leaving silence too heavy to bear.

The clock ticks on, the years pass by,  
The child grows under a bruised sky.

A heart hardened, yet still beats,  
Among the lies, The small defeats.

The parents say “you are to blame.”  
For every storm you bear the shame.  
But deep inside, a voice persists,  
A quiet truth that still resists.

The outside begins to call,  
Promising freedom, promising all.  
The child step out, unsure, afraid,  
Into the light, where dreams are made.

Yet shadows cling, they always do,  
The past, a weight that splits in two.  
One half aches for love unspoken,  
The other mends what’s been broken.

The journeys long, the road unclear,  
The scars remain but so does fear.  
Still, hope ignites, A fragile flame,  
Yearning to outrun the name.

For in the end, though homes may break,  
A soul can bend, a soul can wake.  
From ashes rise, rebuild the frame,  
And find a home without shame.

This tale of sorrow, raw and true,  
May not be yours, But may be you.  
A thousand words, a million cries,  
From hardened homes, where silence lies.

So take the cold, the past, the pain,  
And turn it into strength again.  
For every shadow bears a spark,  
To light the way out of the dark.



# Floyd Boykin

Grade 11, Lutheran High School North

*Poetry*



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## My War Against My Brother

I don't even know you...  
I don't even know you and yet  
You still affect my life  
You are hundreds of miles away and yet  
Your actions still bear repercussions

16

16 years

16 years remains the age of your younger brother  
The brother who deals with your actions almost daily  
16 years being the difference in age between you and me  
Half of which being the years we've spent apart  
8 of which I can't even remember  
8 years stripped from my mind

Or was it 4?

3

2

1

For I have dealt with the repercussions of  
Your actions since my clock was set  
Your yelling  
Your smoking  
Your drugs  
The actions you participated in even  
Before your life fell apart

And by God, I want to *pull* my hair out  
Pull on my hair as you pulled me from  
The innocence of childhood  
Pull as you pulled the wood off the walls  
And doors of our house  
Pulling the happiness out of a joyful home  
A joyful family  
A joyful child  
You created a rift in that child  
Yet despite how you ruined me  
My personality  
My relationships  
My family  
I don't blame you  
For you are a victim of your own actions  
A victim of the violence of others  
You didn't ask to have your life torn apart  
As I didn't ask to deal with the fallout  
I don't blame you  
As mom blames me for her lack of awareness  
Putting the pressure of the world on her kid son  
I don't blame you as she did, me when we  
Found you passed out on the floor of our hotel  
"How could you take your eyes off of him!"  
She screams  
How could *you*, mother?  
How could you place the blame on me,  
A *child*,  
For something I had no business being in control over  
Not ready for the responsibility of the life of his brother  
All because you couldn't accept that your actions  
Almost caused the death of your son  
And by God, I want to PULL my hair out  
And I don't even *believe*...in God  
So brother... I don't blame you  
But I may hate you

# Casey Bradshaw

Grade 8, Parkway West Middle School

Educator: Tracy Bouslog

*Personal Essay & Memoir*



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## Determination

“This is my stop, I’ll see you guys later.” The bus stopped on my street. I stepped out of the rumbling yellow vehicle and hiked to my front door. It felt like an ordinary after-school Monday. I pushed the front door, and it creaked open. I kicked off both of my shoes, and unzipped my bag where my Chromebook rested. I flipped it open, and went onto YouTube. I plunged into the couch, and I scrolled to find an entertaining video. I did not know that what I was about to come across would benefit me as a person. *Maybe procrastination does help...* Swiftly, an enchanting looking thumbnail came across my screen. An image appeared of a hand clutching a thick chopstick looking object, with a long blade on the tip. Me, being super fascinated by sharp objects, clicked on the video. The man in the video twirled this chopstick blade fluently in many directions, and even spun it around all his fingers. At the end of the video, my jaws dropped to the ground, my eyes wide open. I thought to myself, *Forget magic tricks, those blade things are the most bewitching things ever.*

After further investigation, I learned that the chopstick blade things are called balisongs. Balisongs were adapted from medieval Europe into the modern version of today in the Philippines, in the early 1900s. They have two interactive handles that can be spun freely. These mechanisms are what makes balisongs unique, and gives the performer an expressive form of art. Immediately, I hurried to look for trick tutorials, and found out the recommended order to learn the tricks. While watching another expert spin the chopstick blade, I stomped down to the basement, with my Chromebook in my hands, and opened dusty boxes of Lego bricks. I used small plastic pegs that mimicked the balisong mechanisms to

make a working replica. After poking around with my newly built blade, I felt prepared to start studying the tricks.

The first ever trick I learned was the infamous opening. The trick requires one to hold onto one handle and flick the other handle openly and spin it right open. Even though the trick is considered one of the easiest to learn, the trick to me seemed tremendous and elite. "Here we go," I said nervously. I grabbed the balisong in the closed position, then flicked it open with all my power. *Ow! Oopsies.* One of the handles smacked my palm, which later became red. I felt very foolish. I was not supposed to flick it with strength but instead with skilled precision. After this first impression, my next few attempts consisted of desperately trying to replicate the trick. I flicked and flicked, but one of the handles kept hitting my pointer finger. I whined and complained about how difficult it was. As I struggled, self-doubt grew in my head, and progressively, I stopped trying. I set my plastic blade down on the cold concrete floor, and refreshed my mind with deep breaths. As I reopened my eyes, I watched the video again, but this time analyzing the vital movements. I learned that the balisong flicks in left and right directions. Slowly, I replicated the balisong flicks in little steps, assisting the blade motion with my finger. After twirling with the blade and further finger assisting, I completed the trick. The blade magically flicked open and it felt truly like a professional experience. My eyes were wide open, and my hand clutching the blade was shaking. The self-doubt in my head disintegrated as I chanted in victory.

The next day, I felt energized. In math class, I kept looking at the ceiling with my pencil spinning in my hand, and daydreamed of myself doing spinning tricks with my balisong in class. I knew that I had to learn more. After sprinting home from school, I was ready to take on the next trick. I grabbed my balisong from my desk and flipped open my laptop. The next trick was even more stunning. The new trick requires holding the balisong in a pencil grip, flicking the entire blade around the thumb and then catching it in an open position. The move was so advanced, I thought to myself *If this is only the second trick, how am I going to keep this up? Surely, I can become a balisong expert after this trick.* Eagerly, I flicked the balisong, trying to flip it with my thumb, but it kept tumbling out of my hand onto the floor. Suddenly, the self-doubt feeling flooded me again. I had all sorts of pessimistic thoughts, and felt the loss of aspiration. I needed to learn the timing of the catch, to accomplish my objective. After hours of what felt like a balisong asylum, I had no progress. The balisong plummeted out of my hand every time I flicked it. I stumbled into a hopeless dead end. Then, inattentively, I

did the trick one more time. The blade spun around my thumb, and I was able to catch it. My eyes were already widened, but they became extra open as this trick magically executed itself on my hands. I held my balisong in disbelief. “I.. I did it! I did it! Finally!”. The dopamine rushed into my brain, and I threw the balisong in the air. All I could say was “I did it!”

The next day, I had a little voice in my head. The little voice said “Hey! You need an actual balisong model. There is no way you’re going to learn tricks with that Lego stick thing!” I am not capable of having an authentic balisong with an actual, sharp blade. Fortunately, beginners can learn with a balisong featuring a harmless weight instead! This led me to the rabbithole of balisong trainers. After excessive begging, I was finally able to have the real deal. I walked home from school one day and peaked in the mailbox. The package had arrived. I snagged the box with my two mischievous hands and hopped home. I ripped open the box like a little gremlin and there it was. The beauty. The balisong trainer. I held my new instrument in both my hands. It felt like there was a choir singing in the background as I inspected this masterpiece.

After all these hours, the lesson was simple. Make the best out of your “ordinary days.” I learned to appreciate the fact that any day, boring or not, can significantly change you as a person. Practicing to perfection is like a long hike with snakes and zombies along the way; you have to learn how to overcome all of the small challenges trying to stop you. Life is very interesting, and at any point, any day can transform from a boring ordinary day to an extraordinary one.

# Ella Braig

Grade 12, Ladue Horton Watkins High  
School

Educator: Abigail Eisenberg

*Short Story*



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## God's Creatures

Seth trudged through the woods, clomping against the crackling leaves beneath his boots. It was so cold that afternoon, his breath came out in puffs of visible air as he panted and heaved during the uphill climb. The frost-encrusted woodlands suggested that snow had left its imprint on the greater Ellijay area, but what's left of it didn't make for a very pretty landscape. The ice and sleet was melted just enough to reveal beige indications of nature, but there was no greenery in sight. That afternoon, the brown of the hibernating world was spotted with white, just like the deer he was searching for glimpses of through the trees.

To prepare for the day's impending events, Seth held a musket that weighed nearly as much as him. Struggling to balance, he teetered like an unoccupied see-saw on the trail, trying to keep up with his stepfather, Walter. While their weapons were approximately the same size, the older of the two men lugged his over his shoulder with ease. Seth, on the other hand, seemed to let his musket drag him along rather than the other way around.

"Quiet feet, Seth," Walter chastised the kid. "You'll scare the buck away."

Seth knew what he was doing. By noisily hobbling across the distance of the woods, he was saying to the deer, "Get out of here! It's hunting season!" Truth be told, he was uninterested in shooting animals for sport. Initially, he had made plans for that day to go to the skating rink with Ava Kate, his friend from primary school.

"Well, look at you, stud," remarked Walter over breakfast that morning, upon learning that Seth wished to spend time with a girl. His old-fashioned way

of thinking obstructed his ability to comprehend modern concepts such as forging friendships with the opposite sex.

“What’s ‘stud?’” Seth asked, earning Walter a glaring look from the boy’s mother.

Instead, Seth found himself stuck in the middle of a desolate forest, watching his stepfather’s eyes light up each time he spotted a living creature to put out of its misery. So far, Walter had caught two squirrels and a poor, chirping robin. However, because these animals were so small, he didn’t see any point in bringing them home for supper.

“What’s the fun in hunting, anyway?” Seth wondered, hoisting himself up to the top of the hill. Instead of reaching his hand out to offer any assistance to his boy, Walter stood on the flat ground, idly watching him use his skinny legs to join him on the incline.

“Gives a man power,” explained Walter. “Plus, it puts food on the table.”

Seth was puzzled when he finally managed to hobble up the hill. “But, we’re not gonna eat the squirrel or the robin,” he countered, “So, why do it?”

Walter was staring at his stepson, but from Seth’s perspective, he felt like he was looking right through him. “Aw, man,” Walter began. “I don’t know. You don’t need to turn everything into a thought experiment, kiddo.”

Walter had a habit of changing the subject any time a conversation between him and Seth made him question his own beliefs. Where some people were subject to change, Walter was set in his ways, as unmoving as a mountain range.

Just then, for a fleeting moment, Walter could hear that certain noise— the noise of hooves crunching against the frozen ground— that he was all too familiar with. As if it were reflexive, he directed his musket in the deer’s direction and prepared to fire. Then, he nudged Seth, encouraging him to do the same. However, the boy couldn’t find it in himself to move. He was completely enraptured by the wildly magnificent animal who stood in front of him: her large, beady eyes, her narrow face, her twitching fur coat. Seth watched in awe as she brought her tongue to her nose and licked it clean. *My dog does that, too*, Seth thought, and in that moment, he vowed to himself to never harm one of God’s creatures; to never develop an urge to hunt and maim everything that roamed the Earth on four legs. His grip on his weapon loosened and the musket fell to the ground, etching an imprint in the snow.

“What’s the matter with you, boy?” Walter scolded, lightly whacking him on the shoulder.

"I can't do it," Seth explained. "I can't be the one to hurt her."

"Aw, gee," Walter began. "I was nervous on my first hunting trip, too. You'll get over it."

"But maybe I don't want to," Seth admitted to his stepfather. "Maybe I *want* to feel bad for doin' somethin' real nice like that deer in. Isn't that what doing the wrong thing is supposed to feel like?"

Walter wiped his nose on the sleeve of his coat, made a hacking noise in the back of his throat, and spat into the powdery snow. "Now, how did you get so gosh-darn sensitive?" He wondered out loud.

In the way that a much younger child would behave, Seth threw himself to the ground, face-first, and pounded against the dirt with balled-up fists. Startled, the deer retreated into the woods, prancing most elegantly. He could not contain himself any longer and felt as if he might pass out. Nose running like a geyser, he sniveled into the crystalline snow. Bits of dried leaves stuck to his wind-battered cheeks, which were now wet from the melting frost. He hardly moved, only shaking as his body was racked with sobs. Walter was not a particularly sensitive man, but even he could see that his stepson was affected in a major way. Though, because his emotions were not treated with compassion in his own youth, he had no idea how to handle this sudden tantrum. The crack of a leather belt was all he had ever known. He figured it would best benefit his boy if he administered some tough love, so he started on the narrow path and down the rocky hill.

"Well, come on, if you're comin'," Walter spat. "I ain't waitin' on you any longer."

When Walter had been long gone, leaving Seth still on the ground but turned over on his side, the deer emerged from the woods once again and approached the kid from behind. The creature licked Seth's cheek clean of any grime, which made him squirm at first. Though, soon enough, he gave in to the animal's gentle contact. After all, they are both God's creatures, and God's creatures need to look after one another.



# Ella Braig

Grade 12, Ladue Horton Watkins High  
School

Educator: Abigail Eisenberg

*Poetry*



---

## I Know You Will Be Gone

So I try to ask you questions  
That reveal nothing at all  
And I wait under the swaying palm trees  
And brace the trunks  
While you are ripped from my world  
Like painter's tape on an unfinished wall  
Hot wax on a hairy back  
Very carefully, and then all at once  
Man, does it sting.

You take me shopping at The Grove  
We try on charm bracelets and collect free perfume samples  
And soon, our purses are filled  
With scents of clementine and sandalwood  
The sprits from the bottle laps against your wrist  
Your veins soak it all up, and they are overgrown  
Three blue vines diverged at the stem  
For a moment, I picture you Real Young  
When your veins were still evergreen.

You never had a little girl,  
And you still don't,  
But I imagine this is fun for you  
To play pretend

Come December, you'll be gone.

These days, I hear about you from my Dad  
How you still dog-sit for him  
Even when he left you as you got sick  
And weak  
And tired  
When you woke up dry-heaving,  
Bathed in salty sweat that stung your eyes  
And he didn't set his phone down to hold you in his arms.

How you beat the Big C and that news didn't reach me  
Until I heard you ring the bell  
I heard it all the way from Missouri.

I think about you all the time  
You were my father's wife,  
But that doesn't sound right  
You are someone's mother,  
But you shouldn't be mine.

# Ella Braig

Grade 12, Ladue Horton Watkins High  
School

Educator: Abigail Eisenberg

*Poetry*



---

## Let's Be Cowboys

And we can forget how long it's been  
Since we cried in front of someone else  
"Let's shake on it,"  
You suggest  
I spit into the palm of my hand  
You pretend it doesn't gross you out.

The first rule of the ranch  
That we've made for ourselves  
Is we can never get too deep  
Cowboys don't get too deep  
Cowboys Push It Down  
And wouldn't you like to Push It All Down?

I feel the Pushdown like a hydraulic press  
Condensing me  
Discarding me like a crushed Coke can  
"I don't like pretending to be cowboys,"  
I admit  
"Let's be something else."

We put down the hats and detach our spurs from our boots  
Toss out the grain hanging loosely from our lips  
Set our cattle free  
For the first time

We inhale, exhale and all that can come out is  
The wailing, the sobbing repressed by the Pushdown.

This is no time to pretend.

# Ella Braig

Grade 12, Ladue Horton Watkins High  
School

Educator: Abigail Eisenberg

*Dramatic Script*



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## Muchmore

A jewel box outside of a farmhouse in Holcomb, Kansas. The sun has just about set as Felicity trims a budding rosebush. With nimble hands, she is careful not to snip the flowers off. Slowly at first, Wilder creeps up behind her and jolts her shoulders with his hands. He is playful the way that a child might be. Startled, Felicity accidentally slices a mostly bloomed rose, separating it from the branch and falling to the ground.

FELICITY

Jesus! Oh my God, Wilder. / You can't do that.

WILDER

What? I was trying to be cute. Come on, Felicity.

(He wraps his arms around Felicity's waist.)

Don't be like that. You like it.

(He notices the rose and its torn petals, now fanned out at Felicity's feet like a peacock's feathered tail.)

Oh, now, what'd you do that for?

FELICITY

I didn't mean to.

(She struggles.)

You freaked me out.

WILDER

What?

FELICITY

I didn't know it was you.

WILDER

What you don't know can't hurt you.

Felicity fully breaks away from Wilder.

FELICITY

Yeah, but it hurts more to not know. If I knew, I could at least expect the hurt. I could anticipate the hurt.

Wilder doesn't possess the vocabulary to respond to Felicity. He does not see things  
The Way She Does.

WILDER

Hey, remember when I told you how I don't like it when you do all that?

FELICITY

Do what?

WILDER

Talk in tongues. Sometimes— and I really do love you, Felicity— but, sometimes, you don't make any sense.

FELICITY

(A bit offended.)

Ok, Wilder.

Felicity locates a spray bottle and starts spritzing a new tree— one that has sprouted

little, green olives that look like crown jewels set atop a collection of laurel wreaths.

Conveniently, this glorious tree is located on the opposite side of the jewel box.

Wilder, ever the persister, follows her.

WILDER

Aw, come on. It's not that serious.

Wilder grabs Felicity's hand. Though she really should be more firm about her boundaries, she gives in every time. She really does love him— though, he makes it

very hard. At last, she forgives him.

FELICITY

Ok, Wilder.

(She examines a single olive growing from the tree. Without plucking it, she holds it in

between her fingers.)

I got this one a while—

(Usually, she wouldn't advocate for herself. However, the sudden jolt of wisdom from merely

touching the olive tree gives her the courage to speak up.)

Wilder?

(Wilder is not listening. Gently, she taps him on the shoulder and he turns around.)

I got this one a while ago.

WILDER  
(Uninterested.)  
Hm.

Wilder puts his arms around her again and rests his head on her shoulder.

FELICITY  
I've been taking really good care of it. Like, better than any of my other plants. I'm thinking of installing a grow light, so it can have sunlight even when it's nighttime, or raining.

WILDER  
Can I be honest with you?

FELICITY  
Hm?

WILDER  
It's kind of an eyesore. I mean, it's not even pretty. It doesn't have flowers or anything.

FELICITY  
Well, I like it.

WILDER  
But, see, that's the thing. You always put too much importance on things that don't matter.  
Think of it this way: in ten years— no, let's say five years, are you really gonna remember this tree?



FELICITY

Well, maybe. I remember everything. You know I've never let anything go.

WILDER

I do know that, yes.

Felicity playfully whacks Wilder with the back of her hand.

FELICITY

Stop teasing me!

She throws his hands off of her and goes to retrieve a shovel. He follows her.

WILDER

Oh, Felicity! How can you ever forgive me?

(She ignores him, enjoying this game they are now playing. Desperate to go along with it, he

gets on his knees and takes her hand in his.)

I'll be good, I promise. I'll listen to all your silly stories about the tree. I'll do anything you want. Please.

FELICITY

You're making a fool of yourself.

Wilder smothers her hand with kisses. Hesitantly, Felicity helps him up off the ground. Then, she darts to retrieve the potted olive tree, shovel in hand. Once it's secured in her arms, she teeters towards the jewel box's door.

WILDER

Wait, where are you taking it?

FELICITY

To the yard.

Felicity exits the jewel box. As loyal as a hunting hound, Wilder trails closely behind her.

WILDER  
What? Why?

FELICITY  
It's gotten too big for its pot. So, I need to plant it in the yard. I want it to get nice and tall.

WILDER  
Well, it doesn't have to grow. Can't it just stay small?

Felicity braces herself for a conversation she did not want to have today

FELICITY  
Look, Wilder. There's something I've been meaning to tell you.

WILDER  
You're doing it again, Felicity.

FELICITY  
Doing what?

WILDER  
Confusing me.

FELICITY  
Just— just— just try to understand for once, ok? Just try.  
(Beat. Then, Wilder nods.)  
So, last week, I found this tree on our doorstep. Well, at the time, it was just a sapling, but  
still.

WILDER

Wait, hold on. Why don't I remember this?

FELICITY

You were out. I don't know.

WILDER

Oh.

FELICITY

A lot goes down when you go out.

(Beat. They take this in. Perhaps Wilder could've prevented all this if he hung around the house more often.)

So, anyway, I touched it to see if it was real or one of those plastic things. Just out of curiosity. And, you're not gonna believe it when I tell you this, but... I saw something.

WILDER

Saw what?

FELICITY

That's the thing: I don't know! I just know that I saw something I had never seen before. Like,

I was looking out a foggy window and, for the first time, I found the strength to roll it down.

I don't know exactly what it was that prompted all this, but I think I have an idea. I think it was wisdom.

WILDER

I'm not following.

FELICITY

You don't have to. I'm doing this for myself.

She pulls the shovel out and begins to dig. Although, she only makes a small dent,  
as

Wilder soon tries to pull the shovel away from her.

WILDER

Woah, woah, woah— hey. HEY. What on Earth do you think you're doing?

FELICITY

(Appalled.)

Planting an olive tree. What are you doing?

WILDER

Trying to stop you from digging up our lawn. The foundation of our beautiful  
home that I  
built for you and I, Felicity.

FELICITY

Oh, get over yourself, Wilder. You didn't build this house. You held the tape  
measurer while  
my dad worked for weeks to remodel the kitchen. That was it.

WILDER

Still! I don't want you to bring that into our lives.

FELICITY

Bring what into our lives? Wisdom? Is that what you're / afraid of?

WILDER

No, no, you've got it all wrong. It's just that I...

FELICITY  
(Mocking him.)  
...You?

WILDER  
Don't you think we're ignorant for a reason?

FELICITY  
What? That's the dumbest / thing I've ever —

WILDER  
No, just— please listen. I mean, when Eve bit into the / apple.

FELICITY  
Ooooookayyyy, Wilder. / Here we go.

WILDER  
No, seriously. When Eve bit the apple, she learned so much, right? But she also suffered even more. Her suffering outweighed all of the knowledge she gained.

FELICITY  
Babe, this isn't an apple tree. These are olives. Olives.

Felicity waves a still-attached branch in Wilder's face.

WILDER  
Don't be smart with me. You know I already know that.

FELICITY  
You do?

WILDER  
I do.

FELICITY

But, you could know so much more.

WILDER

That's not what I'm worried about. I want to know more. I really do. I just... I can't have you knowing the same.

FELICITY

What? Why?

WILDER

Because / you might—

FELICITY

Why is that, Wilder? Huh? Why don't you want me to know / as much as you?

WILDER

See, now you're twisting it into something it isn't. I mean, don't you... don't you like

depending on me?

(Felicity says nothing.)

I like it. But I'm afraid you won't like it anymore after you get all that wisdom in your system.

FELICITY

Do you know what I think? I think you're scared. You're scared that I'll be able to see you more clearly.

Wilder, dumbfounded that he has been discovered, pulls her into an embrace.  
Like  
every time before, she gives in and reciprocates his touch.

WILDER  
I just don't want you to leave.

FELICITY  
I'm not going to.

WILDER  
You could do so much. You could be so much more. But, you're also my wife. What  
if you  
don't want to be that anymore?

FELICITY  
I do, Wilder. I do.

(She breaks away from the hug and holds his hands in hers.)  
If you're really a good man, which I know you are, I'll see you exactly the same  
way. So, let  
me plant my olive tree. Please.  
(She drops his hands.)  
I get so lonely when you go away. I've got all this time and nothing to spend it on.

Wilder pretends to consider this. It's pretty convincing.

WILDER  
No.

FELICITY

But, I said I'd never leave you.

(Beat.)

It wouldn't be an issue. I'd still want to stay.

(Beat.)

WILDER

You don't know that.

(Beat.)

God. It's almost like you want to not like me. Like you grasp for reasons to be upset.

FELICITY

That isn't true.

Felicity stakes her shovel in the dirt stubbornly and resumes digging.

WILDER

No, I think it is.

(He rips the shovel from her hands. This frightens her, but he doesn't realize why.

There's no

going back. The damage has already been done.)

I've never hurt you. I've never hit you. I never even try to inconvenience you. And yet, you

complain, and complain, and complain. I would kill to stay at home and play in the garden

all day.

FELICITY

You're hurting me now.



WILDER  
Bullshit.

FELICITY  
You're hurting me so much, and you don't even seem to notice.

Beat. Wilder does love her. He really tries to.

WILDER  
I don't want to hurt you, Felicity.

FELICITY  
I believe you. I believe that you don't want to.

WILDER  
How do I stop?

Felicity thinks. Then, she breaks a branch off of the olive tree and hands it to Wilder.

FELICITY  
Go on.

Reluctantly, Wilder bites an olive straight off of the stem. It's like an animal testing food for poison, the way he does it. After he chews, savors, and swallows, he looks at Felicity— really Looks at her. For the first time, he sees all that she is and all that she could be. The only thing left to do is help her. So, he kneels in the dirt and starts digging with his bare hands. Felicity picks up the shovel and continues to dig beside him.

FELICITY  
Do you want to talk / about—?

WILDER  
That's ok.

FELICITY  
Alright.  
(Beat.)

What— happened?

WILDER  
It was time for me to wise up.  
(Beat.)  
You could become so much more.

As they work, they steal glances at one another. But mostly, they just dig. When the hole is large enough to plant the tree in the ground, they gently shake it out of the pot and carry it over together. Then, they smooth the soil with their hands. Once the job is finished, Felicity stands.

FELICITY  
I'm going out.

WILDER  
To do what?

FELICITY

To become so much more.

Felicity exits.

END OF PLAY.

# Ella Braig

Grade 12, Ladue Horton Watkins High  
School

Educator: Abigail Eisenberg

*Dramatic Script*



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## Talking Stick

**Time and Place:** Laura's bedroom.

**Characters:** 4W

Laura - 13, female. Deeply apologetic. A therapist will prescribe her Lexapro as an adult. Grasps for control. Detail-oriented.

Bennett - 13, female. Resist the urge to play her as a mean girl. She is going through just as many changes as the rest of them. Hurts people without intending to.

Morgan - 14, female. Dismissive in the way that makes middle school girls want to be her friend.

Piper - 13, female. Homeschooled. Knows the other girls because their moms are friends. Doesn't have any outdoorsy badges, only craft ones. Owns a rolling backpack.

1.

*Laura's room.*

*Bennett is attempting to braid her own hair.*

LAURA

Do you want me to help?

BENNETT

Um, I think I'm good.

*(She continues to braid. It isn't working out,)*

Actually, Morgan, can you do it for me?

MORGAN

Ok.

BENNETT

I just feel like you're so good at it. I can never get it right.

MORGAN

Aw. You're sweet.

*Feeling rejected, Laura sits on the bed so that she is physically above everyone else.*

LAURA

Ok, so, we should probably start the meeting by / talking about the—

PIPER

Yeah, you really are good at it. Can you do a fishtail?

LAURA

You guys, seriously. We have to get back / on track.

MORGAN

Probably. Dunno. Haven't tried it.

BENNETT

I'm so glad you finally gave in and joined the troupe. We have to get you an initiation patch.

LAURA

YOU GUYS.

*(The girls pause what they're doing to look at her.)*

Sorry. That was like. That was not cool.

*(Beat.)*

Sorry.

*Bennett and Piper wait for Morgan to react.*

MORGAN

It's fine.

LAURA

No because that was actually so rude and I don't want to be rude or anything and I don't want you guys to think I'm rude.

MORGAN

Laura. It's not that deep.

LAURA

Sorry.

MORGAN

Anyways, we should get back on track. We have to talk about how we're gonna sell / these cookies.

LAURA

Yeah, cookie sales. That's what I was trying to say. We need to come up with a strategy for this year. Apparently, sales aren't going so well for any of our sister troupes.

PIPER

Ok, so I was thinking: you know how my mom doesn't let me have red dye 40 because it makes me get aggressive?

*(They nod.)*

Well, what if this year, we made them ourselves. Free of all the bad stuff that's in the regular kind. That way, I can finally eat them, too.

LAURA

Yeah, but that's what makes them taste good. And I don't really feel like people buy Lady Bird Scout cookies for their nutritional value.

*(Thinking she's being insensitive.)*

Like, I'm not trying to say that's a bad idea. It's a good one. And I understand the intention. But what we should actually do is—

MORGAN

Laura, can I give you some feedback?

LAURA

...What?

MORGAN

It's just... I've noticed that whenever we have a troupe meeting, you take up like 70% of the conversation.

LAURA

Oh. I didn't know.

*(To Piper.)*

Sorry.

PIPER

Nah, you're good. It doesn't bother me.

BENNETT

It kind of bugs *me*, though. Morgan and I were talking about it yesterday, and we think we should establish some sort of talking stick. That way, the conversation isn't dominated by one person.

LAURA

Since when do you and Morgan hang out one-on-one?

MORGAN

Just hear her out, Laura. You didn't even let her finish.

*(She puts a reassuring hand on Bennett's shoulder.)*

Keep going.

*Bennett touches Morgan's hand.*

BENNETT

Thank you. What I was trying to say was, maybe we could use...

*(She looks around for an inanimate object.)*

Um...

*Piper digs into her rolling backpack and pulls out a thermos with an owl on it.*

PIPER

What about this?

*She hands it to Bennett.*

BENNETT

Why is it just loose in your backpack?

PIPER

My mom says it's good for me to drink hot broth throughout the day to regulate my body temperature.

BENNETT

Ok. Cool.

*(Beat. This is maybe the most uncool thing she's ever heard.)*

So, this... thing... can be the talking stick.

LAURA

But, my mom is the troupe leader. You can't just make decisions without consulting / her.

MORGAN

I'm sorry, Laura, but the Lady Bird Scouts function as a Democracy. And right now, Bennett has the talking stick. So, why are you still talking?

*She motions for Bennett to continue.*

BENNETT

Right. So, I think I know how we can raise cookie sales this year. My mom is employed by this brand called BossFit. It's like a legit thing. She works from home and everything. All she has to do is recruit other women via Instagram DMs to also post reels about the brand.

PIPER

What do they sell?

BENNETT

Detox teas mostly, but they make vitamin supplements, too. Well, they call them vitamins, but it's really just ozempic frozen into little pill-shaped molds, and then packaged for easy consumption.

*Morgan reaches for the talking stick. Bennett hands it to her.*

MORGAN

Your mom sounds so sick. I love it when women are their own boss.

PIPER

So, are we gonna...

*(Morgan passes her the talking stick.)*

Right. Sorry. But, is this the plan?

LAURA

I don't know. I think—

*(She takes the talking stick from Piper.)*

I think we should discuss other options. I mean, it's not like we can market our cookies exclusively to wealthy women who have nothing going on.

BENNETT

Um, my mom has plenty going on.

LAURA

No, wait— I wasn't trying to say—

BENNETT

She does so much. She reposts GoFundMes on Facebook. She re-does her nails once a week. Sometimes, she DJs in Miami on weekends. She's very well-rounded.

MORGAN

I personally am cool with the idea.

PIPER

Me too.

BENNETT

Cool! Then, it's settled. I'm so excited. I have like a million thoughts about how we can...

*The girls trail off, eagerly discussing their plans, while Laura sits on the bed, utterly defeated.*



# Ella Braig

Grade 12, Ladue Horton Watkins High  
School

Educator: Abigail Eisenberg

*Journalism*



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## When The Letters Stop Coming

Love is something that's impossible to entrap. It's like a butterfly caught in a dull, mesh net: it's nothing special to look at when it's fluttering around, searching for a way out, but when it escapes its confines, it soars and dazzles its audience. This is especially true for the love shared between two friends who couldn't be further apart in proximity.

No love is ignited from such a minimal spark than that of what is shared between pen pals. What a wonderful feeling it must be to hear the skittering of the mail truck pulling up to one's home; to tear open a licked-shut envelope and find what is more substantial than anything in the world: the kind words of one's best friend. With every sentence scribbled, two heartstrings tangle and entwine. But what happens when the letters stop coming?

*The Forgotten Leftovers of Meaningful Things*, a short film by Lizzie Esther, was first presented at 7:30 in the morning to a room full of yawning, heavy-eyed high schoolers. But Esther had a much larger vision for her project; one that simply could not be bound to the confines of the classroom. In March of 2023, both Esther and the film received the award for Best High School Film at the Fault Line Film Festival. Soon, the film went on to win a Mid-America Emmys Student Production Award for Writing (High School).

"I was happy to share my film with other people who love film, love editing, love video creating, love this whole concept," Esther said.

Esther, a junior at Ladue High School, has been writing to former classmate Rachel Chu since elementary school. Saved by a pen and paper, exchanging letters has been the perfect kindling to keep their long-distance friendship ablaze. However, Esther admits that as they've grown up, it's been difficult to maintain their connection to one another.

“I’m not as good about it now and she’s not good about it now, because we both have such busy lives, about writing back and forth to each other.” Esther said. And with that, her correspondence with Chu was put on hold.

For Esther’s final project in Broadcast Technology, one of the many classes offered at Ladue, she was challenged to create a short film that utilizes cinematic techniques she has learned over the course of the semester.

Two subjects immediately came to mind: “My lost love of painting,” Esther said from the privacy of Ladue’s TV studio. “But also [...] the relationship I had with Rachel, one of my friends and best friends at the time.”

Directed, edited, written by and starring Esther, *The Forgotten Leftovers of Meaningful Things* touches on Chu and painting, friendship and recovery. While not everyone has written to a pen-pal, the idea of moving on from a long-term relationship is universal.

“Making something that not only is meaningful to me and relatable to me, but so other people can connect to my character, my story, but also things that they’ve seen in their own life [is a priority for me],” Esther said. “Maybe not exactly a lost friendship or a meaningful box. I want someone to find something that relates in their own life to mine.”

The film follows a fictionalized version of Esther as she scrambles to complete her final project in her painting class. Low on motivation, she is inspired by a wooden chest that, in the words of her accompanying poem, “had no story to tell,” and embellishes it with images of cerulean flowers. With every brushstroke, memories of her messages to Chu become more apparent; but it isn’t until she’s tucked the letters away in the aforementioned box that she realizes their reunion has been a long time coming. In the film’s final shot, Esther flips over a letter addressed to Chu, revealing it to be decorated with the all-too-familiar flowers. From the painted buds blooms a renewed friendship, and the story concludes with an optimistic rhythm.

Esther doesn’t know if she’ll produce another short film. But for now, she is satisfied with her recent success. Her message is sent and her friendship is secured; what more could she want? Everything must fade— even Esther’s own painted, cerulean flowers will dull over time. However, as the film asks, “Why keep the pieces of friendship in a box?”

# Madeline Bratkovic

Grade 10, Olathe North High School

Educator: Deirdre Zongker

*Flash Fiction*



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## Breaking Free

Josephine sat in her room in silence one morning remembering what it had been like to be free. She remembered how she used to climb trees and run in the forest as a young girl. She remembered how fresh the air smelled, the way the wind moved in her hair, and how she wished she had someone to share her lovely life with. Josephine had married her husband Lucas when she was just nineteen years old, hoping he would fill the void of loneliness in her life. They had been married nearly twenty years now, and the void was never truly filled. Josephine went from a free girl to a depressed housewife the second she got married. She would spend most days cooking and cleaning, waiting for her husband to get home so she could wait on him hand and foot. This day however felt different; Josephine had a feeling that today was the day things were about to change.

Just then Lucas walked in the room with exciting news.

“I got a promotion!” he exclaimed.

“A promotion– that’s wonderful dear”, she said with a forced smile. Josephine hated his boss and the company and had always hoped he would quit his dreadful job of being a used car salesman.

“I know right! When the boss walked in and told me I simply couldn’t believe it. He and his wife invited us over as a celebration and I told him we’d be there, so make sure to put on your best clothes.” Lucas put his left arm around Josephine and kissed her on the cheek.

“Well I guess I’d better get my suit ready for tonight, see ya darlin.” Lucas winked and left the room. Suddenly Josephine looked in the mirror, and no longer saw that beautiful reflection of a woman with brown hair and a pleasant smile, but instead saw a woman with gray hairs and the frown of a child who just dropped ice cream on the sidewalk. As Josephine looked in the mirror, she thought of the life she could’ve lived. A life where she could explore the world and

all of its flaws, instead of being trapped in a house that seemed to get smaller by the day with a husband who talked about nothing but nonsense. In that moment, Josephine wanted to cry and smash everything in the house, but she didn't. Instead she went on with the day as if everything was fine.

When Lucas and Josephine arrived at his boss's house they were in awe. The house was immense and looked simply magnificent, with lace curtains and a huge grandfather clock that looked like it had been passed down from generation to generation. Josephine and Lucas sat down to dinner and she watched as Lucas and his boss rambled on and on about mindless nonsense.

"This chicken is really good", Lucas said as he contently cut the piece of overcooked poultry.

"My wife is the best cook in this town I tell ya what!", Lucas's boss said with his mouth full of food. He swallowed and continued the conversation, "She told me that she wanted to start working and I said 'no sweetheart not when you can stay home and cook for me', a talent like hers shouldn't be abandoned for the workforce. I'm sure you feel the same way about Jo".

"It's Josephine", she said annoyed.

"While Jo's a good cook and I do enjoy having her at home, I must say her chicken has never tasted this good." Lucas said cheerfully.

"God can you two stop talking about this chicken and talk about something else? Like the promotion; what exactly is my husband being promoted to?" Josephine asked curiously.

"Why he's being promoted to manager. It'll be less money but I knew that Lucas would be just perfect for the position." The boss said in a very suspicious manner.

"Did you think he would be perfect for the position? Or did you think he was the only one stupid enough to fall for a pay cut?" Josephine said her hands tensing up with anger.

The boss gasped, "How dare you accuse me of such a thing? Perhaps I was wrong about your wife, Lucas. She doesn't seem like a submissive housewife."

"That's right I'm not! I may cook and clean my life away, but I have something you don't have, Confidence. You are so scared of being honest with people that you couldn't even tell my husband that managers make less money than salesmen." Lucas and his boss were in shock at Josephine's words. "But that's where we're different, I am not afraid of telling people what I think. I'm confident and brave, something you could never be."

“I have to go, I’m sorry”, Josephine ran out of the house with Lucas chasing after her.

“Have you lost your mind?! I don’t know what’s going on with you but you need to get back in there and apologize for what you did!” Lucas said.

“God do you ever stop talking? All you have done since we’ve been together is spout nonsense and I’ve sat here and put up with it, but that ends today!” Josephine was crying now for the first time in years, and she knew in that moment what she had to do. She took a deep breath and said what she had wanted to say for years, “Tomorrow, I’m going to file for divorce, I’m tired of being treated like dirt.”

# Meera Brau

Grade 8, Parkway West Middle School

*Short Story*



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## Cold Love

### I.

Candle flames dance in the wind atop the autumn trees. Cruel wind bites at the last echos of life before the winter. Among the small houses, brothers in a small New England town; silhouettes of families dance in the lit window. Small families, old families, new families, and big families; all gathered here to breathe in each other's warmth, and mourn the loss of the summer.

In the small orange glow of a brick-clad house, she gingerly tends to the oven, caring for the potatoes. The ethereal hum of the oven whispers through the silence. The kitchen plays like a silent orchestra, everything working in perfect unison.

As the sun lowers itself below the horizon, the turkey sits idle on the table. The quiet of the night creeps through the house meandering through every nook and cranny.

"They should be here," she says to the sky, a soliloquy to the waning warmth of twilight.

To be forgotten is not a sudden death, It is a slow cancerous ache that eats away at your heart; it is a futile battle when those who have forgotten do not wish to remember.

Icy bitterness builds, freezing the rains of sorrow.

"S'pose they think they're too good for me? I ain't worrying about them one more day." She calls as if her fury was strong enough to find anyone to listen. A black dog, ribs protruding like ripples in a pond, deftly scampers across her yard. Hidden with the colors of dusk, the only hint to his presence is a weak glow from the early stars.

With a short chuckle, she opens the door letting in the darkness. Warm turkey in hand, she kneels beside the pathetic creature.

"You poor thing, here," she whispers leading him into the house.

"It's just the two of us, huh?" The dog licks the remains of his morsel.

"Here I got som'in I know you'd like. You ever had mashed potatas? Oh my goodness, 'course you ain't you're a dog. Why am I talking to a dog?" She shakes her head. "I must've really gone crazy"

She pushes herself up, the aroma of food slowly dissipating into the sky. Wandering over to the kitchen, her eyes linger on the black canvas of night, looking for those headlights she longs for. The little dog cautiously follows her into the kitchen.

"Here you're gonna like these," she coos, reaching down with a cloud of mashed potatoes on her finger.

Her phone sits idle on the table, the pale starlight reflecting perfectly off of the glossy black screen. The dog looks up at her; urging her to call.

"I'm not gonna call him" she whispers to the dog "I'll just make a bigger mess."

In the empty house, her voice echoes back, singing back, songs of the pathetic.

"I suppose I'll be alone either way," she mutters into the night, picking up her phone. She jabs his number into the pad, each *ring* bringing more and more dread, but she holds firm.

"Where are you?" she says, an unexpected bitterness to her words.

"What do you mean?" Her son fumes confusion.

"Don't be stupid Colin!" she strains to keep her voice together.

"What's the matter with you?" he says, anger rising through his words.

She takes in a deep breath, ready to start the most familiar argument with her youngest son. "Don't play stupid with me." she bites, letting the teeth of her tone sink deep in his mind. "I watch your kids, I provide you money, *I bend over backward* all for you. But its okay for you to ignore me when you want."

"Wait I-"

"Don't try to make an excuse, it's the same every holiday. I wake up, no call, no text, no *you*. I don't understand how this is so hard for you."

"You know I have to spend my holiday with my fiancée, I can't just abandon her."

"Oh so you can't abandon Maddie but you can abandon *me*."

"I'm not *abandoning* you." he says, his eye roll almost translated through the phone.

"Don't. I am always, *always* here for you. All I ask is for *a fraction* of the love I show you to be returned."

"Mom-please, you're being- you're doing too much. *Please* calm down. I'll see you some other time."

"I've heard it a million times, 'oh I'll see you some other time' well that time hasn't come for the last 5 *years*."

"*Mom* let me enjoy *my* family."

She almost chokes on the air around her. The cold wind outside fills the loud silence between them.

"It's not about you!" her voice breaks, her breathing morphing into quiet sobs. "I just- I just" she pauses, "I gave you my everything for 23 years. Why can't you give me one day."

She waits for five eternal seconds. "Leave me alone." The only thing left is the deafening quiet and three small *beeps* that indicate that her son won't put up with her.

A silent rejection often rings louder than a yelling one. Basic words, like old friends, carry you through life, and their betrayal cuts as deep. Now, with the world having no desire for her, the empty night seems a little less menacing; the wind a little less cruel.

Instead of fury or anger, a seed of peace drops into rocky soil, growing. Growing even when its cold, or wrong.

In the secret of darkness, she takes any money she can find, and makes a drive, running on thoughtless inhibitions.

Train tickets have edges, sharp like the twists of life. As the train sets off, the faded yellow seats cold and plain, sink with the weight of midnight riders, trying to escape. Ticket to nowhere, that's what she needs, every inch of her screams to get off, but her legs hold still, resigning to the plan, a new fate. Her head rests against the windowpane, the cold glass. It's like ice, sharp, sharp ice, and it cuts her. She closes her eyes as the methodical bumps blend into voices, and the ice fades away.

"Screw you," he says, *emotionless fury coursing through his heart*. "*Maddie is not a gold-digger. She loves me and I love her. I don't care what you think of her because she is not your girlfriend.*" His voice is cold, unsparing.



*"Not a gold-digger?" she laughs "How many boyfriends has she had? Collin, she's only two years older than you and has been passed around more than a cigarette lighter!"*

*"Wow. You're such a hypocrite. You talk a lot about how we should 'love thy neighbor' and here you are judging a girl you barely know."*

*"At least I know how the world works." She spits, face flushing with wrath.*

*"Apparently not," he craves the taste of blood in this argument, and he knows how to hurt her. "You go around pushing everyone away from you, and one day you'll complain that you're lonely. You can never let things be." He draws in a breath, "You think Cara went to school in France just because she wants to 'see the world'?" He watches as she bites her cheek. "Everyone is so tired of your little hero story where you save the day. Your little fairytale is getting tired. Cara went to France because she needed to be a whole ocean away from your lies."*

*"My lies? You're living in a fantasy world where everything will work out. You're wading waist-high through your delusions. I'm here to help you, but you can't seem to get off your high horse and accept the truth."*

*"STOP TRYING TO BE THE MAIN CHARACTER OF EVERYONE'S LIFE!" he screams, voice raw from the argument.*

*"Whatever. go be with your little harlot, but don't come back to me when she takes your money and runs." Her voice turns dead, she stares straight into his deep brown eyes.*

Candle flames dance in the wind atop the autumn trees. Cruel wind bites at the last echos of life before the winter. Among the small houses, brothers in a small New England town; silhouettes of families dance in the lit window. Small families, old families, new families, and big families; all gathered here to breathe in each other's warmth, and mourn the loss of the summer.

Now in the dead of night, with a pit of remorse in his stomach, he opens the door to a dark house. No trace of life except for an uneaten meal, and a small black dog with ribs like ripples in a pond.

# Luciana Brieler

Grade 7, Rockwood South Middle School

Educator: Kristen Engle

*Short Story*



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## Hopping Along Through Life

“Dahlia! Wait for me!” Alexis, my best friend since first grade, calls out. I turn back to the bus waiting for her to get off. She emerges from the bus with her black backpack thrown over her left shoulder. “Can I come over later today to see Arvada?” She asks. Arvada is my pet bunny. She has silky, snow white fur and crystal clear blue eyes. Not to mention, she is really energetic. Although, she has been acting weird lately.

“Sure!” I respond.

When Alexis and I reach her door, I leave her with a promise to meet up later this evening. I continue down the sidewalk to my house thinking of playing with my dog, Molly, and the science essay in my bag that I can’t quite get right. I stop in front of a beautiful house with black accent pieces, flowers that follow the path up to the door, and a sleek black car in the driveway. This house is mine. I live here with my parents and my two pets, Molly and Arvada. Pulling out my key, I open the door to the sounds of Molly barking and the voice of my mother calling out to me. I step into the house, my foot hitting the hardwood floors. I walk into the entrance area taking off my shoes before moving on to the living room hoping that my dad is home from work. Usually, he’s sitting on the black leather couch watching TV while my mother is in the kitchen making something for her first grade class. Being the multi-tasker she is, she’s also watching the TV over his shoulder. But judging by the lack of noise from the living room, Dad isn’t home. I entered the living room, feeling a bit disappointed to not see my father even though I already knew he wouldn’t be there. I let my feet sink into the soft carpet, setting my bag on the ground and I flop onto the couch. I look back to my

mom, informing her. "Alexis is coming over later this evening to play with Arvada."

"Okay, Dear. Would you like a snack while you work on your homework?" She asks.

"Sure!" I reply, pulling my computer out of my bag. I stare restlessly at my computer screen, unable to come up with the next sentence of my essay.

At first, I chose this topic because I thought it would be easy since I already know so much about bunnies. So then why is this so hard? I rest my head on the cool, black leather of the sofa looking up at the ceiling. "Ughh! Why is this so difficult?!" I exclaim.

"What is it, Sweetie?" My mom inquires, turning her attention away from her project.

"It's nothing, just something for school." I reply quickly.

"Maybe I can help." My mother suggests.

"No, it's fine." I utter, looking back at my screen, willing ideas to come to me.

"How about you take a break and come back to this essay later? You have been working on it for a while." My mother suggests.

"Mom, I really need to get this done." I try to explain, suddenly getting annoyed.

"Dahlia Rose, you will stop giving me attitude and put that computer down!" My mother demands, leveling me with a glare.

"Fine!" I declare, throwing my arms up and rolling my eyes.

"Dahlia, don't roll your eyes at me!" She shouts. I throw my closed computer to the side and run up to my room, my feet hitting each step making a thumping noise. I step onto the white, fluffy carpet in my room and sink down to the floor, pulling my knees up and close to my chest. I rest my chin on my knees, feeling the familiar lump in my throat and the tears stinging behind my eyes. I try to will them away. I know I'm just being silly and that this essay isn't worth crying over, but I just can't seem to stop the tears as I feel one roll down my face and hit my leg. All I can seem to think about is the essay. Suddenly, I hear a soft *squeak*.

Then, another *squeak* echoes. I turn my attention to Arvada, who is staring at me with her blue eyes and her squeaking so soft I wouldn't be able to hear her if the room wasn't silent. That's weird for her since she used to be so vocal. In fact, one would be able to hear her from the next room over. Now, she can barely be heard even in the quietest of rooms. I get up and walk over to her cage, tears

and science essay forgotten. I grabbed the bag of bunny food from the shelf beside the cage, and put a little in her bowl. Arvada makes her way to the food slower than usual. I noticed that it seemed to take a lot out of her to travel such a short distance. Suddenly, I remember that Alexis is going to come over to play with Arvada. Looking at how she is acting, I think better of it and send Alexis a text saying, "Hey, Alexis. Arvada isn't looking too good. You shouldn't come over. Sorry."

I set my phone down and returned my attention to Arvada sticking my hand in her cage to pet her. She jumps as if spooked, which is shocking since she is usually super social and friendly. *Ding!* My phone rings when Alexis responds to my text. "Okay, that sucks. I hope it isn't anything serious."

I put down my phone and started to walk down the stairs to inform my mom of the change. As I get to the bottom of the stairs, I hear my father's voice. "She deserves to know! Arvada is her bunny!"

"I'm not saying we never tell her but, let's just wait. The vet said that with the antibiotics, she will live. So why make her distressed if Arvada isn't guaranteed to die? That's all I'm saying." My mother insists.

"I get that, but shouldn't she at least know that Arvada might die so it isn't sudden if she does pass away?" My father argues. I can't seem to contain my curiosity. But as I walk towards the living room, my curiosity seems to mix with something that I could almost describe as fear. I enter the living room to see my dad and my mother talking with their hands resting on the kitchen counter.

"I just don't want to- Oh, Dahlia! What are you doing here?" Both my mother and father turn to face me.

"What were you guys talking about? And don't say nothing because I heard you talking about Arvada." I question with blood pounding my ears. My parents look at each other as if they have a secret and don't want to share it with me. I look at them intensely, feeling increasingly nervous for how they will respond. My father nods and my mother sighs, turning their eyes back to me looking at me with pity filling their crystal clear blue eyes.

"Dear, why don't we sit on the couch to talk?" My mother finally speaks.

"Sure." I reply with suspicion in my voice. I'm sitting on the couch with my parents on either side of me. After a few minutes of uncomfortable silence, they start to explain the situation.

"Today, we took Arvada to the vet and she is sick." My father says, consoling me by putting his hand on my back.

“Also, the vet said that Arvada might only have a few days left.” My mother adds on to what my father says.

“What?!” I can’t believe it. I don’t want to believe it. I look between them and my mother gives a small nod. My eyes burn as tears collect in them. One tear rolls down my face and falls to the floor, then another falls. It’s like a waterfall spilling over a cliff. Soon comes uncontrollable sobbing into my dad’s chest while he strokes my hair. Once I was able to control my sobs, I looked up at them and asked.

“What’s wrong with her?”

“Maybe it’s best left for another day.” My mom concludes. What does she mean by that? Suddenly, I feel rage flood in my body, replacing my sadness.

“No, I want to know. Arvada is my bunny!” I need to know. My parents look at each other again, which only seems to make me more angry.

“Arvada has pneumonia. The pneumonia seems to have been affecting her for a while judging by what the vet says. However, with some antibiotics, she will probably live.” My mother explains to me. A spark of hope flickers in my chest.

“ So she’ll be fine!”

“There is a chance.” My mom agrees. “But there is a chance that she won’t make it even with the antibiotics.” She adds. My dad simply nods along.

“We know this is a lot, so if you want to stay home from tennis tonight, then you can.”

Before answering their question, I sat and thought about my options. The weight of sadness and exhaustion from crying only a few minutes earlier weighed me down as well as the thought of Arvada possibly not making it swaying my mind to stay home. But the looming thought of possibly making my coach angry makes me feel stronger about going to tennis. Finally, I made my decision.

“ I want to go to tennis tonight.” I finally respond, not sounding very confident. But I can always spend time with Arvada. Both my parents sigh, looking at each other as if I did something wrong. Finally, my dad spoke up.

“Are you sure you want to do this, Honey? You don’t have to. No one will blame you.” I start to second guess myself.

“I will go to tennis. Then I will spend time with Arvada after.”

“Alright, if that is what you want to do, then that is what we will do.” My mom says exasperated. “Just know that if at any time you want to come home, just call or text either one of us.” She adds on before pushing the hair out of my face. “I will.” I get up from the couch and go to get ready for tennis. Opening the

door to my room, I go to check on Arvada, finding her fast asleep. Walking over to my vanity, I pull my hair back out of my face into a slick back ponytail. Then, I go over to my dresser for my tennis skirt. I keep the black tank top and navy blue hoodie from my school outfit, sling my tennis bag over my shoulder, and grab my phone before I leave the room, turning the lights off. Walking into the kitchen, I make my water, then inform my parents. "I'm ready. Let's go." I watch as Dad gets up from the couch. I follow him to the front door where he gets his keys and I get my shoes on. I yell goodbye to Mom before walking out the door. I make it to my dad's car and just hope that he doesn't feel the need to talk about the Arvada situation because I could not handle it. I'm suddenly snapped out of my thoughts by Dad turning on the radio. A sudden burst of loud punk rock music blasts out of the radio. Dad goes to turn off the radio imminently. I look out the window, watching the houses and cars fly by us while soaking in the warmth of the low sun. About ten minutes later, we arrived at the courts. I get out of the car, waving goodbye to my dad and walk down to the courts to greet my coach and teammates. We soon start on warm ups, then serve drills that eventually morph into playing matches against teammates. By the end of practice, it all seems to haze together because I can't focus on anything other than the sinking feeling in my gut. Practice ends. I walk to my dad's car. As soon as I got into the car, I could tell by his face that something was wrong because of the creases in between his eyebrows.

"What happened?" I ask, trying to look at him in his eyes while he tries to avoid eye contact.

"We should wait until we're home." Taking that as an answer, I lean back in my seat, staring off into the distance, thinking of everything that could have gone wrong as I nervously fidget with my hands. Finally, after what felt like days, we make it home and got through the door. We sat on the same couch in the same position that we were in only a few hours ago with my parents on either side. Only this time, my mom was holding my hand. Looking into their faces, I recognized the look on their faces. Instantly, I started to tremble with the familiar lump in my throat and stinging eyes as they filled with tears again.

"She's gone. Arvada is gone, isn't she?" I hear myself say although I sound weird and unfamiliar. Suddenly, I realize that I sound like little 10 year old me. When my first cat died, I cried for months after. It was one of the worst things to have happened to me at the time and now, I have to live through it again. Although I'm fifteen, I feel just as sad and pathetic as I did five years ago. Another voice pulled me out of my head, making me look up to the voice. It was my mom



in her sweet voice telling me that it will be okay with her arms wrapped around me as if shielding me from the world. I start to shake as tears spill from my eyes uncontrollably. My mother soothes me, helping me to calm down enough to get ready for bed. She stays with me until I am able to fall asleep.

I awake the next morning to the sun pushing its way past my curtains into my room. I sniffed before blowing my nose, undoubtedly caused by all the crying the night before, though I can't seem to remember why I was crying. Something seems to be missing, but the question I can't quite answer is what? Looking around my room, nothing is obviously out of place. That is, until I turn to go check on Arvada and see that she's not there. A wave of panic washes over me thinking that I lost her until the missing memories flood back to me. Arvada is dead and she has been for hours now. Even as the realization dawns on me, I can't bring myself to cry again or feel sad. I don't necessarily feel happy, but I also don't feel devastated or upset. I bring myself to my vanity and look at myself in the mirror. My eyes are red and puffy from crying and one can see the streaks that the tears left behind in their wreckage. But I start to think about it. Soon, I realize that her cage will be taken out of my room, probably shoved in a box and thrown with all the other boxes in the garage. Not to mention, the bunny food will probably be thrown out. The only evidence that Arvada was even here would be the memories that everyone fortunate enough to meet her gained. Eventually, those would fade. I'm snapped out of my thoughts by the knock on my door paired with the voice of my mother saying, "Dahlia, are you awake?"

"Yes, Mom." I reply groggily, suddenly realizing that it is a school day. But I can't bring myself to care.

"May I come in?"

"Yes." I hear the clicking of the door opening and the soft creaking. As it opens, my mother's head pokes in from behind the door, carrying a tray of sorts as she fully walks through the door. The tray comes into view, showcasing an assortment of strawberries, bananas, and waffles covered in syrup and whipped cream. On the side of the tray, there was a glass of my favorite apple juice.

"I thought you might be hungry, so I brought you some food. Oh, and I am taking the day off to be with you in case you need anything and your father is at work." I process what she said for a second before replying,

"Okay, thank you."

I expect her to leave after my response. Only she doesn't. Instead, she walks over to me after putting the tray down on the dresser when she walks by. My mom walks over to me at my vanity and hugs me. The hugs seem to change something

in me. I started to feel comforted because this hug was something I really needed. Molly comes barging into my room just as my mother stands from the hug. Molly gets up onto my lap and licks my face, which leads me to laughter. Although I still need time to process Arvada's death, I know that my family and friends will always be there for me.



# Ruth Brooks

Grade 12, Olathe North High School

Educator: Deirdre Zongker

*Personal Essay & Memoir*



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## Playground Problems

It is a commonly known fact to anyone under the age of eleven that recess is the best part of the day in elementary school. Children wait in anticipation for their teacher to finally dismiss them to the ever-glorious playground so they can run around and exert energy with friends. Recess is a break from the dragged-out lessons and the stifling air of a crowded classroom. Recess is an opportunity for children to be imaginative and immersive, enjoying games and creating entertaining ideas to play out in real life. Recess is the highlight of many children's days, which is why having a fun playground is so important. Children cannot be considered "too old" for a playground either, as they continue to use them even after they leave elementary and advance to middle and high school. Recess, albeit only fifteen to thirty minutes a day, proves to be an integral part of a person's childhood. Specifically, the playground at my elementary school houses so many memories, being a place of comfort and chaos. The playground I grew up on is where I met some of my best friends and had much-needed heart-to-hearts. I had some of the best and worst moments of my childhood sitting on the swings or running through the field in the burning heat or freezing cold temperatures on the playground.

At Black Bob Elementary School, where I went to kindergarten through fifth grade, we had one of the best playgrounds compared to the other nearby schools. There were swings, slides, multiple monkey bars, a zipline, basketball hoops, four square, a field to run around on, and so much more. Although a few changes were added to the playground over the six years I attended school there, it stayed relatively the same. There was always a wide variety of equipment to use and make memories on. Recess at Black Bob was something my peers and I could look forward to every day, with eager excitement to play on our favorite section of

the playground with all of our friends. Even as I aged out of playing at the park, the playground was still a place where my friends and I would hang out, reminiscing our childhood. This was until a few months ago, to my dismay, when I drove past my old elementary school to see the whole playground gone, replaced with work trucks and construction to entirely rebuild the playground.

I am genuinely upset about my childhood playground being gutted and remodeled. Firstly, no one was aware the school was redoing the playground until it was already gone. If we had known, we could have had one last chance to play on the playground of our adolescent years. We could have cherished our last moments with the older equipment. It seems silly, to be so bothered by a minor matter, but it's more about our memories than the equipment itself. We'll never be able to relive our schooldays or feel the same as we once did playing there. While being upset over the present, I've found myself pondering the past. My friends and I have been sharing our favorite stories from recess, trying to remember the equipment we grew up on and the stories that came with it.

The Black Bob Elementary School playground was constantly crowded with kids of all ages and sizes playing on all of the different equipment. Walking out of the building, there was a large section of pavement to walk laps on as a punishment, play basketball, or play four square on. This is also where the ball cart was and where classes would line up to go back inside for lunch or class. Personally, my friends and I took over the area where classes lined up to play a game we coined "Girl Square" which was our own version of four square, but without all the boys. We didn't want them to play, and if any of them decided to, we made it impossible for them to get in the coveted square number one. There was then a smaller field and benches to the right of the pavement with a poor attempt at a garden. Further out is where the actual playground started to form. There was a small isolated section with two pieces of equipment: a blue, spinning contraption nicknamed "The Comet" and a small rock wall. The Comet was a newer edition to the playground, added when I was in third or fourth grade. It was a hot item with the younger kids, as they could fit three to four people on it at a time and spin incredibly fast.

Past the small section is where the bigger playground began in all its glory. Bordered with black plastic tubes to keep the rocks in, the area spanned the majority of our outdoor space. As kids, we would sometimes consider the tubing as a game itself, trying to walk along the perimeter of the playground without touching the concrete or grass. Once someone passed the bordering tubes, rocks were bound to get trapped in their shoes. No matter how fast or slow a person

walked, they would no doubt be pulling rocks from their shoes once we started lining up to go back inside.

The few items at the front of the playground were less popular. Most of the boys played four square on the pavement, while the majority of the girls spread out throughout the rocks. The front of the playground was where younger kids tended to play, usually on the mini-swing set. The swings were close to the ground and created for the kindergarten and first or second graders. Next to the swings was dubbed “Ketchup Mountain,” a climbing contraption, and a play area with three slides and a few different things to climb. There was also the red “Umbrella,” another spinning device. This one, however, was more dangerous, as kids frequently ended up flying off and needed to visit the nurse’s office shortly thereafter.

The middle of the playground had the most buzz around it. There was a normal swing set for the big kids, where lots of kids played and took turns. In front of that was a bench that people treated more like a balance beam. Next to the bench was a skeleton of a car, silver bars, and black seats. There were no actual doors, windows, or even a steering wheel. It was pretty much a glorified bench with an exoskeleton that resembled a car. It was a fairly popular toy, though, as many kids would play “house” with the car and pretend to drive their children around and run errands. On the pavement outside of the rocks, there were a few tetherball poles to play with. This game was either exhilarating or terrifying depending on who you were playing against.

The back of the playground was where my friends and I tended to spend the most time. In the far left corner of the playground sat a smaller area, complete with stairs, monkey bars, slides, ladders, and a zipline connecting the two sides. This is where my friends and I would play “Ground-Man,” a combination of the game Man on Rocks and Groundhog. Every day as soon as we were released for recess, we would sprint to the back of the playground, because the last one there had to be It, which no one wanted to be. I was frequently the last one there, as I couldn’t run all that well, but that’s also how I became good at cheating. I would frequently squint my eyes to see where people were so I could tag them and end my turn, so they had to be It instead of me. No one ever caught on and just assumed that I was really good at the game. Next to where we played every day, there was a unique set of monkey bars that was deemed the “Magic Carpet.” This wavy set of monkey bars wasn’t all that comfortable, but it was where kids would go to sit on the top of it and gossip. When people were on the Magic Carpet, you knew not to disturb them.

In the dead center of the playground, in between everything, was the “Volcano.” The Volcano was a gray piece of plastic with a rock wall on the outside. It had two levels, so you could sit under or on top of it. The Volcano wasn’t that big, but it’s where most people ended up playing on cold days. In winter, when we were forced to go outside in the cold, most of our grade would huddle together in the Volcano. With our puffy coats and red runny noses, we would all run to the Volcano and shove our way into the bottom level, as the bottom was surrounded by walls on all sides that protected us from the sharp wind. The unlucky souls who got there last would have to climb to the top and brave the biting wind. Every few minutes, we would rotate and switch out who was on the top and bottom, conserving our body heat and trying to stay warm. When the recess period was over, the class would emerge from the Volcano and run to get in line, excited to go inside the heated building and eat a lackluster lunch.

Obviously, this playground wasn’t perfect. The car was starting to get rusty, the zipline was creaky, the tetherball pole slanted sideways, and paint was chipping off of practically everything. The playground wasn’t physically pristine, but to me, it was flawless. I could play to my heart’s content on that playground, surrounded by laughter and smiles from my closest friends.

I think of these games and equipment every time I think about my time in elementary school. Now, knowing that none of the equipment is there anymore, I wish I could go back one more time. Instead of the vibrant colored and unique equipment that used to reside on our playground, it is replaced by weird, geometric, brown, tan, and green playsets. The few times I’ve driven past Black Bob and gotten close enough to see the almost-finished playground, I am disappointed to see the lack of color or fun things to play on. What’s the point of recess if there’s no unnecessarily dangerous piece of equipment to play on with your friends?

Being eighteen, I know going back to the playground wouldn’t be as fun as it was when I was seven. It was more about the memories that reside there. I wouldn’t have nearly as much fun playing on the playground by myself, but because I was with my friends, everything was fun. Despite the occasional fight over something being considered “not fair,” recess was always an activity to escape the boring reality of the school day. Despite the fact that I’m not still friends with everyone from my elementary school, it’s nice to remember how we all got along and played with each other pretty much every day of the school year for six years. I may not be friends with them now, but at one point we were all each other knew.

The Black Bob Elementary School playground is a place of many memories for me and many others. Despite the fact that it is currently torn up and revamped, I will always remember the activities that took place on the pavement and playground. I made promises, and new friendships, cheated, cried, fell, sang, and made an endless amount of memories. To anyone else, it may just be seen as “not a big deal” and a normal playground, but to me and many others, it’s where we spent the majority of our childhood and were impacted the most by each other.

# Scarlet Brothers

Grade 11, Nerinx Hall High School

Educator: Raeann Eschmann

*Critical Essay*



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## God, Gore, and Glory: An Investigation Into The Necessity of Religion

“People believe... It's what people do. They believe, and then they do not take responsibility for their beliefs; they conjure things, and do not trust the conjuration. People populate the darkness; with ghosts, with gods, with electrons, with tales. People imagine, and people believe; and it is that rock solid belief, that makes things happen.”

– Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*

43,000 years ago, down deep in an Indonesian cavern, early humans painted buffalos and hunters. The hunters were mythical things: humanoid creatures with beaks and tails. Discovered in 2017, these cave paintings are evidence of early religious beliefs (Wong). And religion wasn't just isolated to this cave. Around the world, humans were developing religious practices and beliefs that would twist and change into the religions of the current day. Mayans sacrificed their people to the gods, Jains swept their walking paths so as not to kill an insect, and European Pagans worshiped a wide pantheon of gods. The Torah was written, as were the Sutras, the Bible, and the Quran. Religion is an aspect of every civilization that exists or ever has, so one can't help but wonder—why? Why do we do this? What is the point? And, in an increasingly secular society, the question arises; do we need to? Venturing back in history to the evolutionary beginnings of religion, one thing is clear: religion as it is understood today is not necessary, in fact, it can be extremely harmful. Paradoxically, some aspects of it are essential to the workings of human society.

Initially, though, the concept of religion must be defined. The issue is that defining religion is quite difficult, and it's widely debated by religious scholars. Trey Lawrence, a religious studies major from Harvard, suggested that this debate stems from the inadequate approach most take. In an interview, he said, "Most people... try to define religion by the content of the beliefs, but what I've found in studying religion from the perspective that I did [law and government] is that every time you try to do something like that you find something that's very clearly a religion that doesn't contain that" (Lawrence). If religion is defined as belief in a god, then it would exclude Buddhism, and if it is defined as belief in an afterlife, then it would exclude early Judaism. Furthermore, for the majority of human history, there hasn't even been a need to distinguish the concept of religion from other aspects of life. Religion was so heavily intertwined with people's family lives, social status, and government that it would have been outlandish to think of separating it (Armstrong 26). When describing the early function of religion, Karen Armstrong, an author known for her relative studies of religion, says, "Everyone in the city-state, no matter how menial his or her task, was engaged in divine service" (25). It wasn't until the Enlightenment that religion began to be thought about as a definable concept, and one that could be isolated from other parts of life. From this point on, religion began to be taken out of public places and confined into its own separate sphere of society (Armstrong 241). Considering that for the majority of history, religion was inseparable from society and government, it is more productive to define religion through its functional role in civilization. Trey Lawrence's explanation checks these boxes. He defines religion as "A system of beliefs, practices, and viewpoints that help orient the believer within a worldview that is larger than themselves." Whether that worldview is gods, an afterlife, or even just a person's wider community doesn't matter.

With that definition in mind, the role of religion can be discussed further, and when it comes to religion's functionality, it's best to start at the very beginning. There are three major theories on the origins of religion. The first is known as the "Big Gods" theory, and it focuses around human conscience. One of the aspects that sets humans apart from apes is our ability to experience guilt, and our need for revenge. Essentially, humans driven by revenge would fight and die, while those driven by guilt would survive to pass on their genes. The resulting guilt-powered population created gods who could forgive their wrongdoings or provide divine punishment. However, where this theory falters is that it fails to consider all religions. These "Big Gods" who served the remorseful

are not present in many belief systems– a fact that almost entirely disproves the “Big Gods” theory. The next theory relies heavily on superstition; it is called the “False Agency” theory. In essence, humans who were prone to superstition and were easily spooked had a higher chance of surviving and producing offspring. In other words, “These misguided individuals were wrong about the evil spirit they falsely imagined to be approaching through the treetops, say, but they were right to run because, on occasion, the branches were swaying due to the weight of a hungry panther” (Vernon). But there is no support behind the idea that this hypervigilance needs to be connected to deities. Another form of the theory argues that ancient humans created gods in the same way that children give personality to inanimate objects. However, there is not adequate evidence to prove that these early humans didn’t just grow out of this behavior as current-day humans do. Yet another variation of the “False Agency” theory suggests that religion emerged from overlapping brain modules that brought the idea of gods. It maintains that the emergence of religion is simply an issue with the way human brains are wired (Vernon). All of these theories have issues with them, but their underlying problem is their reliance on belief in gods. As defined previously, religion does not require belief in a deity, and many religions do not believe in gods, so any hypothesis on the origins of religion cannot be valid if it simply seeks to explain the emergence of the divine. By far the most supported theory on religious origins is the “Trance Theory.” Introduced in an article by the International Society for Science and Religion, or ISSR, this theory finds religion’s start in rituals, rather than gods. “It seems clear that it [religion] started with embodied practices rather than with cognition; cognition seems to be one of the later aspects of religion to develop, and the cognitive aspects of religion started with narrative before they became doctrinal” (Nairn). At some point in ancient history, humans discovered that they could induce ecstatic experiences through practices like dancing, chanting, meditation, usage of psychedelic drugs, or asceticism (Haidt 2:45). These transcendent experiences are proven to increase endorphins, a chemical that encourages social bonding. When people experience this ecstasy, they feel connected to something bigger than themselves (Nairn). They are able to look past their own interests, and therefore work better together as a group. In a survey, nearly 70% of students at a Catholic school reported that they either felt somewhat or very connected to their peers during religious services, and 100% of students who said they were very religious described some connection (Brothers). Effective communities are more likely to survive, and this group selection is not just seen in humanity. The most exemplary case of this is



in bees, which have evolved to work extremely efficiently within their hives. Both bees and humans have a unifying factor that keeps them in their groups: for bees, it is their shared hives, and for humans, it is shared transcendent experiences (Haidt 5:45). The rituals increase endorphins, which assists group collaboration. That means that the community will live to pass on their genes, and their religious beliefs (Nairn). The trance theory's impact on how religion is viewed is enormous. It means that religion, or at least the practices associated with it, is crucial in keeping humanity together. Religious practices were essential for human survival when they first began to form, and they continue to be a unifying force in society today.

Undoubtedly, religion's role in the workings of civilization are extensive, but its benefits on a smaller scale are not to be ignored. Research on religion's impact on the modern individual is vast, and it all agrees on one point: religion is a large factor in making people happier, healthier, and more successful. This is especially true in working class teens, according to an article written by Elizabeth Clark, a religious studies professor.

The impact of religion in individuals is particularly noticeable in adolescents. Positive correlations with religiosity include physical and mental health, academic achievements, and community involvement. Frequent attenders at religious services engage in fewer risky behaviors such as illegal drug and alcohol use. The impact on youth is especially notable in working-class families—one study found that those who were involved in their religion and strongly believed in God were twice as likely to go on to earn bachelor's degrees.

Being part of religious communities is also proven to increase civic engagement (Clark 19). Because volunteer opportunities are often built into religious environments, believers are more likely to do service in their community, and also more likely to vote (Clark 19). In a survey conducted on students at an all girls Catholic school that requires service, over 70% of students said they either would not do service or weren't sure if they would if it were not required (Brothers).

Clearly, the opportunities and, in some cases, requirements of religious spaces make participants more prone to helping their community. Additionally, religious beliefs also increase happiness. In many religions, belief in a god is instrumental in helping believers through difficult times, which positively impacts their mental health (Clark 7). When an individual accepts that what they are going through is all part of "God's plan," they feel reassured and less anxious. However, the act of believing in a god alone does not bring all the benefits of religion. Evidently the ritual and communal aspect of religion plays a large part, as do

faith communities, which foster a sense of belonging (Clark 7). As previously mentioned, the community aspect of religion is why it was favored by evolution, and the effect carries on to the present day. “Khushbeen Kaur Sohi [a researcher at the Indian Institute of Technology Delhi] looked at Sikh communities, for example, and found that the ability to practice rituals and the frequency of ritual participation were positively correlated to social well-being and sense of community” (Clark 8). The vast advantages of religion support the idea that religion is, if not *necessary*, extremely beneficial.

That being said, religion has also been used to support instances of extreme violence, and, to many, it may seem like religion’s downsides outweigh its upsides. Some even go so far as to say that religion is intrinsically and inevitably destructive, and it’s not hard to see why. From its start, religion everywhere has included aspects of brutality. Animal sacrifice was an aspect of nearly all early religions, and evidence of human sacrifice has been found in most parts of the world, including the Americas, China, Africa, and Europe (Jarus). Religion is constantly being used to reinforce oppressive governments, despite the doctrines of the chosen religions advocating for nonviolence. “If a ruling elite adopted an ethical tradition, such as Buddhism, Christianity, or Islam, the aristocratic clergy usually adapted their ideology so that it could support the structural violence of the state” (Armstrong 14). Even today, religion continues to be warped to uphold unjust leaders. Vladimir Putin, the dictator of Russia, is heavily connected with the Eastern Orthodox Church. Moreover, while religion can be a unifying force, it can also separate people; pitting them against each other. Often, religious tensions explode into warfare or violent revolts, like the Crusades in the Middle East, the Seven Years War in Europe, the Sepoy Rebellion in India, or the Taiping Rebellion in China. The development of extremist religious groups like al-Qaeda, the perpetrators of 9/11, can lead to bloody terrorist attacks, and the persecution of religious minorities has been a constant throughout history (Armstrong 303). Examples include the Spanish Inquisition, which targeted Muslims and Jews in Catholic Spain, the Holocaust, a horrific genocide against Jews in Europe, and the Armenian Genocide, the mass killing of the Christian Armenians in Turkey. Religion has a unique way of turning humanity against itself. In the words of Armstrong, “In a war of civilized ‘us’ and bestial ‘them,’ any form of treachery or deceit was permitted” (87). Furthermore, religious doctrines can carry prejudice among its own people. People with gay and transgender identities are most often targeted. Of 26 surveyed highschool students, 23% said they didn’t feel supported in religious environments, and two

people even expressed that the reason for this was due to their queer identity. “I think as a queer person I feel unsure in religious spaces whether I will be accepted and supported. Especially in the Catholic faith, in progressive areas I feel accepted but not supported,” responded one student (Brothers). Undeniably, religion has the capacity to be disgustingly harmful, but some scholars suggest that this harm comes not from religion, but from humanity. “I think it’s not that it’s so much an inherent part of religion itself. I think it’s an inherent part of humans coexisting together” (Lawrence). The idea is that people are simply prone to violence; religion just happens to be one of the things humanity disagrees on, and that could be true, but there are certainly things that can be done to prevent or mitigate that reality. One powerful peacemaker is religious freedom. Studies show places that are intolerant to certain belief systems are less politically stable, and more prone to violent conflicts. In contrast, countries that practice religious freedom see an uptick in women’s and LGBTQ+ rights (Clark 39). Additionally, while religious violence could reasonably be used to advocate for a secular society, history shows that this could have devastating effects. Secular states are known to breed violent extremist groups. “In almost every region where a secular government has been established, a religious counterculture protest has developed as well” (Amrstrong 302). Undeniably, religion and religious freedom need to be protected.

However, that is not to say that a person needs to hold religious beliefs to lead a happy and fulfilled life. There are other options. Because the majority of the positive effects of religion stem from the ritual behavior that it involves, there are many alternatives that have the same results. One prominent new example is “Sunday Assemblies,” secular communities that come together on some Sundays to sing and interact as a group. Kelsey Derringer, the vice president of Sunday Assembly Pittsburgh described it as “just really a group of people who come together once a month or sometimes more frequently to just try to figure out how to be good people without turning to ancient religious texts to do so. So we’re trying to be good people and trying to figure out how to do that well.” Their gatherings tend to mirror traditional Christian church services, and in this way they provide the same positive effects as religious services, just without the religion. These communities include a diverse population, and inclusivity is built into the core beliefs of the Sunday Assembly in Pittsburgh (Detrow). But the practice doesn’t even need to be this “churchlike” to take the place of religion. Yoga is a prime example. In a study by the ISSR, yoga was proven to have the same positive effects seen from religious communities. “We found that social

bonding and pain tolerance increased from before the yoga sessions to after, and that the social bonding effect increased with time. We found no significant differences between the spiritual and the secular conditions” (Nairn). Clearly, what matters is ritual behaviors in groups, not religious beliefs themselves.

In the end, there are many aspects of modern religion that are not necessary for humanity, nevertheless, some aspects, like ritual traditions, were, and continue to be, crucial to human survival. It’s not the dogma that’s necessary; the Pope is not necessary, nor is the Dalai Lama, or even belief in an afterlife or god. What is significant is the dancing, the singing, the bonding as a community. True, religious violence can sully the concept of religion, but it doesn’t have to be that way. Digging deeper into the issue, it’s clear that this brutality can be mended by religious freedom. Additionally, considering the value of religious practices, it would be definitively powerful to implement some of these bonding rituals into everyday life, even for people who aren’t religious. Joining a Sunday Assembly, yoga studio, or even a Christmas caroling group could have extremely influential effects on happiness and group bonding. In the words of Karen Armstrong, “Somehow we have to find a way of doing what religion—at its best—has done for centuries: build a sense of community, cultivate a sense of reverence and “equanimity” for all and take responsibility for the suffering we see in the world” (401).

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# Sophie Buchowski

Grade 11, John Burroughs School  
Educators: Joy Gebhardt and Jeanne  
Gillanders  
*Personal Essay & Memoir*



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## Escape

May 13, 2017

“Hurry, evil stepmom is coming after us!” Bella screams back to me, her words barely audible over the whoosh of air against my ears. My grip tightens on the brakes, knuckles whitening as I refuse to let go, embracing the downhill acceleration. The houses smear into a colorful blur, and I struggle to gulp in air. No matter how painful it is, we keep pedaling to escape our evil stepmom, chasing us in the distance. Finally, after what feels like an eternity of frantic pedaling, we reach our safe spot—the Island.

“Bella, we did it, we escaped her! Look at this tree—it can be our home now that we are orphans,” I gasp as I rest my bike on the grass and free my sweaty hair from my helmet. My hands reach for my itchy eyes, swollen thanks to the seasonal spring allergies. Mommy always told me to not scratch my eyes though.

“Let’s set up our home now,” Bella exclaims with a smile. The island, a circular patch of grass about the size of half a football field, is all ours. We stand at the border of the island, where the grass meets the pavement, lush and soft under our feet, before running to the tree. At the far end of the island, a small cluster of flowers always catches our eyes. They are brightly colored—reds, pinks, and yellows—standing out against the green backdrop. However, we never dare approach them, because of the bright, fat bees that surround them. So, we stay where we know it is safe. The island’s centerpiece, of course, are the two grand trees, towering majestically in the middle. We run to the tree, their thick trunks standing firm, the bark rough and textured. Like always, we immediately go to our spots. Bella, on the lowest branch, and me, on the branch a bit higher up.

“I can’t believe we actually did it. We are finally orphans!” I call down to Bella, fully immersing myself in this fantasy.

“What are we going to make for dinner?” Bella responds, and I immediately know the answer.

“Let’s have steak and salad!”

The wood chips beneath the tree become our steak, and we pluck grass for our salad. Our kitchen is the highest branch, where the leaves create a patchwork of sunlight and shade. My heart races as I peer down, our shoes tiny specks on the ground far below. The tree is our world: its base, our stairs; the big branch, our bedroom; the smaller, higher branch, our kitchen; and the very top, our spy zone. It’s all ours.

We finish eating our dinner and decide how we are going to run away if the evil stepmother finds us. As the sun begins to set and the air cools, we shiver, having forgotten our jackets. The familiar vroom of Mommy’s gray Honda minivan brings us back to reality as she enters the neighborhood. She rolls down the window, still in her work clothes, and Coldplay’s “Yellow” plays softly from the speakers.

“Sophie and Bella, you look like you’re having fun! But let’s go back home to eat dinner, it’s getting late.”

The next day, we would repeat it all over again.

**May 13, 2024**

As the sun dips low casting a warm orange glow, I climb into my gray Mazda CX5, precariously balancing a water bottle and a stack of ACT packets against my hip. The weather is finally perfect after days of rain. Still, the sun’s low angle sneaks past the car’s visor, but sunglasses at 6 PM seem almost comically excessive. I crack the windows open, hesitating as my seasonal allergies flare up, but the cool breeze is too refreshing to resist. It lifts the sticky strands of hair from my face and brings ventilation to my sweaty lacrosse uniform, clinging to my stomach. “Yellow” by Coldplay softly fills the car, its soothing melody the only song that allows me to take true deep breaths. As I drive, my Spanish study guide sprawls across the dashboard, perfectly visible so I can steal glances whenever the street is clear. Each quick look is an attempt to absorb just a few more vocabulary words. Because, of course, this is totally going to save me with finals next week. Pathetic, I know.

I have to speed in order to get to tutoring on time, actually relieving, as I don’t have as much time to obsess over finals or field hockey tryouts. Silver linings, right? As I reach the exit of my neighborhood, two young kids, likely siblings, cackle, captivating my attention; something I hadn’t seen in ages. The ancient trees still stand tall, but the flowers that once bloomed brightly are long

gone, and all the other plants have been cleared away. Despite driving past it at least four times a day, the extent of the change hadn't seemed so real. I ease off the gas pedal, allowing the car to coast. With one hand on the steering wheel, I lean slightly to the left, trying to catch a better view of the kids. My eyes scan the area, taking in the details—the way the sunlight filters through the branches, the new moss on the tree, and how the children prance, untroubled. The boy, wearing a weathered striped shirt, swings from a sturdy branch, his sneakers scuffing against the bark with each kick. Beside him, the girl, her hair tied in a haphazard ponytail, teeters on the lowest, weakest branch, arms outstretched for balance. I find myself slowing the car even further, a wistful smile tugging at the corners of my lips. Maybe I should text Bella soon. I haven't talked to her in years, I think to myself.

But, dwelling on the past won't change the present. I have learned that the hard way. So, I sigh and press on the accelerator, escaping the island and leaving the childhood laughter behind as I focus on reaching tutoring on time.



# Sophie Buchowski

Grade 11, John Burroughs School  
Educators: Joy Gebhardt and Jeanne  
Gillanders  
*Poetry*



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## I once Was A Child

i once was a child am a child am someone's child  
am your child you claimed you  
were a loyalist and i clung to the belief  
that family comes first the love  
found in the mellow hum of your  
embrace and the shared laughter that filled  
sunlit rooms like summer's sweet breeze *i love you to  
the moon and back* you whispered *i love you forever and  
ever* remember when we  
caught those fireflies together their warm  
glow cradled in our hands as we sealed  
them in glass jars each flicker casting  
shadows on the weathered planks  
creaking beneath us remember when we  
built castles together  
in the sand and i asked why'd  
they always wash away and you  
knelt beside me your fingers  
tracing patterns in the wet sand your faint smile  
offering no answer now i come back  
only to find the jars cracked  
and empty the fireflies  
fly away their flickering light

vanished into the dark sky the castle now a  
soft mound of sunken sand the joy  
fades into echoes across fields and the sun  
sinks behind distant hills i long for you  
to return and trace the paths  
of my childhood and i pray those memories  
won't haunt me they say everything  
happens for a reason but the reason  
can't be traced in the footprints  
of sand as waves crash dissolving  
my dreams and carrying away the  
innocent days i tell myself that time  
heals all wounds but the scars only  
deepen etching away the flesh in the quiet corners  
of my heart the broken shards of glass that lay  
scattered across the floor slice my skin  
every time i get too close the warmth of home  
is swallowed by the shadows that  
grow darker in the spaces where  
you used to hold me your absence  
cuts deeper than the wounds you left  
behind as if the distance  
could ever wash away  
the sharp shells buried deep in the sand  
i keep reaching for the same  
red apple only to find it  
spoiled and brown the bruises reminders  
of the secrets shared with her  
when you thought i couldn't see  
where loyalty  
was a word but not a  
truth  
i am still  
your child

# Nate Bueg

Grade 8, Parkway West Middle School

Educator: Tracy Bouslog

*Personal Essay and Memoir*



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## One Kid at Camp

*Crunch.* I looked out the window to see that we'd arrived at summer camp with a little time to spare before we were supposed to start setting up. I picked up my hefty bags and fishing gear and hauled them to the campsite. I walked over to my senior patrol leader, Thomas, and asked, "What could I do for set up?"

"You could probably set up tents for your patrol area," he instructed. And so I did. Marching down the camp, I found where the hawks and lightning patrols would cook and sleep.

I grabbed a couple of friends and asked, "Can you guys help me set up our tents." They agreed and went off with me to the site. We set up five tents for ten people and the job felt easier as we got into the rhythm of putting up each tent. Once I had finished our area, I went to help other patrols finish setting up their patrol sites. In my absence, my patrol had arrived and picked out tents. Quinn Kesler claimed a tent with me. However, when I looked around I noticed that our patrol leader hadn't shown up, that had we planned a backup patrol leader would have made this a little easier. After I talked this over with Quinn, we agreed that it's shared leadership between us for the week. As we finished making sure our entire patrol knew this information, we were called to attention as we had to get up to the quartermaster store to get dinner for the night, and our patrol, marched up in a rhythm to a song our footsteps in unison. We ate dinner pulling shenanigans which the adults weren't so proud of. Once we finish, we return to camp in an orderly-ish line. And we could finally set up our gear in our tents.

"Yo Quinn, there is a **big** wolf spider in our tent," I yelled with urgency.

"Cool, you want it out or not because you make it sound like a bad thing," he replies, snarkily.

“Yes, Quinn. Why else would I be requesting your assistance with removing it?” I said sarcastically.

“Well you could want to hold it in your hands and show it to everyone else,” Quinn replied, oblivious as a toddler.

“Why would I do that, Quinn? That just sounds silly. Either way, can you- ” I was mildly infuriated, but I was more surprised by who burst into our tent and cut me off. I watched as the tent flaps flew out of the way to show that a younger scout named Evan had been listening to our bickering.

“YEAH QUINN, YOU’RE SO STUPID THAT YOU DIDN’T PASS THE FIRST GRADE!” Evan burst out, our tent polluted by his boisterously loud voice. Quinn and I looked at each other, knowing this would be a long week. Later that night, he went around causing trouble for other patrols, and my efforts to get him to stop were futile. By the time his antics in our campsite had ended, the day was long over. I went to sleep fully expecting this to just be the first long sleep-away camp jitters, but no. When I woke to the smell of dew I got out of my tent and woke the rest of my patrol up, but when I had gotten to Evan’s tent only his tentmate was awake.

“Hey Nathan, Evan won’t get out of his sleeping bag,” Joey told me after a few lacking attempts to get him up for the day.

“Alright let me handle this. Could you and Andrew get food from the quartermaster store while I work on *this*,” I asked him while still knocking on the tent to try and wake Evan up.

“Evan, you gotta get up man, we have work to do today,” I said, hearing him turn over in his sleeping bag mumbling something. “Alright, your loss.” Everything was working out mostly well the rest of the morning. The only other problem was having to get one of the senior patrol leaders to get Evan out of bed. The rest of the day went on fine with only cooking mishaps causing us trouble. It was suspicious that Evan was always late to cooking and cleaning, but when the food was ready, he would be there on time. That night he and a couple of kids his age were sitting in a circle in our campsite while some of us older kids were discussing the problems of the troop in one of our tents. When all of a sudden...

“Well I think that isn’t a problem,” Evan snarkily said leaning into the tent from outside. “The adults just need to work harder.” I was about to slug him! This was not only a slander on the troop, but hypocrisy on a higher level than I have ever seen before. And we of the older scouts didn’t appreciate that he was saying all this since both he and us know he has been the source of these problems before, with the fact that on all the outings he goes on our troop can’t function

correctly. It is a boy-led troop. The entire purpose of that is to show our independence as growing boys.

“GET OUT!” We all yelled at once. A jumble of the four of our words fly at him, mostly telling him to leave. He slipped out back to his chair so he wouldn’t look suspicious to any onlookers. It was already really late so we all went to sleep. The days were starting to feel like they were repeating themselves. His problem had gotten worse. Now it’s not just butting into conversation or not getting up in the morning, it’s grown into racism, sexism, and pushing all his work like cooking and cleaning onto others so he could relax and act like he isn’t doing a thing wrong. It was Thursday morning and I dreaded to wake just wanting to rest a bit longer.

“Good morning Quinn,” I said as I got up and the same thing happened, everyone but Evan was up at this point I was so irked by it because we needed all the help we could get, as one of our scouts was sick, both Quinn and I were stressed, and to add onto that we were down a person.

“Hey, Evan, WAKE UP!” I yelled into his tent, I heard him turn over in his sleeping bag and he ignores me, so I just left him to sleep in. If he missed the meal it was his own fault. I helped prepare breakfast. Bacon, eggs, and a side of hash browns. As we were talking about how to finish up he finally got out of his sleeping bag.

“Well, look who woke up?” Andrew mentioned in a condescending tone.

“Is breakfast ready yet?” Evan asked, acting like he hasn’t been awake for the past thirty minutes. I look at him with what I could best describe as a disappointment, and I continue to stare because I am now refusing to talk to someone with such a lack of effort toward helping his team.

“Breakfast is served!” Quinn yells, grabbing our food and placing it on the table. I tried to enjoy the meal but by this point, I could only feel my hate for Evan pouring through my body. The sound of the table chatter distracts everyone from my muttering so I could let some of this boiling feeling out without anyone noticing. After the meal, it starts to rain, *hard rain*. The painful kind that seems fine at the start. I had to clean up my patrol’s mess because they all left without cleaning mostly, although they tried. Evan, however, had left trash and food scraps all over the place, without a single thought of consequences in mind. I had to leave the mess half-cleaned so I could get to my merit badge on time. When I returned, the camp was already flooded with water, and Evan had finally gotten in deep trouble because he said a couple of colorful words in front of our

scoutmaster and senior patrol leaders. I listened in to hear what was being said, as I was curious about how he got caught.

“We were told by your troop mates and other campers here that you had been saying sexist and racist things to other scouts, is that correct?” Dex asked sternly.

“I’m not racist,” Evan said, unknowingly admitting to being sexist. His hubris while saying that impressed me.

“Well, now you’re lying because we have warned you about these comments in the past,” Thomas mentioned. I walked away, satisfied, believing that his removal would soon happen. But when I looked back, he was walking back down to our site without even a drop of guilt. To my best assumption, he got away with a final warning, which is infuriating because I still don’t want to deal with him. But I must get dinner ready for cooking before Quinn and the younger scouts got back. As I worked he decided to critique my work.

“I thought we wouldn’t need a stove, will we not have burning coals to use for dinner?” Evan said with a sly grin; he knew how to get under my skin enough to make me angry.

“Evan, if you aren’t going to help, then step off and get out,” I told him, trying to maintain my composure while maintaining a commanding demeanor.

“I was just giving you some advice, jeez,” he retorted. I breathed out a heavy sigh and ignored him, his voice sounding like the background chatter at a party. By the time Quinn returns, Evan was spinning around me like a tornado of chaos trying to prevent my progress.

“Evan, quit harassing him. He didn’t do anything to you and is just trying to work,” Quinn butted in, giving Evan a scare.

“No, he won’t let me cook the food,” Evan complained.

“Maybe if you’d look at the duty roster you’d know why that is,” Quinn retorted, sitting in his chair.

Joey and Andrew both said, “Yeah, Evan.” I found it quite amusing that those who were defending him before were finally seeing what happens when they weren’t looking or think it’s funny. As I let them to the cutting board and stove respectively, I looked over to Evan with a mix of disappointment and anger.

“I will have to tell the SPLs (Senior patrol leaders) about your behavior here.” I watched as my statement stabbed him and cut through his defensive, unruly manner. He started crying, whining, and complaining because he knew this will be the final nail in the coffin to send him away from summer camp.

“Please no, Nathan, I didn’t mean it, I was just joking, I promise I will work,” he choked out, sobbing between each statement. I walked up to the adult rainfly, and Evan trailed behind me the entire way up, begging me not to do this.

“Thomas, Dex, may I speak with you?” I asked patiently waiting for them to walk over to Evan and me.

“What’s up?” Dex asked. He knows what was up; he is just required to ask that because those are the rules.

“Evan has been causing problems in our patrol site that prevent others from working,” I answered. “And I have been doing my best to leave him alone but at this point, it’s impossible and needs to be addressed.”

“Evan, can you please come with us,” Dex asked, “And you can go back to your patrol, Nate.” That was the last time I saw Evan that week. It felt as though obligatory chains fell off of me, no longer dragging me down. I could breathe again without any problems. After a long week of pain and doing my best I had earned peace. Though I felt bad for having him kicked out of camp; he got what he deserved. I returned to the campsite, our meal was ready. Though it was a shabby scout meal, it felt like a feast for kings. The flavor exploded, and I could finally taste and experience the food. The steak tasted like steak, and the vegetables tasted like vegetables. No more dreading the mornings and evenings, it was just camp life. I felt like I had been through the scariest rollercoaster in my life. I wanted to do it again rather than chickening out from harsh things like that. I will endure again.

# Lauren Bullins

Grade 12, Olathe North High School

Educator: Deirdre Zongker

*Critical Essay*



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## Going Full Speedo

In the leadup to the 2024 Summer Olympics, the swimwear company Speedo launched a new advertising campaign with the message “Go Full Speedo”. The brand has been a top contender in the swimming world since its start in 1914 (“Speedos Rebrand”) but this new campaign marks a shift for the company during swimming’s most visible event.

Speedo is the original creator of the widely known skimpy male swimsuit. They were first worn on Bondi Beach in Australia in the 1960s, to the great concern of many beachgoers. Since then, Speedo has been pushing the norm, creating innovative competitive swimwear to increase performance in the water. Speedo has been a dominant force in the performance swimwear market for decades, and in 2008, it held about a 60% share of the market (“Speedo: Leading the Swimwear”).

Previously, Speedo did not use traditional advertising campaigns to promote its products. Instead, it relied upon sponsorships with prominent Olympic athletes. This makes its new campaign a significant shift in tactics. Until now, Speedo-sponsored athletes have served as the company’s own walking, talking billboards, advertising through their performance. This form of advertisement reached its peak at the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games when Speedo-sponsored athletes won 98% of all the swimming medals in Speedo gear (“Speedo Fastskin”).

Today, Speedo is facing competition more than ever before. In the 2012 London Games, Speedo was worn more than any other brand but decreased its medal count only claiming 57% of the swimming medals. In the 2021 Tokyo



Olympics, Speedo's share of the podium decreased further with only 49% of the swimming medalists wearing Speedo gear ("Speedo Fastskin"). Other companies have caught up technologically, leading many athletes to stray from the historical powerhouse. For example, competitive swimwear company Arena saw its revenue increase by 45% between 2021 and 2022 (Bolleli). With companies like the Italian-based Arena and the United States-based TYR catching up in technology and athlete endorsements, Speedo is drawing upon its history to solidify its position in the industry.

One goal of the rebrand campaign is to take Speedo back to its roots and embrace its ties to Australia, a country deeply invested in swimming and the swimming community. The name itself is iconic and widely known. When people think Speedo, they think of both the original swimsuit and the company as a whole. The new slogan "Go Full Speedo" serves as a reminder of where Speedo came from, re-establishing and emphasizing its classic brand name.

The company has spent many years focused on improving and advancing its competitive swimsuits and many accessories, leading it to lose an emotional connection to its consumers along the way ("Speedos Rebrand"). Now Speedo is working to rebuild that connection at all levels of the swimming community. The slogan "Go Full Speedo" is intended to represent commitment, going all in, an idea that can be easily paralleled with aquatics in many forms: from a kid jumping in the pool for the first time, to an Olympian diving in for a gold medal race, or a surfer choosing to go for the biggest wave, to fitness gurus finishing their morning laps ("Speedo Tops Unofficial").

The launch of the campaign begins with a short video featuring the Australian actor Dacre Montgomery (Green). As he makes his way to the beach in Australia ditching his work attire and wearing a speedo instead, he gathers a large group of people who are all choosing to "Go Full Speedo". Turning the brand into more than just a swimsuit, it represents a mindset, a specific way of living that embodies a movement to give your all and be confident about it. This brings the company to a much larger audience with the emphasis not only on competitive swimming, but on recreation, fitness, and everyday wear (yeah, Speedo sells clothing too!). Unlike many other swimming brands, it is fully embracing the 70's and 80's nostalgic feel of the video and incorporating it into their products. The campaign shows that by wearing Speedo, people can look fashionable and still have the classic comfort for which the brand is known, another reason to pick Speedo over a competing company.

Speedo's campaign continues the message with athlete endorsements across social media from well-known swimmers and Speedo partners, posters and billboards at the many major aquatic events happening before and during the 2024 Olympics, and even an original song by an Australian band (Green). All of these things ran right up to and during what is easily the most popular time for the sport, the Summer Olympics. By launching this campaign in an Olympic year, Speedo greatly increased its impact and reach. The Olympics served as the perfect platform due to its worldwide viewership and the prominence of the Australian swim team, every one of them decked out in Speedo attire. However, a campaign like this one is not without risks. Tying back to Speedo's past could backfire, making consumers see Speedo as old and outdated instead of classic and tasteful. In addition, the reignited United States versus Australia swimming rivalry could cause American customers to select the overtly American company TYR over Speedo.

As the campaign is just wrapping up, it is hard to say definitively whether it has been a complete success. With major American athletes like Regan Smith and Michael Phelps continuing to endorse Speedo, the company will likely continue to be a dominant force in the United States market. Given the long-standing prominence of the company worldwide, Speedo's advertising campaign will undoubtedly stand out against its peers. If successful, this well-executed timely shift in advertising strategy could keep Speedo on top for many years to come.

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# Claire Buttell

Grade 12, St. Teresa's Academy  
Poetry



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## For Saying Goodbye And Crying on Planes

*Each time I'm in an airport,  
I think I should drastically change my  
Life:* Pick up a new hobby, maybe knitting  
Like the old woman in the corner of the terminal  
Or online chess like the man on the plane.  
Find a new passion: Like the guitarist in the restaurant  
Or the woman with nearly 5 books spilling out of her carry-on  
Find some new friends: Like the trendy teenager strolling to her gate  
Or the kind old man who offered me his cookies on the plane.

*But then I'm reminded of home:* My art supplies waiting on my desk and  
My camera tucked safely in its case.  
My passions: a collection of clothing 6 drawers deep and  
my records stacked carefully below my speakers  
My friends: Madeleine who shares about every book she reads,  
No real need for me to read them too and  
Celeste, waiting to reminisce on our travels together  
and the new ones we've experienced separately.  
Maybe both can exist simultaneously, maybe I can be all of it, all at once.  
Because I want to experience it all

# Eric Chang

Grade 8, John Burroughs School

*Short Story*



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## Traces of a Scar

The television roared with the sound of cheering. It was the Junior National Soccer Championship. No. 13 on the white team glided across the brightly lit field, sprinting towards the opposition's goal with the ball a few steps ahead of him. He sprinted across the field, pirouetting past defenders with the ball seemingly glued to his feet. His risky yet flawless dribbling made him look like a dancer, with the soccer field serving as his dance floor. Beating one defender after another, he seemed unstoppable. Once he beat the final defender, it was just him against the goalkeeper. He reared his right leg back, preparing to strike the ball, when he hesitated, and then slipped. His lower body contorted, as he hit the ground. His hands shot to his knee clawing at it while he rolled around, face scrunched in agony. The players nearby immediately swarmed him, and one of his teammates, No. 5 desperately screamed for the trainer. Through the crowd's yelling I could hear his painful cries.

It took me a second to realize I was holding my breath. My fingers tightly gripped onto the side of my own knee, creating crescent-shaped fingernail marks to decorate the skinny white scar that was already present.

A knock came from my door.

"Owen, it's time to go. Don't forget your cleats or your water." my mom said through the door. I exhaled and tore my eyes away from the tv. Clutching my cleats in one hand and my soccer bag in the other, I made my way out to the garage, where my mom was waiting.

"What's wrong honey? You don't look as excited for practice as you usually do." she asked.

"It's nothing. My favorite team is just losing right now. That's all." I muttered as I got in the backseat of the car.

“You’ve been sitting around watching soccer the whole day instead of getting active like the doctor advised, maybe that’s why you look so depressing. Soccer practice will be good for you to get some fresh air. Make sure you warmup thoroughly today though, I don’t want you getting hurt on your first day back. Does your knee feel okay?” she asked.

“Yeah Mom, I’m fine. Everything’s fine.” I replied, rolling my eyes.

She glanced back at me with a worried look and then proceeded to pull out of the driveway.

When we arrived at the practice fields, I kissed my mom goodbye and got out of the car. As I walked towards the athletic complex, the familiar sounds of cleats clacking, balls sliding across the smooth turf, and kids yelling overwhelmed me. It had been a while since last being on a soccer field.

The moment I stepped on my practice field. My teammates recognized me and ran over, waving and grinning.

“Yo Owen! You’re finally back, huh? I can’t wait to crush your flimsy dribble moves again!” Levi exclaimed.

Levi had been my best friend since as long as I can remember. We met in kindergarten, and instantly bonded. Levi and I used to love running, and any physical activity of the sort. Naturally, when I introduced him to soccer in the second grade, he loved it.

“Again? As if you’ve ever beaten me in a real one on one before. It’s so on.” I retorted.

I went through a brief yet thorough warmup, stretching out my twitchy legs, eager to get back on the field. I had spent every second of time following my knee surgery watching, studying, and even dreaming about soccer, so I would be ready once I was able to play again.

“TWEET” Coach blew his silver whistle, signaling the start of practice.

Breathing in the crisp, cool, and sweat scented air, I jogged onto the field, where my team was waiting.

Throughout practice, I felt pretty good about myself. During drills, I executed my passes well, and my touch on the ball was no worse than before. Although I started a bit rough, it wasn’t unexpected at all, after being out of the sport for a bit of time. My body felt good, and my confidence was rising. Towards the end of practice, when we had completed a couple passing drills, and reviewed tactics for the tournament in two weeks, our coach decided to reward us with a scrimmage. My heart started to pound in my chest and my body tingled at the thought of being able to play in a practice game.

“Owen, go put on a yellow pinnie, you’ll play striker for team yellow. I know it’s your first day back, but since you’re the star of this team, I have high expectations.” He said to me with a wink. I replied with a brisk nod, and jogged over to my team.

“The Yellow team starts with the ball first.” Coach said.

I jogged over to the center circle, where the game ball lay. Levi stared at me from his position on the other team. He was a big and strong defender, the best on our team. I stuck my tongue out and signaled him a thumbs down. He grinned at me and spat at the ground, mouthing the words “Let’s go”. Once the whistle was blown, I passed the ball back to a midfielder on my team and took off towards the goal.

Ten minutes in, I was exhausted. My team was playing terribly, and were not able to get the ball upfield to attack. Therefore, I was just running around the field from left to right like a hamster on a wheel, hoping for the ball to get played upfield. My stamina was draining quickly, a sign of my prolonged inactivity. Suddenly, there it was. The chance I had waited seemingly decades for. The ball was cleared out of my own half, and it was headed my direction in the air. I quickly ran towards the ball, settling it to the ground with my chest. I fainted left then turned right, beating an opposing midfielder. Realizing that none of my teammates were in passing range, I sprinted towards the goal myself. I weaved through their first two defenders, then passed the third with a spin move. Adrenaline rushed through my body, overriding my fatigue. There was a single defender between me and the goalkeeper. Levi. I smirked, and charged towards him.

A few seconds later, I was on the ground. My knee was throbbing. Levi peered over me, a concerned look on his face.

“My bad bro, I didn’t mean to go into the tackle that hard. Are you good?” he asked, reaching out an arm to help me up.

I put on a brave face and nodded. “Yeah, just a little shaken up.” I replied, accepting his outstretched arm and getting on my feet. But as I took a couple steps, a sharp pain jolted through my knee. It was just like last year, I thought in my head. Last year during a game, when I felt invincible. Last year during that game, when I collided with a defender. Last year during that game, when I dislocated my knee. I collapsed back onto the field, tears stinging my eyes.

“Hey Mrs. Mason, and Owen, good news! Your right knee looks totally fine, probably just a minor bump or bruise. No serious damage whatsoever. It

definitely shouldn't hold you back from participating in physical activity." the physio said.

"That's great news, thank you so much Doctor." my mom replied.

The drive home was unbearable. My mom's comforting words going through one ear and out the other. I was subconsciously replaying what I saw this morning on the tv, over and over in my head. How quickly someone so invincible could turn completely vulnerable.

Although I was relieved that nothing was severely injured, I felt a sense of uneasiness. It was as if my right leg was made of glass, and that one wrong step would cause it to crack into little pieces. The next day, I convinced myself to be grateful. I still had my knee, and I could still play. Before running onto the field for practice, I took a deep breath. "Let's do this". I thought in my head. However, the second I stepped foot on the turf, the mental wall I had been building crumbled. My knee ached. The doctor had warned me about some residual pain for the next few days, but deep down I didn't trust him, and my insides squirmed around whenever the thought of my former injury entered my mind. Practice went terribly. I didn't make any mistakes, but I didn't do anything well either. This time, instead of confidently charging at defenders, I would hold the ball back and pass it to a teammate. Every one on one I had with Levi ended in a loss for me. After practice, he approached me..

"Yo O, what's going on man? It can't be this easy for me to beat you." he teased, holding out a water bottle for me.

"I don't know." I muttered, ignoring the water bottle and heading towards my mom, who had already arrived. He looked at me with a confused expression and shrugged, leaving me to converse with the other boys.

Later that night, my mom received a phone call from my coach. She looked concerned while she departed to her bedroom and shut the door before answering. Through the walls, the only words I could make out were: unready, nationals, and bench, which were more than enough for me to figure out what was happening.

As the rest of the week progressed, I showed no signs of improvement. Knowing that I had pressure to play well didn't help, either. I felt like a shadow of myself, scared to be bold and scared to tackle. Through my coach's sunglasses I could tell that he was just as upset about my performance as I was.

When the first round of Nationals came, I prepared myself for the worst. My team arrived at the enormous soccer complex early in the morning, still



groggy from the long drive. We were the first ones on the field, immediately getting into a thorough warm up. When we had finished and the referee signaled five minutes until kickoff, our coach announced the lineup.

“...and finally at striker, we will have Aaron,” he said, glancing at me with a sympathetic look. He tossed a yellow pinnie to me and pointed at the bench. After patting Aaron on the back, I jogged towards the cold, silver bench and took a seat. The game was completely one sided in our favor. Our team was playing like a well coordinated marching band, with Levi as the drum major. He looked unstoppable. Every chance the other team got, Levi shut it down, with flair and confidence. Anxiously watching my teammates shine from the bench, I was hoping that my coach would put me in, to give me a chance to prove that I wasn’t the shadow of my old self that he assumed I was, but he didn’t even glance in my direction a single time that day.

“Owen, you want to play some one on one before we go?” Levi asked, one day after our pre-tournament practice had ended. I looked at my mom, who was early and waiting as usual, who gave me a nod of approval.

“Yeah let’s go. Just gotta warn you though, I’ve been trash lately.” I replied, eyes staring at the ground.

He patted my shoulder and ran out onto the field. Our one on ones were just like the matches my team had played so far, completely lopsided. Levi had complete control over the game, forcing me on to my weak foot, and not allowing me to drive forward. Strangely, it was fun. I hadn’t felt so alive in ages. We laughed and played just like how we did when we were kids, forgetting any outside concern we had. It was just us and the ball, dancing in the chilly night air. Just like how we were kids, I realized soccer at its simplest is just a game. A game that I fell in love with. Levi and I relentlessly continued for hours. Only when the complex lights began to shut down, did we stop, collapsing onto the ground. As we huffed and puffed from exhaustion, our warm breath was outlined by the cold winter air.

“Levi, just. one. more.” I pleaded, gasping for breath in between words. That might have been the fiftieth time I had asked that question tonight. I hadn’t won a single battle yet. Levi turned his head and looked at me, he was obviously exhausted, but still looked at me with a gleam in his eye.

“Sure, one more,” he replied. At this point, my muscles weren’t under my conscious control anymore. I swayed from side to side, instinctually feeling a rhythm with the ball. I fainted right, twirled left, then lightly poked the ball through his now wide open legs. I squeezed past him, raised my foot to strike,

and buried it in the left corner of the net. I turned around to see Levi already walking towards the bench, getting ready to leave. He glanced backwards, and though the lights were off, there was just enough light from the moon for me to make out a grin on his face. Before I left the field myself, I took a moment to lay down in the center circle, feeling the prickly turf on my back, hearing leaves scrape along the cement sidewalk, and taking in the musty smell of sweat, buried deep into the artificial grass. Slowly getting up, I walked to the car, a grin on my own face as well. I nudged my mom's shoulder, waking her up, and began the drive home.

Two minutes left on the clock. Our team was down 1-2. I gave a signal to Levi, who had just made a brilliant tackle to play me the ball. We made eye contact for a brief moment and he nodded, immediately driving the ball down field into the space I was darting into. Three defenders in front of me. The biggest of the three came barreling towards me, trying to cut me off from the left. With my first touch, I controlled the ball, cutting to the defender's right, making him lose his balance due to a sudden shift in momentum. Two to go. Charging towards the middle of the field, I challenged the second defender head on with speed, blowing by him quickly. One more. I looked at the defender, his eyes focused but desperate. Transferring the ball to my left foot, I raised my foot for a shot. Once I saw the defender lunge his leg out in an attempt to block my shot, I cut the ball back sharply back to my right foot. I loaded up again, this time a legitimate shot. My knee ached, but it didn't matter to me. Locking my eyes on a spot on the goal, I swung my leg forward wildly, like a raging bull finally breaking free of its chains. The ball was struck beautifully, and it rocketed towards the upper right corner.

"CLANG" the goalpost rattled at the impact.

I put my head down, disappointed that I had missed, when I heard the crowd erupted in a frenzy. Bewildered, I glanced at the goal. The ball had ricocheted from the post into the back of the net.

"The reigning silver medalists in this tournament have equalized! A beautiful assist by the captain, No. 5, Levi Yusef and a perfect finish!" the commentator announced.

"No. 13 of the white team, Owen Mason, who had three goals in the semi-final with another extraordinary strike to send this championship to overtime!"

I slapped my teammates outstretched hands and jogged to the bench, a focused expression on my face. The game wasn't over just yet.

# Ethan Chen

Grade 9, Blue Valley Northwest High School  
*Critical Essay*



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## The Nature of Savagery Within Young Boys in *Lord of the Flies*

An island, once a tropical paradise, has been flooded with violence between nothing but boys; merely children, turning into a struggle between life and death. Their minds and everyone else's on the island are immature, and can make senseless and absurd decisions. Nevertheless, two kids, Jack and Ralph, are willing to take extreme actions against each other to convince everyone what they believe is right. In *Lord of the Flies*, by William Golding, the novel explores the controversial idea of human nature that is applied to Jack and Ralph: without learning proper morals, the appearance of innocence only hides the natural desire for brutality, cruelty, and the natural urge for control within boys (White).

Ralph seems to behave more maturely, while Jack does not reason and acts out, becoming violent and showcasing his animal nature. Throughout the novel, although everyone around him are enjoying themselves, Ralph shows signs of leadership, from telling people to create warning fires to building shelters. On the other hand, Jack is more like the other kids, wanting fun and entertainment. They get overly obsessed with the savagery of hunting and end up killing a sow in an excessively gruesome death, and Jack even “held up the head and jammed the soft throat down on the pointed end of the stick which pierced through into the mouth. He stood back and the head hung there, a little blood dribbling down the stick” (Golding 168). Jack eventually separates himself from Ralph's group and starts his own group where they prioritize hunting, dancing, and playing. Even Ralph participates in the dance in which they murder Simon, which shows

how savagery flows through even the ones who are ethical and good (Parry). Because Jack's group had more savagery and wickedness, the other naive boys found Jack's grouping much more appealing than Ralph's group which prioritized order and peacefulness.

With the boys now disbanded, the conflict intensifies, and the people who try to keep everything from falling apart are not taken seriously, further increasing the hostility of arising conflicts. Piggy never argued and helped Ralph focus his thoughts and think clearly (Parry). Even though he contributed plenty to the well-being of the boys, he was not appreciated and ended up accidentally killed in the conflict between Ralph and Jack. Simon, who was also an innocent person who wanted to help out of the goodness of his heart and had "intuitive insight and self-awareness" (Parry), saw a vision that made him understand the truth about the beast on the island, which was that the beast never existed physically; it was within each of the boys. However, when he tried to tell the others, the other boys only saw his shadowy figure, and thinking incoherently, killed him on the spot. The sole boys who were acting for the benefit of everyone were not only ignored but were killed by everyone else.

Everyone must cooperate towards the common goal to create unity and minimize conflict. The conch shell was found at the beginning and was used as a horn to bring all the scattered boys together, with a rule that only the person holding the conch could speak. It was not only used as a horn but it was a symbol of peace and unification, demonstrating a powerful representation where order was lost, and it helped everyone communicate with one another for the wellbeing of the boys ("The Conch"). However, the situation almost immediately worsens after Jack leaves the group, and the conch is subsequently used less. This divides the boys and the unity they once had, leading them to chaos and violence, which is also when the conch shatters.

When all hopes of reconciliation are lost, the boys are found on the island by an officer; an adult. Ironically, the officer discovered them because the boys attempted to burn down the entire island to hunt Ralph. Their shameful actions of attempting to murder another schoolboy were likely the beginnings had the officer not intervened. Immediately, they straightened up their act in order to keep a good image of themselves. They thought they had broken loose from the orderly conduct in the real world, but when the real world came back to them, they did not hesitate to behave maturely because they valued their social image. The Stanford Prison Experiment is another instance of how violent human nature can drastically affect people psychologically. Healthy, male college

students volunteered and were randomly assigned to be prisoners or guards. The guards ultimately became extremely violent and cruel due to their self-esteem in a powerful role with little to no oversight while the prisoners became obedient to the brutal orders of the guards due to their sense of powerlessness as prisoners, even though everyone was “fair” in the real world (“Demonstrating the Power of Social Situations via a Simulated Prison Experiment”). These examples of savagery only demonstrate that when males can act upon themselves with little to no restrictions, the results often are that their hidden nature of violence will overtake the morals that society has pressured into them, and the values that they were taught have not been engrained into their mindset deep enough.

William Golding’s life inspired many of the ferocious ideas throughout the novel. Golding grew up in England, next to a graveyard. His frustration in his early life leading to bullying kids resulted in his younger self taking pleasure in cruelty. His involvement in teaching unruly boys, and his participation with the Royal Navy during WWII, which explains the atom bomb reference and the plane scene, taught him that “[a] man produces evil as a bee produces honey” (“William Golding”). All those experiences opened up the world of savagery for Golding, which certainly affected his mentality, and sparked the inspiration for his composition of the novel.

In conclusion, when boys are not taught proper ethics, they will naturally become violent and savage. Although individuals on the island tried to convince everyone to do the right thing, they stood no chance against the natural urge that boys had: to have fun, no matter the cost. Yet, they never behaved like ruthless megalomaniacs in their civilized lives simply because they valued their public image. Even those closest to the boys likely never imagined how ruthless they could become. The book opens the eyes of the world to the nature of how boys act, demonstrates how crucial moral values are, and what happens when those are taken away.

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# Albert Chen

Grade 11, Hotchkiss School

*Personal Essay & Memoir*



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## The Pink Road

The airport is forty-two minutes away from the 陈 (chén) family's house. One clear, cold morning on the car ride after winter break, the eldest, 陈空 (chénkōng), made sure to take a deep breath. He made sure to bundle up these last few moments with his 妈妈 (māmā, mother) to take with him before flying out of her nest, once again, back to school. He breathed in and tucked away the stuffy air circulating around his 妈妈's car from vents that probably hadn't been cleaned since they got it. 陈空 bottled the naturally-feminine fragrance from 妈妈 that only he could recognize. His 妈妈's slightly-smelly-but-tolerable-and-lovable morning-breath, encased by a mint Crest-toothpaste layer, was his most precious perfume; 陈空 mourned for when he could no longer smell its scent. Blinking fast, 陈空 quickly looked at the GPS, outdated and older than he was, and focused on the pixelated pink road that determined their route. On the bottom-left corner was the time:

35 : 42

陈空 fidgeted in his seat, hoping that some posture would help him think straight and logically like his 爸爸.

“妈妈?” 陈空 quietly asked, soft enough so that any other person wouldn't have heard it under the old car's noises.

“Yes, honey?” 妈妈 replied. 陈空 smiled and stiffened at “honey”, hoping she would still call him that after this car ride, hoping that he would always be something sweet to her.

“Could I talk to you ab—” 陈空 stopped, looking at 妈妈. The car silently sped 100 meters. “Could I talk to you about something?” he continued, turning to look out the front window.

“Su-ure,” she said, with her used-to-be-rare-now-in-recent-years-more-optimistic tone. 陈空 smiled and stiffened again.

“I...”

300 meters zoomed passed.

“You don’t have to say anything right now, sweetie.”

“But I want to! It’s just...”

Another 400 meters.

“It’s just....I’mkindascared.”

“Don’t worry, honey. Take your time.” 陈空 took his time with blood-pink eyes, eyes 妈妈 would have recognized if they weren’t stuck on the road.

28 : 02

“You no need tell me if you don’t want,” 妈妈 said through her Chinese-chapped lips.

“Wait, I really want to, I do, just...just give me another minute.”

23 : 56

“妈妈, do you remember—”

“Wait, sorry, I need to focus for a bit. Remember, this is the tricky spot where I always make mistakes. Remember last time?” 妈妈 said, chuckling, “Let’s merge on the safe road, then we can talk more.”

“...Okay”

21 : 14

“Is it safe now?”

“Yes, go-o ahead,” 妈妈 said in her funny-captain-of-the-boat voice.

“Do you know ‘Love, Simon’, the movie?”

“No, I don’t remember. I am o-old.” 妈妈 said, humorously extending the “ooo” sound, “Should I watch it? I need to improve my English. When I came to America, after 爸爸 (bàba, father) came here for school, I watched movies again and again to get better fast. I don’t read many books or watch English movies recently, so my English isn’t very good as used to.”

“Oh! No, definitely-not,” 陈空 said, rushing, “I just wondered if you remembered me showing it to you when I think it was third grade. I saw it on the charts on iTunes and I watched the trailer. It confused me and I looked at the summary of the movie. There was a word that I didn’t know meaning. You explained it to me, though you didn’t like me knowing the word that young and you cautioned me about the word...do you remember?”

“No, I am old now, remember?”



“Yeah, I guess,” 陈空 said, eyes blurry again, and sighed. He wished that 妈妈 wasn’t getting older, wished that this car ride didn’t also have to end. He wished that they had no destination and that the pink road would continue forever.

陈空 stopped breathing for a few moments to let his heart slow down and stop thumping like 爸爸’s weighty, imposing steps going upstairs.

13 : 34

He took a final shaky breath, glanced at the time left on the GPS, then looked to 妈妈’s reflection.

12 : 26

Blinking fast and drilling his blurry eyes on her reflection, 陈空 said, “妈妈, I am queer, though it isn’t the word you were worried about me knowing too young from the movie...Do you know what it means?”

*It can mean strange but.....please, I hope it doesn’t to you,* 陈空 prayed, to what he didn’t know. He remembered hearing from somewhere that people only pray when they want something.

...

*But what do you do when you **need** something?*

...

陈空 quickly turned his attention to the magenta road on the GPS, stretching it as far as possible until it matched the vast, rose-tinted morning sky: 天空 (tiānkōng, sky).

# Liam Collins

Grade 10, Timberland High School

Educator: Andrea Dubitsky

*Flash Fiction*



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## The Cry

He watches him from the back of the classroom, the sunlight catching on his black curls as they fall perfectly over his eyes. That laugh-how could one sound hold so much joy, so much life?

His heart skips a beat, then another, and he wonders for the thousandth time what it would feel like to be the reason behind that smile. He imagines reaching out, letting his fingers brush against the boy's, just once. But he doesn't. He can't. The world outside is loud-too loud. The whispers people think he doesn't hear. The way people whisper when they see two boys standing too close together, the way they cross the street when they see love that doesn't fit into the mold. His chest tightens at the thought. *No, not here, not now.* He sinks further into his chair, watching him from a distance, thinking about all the words that will never leave his mouth. Words like, I think about you more than I should, or I wonder if your hand fits mine like a puzzle piece, or simply, I want to know you. All of you. But those words stay locked inside, behind the walls he's built brick by brick to survive in a world that doesn't understand.

The boy glances over with a smile from his chatting. The flutter like butterflies came, then the heightened heart beat like he was running a marathon. The smile he wishes could be from him. *To be the reason he laughs.* As the boy looks away, reality crashes in, cold and unforgiving. What would happen if he spoke those words out loud? What would the world do with them? The loud outside, the narrow walls always seem too overwhelming. If they truly knew how he felt, who would he lose? The way people look at him turning to sneers in his

head. What if things were different? What if no one cared. Lived the same way if they knew who he'd fallen for. What if it wasn't a secret? Something That could be worn on his sleeve. The world isn't there. What if it never will be?

So he sits. Silent. Stealing a few glances. Pushing back his feelings like a secret too fragile to share. The boy smiles again, and for a brief second, he allows himself to dream of a world where love is just love, no matter who it's for. But as the bell rings and the boy disappears out the door, the dream fades, leaving him alone with the quiet ache of everything he'll never say.

Meredith

Cornstubble

Grade 12, Faith Christian Academy  
*Science Fiction & Fantasy*



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## A Broken Sword

Teeth meet iron with a clang. She swings the sword away to block an attack with her shield. The monster attacks again. It's a bear with longer claws and sharper teeth. Matted fur, bloody cuts, and murderous eyes encompass this attacker. And make no mistake, there is nothing more ferocious than a monster with nothing to lose. This monster stole hungry babes from their homes. He destroyed farms and massacred livestock. Too many lives have paid the toll of his ravenous hunger.

The challenger, a woman, is a force to be reckoned with. Called to defend the defenseless and guard the unguarded, she remains ever faithful to her task. Her strength gives her resolve, and her cunning keeps her alive. However, she is no hero. She cares not for the village, only the power her sword gains with each blow. Only the most powerful sword would grant her payment for the life she wants: one where she can reside far from the woes and pains of humanity. She cares not for who or what must pay that price for her.

Forward, back, left, and right; she dances with the starving demon, parrying every strike. Finally, in a moment of the monster's hesitation, the woman shows no delay nor mercy, and he falls; defeated.

She stands and lifts her head. Death is cold, even when it takes a monster, but she is not sorry. Death is cold, but she is colder. As the townspeople come rushing to see the aftermath of the battle, she quietly slips away into the woods where she met her foe. They would want the chance to thank her, but she learned long ago that no thanks is worthy of value.

She steps quietly, enjoying the gentle snowfall around her. A squirrel races up a tree, and she watches until he disappears among the branches. When she looks down again, she sees a cabin. Smoke funnels through the chimney. She's

taken this path hundreds of times, and there's never been a house. Whether it be brave or foolish to approach the strange house remains to be a judgement for the reader, but that is what she does. Stepping onto the porch, she sees a cat sitting on the window. He hisses at her approach, but she merely rolls her eyes and knocks on the door. Maybe there is another creature she can strike down.

"Come in," a scraggly voice calls. The woman obliges, pushing open the door. The cat scampers through immediately, disappearing into another room. Coal-black eyes meet hers. Their owner is a witch, if ever there was one. Warts, wrinkles, black cloth, with a pointed hat to complete the ensemble.

"Hello, deary," the voice drawls.

"I'm so sorry, I don't mean to intrude. It's just... there's never been a house here."

The witch laughs, cackles may be a more accurate term. "Oh, deary, it's always been here. It's you who had been fortunate enough to never see it." A sly smile creeps onto the witch's face at the end of that sentence. Before our hero can react, the door slams closed, and every lamp, candle, and even the great fire goes out. Does she fall asleep or are her eyes still wide open? Who can tell in such darkness?

When she comes to, and the candles relight themselves, the woman has managed to find herself tied to a chair in the center of a different room. She's a hostage, it would seem. Bookshelves line every wall, cobwebs rest in the corners of rooms, and cobblestone floors surround her. In the center is a table with a jar full of marbles. Everything feels much lighter in this room, as if the air thinned itself. The witch stands in a corner, reading a book.

"Who are you?" the woman asks. The book slams closed and the witch responds slowly without looking up.

"It doesn't matter who I am. I know who you are. I already know more than you."

"Excuse me?"

"Look at my jar! Do you see it?"

"Yes, it's very nice. But I must warn you that if you have any ill-intent at all, if you kidnap anyone again, for instance, I will not hesitate to burn you and your house to the ground." With that, the hero attempts to stand but is immediately forced back into her chair.

The witch cackles again, "My my, such a threat! I wonder, who would you be without those nasty words, and an even nastier record. Tell me, can you count these marbles?" What an odd question.

“No, there’s too many.”

“Exactly. Your swords are treacherous and terrible, honey. You’d be better off without them.”

Puzzled at these words, the woman chooses to respond to the second claim, “I have only one sword.”

Another giggle before, “Oh, no no no. That tongue of yours, darling. That is a weapon all on its own, and you use it too harshly. Alas, I cannot break that, but there is nothing stopping me from destroying this one,” she holds up the sword.

“No you can’t! I need that to defend the people from the likes of you!”

“Oh, precious is it?”

“It was a gift.”

“You use it poorly. You care not for those you defend. I’ll prove it to you. Consider this *my* gift: :

See the crystal  
Watch it spin  
Like a pistol  
This all must end  
No more death  
No more time  
Take a breath  
Spend the dime  
The sword will shatter  
Your shield shall melt  
Your world’s in tatters  
Not where you dwelt  
Go home  
Go back  
Still as a gnome  
Stop your attack!”

Darkness again, except for her sword glowing red in the dark. Her bonds are gone, and she stands from the chair. But as she reaches for the sword, it breaks in her hand. The witch cackles again, and the room seems to spin. When the girl wakes up, she’s lying in the snow, in the forest without any armor or weapons. The house is gone.

The wind picks up as she slowly stands, trying not to anger the pounding in her head. Gusts of wind start carrying the snow, swirling it around her. It’s pretty at first. Then it gets faster and faster, colder and colder. The billowing

snow forms a shape like a body twice her size. It's a monster. She takes a step back as its eyes open, glowing red.

Her shield is laying next to a tree, some ten feet away from her. One snowy hand reaches for her, but misses. The other takes the shield, throwing it hundreds of yards away. She's analyzed all her options. She has no defense, no weapon, and no choice. She does something she's never done before. Before the hand can grab her, she turns and runs.

She feels the chill following her, knowing the monster is following. Good, that's just what she wants. There's one place where she can hide and distract him. She runs back to the village, dodging branches and leaping over fallen limbs. Briars grab at her cloak, but she doesn't stop. She leads the monster to the village. With it in his sights, he forgets about her. Dark clouds fill the skies, and giant flakes of snow fall to the ground. She sees the panic in the villagers' eyes as they realize they have no wood laid aside, their animals remain in their pens without shelter, and there is no time to escape such a blizzard. Luckily, monsters like these only create snowstorms.

Meanwhile, the monster moves toward the homes. There are children playing on a hill, unaware of the chaos overtaking their parents. An icy hand grabs one of the children, and the woman watches as the life leaves his eyes. He falls to the ground, frozen and purple. The other children scream and run while the monster moves into the village. There's a voice on the wind:

"Oh, darling, did you think he'd settle for a storm? Everyone in this village will die, and it's all your fault!"

Frozen bodies fall as he passes through them. This is no blizzard, everyone within this trap will die. She falls to her knees like a heavy weight has suddenly been dropped onto her shoulders. She knows she can't stay here. The monster will make quick work of the villagers and then come back for her. She had no choice, she reminds herself as she walks away. She bought them an extra few hours of life without terror. This is how they can thank her. She shakes away these thoughts. She needs a sword. She can't pay with no sword, she must focus on the sword.

There is one place she can go. It's a two day journey from here, but it's the only place she can go. Maybe He will help her. He will forgive her for what she stole. He'll make her a new sword, and she can go back to finishing what she started. She turns back into the forest. She must travel straight through.

It's been five hours inside the forest. It feels like ten, and now she's hungry. As the shadows start to grow, and the light starts to dim, she stops for a rest

under a large oak tree. She keeps a small knapsack with her at all times, hidden under her cloak (and usually her shield), and it has everything she needs for travel. Money, food, water. She takes out a slice of bread and an apple to eat. Once she's finished, she lies down to sleep for an hour or two. There is a full moon tonight, so she will travel then and rest now, between night and day.

The leaves rustle. Someone's here. She reaches for her sword... oh that's right, she doesn't have it. She waits with her eyes closed. Maybe whatever it is will go away without trying to kill her. Was that a hiss?

"I know you're awake," the voice says. He says it slowly, like he's very careful about announcing properly. She lifts her head, eyes open, then sits up. It's a snake, a talking snake.

"Who are you?"

"My apologies, I did not mean to frighten you," he says, drawing out the "s" sound.

"I'm not frightened."

"My dear, you should be."

"Why?"

"These woods are dangerous. Please, let me help guide you."

"You don't even know where I'm going."

"Your Father sent me."

"You know my Father?"

"He told me about how you wish to pay for solitude. That you stole a sword from Him. He wants to help you. Too many marbles sit in your jar."

"That's the only way to pay."

"There's another way. He told me to tell you that. Please may I help you?" She stands, ignoring the question. She packs up her things and begins walking. A couple steps away, then she turns and motions for the creature to follow.

"How do you know my Father?"

"I've always been by His side."

"I've never seen you."

"Well, most times, I am with His children. If I am with one of you, then I am with Him."

She says nothing as they come to a fork in the road. The path to the right has been encroached on by trees and brambles. The left is wide, and the trees are sparse. She starts to the right, remembering the way to her Father's house.

"No, no! You mustn't go that way!"

"It's the way to my Father's house."



“No! I’ve taken plenty to His house from this way. It’s much easier. Please, your Father asked me to bring you this way. And you have no way to get through the brambles. You’ve lost your sword.”

“I know.”

“We must go this way.” She relents and follows him to the left.

He was right, this way is much easier. After a couple hours of walking, they come to a patch of berries. The snake slithers up to them, eyes wide and mouth open. Before his tongue can touch the sweet fruit, the woman grabs him and pulls him away.

“Why did you do that?! I was hungry!” She could be mistaken, but it seemed like he grew slightly. Is that smoke coming off of his scales?

“Those are poisonous! You can’t just eat berries in the woods! Here, if you’re hungry, I’ll give you some food.” She hands him another apple from her sack. He’s quiet for a minute, staring at the glistening fruit.

“Thank you,” he says slowly.

“Who’s there?!” A man appears with a lamp and a staff. The snake, already having devoured his apple, slithers into the bushes, leaving the woman alone.

“I’m just passing through,” she calls back.

“Why are you going this way in the dark?”

“I have places to be.”

“This way leads to a dead end. You should stay with me, and I can take you back to the fork. You can go where you’re going from there.”

“No, you’re wrong. This road leads to my Father!”

“Who told you that?”

“Does it matter?”

“Yes, there are dangerous creatures in these woods. You can’t trust anyone here.”

“You mean like you?” The man’s eyes and mouth freeze. He stops talking and moving. Then he falls as the snake slithers back out of the bushes. The creature does seem larger.

“Exactly like him. Let’s keep going,” the snake sneers.

“What a jerk. How dare he assume I don’t know my way through the woods?” She pauses before asking, “You killed him didn’t you?”

“Indeed.” Shivers crawl down her neck, but she brushes them aside. This is the way to her Father. What she does to get there doesn’t matter. They move on in silence.

They reach a bluff as the sun rises, but the path continues down the cliff. Rocks jut out everywhere, and there are very few places to grab. After hours of slow work, they arrive at the bottom of the mountain. The sun is hidden by the dense forest so it still looks like early dawn.

"I didn't realize this leads to more woods. My Father's house is nowhere near here."

"No, it is not. This is His garden through here." He leads her into a clearing. The grass is dry and yellow, there are tree stumps everywhere, and downed branches litter the forest floor.

"I didn't ask you to lead me to His garden, I asked you to take me to His house."

"Actually, you didn't ask me anything, I don't recall."

She turns around, and the snake has grown into a monster three times in length as she is tall. The once little garden snake now glows red with smoke seeping through the scales as if his very insides are on fire. She backs away slowly, but he has surrounded her with his body. He says nothing, but slithers in circles around the garden, setting everything ablaze. There's nowhere to run. She's trapped in the fire and smoke.

"I trusted you! You said you'd lead me to my Father!" she screams at the monster.

"You should have known to never trust a snake, and don't bother feeding the Devil. He won't ever return the favor." he hisses before shrinking and slithering away.

She runs after him, trying to escape the flames, but there's no clearing. She attempts to leap over the blaze, but it burns her and she falls to the ground. Stands up, tries again. She ignores the flesh burning its way down her arms. She detaches her cloak so it doesn't catch fire too. This time, the fire is too high, and her legs are caught in the flames. The fire has spread everywhere, in the trees and on the grass, trapping her. The smoke climbs into the sky, taking all of the air with it. She can't breathe and falls to the ground, coughing and gasping for oxygen.

"I'm sorry, Father," she whispers, tears streaming down her cheeks. The fire grabs her, burning her fingers, making its way up her arms and legs. She closes her eyes, seeing only white light and feeling the heat. She doesn't long for her sword now, only her Father who she betrayed.

\* \* \*

Everything is still, quiet, soft, and warm. It's as if I'm laying in a field with the sun shining on me, but the grass is softer than a blanket. I hear the clang of steel against steel and the sizzle of water extinguishing fire. I slowly open my eyes. My burns don't hurt anymore. I *am* in a bed, my bed. I'm home. A man walks in. I recognize Him immediately, He's my Father.

"Father, I'm so sorry. I'm sorry, I never should have stolen from You. Please forgive me." He says nothing for a few moments before He turns around. He's holding a sword. Wait, that's the sword that I stole. Then, He speaks:

"If you'd only asked, I would have helped you find the peace you longed for. You should be more careful with things like this sword. They work best when their designer teaches you how to use it."

"I'm sorry."

"Daughter, I forgive you. Like this sword, all things can be remade."

Meredith

Cornstubble

Grade 12, Faith Christian Academy  
*Portfolio*



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## Broken and Remade

### The Hospital

It's in bright, golden light where I'm someone.  
The room is sweet in spite a smoke-like haze.  
The roses there are the hearts I have won  
I feel warm thinking more of each sweet gaze.  
The bed is wrinkled, but no one will stay.  
I yelled for my friends, but no one has heard.  
Took the pill, but for my woes I must pay.  
Gold fades to gray. As from loves, not a word.  
I wake. My ghost is grinning from the wall.  
The smoke cleared with no lover, not a rose.  
They will close the door, I'm kept from it all.  
I am alone, as always I suppose.  
Remember now, there never was such love.  
Chained to a bed with nothing to dream of.

### No Dawn

Death always takes more than the one who dies.  
How can we know shadows cover our path

When the start promised beautiful blue skies?  
She chose herself, summoned curses and wrath.  
A final child did come, but tell me  
Was that the kind of life I should have cheered?  
A terror she was born to and would be,  
No shock, she ran and he drowned in his beer.  
His grief led him to oceans of defeat  
She watched; out to sea she must have been tossed.  
By his choices, to the ground he was beat  
So was she; it was too great of a cost.  
Six died, followed the first one that was gone  
To those who choose themselves, there is no dawn.

## Toys

She takes the doll in hand.  
Like a magic wand, creates something grand.  
And in this new land  
Which sparkles like a golden band

The witch casts a spell.  
The maid answers the bell.  
The king they must compel  
So in the castle she can dwell.

It's not long before  
The girl laying on the floor  
Must go somewhere that's a bore  
For someone who is only four.

The dolls watch in wonder  
As their world is plundered  
Cause she never calls their number.  
It's like a crack of thunder.

Water falls from skies and glass eyes  
Though she was there for such highs.

What once was her prize  
Now only makes her cry.

Where a girl played  
Now a woman stays.  
Even though they pray  
Back to their world they never will stray.

She never would've guessed  
That doing her best  
Made her less than a guest  
In where she'd once rest.

She played adult for too long  
And thinks she played a bad song.  
She did this all wrong  
Cause its fantasy that makes us strong.

## **It Beats**

Tick tick tick, the clock goes by  
It beats in time  
Loving the climb  
Enjoying this rhyme.

Alway, always moving  
Only cause it's bleeding  
Oh it's ever flooding  
But no it's not receding.

These cracks by fire traced  
Made of brimstone and burning  
With each tick and every gaze  
This watch can't stop turning.

The fire is hungry  
It needs more fuel

And won't ask humbly  
Cause skin-claiming flames are cruel.

Starved of air  
it shall burn out  
But it's got its own flare  
And I have no doubt

No matter what happens  
It continues to breathe  
It may be a dragon  
At least it's without teeth

It will always live  
Even though cracks make us tense  
Any attack it can survive  
Though sometimes we wince

Hearts split everyday  
But no matter what they endure  
They will have their way  
Cause we will always have the cure

And so in our despair  
Remember glowing hearts,  
These gifts have been repaired  
and can't be torn apart.

Meredith

Cornstubble

Grade 12, Faith Christian Academy

*Poetry*



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## Such A Pirate

Tell me their story, what happened?  
Who ran them aground, that ship they captained?  
Did he lie to her? Did she stab his back?  
No darling, it's never a simple attack.

I'll tell you what happened. There were three maps.  
And To follow was to shoot bottle caps.  
One led to treasure up sweet love clouds.  
Another led to water's edge, clear and loud.

These led to simple paths, I'll tell you that.  
But they took the third, hidden 'neath a mat.  
They found some jewels, but twas fool's gold.  
For they never listened to legends told.

They couldn't follow map three.  
so map one had to be  
kept in a cursed chest.  
They took map two, the worst of the best.

Such a pirate move, putting gold above  
What could have been love  
They were pirates, him and her. Stole her heart,  
Took his crown. So the score split their ship apart.

Its okay now that they chose their own paths



He's a pirate, and she's far from his wrath.  
Such a pirate she is now  
That only God above has her bow.

Isabelle

Cox-Garleanu

Grade 11, Mary Institute & Saint Louis

Country Day School

Poetry



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## An Episodic Life

always, sewing the moon to your face  
the moment the elixir evanesces, the sauntering  
crescent against our bodies, sparkling with  
luster & luring homesickness to our lips like a siren at sea  
finding beauty in brevity is a skill, 母 says—  
well then isn't there the divine; half ambrosia half ideas  
clinging to the amorphous wonder of innocent  
ribbons and reflexions in blue corneas, boats aloof  
on the ocean sinking and a star's acrobatics  
descending—atrocities made beautiful in hindsight  
am i happy or do i just live without focusing?  
only 母 would know, her fingertips pressing  
blood back into my veins, her whispers  
guiding my sanity to rotting portals unseen in real life  
as a vagabond, i am faithful to the streets i  
used to know and the languages my lips once touched  
but sadly, the only religion in my multicultural  
world is the vanishing of [correct words] and the gaps  
between them—it is 母 and i's tongues clasping  
different gods, replacing verses with confusion  
and halting our breath like it is noxious, because  
*hope*, we have been told, is *the grief of a mother tongue*  
in this episodic life i wish to timelessly embrace it  
one certain way, but what the cornea captures changes  
when it is glanced at again—even the deadliest

thoughts of mine are never barren, only wickedly alive  
like the remnants of 日本語  
crawling back to me from the timbre of uncertainty

Isabelle

Cox-Garleanu

Grade 11, Mary Institute & Saint Louis

Country Day School

*Poetry*



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## Pa's Red Bowl

On Sunday night I open a lacquered linseed box  
Inside, incense  
& a black bowl with red inside bows into a prayer

Dust sprinkles onto me  
like an announcement of Red summer,  
when Pa's legs had become amorphous

One by one I rinse the bowl &  
I imagine myself as a predator:  
my flesh dehumanizing the years of  
hibernated memories coating this blooded basin

It had fought in war just by watching the battles  
from Ojichan's dining room, its red mouth stuck  
agape, warm with miso for Pa's return  
It had been infected by midnight sun, saffron, sesame  
Now my subversion

My greedy lips lack honor against its

glassy romantic rim, slipping  
in the space between silence & salvation  
It expects Pa's breath, his smile lines,  
his hero face ripe with promise  
under the weight of glory  
because  
in this country being the daughter of a good man  
is not enough  
unless she is also  
the ghost of him

So I rinse this bowl  
Over & over & over again  
Cleansing its eyes, resplendent  
Tonight I am hungry for a bony war

お願い、お腹が空いてるから

Isabelle

Cox-Garleanu

Grade 11, Mary Institute & Saint Louis  
Country Day School

*Poetry*



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## The End We Share

i

how i have drowned  
languidly in your words  
and quiet cacophony

ii

far from what 母 has prayed for me

iii

your love pours and grows  
for another love  
avaricious a moonlit hazard

iv

i am turned into a rhyme  
at the ends of an end  
that we share

v

expectedly when 母 met you  
her veins teared out,  
changeable like the ocean

vi

「辞めて、神様が見ているから」  
“stop, the divine are watching”

but i'm not watching them

vii

beauty is brief but    nothing  
is                      briefly beautiful

viii

with you the taste of lust is never  
sacrificed        by time

ix

your fish scales an armor  
arranging the light

x

let's swim  
in the wind  
let's

xi

water our vision  
let's

xii

find our daughter in  
a bamboo stick  
and ship her to hotels  
in the moon  
she might bring back  
more light  
for us  
let's

xiii

last night all sewers of the moon  
arrived at our wedding  
to stitch freedom on  
our faces

xiv

母 said you looked like sin

xvii

i say you looked like  
you drank a starry planet

xviii

and right now you look like  
the rest of                      my days



Isabelle

Cox-Garleanu

Grade 11, Mary Institute & Saint Louis

Country Day School

*Poetry*



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## When Women are Blue

i.

everything about her  
salty caramel  
with tangerine teeth  
off  
turned her on  
look at her  
was a privilege  
from a picasso creation  
nostrils  
supposed to birth

was caramel  
sweet red bones  
she would wander  
to somewhere that  
letting me  
watching this woman  
breasts blue  
sun beaming through  
she was  
languages but

I am just a dialect  
are  
she holds us  
for the war that  
and for the war we  
she bends  
she rises  
to meet her  
I am nothing  
lost faith

all of us  
fluently broken  
accountable  
she gave us  
gave her  
and the world straightens  
and the sky lowers  
in her gaze  
but the weight of  
but at least I weigh

ii.

This woman moves like river stones,

curves as rigid as the bamboo stick that  
birthed Kaguya Hime. Her tangerine  
teeth flash like summer lightning, cutting  
through your womb. She asks you to do  
something. Either pick up your cherry  
and give it to the shrinking man who  
diagnosed you as "fourteen so basically an adult"  
or run. Tells you you're so young  
that men want to reduce you, kiss you.  
You look at her teary-eyed so she adds  
*baby you can't be something to everyone,*  
but what she should've said was  
*baby you can be everything to someone.*  
She whispers *you don't have to choose*  
but you know she is lying. You know  
she has already chosen for you. The  
shrinking man stands still, his eyes  
cold like a slur, his hands waiting  
to peel you, to take what you don't  
know you are giving. She knows  
you're scared, the way your hands shake,  
the way you can't reach for the cherry  
she has placed between your fingers.  
You are nothing but a moment. Nothing  
but a mistake to be repeated. You wonder

if you're a girl or a woman or anything at all  
as her breasts turn bluer just watching

you unfurl and unfold and become undone  
into caramel. Sticky, gooey, caramel.

iii.

Darling in blue. Sew the  
moon to your face,  
to the poetry of your body.  
Believe in words,  
because what else speaks  
the truth?

# Aubrey Crews

Grade 10, Timberland High School

Educator: Andrea Dubitsky

*Short Story*



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## Weight of Words

High school, as many describe it, is a microcosm of society, an intricate web of social hierarchies, unspoken rules, and expectations. For some it's a place of growth, friendships and self-discovery. But for others, it can feel like a pressure cooker where insecurities are magnified, and the struggle to fit in becomes overwhelming. The sprawling hallways filled with students rushing between classes offer a sense of anonymity for some but can be a battleground for others. It's easy to get lost in the crowd and for those who stand out just a little too much or fall just outside of the accepted norms, this place of learning can quickly become a place of torment.

The schoolyard was once a place filled with heavy laughter and riled children, swaying green trees in the cool swift breeze of fall, the bright light from the shining sun beaming down on the black pavement. How does one describe the peacefulness of nature? The heavy laughter soon became silent, it soon became nostalgic. The schoolyard, I now am afraid, the same place I used to adore so much, is ruined. Every step I take to go out is another feeling of guilt and disgust about myself.

The school stood like a fortress, cold and unwelcoming, its long red brick walls towering over students as they all crowd into the cold steel doors. It looms against the gray sky, casting a shadow that can stretch forever, swallowing every bit of light. The cold steel doors are like gates to a prison, heavy and foreboding, swinging open not to welcome, but to trap. Inside, the hallways were narrow and suffocating, like tunnels carved deep into the earth. The walls, painted in dull shades of beige and gray, seem to close in around the students as they walk, their

chipped paint a testament to the years of silent suffering they had witnessed. Lockers lining the halls like rows of iron bars, each one a small, personal prison where students hide their books, and sometimes, their fears.

The air smelled like old paper and disinfectant, sterile scent that did very little to mask the underlying rotting of the ceiling. The fluorescent lights overhead flickering like dying stars, casting harsh, unforgiving shadows on everything beneath them. It all starts with words, words that I didn't even know that had much sincerity to them. I remember the first time I felt trapped and isolated in school. It wasn't physical violence or blatant threats, but a series of subtle, cutting remarks that slowly eroded my confidence. The whispers in the hallway, the snickering while I was walking by, the smirks when I walked into a room, and the quiet laughter that shadowed me everywhere I went.

Each comment felt like a small stone being added to an invisible backpack I carried, the words that piled on until I was weighed down by shame and insecurity. It wasn't just the things they had said, but the way they said them, as if I was less than them, as if I didn't belong. Knowing the same group would be waiting ready to make me the target of their amusement was extremely nerve-racking. They would pick apart everything my clothes the way I spoke even though I walked. Their eyes followed me everywhere, always watching for the slightest mistake or moment of vulnerability. I could feel their gays burning into me even when I tried to turn away or pretend I didn't care.

The world around me felt smaller and more suffocating as every space I inhabited was claimed by their cruelty. The sound of their voices became a constant echo in my mind even when they weren't around. In the classrooms the desks were arranged in neat rows but there was nothing orderly about the way I felt inside. Each seat was an island isolated and exposed, offering no shelter from the storm of ridicule that raged around me. The chalkboards, once a symbol of learning and opportunity, now seemed like dark mirrors reflecting back the fears I couldn't escape.

The teacher stood at the front, his voice downing on like distant thunder unaware of the battles being fought in the minds of students like me. I sit there staring at my hands trying to make myself smaller trying to disappear into the cracks of the linoleum floors. The clock on the wall ticking away the minutes with agonizing slowness, each second stretching into eternity as I waited for the bell to ring signaling yet another round of torment to begin.

Outside the world continued to turn but for me time seemed to stand still. The school's vaccade with its worn bricks and faded windows was like the

face of a tired old giant and different to the suffering within its walls. The trees that line the courtyard were bare, their branches twisted and gnarled like the fingers of some ancient creature reaching out to ensnare anyone who dared to wander too close. Even the sky heavy with dark gray clouds seemed to press down on me as if the very air around the school was conspiring to keep me trapped.

Everyday felt like a battle between hope and despair and the school was the battlefield where I fought not just against my bullies, but against the overwhelming sense that I would never escape. It was a place where dreams went to die strangled by the weight of words and the silence of those who look the other way. It's strange how I feel words can change the way you see yourself. I still remember the first time I was bullied with such clarity. It wasn't a dramatic event, just a passing comment about how I looked. But it stuck with me echoing in my mind long after the bell had rung in the hallways. How does one explain the hurt? What was it about me that made them choose to say those things? My mind relaying their words endlessly dissecting them trying to understand if I had done something wrong. As days passed my confusion turned into something more insidious. Every time I looked into a mirror I saw someone who deserved the ridicule, someone who wasn't *enough*.

# Devin Datta

Grade 11, John Burroughs School

*Short Story*



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## Together

“Of course, I’d love to romanticize, dear, but It has to come naturally. It comes out in spurts, you see? Little spurts here and there. Yes, I do miss how you would pour me a glass of water in that Barcelona hotel, how we’d look out together, and how you’d always say it was such a privilege to be able to say that I was yours. But we’re in it now—really, we are. Don’t you think so? I know it’s sad. It’s sad for the both of us, but that’s where things count, and where they are. Do you remember how we’d look at them below and go, ‘Oh what’s that pathetic little man up to now?’ or, ‘Look at them scurry through each other,’ or, ‘Look at that beautiful couple walking along the plaza.’ Yes, I miss it, just the same as you do.”

Nancy Kermstrand reached for her drink once more and looked down at her husband, whose head was resting in her lap. The couch they were on was one that can be found in the best suite of every high-class hotel, with its dark red color and light velvety touch. The two were seated upon its rough support, their arms outstretched as if posing to be drawn or painted. Afternoon light ran through the skylight and down into the center of the quiet, flustered room. Nicolas Kermstrand’s voice became rough as he asked her to pass the live cigarette that stemmed from her two full lips. Smoke from the end made a billowy line down to the head of the young, handsome man.

“Well, we’re strapped up now,” he said. “Why can’t we just live in our reminiscences? Hm, I quite like that—‘reminiscences.’ Is that a word? It has to be. Well, anyway, you know I’d love to, darling— I’d quite like to. Do you remember the old grumbling man who pushed you in that station out in the country? Oh, he was so rude and old and ghastly! Or the water when we stayed at the small house in the south? Tell me you remember it, darling. Oh, how I wish I were a poet!

Everything seems so faint now, and I don't want to remember it as some sort of outing— you know how it always is: go, see, like, die. I'd quite like to go back; only, I fear it will never be as nice as it once was. Do you remember how I attacked you in Madrid?"

"Yes, I remember," she replied, smiling. His arms had been moving while he talked, and the smoke that came from his mouth danced around her head. She inhaled deeply and rubbed his chest softly. He continued.

"Of course I remember the beautiful glasses of water in Barcelona, and how I poured them for you. You sat, reached your arm out, and smiled up at me with that heavenly smile of yours. Yes! That one!" (upon looking up to her slim-lipped grin). "And I remember how we would sit together and read in that house on the water in the south. You would bring coffee and complain about how the waves were too rough to swim in, but the water was still pretty to you, and how it glittered like jewelry. Hm, I still do remember it all."

"Let's stop remembering for a second," she replied, rising from the couch and dropping his head back down. The cigarette, which stood erect out of his tightly pursed lips, was snatched away by two long, skinny fingers. She went to the balcony window which overlooked the city's dreary afternoon bustling. At once, the heat from all the windows felt too hot for the room and she took off her light scarf.

"Oh, come now," Nicolas beseeched. "Let's talk again about our nights there together, please, dear? Oh, let's go back someday, dear. Please, Will you promise me that?"

"Don't beg, Nick." She was still looking down through the window onto the scene below. From her dress pocket, she produced a pair of dark glasses. "So are we going to the Coût tonight?" she said, smiling once more at him, as she put the glasses on. He stared at her from his place on the couch, then looked to the ceiling, rising with a grunt.

"If we can have a drink before," he muttered.

"Well, that's quite all right with me," she replied, rushing toward him in an attempt to stop him before he stood up completely. She pushed him lightly back onto the couch so that he sat with his back propped up against its support, with his arms spread across it. She seated herself in his lap and brought her hands to his jaw. She looked down her nose at him, smiled once more, and placed the cigarette back into his mouth.

"And do shave your side-burns for me if we'll be going out," she said.



He continued, despite the fact she got up and walked towards the bar. "Tell me, dear, do you remember how when we were walking together in that harbor in Barcelona, early in the morning, and we looked at those sentimental boats under the red-orange sun that crested the horizon? How they floated stationary there? And how I told you, for the longest time, that I had looked at them alone and felt I was a boat on the ocean amongst endless, unchanging waves. But then, when I was there with you, I felt myself above the water, flying. Tell me you remember that, dear. Oh, please tell me you do."

Over the rim of a short wine glass filled with some exotic drink, her eyes met his, and she swallowed. "I do, dear," she said more quietly.

"And?"

"And what?"

"And what do you have to say about it, dear?"

Nancy downed her drink and took her dark glasses off, putting them back in her pocket.

"I'm not sure what to say about it, dear."

The two remained silent. Nancy turned once more to the bar, put her glass away, and then set her two palms firmly on the counter, her gaze sharp at Nicolas. He let out a tiny sigh.

"You never do," he said. This time, he went to the window and leaned on it. Nancy's smile faded, leaving behind a thin curving slightly downward at its ends.

"I'd like to go back, Nick," she said to his backside. "I'd very much like to see the boats in the harbor once again and be well with you under that warm sun, Nick, but I can't. There are times when I can't bear to see you here."

"What does that mean?"

"You are terrible to me sometimes," she replied.

Nick turned around to face her. The large light coming from the skylight separated them as if it were a large column holding up some ancient structure.

"Talk. No, keep talking," he said, jerking his head in a nod.

"Why are we here now?" she asked. "Why can't we be like how we always are? What's wrong?"

Nick looked at her with a frown. "Oh, Nancy," he said more softly. "Where's your laughing face gone? I remember just the same as you, when we were young—or at least younger—the way we'd talk to each other and the sweet things you would whisper into my ear."

"Stop it," she snapped. "Why do you always play the damned woman?"

With that remark, the two paused and looked at each other with scowls on their faces. He turned away, moving slowly to the couch again. He seemed to think, then nod to himself in affirmation.

“Right, so then you’re the man and I’m the woman. It makes more sense now.” Nancy looked at him, not with anger, but with the remains of sadness’s takeover.

He continued, turning to her with his hands on his hips. “Yes it makes more sense now. All the men are the ones that go off around here. The men are the ones that sniff other women’s perfume and caress other women’s hair around here. And yes, the place you most love to be—here. It makes sense now that you put it like that.” He put his hand to his head in mock realization.

“Whatever are you talking about?”

He took his cigarette from his mouth and held it between his pointer and middle fingers, examining it. He looked directly into her eyes once again and shook his head. “You know what I’m talking about. Yes you damn well do!” (upon seeing her tiny shake of denial.) “You don’t think I see how you are with Jim and that other bastard? ‘Oh, Nick, let’s go to the Coût tonight, but I’ll be too sick tomorrow, so we’ll go the night after. Oh, come on, it’s a good time, Nick! You say I’m terrible to you, when you’re the same way with your hotel-gallivanting, perfect-faced, mean, drinking, ‘let’s have fun’ demeanor. Why can’t you go back with me, huh? And no, it’s not living in the past—it’s looking back and enjoying it. I hate that it always has to come down to you having the Coût and me having us. Why can’t you have us, too? Do you not love me?” With that, he stubbed out the cigarette out and plopped down onto the couch in defeat, staring at the base of the white-light column.

Nancy let her hair loose and turned to the Goyesca on the far wall. “You know I do,” she said. “We’ll go back to the boats one day, Nick.” She reached into her pocket once more and produced a packet of cigarettes. She lit one, the small thing drifting up to her lips. “You have your own problems, though,” she said, turning her head toward him. He was slouched over on the edge of the couch, elbows on his knees, head held up to the light at the window once more. She looked at his thin neck, and wide, muscular shoulders, and at the tousled brown hair whose color was lighter under the sun.

“Don’t spend your life reminiscing, only to die on the shitter just the same,” she said, exhaling smoke. Under that brightness, she thought she saw a tear develop under his eye. “Oh, don’t say those terrible things, Nick.” She looked at

him once more and set down her cigarette to rush at him, wrapping her arms around him. "You don't really dislike the Coût, do you?"

"No," he replied. "But I don't know how long we'll go on like this."

"Like what?"

"This," he said, gesturing to the room with its sunken atmosphere and hot floor.

"But look outside, dear," she said, turning her head toward the window. "It's all there for us, and it always will be."

His faded expression did not change. Upon seeing this, Nancy grew closer to him with concern.

"We'll never stop being kids, Nick. We'll never stop being kids that look back on their life, wishing they were in the past. We're always kids—everyone is." She took his head in her hands, looked into his eyes, and smiled softly. Then, taking her seat neatly, she guided his head to her lap once more. Many minutes passed with the two in silence like that. The column of light had shifted to the couch, shining Nicolas's chin. The air was calmer than it had been before.

"Do you remember when you first met me, a couple of blocks down?" He said.

"Yes, I remember," she replied softly, smiling once more.

"And, do you remember the first words I said to you?"

Nancy was silent. Some more time passed and Nicolas continued. "I said, 'Excuse me, Ma'am, but I couldn't help notice how well you hold a drink. I was wondering if I could have the pleasure of joining you?'"

"And what did I say after that?"

"I don't remember exactly, but it was some nasty remark."

They were quiet again.

"I'm sure it wasn't nasty," Nancy said.

"It was, you were quite cold to me," he replied.

"Well, it was probably just the repartee one employs at bars."

"Ah, yes. You and your repartee."

Nicolas closed his eyes and let the weight of his head be fully supported by Nancy's lap. The quiet returned, and Nancy looked longingly at the bar for her cigarette. She pretended to take a puff and exhaled imaginary smoke onto the man in her lap.

"Why don't we go to Italy next," she suggested.

"Fellini's ruined Italy for me," Nicolas replied without opening his eyes.

“We could go to Milan and Naples—or to the north.” She paused, as if to think. “I’m sure there are beautiful boats over there. I’m sure there are similar harbors where they float as well.”

She looked down to his face, which did not look asleep, but rather in meditation.

“Are you all right, dear?” she asked.

“I’m fine. I’ll be fine.”

# Jaiden Davis

Grade 12, Blue Springs South High School

*Personal Essay & Memoir*



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## Empty Promises

Daddy's little girl never had a chance because he created such a mess way too early on; before she was aware that he left on free will. A daughter paying the price for her father's cowardly choice to leave his own flesh and blood behind. Commitment issues. She wants to love this man and let him in, but she is struggling. She can't love him, and she won't let him love her. Abandonment issues. She's sacrificing herself in ways a human being shouldn't be in hopes to not have to watch another man walk out of her life. She's paying a tremendous price all thanks to his choice. He won't ever see the magnitude of his decision to turn his back on his baby girl. And all she wanted to be was daddy's little girl.

As a child, I danced on the edge of my father's words, balancing between the sweetness of his assurances and the bitterness of his betrayals, a light waltz that shaped my perception of trust and resilience from a tender age.

He swore he'd take me to the amusement park for my 5th birthday, a place I'd dreamed of visiting for years. I clung to that promise, imagining the thrill of the rides and the joy of spending time together. But as the day approached, excuses began to pile up, each one chipping away at my anticipation until the day came and went, leaving me with nothing but disappointment and a growing sense of mistrust.

This was only the beginning. Each year, his promises grew more elaborate and his excuses more creative. There was one time he promised to teach me how to ride a bike, only to get distracted by his own pursuits, leaving me to struggle alone in the driveway. Or the time he swore he'd be there for my school play, a pivotal moment for me, and yet an empty seat in the audience was all that marked his absence. With each broken promise, my hope dwindled, replaced by a

growing skepticism. I learned to mask my disappointment, to pretend that his words didn't matter, but deep inside, they did. Each unfulfilled promise was a reminder of his unreliability, a testament to the gap between words and actions. It wasn't just the missed events or the broken commitments; it was the erosion of trust, the slow realization that I couldn't trust him. This pattern of deceit and neglect shaped my understanding of relationships, teaching me to guard my heart and question the sincerity of others. The lies and empty promises became the backdrop of my childhood, a constant reminder that words without actions are meaningless.

From a young age, I found myself under immense pressure due to my father's lack of truthfulness. Each commitment heightened my anxiety levels because I always knew it wasn't happening. Mentally, I struggled with feelings of insecurity and a constant fear of being let down, which affected my self-esteem and overall well-being. The long-term exposure to the hurt he caused undoubtedly shaped my psychological development, leaving a lasting impact on my ability to form relationships and manage stress effectively.

I needed my dad. But he didn't need me. The absence of a father, especially one who constantly lies and fails to fulfill his role, had a profound impact on me. My dad's unreliability created a void in my life, leaving me to navigate the complexities of growing up without the guidance and support a girl needs from her dad. The emotional turmoil of feeling abandoned gave me a deep sense of mistrust in others. I often find myself questioning my worth and struggling to understand why I wasn't deserving of his attention and honesty.

He was supposed to toss me into the air, catch me, and do it over and over again, give me piggyback rides when we were out running errands, and tell me that I wasn't allowed to have a boyfriend until I was 30. He has the title of being a father. But he never was a father. And I used to be so upset and angry. My hope eventually just ran out. Now, I have realized that being a father is a choice. Choosing to love your child is a choice. I wonder if I try to fix my lovers because I couldn't fix my father. He was broken; and I couldn't love him back together again.

# Devika Eluru

Grade 10, Parkway West High School

*Short Story*



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## The Seaside

The threads had never spun so perfectly. The teals were marbled with hues of gold throughout--just the correct amount of dye, a rare phenomenon. The morning sunlight filtered in through the woven tapestry curtains, onto the fibers, and you thought of how much it looked like that seaside--when the waves crashed along that beach, when the sun glinted on the waters like the touch of Midas--golden and beautiful, but with the power to sap everything with its saturation. It was a place you couldn't recall.

As the wheel spun, you continued to pinch the threads and pulled them along. They moved across the wheel, softly at first, unsure of who they were. But as you stepped on the pedal, they grew into themselves. It was just the pressure they needed to truly understand themselves, find a place amongst the millions of other fibers--to one day, intertwine into a creation you thought only Earth could conjure. The blurs of teals and golds would someday hold the greatest depths. They were all destined for a greater purpose it seemed. The like could not be said for you.

You continued the rhythmic spinning and pinching of the thread until it had become one big spool of seaside colors, with some of it spilling onto the wooden floors of the weaving chamber. You left it there. You needed to measure it anyway, before it could be woven. Your eyes went to the loom in the opposite corner, where there were still bits of thread from your last weaving. You had completed it yesterday, but of what it was..you couldn't remember. Yesterday seemed to meld into a haze of events. As did the day before, and the one before that. It was like a ritual now, and you didn't have it in you to feel the same fear and confusion you'd initially felt. When something happens for long enough,

your soul learns to weave that into itself. Whether that was a good or bad thing you were unsure, but that was all you seemed to feel as of late. Every day it seemed, you awoke to a new delirium. Every day as you sat in this room, questions seemed to arise...but it was rare you knew the answer to any of them. You were stuck here, with nothing but the spinning wheel and loom. The only thing you could truly do was weave. So, that is what you did. It was the only part of yourself you seemed to have left. But that seemed beyond impossible.

You walked across the chamber to where the loom was. The window was right next to it, and you pushed it open. The morning air was warm, beautiful, but there was also a slight chill to it that brushed your cheeks. You looked out, squinting. In the close distance, you could make out the lines of a sea. The same colors were still on the floor. You closed your eyes, trying to conjure an image. But you couldn't. Your mind wouldn't let you, and all that came were *bits and pieces* of a sea...but of one you *simply couldn't recall*. How could you create something that you didn't even remember? The only bits of inspiration you were given were taken away by the cruelty of your own mind. It was infuriating, frustrating, *tiring* because you hadn't a single clue as to what was happening. You'd been a weaver of worlds before this malady of forgetfulness took over you. When your fingers worked the loom, they'd once been able to create something so elaborate that one could almost hear the sounds of what you'd created, feel the textures. You'd built yourself up, and the estate you lived in was a testament to who you'd once been. It had arches and filigree and was composed to look like it was almost built into the sky, one with the natural world. But now, you were locked in this infinitesimal room, of this colossal house. And the key had been thrown by your own mind.

The disease had come knocking on the porch one day, slowly. And then, like an uninvited guest, it had walked deeper and deeper, ransacking and misplacing memories and thoughts til you were left the mess you currently felt. This chamber was that mess. From the spools on the floor from the previous days--or nights, you weren't sure--to the tapestry needles and measuring tools. But of course, as with everything else, you didn't know the threads of the thought tied to the tangible objects. Because you were just...here. Trapped. Wound in a tangle that could never be unraveled, completely meaningless, all *because you couldn't remember*. And that meant you were nothing to this world. But worse still, you didn't even know how to feel purpose, or what it meant. It was an abstract concept, one your mind struggled to comprehend as time passed in this tiny room.



You looked out the window once more. There were hills, rolling and deep, in the distance. Small cottages. A bustling marketplace. A few years ago, it was where you had sold your greatest works. The first had been a dancer. The lines and colors had captured her essence and movement so perfectly, everyone who passed your stall had stopped to stare in awe. You gave people the ability to feel things, and see things they otherwise would never experience quite the same again. That was what made you feel happy, *fulfilled*. But it was gone now. Your eyes followed from the marketplace to the sea again, lingering there. Even now, in this sunlight so bright it was almost blinding, it was easy to catch a glimpse of the waves. They were calm, yet outraged. Precise in their movements, yet so sporadic. They were contradicting and vexing in every way. You just couldn't understand why. Or what you'd even seen to be reminded of them. You felt an urge to mimic them in your medium, but it was all lost on you. *Who am I?*

You sat at the loom. You needed to do *something*; the longer you idled, the more it hurt your soul. *But what do I even do?* You looked at the floor, scanning the fibers. You spotted the threads of teals, blues, and golds. *The seaside*. You set aside the teal and blue, because they were the main colors. That's what you thought. The gold, you didn't need as much of. You ran your fingers over the gold thread, and stretched it out to about arms' length. On a typical day, you'd know it was nowhere near enough. But no day would ever be typical for you again, and so, this *had* to be enough--even if it meant running out before the piece was done.

It was time to begin. But, try as you might, your mind fumbled with the threads. You stared at the loom. It was familiar to your hands, but not to you. However, it was *you* who needed to understand this, because no matter how much your fingers remembered, they were futile without that part of your mind to guide them to create the fine details you needed. *So how were you supposed to craft anything if you didn't even know how to start?* Your head pounded with the illogicality of the predicament, and your heart, with the hopelessness of it all. You went under and over the strings of the loom, but it was so arbitrary and so baffling you felt obligated to unravel...only to go back and redo the same sections. What a Sisyphean task. You were condemned to this fate forever it seemed. And though eternity and torture were more concepts too abstract for you, they were the epitome of your situation. You were overwhelmed with emotions, but you didn't know how to grapple with any of them. Fisting the fibers in frustration, you looked down at the loom. You felt a liquid drip from your cheeks. *Rivulets of emotions. Tears*. But as with all else, you couldn't quite reach for those meanings

and words--just that they were there. You wiped the wetness away, and gazed around the room, a desperate attempt to find *any* clues on what to do.

It was then you realized that the window looking out was white and empty, and the brightness of earlier was gone. The clouds had started conquering the sky, and the light in your room was dulled. Dulled, but still bright enough for you to see your loom. There was a haze about everything, yet still enough clarity in the air for you to make out shapes and colors, but only a few of the basic ones. You turned back, and looked down at your work thus far--a nameless, shapeless blob. You didn't even remember what you were trying to create anymore. The rivulets fell harder, and they were pelting. Your heart pounded louder. It roared in your ears. In the dimming light, you again felt the striking need to make *something* out of all this nothingness...because what else were you supposed to do? You *physically* felt empty, and mentally...you *were*. You inhaled sharply, and closed your eyes. Suddenly, the sound of thunder pierced the air, and you jumped, shocked. *Loud*. Your ears were still ringing from that, when, before you could process anything else, you heard a deafening *crack*. A strange smell filled the air, as did a sizzling sound, and you felt yourself falling. You quite literally felt as if you were plummeting into the sea--because you were. You splashed into the water, and you didn't quite know how to put it into words...but the pain was horrid enough that if you'd been able to know, you would think you were struck by the lightning. You were in the water now. The coldness surrounded you, and you were amidst a struggling chaos. Above, the lightning struck again. The thunder boomed louder. Below, you floundered, struggling to move your hands and feet to swim through the tumult. You desperately reached out to the first thing that met your hand. It was a piece of your loom. The loom was massive enough that you could grip onto it to stay afloat. You fought to stay alive. It was instinct, but there was that one part of your mind--the one with what scraps of logic were left at all--that wondered, *Why did you fight?* One day, your mind would kill you, and it technically already was--slowly, torturously. Water was getting into your nose and mouth. You coughed uncontrollably, and your lungs burned. The world seemed to close in on you again, but that was nothing new. The key difference was that it was water now, the sea. The same sea that had been so calm earlier today, that you'd thought to have been touched by Midas. You didn't remember it, but that didn't mean it hadn't happened. The threads still on the loom from earlier were hazy, the fibers drenched in seawater. They were mingled together in a seemingly endless pattern, one that didn't make sense. You were exhausted. From the confusion. From the fighting. What were they *supposed* to

look like? A reflection of you, maybe. Who you'd once been. A reflection of the world around you? A tangible way the world changed you. Something elegant and simple. Or something so elaborate, it would take years to untangle the threads of its meaning. You didn't know. *Who were you?* The only answers that arose were fragments. It was all a mess. A confusing mess, that you could never remember no matter how hard you tried. You were in the sea. Endless. Wild. Unpredictable. Tumultuous. Just like your mind. As if on cue, there was another wave that crashed into you. It threw your body to the side. You struggled to keep your grip on the wood of the loom. It was the only thing that was even remotely keeping you afloat, because your body could no longer do anything for you. You were done. You could no longer do this. You were tired of wondering. You were sick of this endless struggle, where nothing--even your weavings felt meaningless...the very things you'd once cherished so deeply. Did even your creations mean *anything*, if none of them ever lasted? If you could never remember them again? The sea pummeled against you. And again, you were moved. You gripped the loom. The teal threads woven into it had shifted. They were blobs of absolutely nothingness. You stared at the shapes. You felt the sea toss you around. You heard the storm overhead, still pelting down. You looked into the water for anything to reach for. You were losing hope. You were dying. At sea. In a meaningless wasteland of confusion and fears and nothingness.

But then you saw it. A golden thread. By some miracle, it was still hanging off the loom. It was so small in the sea, but you'd somehow found it. You reached for it with your free hand, while the other held onto the loom. Perhaps it was the most foolish thing you'd ever done. You were dying at sea, and you were desperately reaching for a thread. A thread you didn't even remember. But it was also a desperate attempt to reach for *something*--*anything*--of familiarity, even if you were drowning. Maybe it was one of the few things left of you that made you feel normal, made you feel *human*. The golden thread was in your fingers now, and it glistened from the seawater. You let your hands do the work, the work they'd familiarized themselves with for the past years of your life. Your mind wandered, and you let it. For the first time, when death was *this* inevitable, maybe it was okay that you couldn't recall a single thing. This moment would have to be enough. And maybe it was, because when you looked down at your weaving, you saw the gold thread shining in the midst of the dark teals and blues of that seaside beach. It was so different from the works of your peak, which had all been of ethereality and detail and utmost beauty. But, in a way, this had more of you in it than any of your other weavings. It was hideous, but it was also raw. It was who

you were, and a true reflection of what you could create. And though more of your mind had been invaded than ever before, there was that sliver of it. A sliver that had contained someone who had loved the sea all those years ago:

*The sea was calm today. The waves kissed the shore softly, and you stood, mesmerized by the diamonds it seemed to contain. The waters were ephemeral, yet eternal--For a single moment, the waves reached out to the shore. They shifted the sands, so infinitesimally, but tangibly nonetheless. And then the waves went back to the sea. It was a short-lived moment, but each grain, despite being one out of billions, was moved by those waves. They were like people, the sands of time--they were the world. It didn't matter how transient the moment was. It was a moment nonetheless, one that still somehow changed everything. And that was beautiful. Maybe, one day, you could translate that into your art.*

It was still a place you couldn't completely recall. But you were okay with that. It didn't torture you anymore. Now, its teals and golds did indeed hold the greatest depths. At least, for you.

It had been so perfect, you didn't even have to cut the thread in the end. It had been just the right length after all. The darkness had never felt so light. The walls had never been so freeing. The sea was calm once again.

# Shreenik Enturi

Grade 11, Fort Zumwalt South

*Poetry*



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## Book Bans

How dare you silence the voices of the people?  
How dare you silence the ideas of the people?  
You limit our intellect  
so we can't understand your dialect.  
With the jargon, you confuse us  
in an attempt to hold us back  
from calling out your vicious lies.  
The fallacies of your arguments.  
You keep growing that same divide,  
when all we need to close the gap  
is a moment through their eyes,  
a moment provided by this ink on a page.  
How dare you control us  
so that we may not digress  
from the path that you set forth.  
We the people,  
shall not remain quiet.

We have seen your story play over and over,  
A story you continue to pull us into.  
This cyclical journey on your quest for power.  
We are crushed under the wheels of your chariot  
as you ride to the highest peaks.

May you never know  
the pain of being anything but you.  
We the people,  
dissent.

# Sam Fleischmann

Grade 10, Smithville High School

Educator: Amanda Collier

*Personal Essay & Memoir*



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## Before and After Dedication

To my circle.

“I cannot make you understand. I cannot make anyone understand what is happening inside me. I cannot even explain it to myself.” – Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis*

### Look Both Ways

“This is what I want: I want to grab my brother’s hand and run back through time losing years like coats falling from our shoulders.” – Jandy Nelson, *I’ll Give You The Sun*

Our hands are sweaty. Our legs are sun-tanned, and our skin is warm. It is 92 degrees. I have been here before. Every day. After school, Andrew walks me home. He goes underground. I pick Matt up from the bus stop. He goes upstairs. I am always in the middle. I am always in between. We are together. In the same house. But it has not been the same. Andrew is slower going home most days, especially when it’s mom’s week. I walk with him because we both feel alone. And Matt cries more. I sit with him because we both tend to overflow. I hide in my room more. Scared. I’m not sure what’s going to happen when I go out. We are together in our: fear, grief, anger, sadness, loneliness. We are together when we cross the street going to the playground. We always look both ways. Except during the yelling. We turn the other way. We are together at night when none of us can sleep. We tell stories of what life could be like. We are together when we don’t understand why we can’t go home. We sit on the steps. Sometimes we talk,

but most of the time we just lean on each other. Because it takes a lot of strength to keep going when there is always a wall. We are together. In the same house. But it has not been the same. Not after. Not since we don't understand each other. Our hands are sweaty from obligation. Our legs are sun-tanned from endless hours outside during arguments, and our skin is warm from memory. It is 92 degrees, and I can't breathe. I have been here before. Every day. After school. Andrew walks me home. He goes down. I pick Matt up from the bus stop. He goes up. I stay in the middle. We are together. In the same house. But it will never be the same.

## Banana Tree

“An invisible red thread connects those who are destined to meet, regardless of time, place, or circumstances. The thread may stretch or tangle, but it will never break.”

- unknown, *The Red Thread of Fate*

She is yellow. Bright. Like the center of a dandelion. Magical. You don't notice when she got there but if she were to ever leave you would feel empty. She fills a hole I didn't know I had. When she got here I couldn't tell you. But she has been here since the split. And she will be here after. She is my best friend. We sit in silence usually. It's hard to talk when we can't relate. I have been split in 4. My Banana Tree doesn't understand. She tries though. She takes notes for me when I'm too exhausted to stay awake. She helps me stay happy. Because she is yellow. Like the sun. Always there even when you can't see it. Before the split, we wouldn't be so silent. We would talk. A lot. About soccer, or thunderstorms. My Banana Tree loves thunderstorms. The kind with thunder that shakes the pictures on the walls, and lightning that makes your room so bright you can't tell the difference between day and night. She still loves soccer. But sometimes the players make her angry. After, I had a hard time speaking. My words would congeal in my throat trying to suffocate me. But my Banana Tree always knew what to do. She would turn on the TV and we would sit. And sometimes when my words weren't so thick I would talk. And even when I couldn't she was still there. And as we got older the words came easier. Now I talk more. We play Just Dance to pass the time. And because she is yellow. She is always there. Like the single light on a dead street. Guiding me through the dark.

## Court Shoes



“I feel like a rope in a tug-of-war, pulled between two worlds that both need me, but neither seems to see how much I’m fraying.” – unknown, *unknown*

I am split in 4. 4 unequal parts. Sometimes I am near the door. On the phone with my boss because I spend too much time working and not enough being present. Sometimes I am not here at all. Maybe I’m sick. Or tired. Or maybe I just can’t handle the stress of raising 3 kids all alone. Most of the time I’m alone. Packing my own bag for practice and snacks for after the game. Most of the time I am too far apart to remember where every piece of me is. Trying to figure that out just makes me sad. So I ignore it. But I always know where my court shoes are. They are always with me. An escape. A chance to run. The running makes me feel whole. I’m not very good though. But that’s okay because I am split in 4. I am not always here. But my court shoes make me whole. My escape makes me whole. They help me remember where I am. Even if my other parts aren’t here. I am. My mom is one part. My dad another. And my brother’s double. They used to go to every game. Every practice. But at some point, everyone got too tired. Too busy. Too separated. And today I am running. I am shooting. I am not all here. Today I am alone. And today the running doesn’t help. Honestly, it hasn’t helped for a while. Where’s my mom? Where’s my dad? Where are my doubles? Where are my court shoes?

## Prince

“There are two means of refuge from the miseries of life: music and cats.”

– Albert Schweitzer, *various works*

My daily routine. Come home. Put my bag down. Take a drink of water. And search. Where is he? Sometimes he’s under the stairs. Or on my clothes. Or in my room. Hiding in the closet. Even if I can’t find him I know he’s here. Especially when I’m sad. Or when we jump from house to house. Or when my parents are fighting. Especially then. He hates loud noises. And the cold. And summer. And wet food. He really doesn’t like wet food. I don’t see him very often during the day. Because the house is really loud. He hates loud noises. But at night when my parents have gone to sleep and the air is still. He comes scratching at my door. Crying. Sometimes he just wants food. But most of the time he comes to sit with me. Sometimes on the bed. Under the bed. In the closet. Or against the door. Listening. We both listen. We both hate loud noises. We sit. I sleep. He watches. He likes to loaf on my pillows. And my clothes. And against my arms. Because he’s a cat. A Prince. My pseudo protector. And he is always near. Maybe not in sight. But always in spirit. Always when I’m sad. He is my best friend. And he

makes the noise a little quieter. And fuzzier. And he is always near. Maybe not in sight. But occasionally I'll turn a corner and he'll be watching. By my door. Waiting. Because he knows we both don't like loud noises.

## Slam Poetry

"You can't always be the one who holds it all in. Sometimes you have to speak, but finding the right words is the hardest part." – various authors, *various works*

I don't like talking. I don't like forcing the words out. Keeping a straight face when he asks what's been happening after. 'nothing'. I feel small when I'm here. My pieces say it will get easier. That every time we go I'll feel better but I don't. I feel scared. What if he takes me away? What if he takes my doubles away? Or my Prince? My pieces say be truthful. Be honest. 'He's here to help'. But I can't. I grit my teeth and hope the words I'm saying aren't anything. I hope I'm saying nothing. But sometimes I can't help it. Sometimes the words don't come forced. But these words aren't from my brain. They're from my ribs. And my bruised arms. And my bent ankles. The ugly parts of my memory. And the sad parts of my heart. These are the words that I choke down. These are the words that make it impossible to speak. They are vile. And cruel. And sad. And terribly, terribly small. These words get stuck in my throat. Scraping my lungs and lodging in my chest. They pull tears from my eyes. And headaches. Always headaches. The kind that makes me stay in my bed for hours. But he says that's just depression. That makes me feel small. 'This is a safe space. Everything you say here stays here.' But these words won't stay here. I carry them with me everywhere. Would it be different? If I said them out loud? Because they want to come out. They are constantly slamming against my ribs. And my red arms. And my bent ankles. They are waiting for their chance. Will it get easier if I stop choking them down? Will it get easier if I let them slam into poetry?

## Deep Breath(s)

"But my anxious heart is eating up my body, eating up my nerves, eating up my brain. I feel this poison slowly filling my veins – every particle becoming slowly tainted...I am never, never calm, never for an instant." – Katherine Mansfield,

*The Diaries of Katherine Mansfield*

Sometimes I can't breathe. Doctors say it's because my brain scares me. But that doesn't make sense. How can my brain scare me? Aren't we the same thing? My mom says no. That sometimes people are born scared. Or their brains get scared and never forget what that feels like. That makes sense. Sometimes I

think I was born scared. Scared of the ocean. Of cars. Of loud noises. And ghosts. And especially people. And their voices. And their hands. Of what their hands can do. Because sometimes I can't breathe. Especially when people grab my shoulders. It makes my head hurt. My chest tight. And sometimes I cry. But it's just cause my brain is scared. Some people say our bodies hold the memory of past traumas. But I don't have any trauma. I'm just scared. And I'm just scared when people yell. And when they push. And when they squeeze too tight during hugs. I'm just scared. There is nothing wrong with being scared. But sometimes I wake up scared. And I can't get out of bed. Because my arms are heavy. And my head is swimming. My chest is tight. I can't breathe. Doctors say the best thing to do is try breathing exercises. But if I can't breathe how does that make sense? On those days I lay there. And do what the doctors say. And it doesn't always help. But knowing I can actually breathe does. And it's not because I'm scared. It's because my brain is scared. And because sometimes people are just born scared. But most of the time they are just made scared.

# Sam Fleischmann

Grade 10, Smithville High School

Educator: Amanda Collier

*Critical Essay*



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## How Religion and Philosophy Shape Statecraft

This paper will argue the effects of religion and philosophy on statecraft in classical civilizations and how they were used to justify political and social acceptance as well as persecution when it came to public opinion of the government. It will outline how the execution of Greek philosopher Socrates under the Athenian government was a reaction to a possible shift in public opinion towards the Athenian government, as well as Tiberius Gracchus and the effect Confucius and his teachings, had on statecraft and the reestablishment of social normalities in classical China.

The Gracchan reforms, proposed by Roman aristocrat Tiberius Gracchus, help to solidify my argument that religion and philosophy were used to justify social and political acceptance/persecution because it clearly outlines the governments of classical civilizations' commitment to staying in control and the lines they would justify crossing to keep it; and the things they would choose to accept. The Gracchan reforms focused on two main things: land redistribution and social equality. In the aspect of land redistribution, his efforts are especially represented in the Lex Sempronia Agraria which aimed to enforce the pre-existing limit on public land ownership and help redistribute that excess land back to the poorer and landless citizens. In the aspect of social equality, his efforts are especially represented in his attempts to address the widening gap between the wealthy elite of classical Rome and the poverty-stricken masses. Tiberius' goal was to challenge the traditional power structures of Roman society while advocating for reforms that would give the poor a more fair and beneficial standing. Meanwhile, his efforts were met with dedicated resistance from the Senate and ruling elite, who viewed his policies as a threat to their dominance.

The philosophical groundwork of his reforms, rooted in concepts of fairness and justice, were used by his supporters to rally public opinion, portraying his actions as morally righteous and aligned with the greater good, however, his opponents used traditional Roman values and the already established hierarchies to paint his reforms as dangerous and destabilizing. This use of philosophical and intense campaigns, from both sides, highlights how ideological frameworks could be used both to justify social progress and persecution. Tiberius Gracchus's eventual assassination displays the limits of acceptance within the Roman political system, revealing a willingness to cross moral boundaries to maintain control.

The Gracchan reforms serve as a clear example of how religion and philosophy in classical civilizations were weaponized to justify actions that shaped public opinion, often determining whether figures like Gracchus were seen as upholders of democracy or threats to social order.

The Analects of Confucius is a collection of teachings that emphasize moral virtues, social harmony, and the obligations and responsibilities of rulers and citizens. In classical China, these ideas shaped governance by justifying political authority through the "mandate of heaven" and reinforcing social hierarchies based on respect and loyalty. These principles influenced public opinion, acceptance of authority while marginalizing unacceptance, and illustrating how philosophy shaped political and social structures in classical civilizations.

Confucian teachings were extremely effective in maintaining control of social order by promoting a moral framework that linked moral responsibility with government requirements. The *Mandate of Heaven* didn't just validate the elite's power but also established a religious acceptance to perform their duties and uphold the welfare of their people. This course of blind acceptance created a philosophical societal rationale when it came to the acceptance of authority during times of peace. In a way, Confucian philosophy served as both a stabilizing force and a weapon for political responsibility.

Coincidentally, the rigid social hierarchies adapted by Confucianism reinforced the existing class system at the expense of marginalized groups. This expectation of social structure and acceptance of authority extended beyond the political realm and into familial settings; individuals were encouraged to prioritize obedience and duty over personal ambition or distaste. Those who challenged these structures were branded as disruptors of harmony and order, facing exclusion or persecution as a result.

This tandem application of Confucian principles expresses how philosophy could be wielded to shape public opinion and ensure total government acceptance by framing authority as morally justified and resistance as inherently destructive. Confucian ideals provided a powerful tool for maintaining control while suppressing opposition. These social dynamics outline the broader role of philosophy in classical civilizations, where it functioned not only as a guide for ethical living but also as a means to legitimize political and social hierarchies, often under the guise of moral and societal balance.

*Plato's Apology* recounts Greek philosopher Socrates' defense during his trial in Athens, where he argues that his philosophical inquiry, guided by a divine mission from the oracle at Delphi, was aimed at improving the city's moral and intellectual well-being, despite being perceived as a threat to Athenian democracy. Socrates' claim to divine authority directly challenged the status quo by questioning the moral and intellectual integrity of Athenian leaders and citizens; he encouraged individuals to question their beliefs and strive for personal virtue. Socrates sought to improve the democratic system by promoting a more self-aware and ethical society. However, his commitment to philosophical inquiry was seen as disruptive to a society that valued cohesion and public order.

The Athenian government's response to this disruptive behavior was by framing Socrates as a danger to the state, accusing him of corrupting the youth and disrespecting the gods. These charges gathered both religious and political sentiments and, in the end, justified his trial and execution, painting his philosophical mission as a threat to the democratic fabric of Athens. The Athenian government's ability to portray dissent and questioning as corruption, the government was able to rally public opinion against Socrates, ensuring his removal while maintaining the appearance of moral and civic righteousness.

His trial and death, therefore, symbolize the extremely delicate balance between intellectual freedom and societal stability, showing how religion and philosophy in classical civilizations could be used to justify both the acceptance of authority and the persecution of opposing voices.

The connection between religion, philosophy, and statecraft in classical civilizations reveals how these ideologies were used both to justify political and social acceptance and to marginalize disagreement.

In ancient Rome, the Gracchan reforms outlined how philosophical ideals of fairness and justice could be, and were, weaponized for social progress while simultaneously provoking fierce opposition. Tiberius Gracchus's attempts to fairly redistribute land and promote equality were met with violent resistance

from the ruling elite and his efforts were framed as a threat to the stability of the republic. This event demonstrates how philosophy could inspire public acceptance of democratic principles while also providing justification for the persecution of reformers, in this specific situation, to maintain the existing power structures.

In classical China, Confucianism outlined the dual role religion and philosophy had in shaping governments. The *Mandate of Heaven* provided the moral foundation for political authority by showcasing rulers as divinely chosen, but only if they properly performed their duties as governing authority, ultimately creating blind acceptance when it came to political authority. They also reinforced social harmony by emphasizing the people's obligation to obedience and the fulfillment of societal roles. However, these same teachings depicted those who opposed as possible disruptions to the cosmic and moral balance. This dynamic reveals how philosophy was used not only to uphold societal hierarchies in classical China but also its ability to suppress opposition under the guise of preserving stability and ethical governance.

In Athens, Plato's *Apology* outlines the tedious relationship between philosophy and democracy. Socrates' commitment to questioning authority and encouraging self-reflection and free thought, fueled by his divine mission from the oracle at Delphi, was focused on improving the moral and intellectual foundations of Athenian democracy. But, his critiques and oppositions of societal norms and political leaders were perceived as a threat to the state; the Athenian government's accusations of impiety and corruption reveal how religion and public sentiment were used to legitimize his trial and execution. Socrates' fate depicts how intellectual challenges to authority could be suppressed under the pretext of defending democratic, religious, and societal values.

When viewed together, all three of these events each highlight the complex connection, and effect, that religion and philosophy had on the political and social landscapes of classical civilizations. As seen in Rome, China, and Athens, these ideologies established authority and social structures that lacked fair benefit, while also persecuting those who had questions or sought to challenge the status quo. Ultimately this paper outlined the dual use of these ideologies to display their influence in classical statecrafts and demonstrate how religion and philosophy were valuable tools for both acceptance and suppression within the democracies of classical civilizations.

# Calixte Fox

Grade 12, David H. Hickman High School

*Poetry*



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## Incarnate

My roommate was a vampire.  
After she died, I never saw her again  
But I felt her.  
She was the chill in the air in my summer-soaked room,  
the shadows I swore I saw in the dead of night,  
the shift in my sleep schedule that moulded me into a near-nocturnal being  
awaiting her cold, reassuring hand on my shoulder.  
You know, now that I think about it, I never explicitly asked her to move in with  
me.  
I never knew her well, and I never saw her during the day.  
I'd usually see her fast walking in the night,  
determined to reach her destination.  
Before she moved in, I saw her more and more often, and she'd walk slower to say  
hi to me.  
I think she got attached  
...by the teeth.  
She drained my social battery,  
and life force.  
Sucked me dry until I didn't spend time with anyone but her.  
But I grew to appreciate her presence.  
I thought after her death, I'd find solace,  
that I'd no longer be haunted by my imagined impression of her looming face in  
the mirror,  
the coincidental cold spot that'd be left behind,



and the empty pit left in my soul.  
I searched tirelessly for any remnant of what remained of her.  
I followed the path she'd take every night and was drawn to the fields at the end  
in which many others lay.  
But I watched as the moonlight beamed,  
and bended just so on his tomb.  
One night, I knelt down and told him my woes  
and he listened in earnest.  
I never returned to that place again,  
but walking that path became part of my nightly routine  
walking the same path, but the opposite way,  
or so I thought.  
He offered to show me another path  
to help break from the pattern.  
I followed him blindly into the depths of the night,  
drawn into a void of eternal slumber  
and bliss.  
He asked me to move in with him,  
which was a welcome change of pace.  
But his place was dull and barren,  
so of course I decorated.  
I made myself at home;  
covered the concrete with carpet and cast away the cobwebs.  
But no amount of light I brought would ever last for long,  
as I've found that joy is only temporary when it comes to fiends following dusk.  
I wasn't mad I had to return to my house;  
it felt cold and desolate.  
My roommate had been long gone,  
but it seemed with her she had taken my being.  
I tried so hard to preserve it,  
but he had drank up whatever was left.  
Maybe they're related.  
She still lingers,  
I can trace her scent through the halls  
and where they float around the mirror.  
I adopt her mannerisms  
and I do not trust the light.

I stay stuck before the mirror  
in that familiar cold spot,  
stranded in the glass,  
standing behind all else who come  
to guide them on their way.

# Beckett Friedman

Grade 12, Parkway Central High School

Educator: Jason Lovera

*Personal Essay & Memoir*



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## Jew-ish

*How do you want religion to present itself within your life?*

This question remained at the heart of my religious journey throughout my childhood. Growing up with a Christian mom and a Jewish dad has provided me with a multitude of perspectives that others do not have access to; the most important being the heightened ability to question the direction in which I wanted my religion to go. While this sentiment may not have presented itself as an issue in my younger years, age has shifted my beliefs, and non-beliefs, regarding the idea of God.

Beginning after my Bar Mitzvah, I gained the idea of religious free will as discussed in *Paradise Lost*. When Raphael travels down to Eden to warn Adam and Eve of Satan's temptation, he also mentions that Adam and Eve have a choice in worshiping God. Raphael states "freely we serve, / Because we freely love, as in our will / To love or not; in this we stand or fall" (Milton 5.538-540). In providing Adam and Eve with free will, God gives them an option in whether to worship him, a key reason for the existence of free will. However, before this conversation, worshiping God is all Adam and Eve have ever known, and therefore the prospect of not worshiping God has never crossed their minds. The idea that religion is built upon faith and thus free will, is a notion that I developed sooner than most, as a result of my multicultural upbringing.

Most of the time, these questions regarding religious pursuit could be silenced while at gatherings and services. However, one experience presented a new intersection; one of my future career and religious beliefs, one I could not ignore.

Every year, the synagogue my family attends holds a trip for sophomores, in which they fly to Washington DC, and speak to Congresspeople on issues aligning with the Jewish faith. For me, this opportunity could not have come at a

worse time, as politics and religion were ideas I wanted as far from each other as possible. On one hand, I wanted to explore the realm of politics for a place in my future; while on the other, I had yet to decide how, or if, I wanted religion to appear in my future. The idea of this trip scared me- would I be taken seriously in my desired field, speaking on a platform I did not align with? While the prospect of the trip worried me, I knew that my parents would understand my concerns, and respect my decision to abstain from the trip.

“You’re going. The deposit is sent, the decision is made.” My mom declared firmly as we walked out of the informational meeting.

Time slowed, and her words slurred. I shrunk down into my 5-year-old’s body and relieved all of the decisions made for me in my past. I knew that no matter how much I pouted, yelled, or screamed, the decision was truly set in stone; whether I liked it or not.

Discovering the fate that awaited me, I encountered a similar horror, to when Oedipus uncovered his own destiny in *Oedipus Rex*. As the shepherd reveals the truth regarding Oedipus and his fated conclusion, Oedipus cries “O god- / all come true, all burst to light! / O light- now let me look my last on you!” (Sophocles, 1306-1308). While Oedipus was completely fated to the conclusion of committing incestual parricide, his story did not end there, and therefore neither does mine. While fated to our separate conclusions, the most important individual action that can be taken, as Walter Agard’s third freedom states, is the response to the conclusion (Agard, 124). For Oedipus, this sliver of free will meant an attempt at redemption for his previous actions, though heavy remorse and a desire to receive punishment for actions outside of his control. For me, however, I first need to realize that this crucial constraint on fatalism exists.

Each day leading up to the trip repeated like Groundhog Day. Weeks were marked by futile squabbles and arguments never taken to heart.

“I am old enough to decide the ways I want religion to appear within my life, and this is not one of them.” I stated while sitting around the table with my parents.

“Is this trip not exciting for your future goals?” My parents questioned back.

Every conversation illuminated their lack of understanding. With adulthood and full autonomy on the horizon, I found necessary decision-making experience stripped away.

As the countdown to my trip dwindled, I dropped further and further into despair. With my future events determined, any actions I took now became futile.

As Robert Sapolsky puts it in his book *Determined*, “We are not captains of our ships; our ships never had captains” (Sapolsky 386). In Sapolsky’s eyes, every decision is made based on the genes or situation that an individual was born into, and therefore decisions are determined by factors completely outside one’s control. While the physical situation of embarking on the trip remained completely outside of my control, I felt as if my beliefs regarding the trip also determined my experience. On route to a predetermined destination, I solidified myself as a powerless passenger on the journey.

“Gate E20. Don’t forget it.” My mom stated in a worried tone while I inched closer to the security line. At this point, distancing myself from the people who sentenced me to this determined event became more important than accelerating the start of the trip.

Reflection and disdain filled the 2-hour flight as I completed the schoolwork I missed due to the trip. I looked around the plane cabin at my peers; *did everyone else but me voluntarily choose to be here?* Landing in D.C., not only was this question confirmed, but all my suspicions of the trip were realized. It felt like everything subjected to me on the first night included either an idea I did not agree with or an event I did not want to be involved in. As my head hit the pillow later that night, I thought about my parents and dug deeper into their motivation to send me on this trip. *Did they have a reason?*

Similarly, many ask God for a reason when bad things occur within our world. Most ask if death and destruction are necessary, and if so, why? In his article “Why Does God Allow Evil?”, Richard Swinburne discusses this idea at length, both defending and explaining God’s decision to allow both moral and natural evils. Concerning Natural evil, Richard states “The pain gives up the opportunity to perform good actions...The actions which natural evil makes possible are ones which allow us to perform at our best and interact with our fellows at the deepest level” (Swinburne 31). God allows evil, to provide the opportunity for good to occur as a response to this evil. Although I did not know it yet, this same idea applies to my parent’s decision to make this trip a determined event within my life. For me to flourish on and off of this trip, the allowance of adverse effects is necessary to promote positive responses.

As politics slowly gained abundance within the trip’s itinerary, I could not help but wish that the premise of the trip was different. The ideas of religion and politics were both inseparable from the identity of the trip, and that meant I either enjoyed the trip with both present or rejected it altogether. In my eyes, the determined nature of my place on the trip also determined the ideas behind the

trip. If I was determined to go on the trip, religion, and politics both had to be a part of my experience. The trip existed as a black hole to my free will, creating an atmosphere in which either all free will or all determinism existed, with no in between. However, as I would soon learn, both of these ideas have the ability to, and already do, exist within the same world.

On the final night of the trip, the leaders tasked the group with writing speeches for the culminating event of the trip; speaking to the team of Missouri Senators and Representatives on political issues tied to the Jewish religion. Simultaneously, this cumulative task embodied all of the factors I held contempt for while on the trip. This was a once-in-a-lifetime experience, one that was perfect for an individual interested in policy, and yet it was tainted by my inability to respond positively to a situation in which I had no control.

I typed away at my speech; attempting to make it as weak as possible as an act of remorse towards the trip. While I wrote, I could not stop thinking about my parents, and the question that plagued me ever since the first night. *Why would they send me on this trip?*

With satisfaction, I added the final period to my work. I glanced at the speech for a few seconds, then deleted it all.

Reading my writing over again, I realized an idea hiding in plain sight. I may have not chosen to take this trip, but how I act on the trip is completely up to me. While an event may be determined to occur, this is separate from the way in which I experience the event. As Bruce Waller writes in his article “There’s No Such Thing As Free Will”, “we should focus on our ability, in any given setting to generate a wide range of options for ourselves...In his view, free will and determinism are not the opposites they are often taken to be; they simply describe our behavior at different levels” (Waller 74). If I cannot change the contents of the words I will say, why should I place all my focus on them? I can separate the determined outcome and contents of my trip, from the response I have as a result. I realized that I am only determined to be on the trip, not act a certain way while on it.

Taking this realization to heart, I added back in the required aspects of my speech; only this time, filled the gaps with ideas that would help me gain the experience I desired from this opportunity. I fell asleep that night confident that the determined nature of the trip would not impact the way in which I experienced the final day.

The final morning started better than all the others. Not only did my newfound free will impact big events like the meeting with Congresspeople, but my overall

attitude as well. I knew that whether I acted happy or sad did not affect the trip's length or existence, so I decided to be happy.

Walking up and down Capitol Hill, I marveled at this place that until today, only existed within my dreams.

Entering the conference room, speech in hand, I felt like Adam and Eve as they walked through Eden after exiting the Garden. With an uncontrollable fate occurring, they decided to work together, knowing whatever choice they made would not change the fact that they sinned. "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.12.646-649).

As I opened my mouth to give my speech I was calm; but more importantly, I was in control.

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## A Grave for Nikita Vasilyev

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

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

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

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

...



A third coughing fit strikes Brett as she latches the door of her flat behind her. She sits on the thin carpet, leans against the door, and coughs until her chest and throat ache. She stands unsteadily and washes more black liquid from her skin. The water barely warms her freezing hands, and she tosses a damp dish towel onto the weathered countertop of her tiny kitchenette after drying them.

She steps out to the small balcony – no bigger than a coat closet – and grimaces at the sharp scent of cigarettes from below, as she begins to light one of her own. A flash of orange hair within the crowd on the street catches her attention, and she nearly drops her cigarette in her rush to get away from the edge of the balcony. An unfamiliar face appears from behind the fluffy head of ginger. Not Alina. Not a Vasilyev.

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

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

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

...

The dead trees in the park reach toward Brett with scraggly fingers, and the leaves they've shed crunch under her boots. She holds her arms tightly around herself, periodically having to stop and brace herself against more coughing. Her frame shakes as she wheezes, fighting to fill her lungs with the cold autumn air.

She slips through a small gap in the brush at the back of the park, making her way down a long-forgotten, overgrown gravel path. An equally neglected church sits at the end, its floorboards rotting in tandem with Brett's soul. They

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

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

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

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

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

# Gabe Garcia

Grade 10, Timberland High School

Educator: Andrea Dubitsky

*Flash Fiction*



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## A New Life

“Really funny joke, dude,” I told Ryan.

“What’d I do?” Ryan said, seeming clueless as to why I was starting to freak out.

“Why’d I just have 5 people asking why I did something to Ava?”

“What did you do with her?”

“NOTHING! THAT’S THE PROBLEM!”

“Geez, Matt. Wha’s up with you right now?”

“People are saying I SA’d Ava, ‘n we never even did nothin’ together!”

“I believe you, but’s there any proof of you bein’ innocent?”

*At least Ryan believes me.*

“No, but there ain’t any proof of me bein’ guilty, either.”

“Then you should be fine.”

“Yeah, e’rybody should believe me.”

Oh boy, was I wrong. Oh, I was so very very wrong.

I arrived at school right after our spring break, wanting to catch up with some of my guys I haven’t seen in a while.

“That’s weird,” I said in my head – and might have said out loud. *They all just dipped on me.* I looked up after putting my airpods in, and what I saw honestly scared me.

“What the...”

Every pair of eyes in the school was on me. Every person in my view was staring right at me. There were a few groups pointing and whispering, as if saying something about me. *Yeah, I’m gettin out of here,* I said to myself.

“Whatever.”

My phone starts to shake in my pocket. Ryan is calling me, and my SnapChat is exploding

*Why is Ryan calling me? It's 8 in the morning, and he doesn't even go here.*

“Dude, this is real bad. Real real bad.”

“What up man?”

“People in my school are talking about you. What you did.”

“Geez, dude. I never did anything.”

“I know, that’s the problem. We gotta find a way to pro–” Ryan exclaims, as my teacher starts yelling at me for being on my phone.

“Hollup, I’m gettin’ yelled at. I’ll talk to ya later.”

The first half of the day flies by. Nobody talks to me, and all eyes are on me. *I really don't like this.* Lunch rolls around, and here is where stuff gets real.

“Matt, get away from us, bro,” Aiden says. *I've known this group of guys all my life. Why don't they like me anymore? It better not be that stupid 'SA' crap that Ava pulled.*

“I never did anything. Why are y’all so pressed?”

“Do you want to get away and maybe live, or come any closer to us and see what happens when we find a rapist?”

“Y’all, I swear I never did anything, bro. Y’all don’t have any proof, anyway.”

“All the proof we need is a defenseless person’s voice. You’re nothing to us anymore. Nothing but a big pile of scum. So you can leave. Now.”

*I had just discovered that my life was now flipped completely upside down.*

# Chase Gillett

Grade 8, Parkway West Middle School

Educator: Tracy Bouslog

*Personal Essay & Memoir*



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## Finally I'm a Hunter

"We are ready. Start walking through the woods. Be loud," my dad told my papaw as he hung up the phone, "Alright Chase, get your gun on the fence and be ready to fire at the first thing you see." I steadied my rifle on the barbed wire fence. *I finally might get to shoot one.* We were about 300 yards away from the road to our left. There was a patch of wood down a small hill in a ravine about 50 yards in front of us. We could hear the leaves crunching underneath my brother and my grandpa. *Yes, good job guys,* I thought. The reason we wanted them to be loud is so that they would scare all the deer and they would hopefully run away from them and right out in front of me. After 30 seconds of my brother and papaw stomping through the woods, there were already 5 deer in the field right in front of me. *Yes! I get a chance to get one.*

"Make your choice. Which everyone you want, you take," my dad told me. In the past, I had just sat in the woods with my dad. No gun in hand. Just watching and listening to my dad to learn how to do it all. That's how I knew to think of looking for the buck immediately. The year prior, a group of deer about 75 yards was in front of us. My dad shot at one, and once he knew he hit one, he started talking to me. He was teaching me his thought process.

"Chase, when you get out here next year and see a group of deer, always look for the buck first."

"Ok!" I responded. I was super happy for him that he got it, but I was also jealous. I wished that I was able to shoot it and not him. I looked through them and immediately thought: *are there any bucks?* I looked at all the heads of the deer and not one of them had antlers. *Dang, no antlers,* I thought. *Ok, if there are no bucks, then which ones are the biggest?* The one closest to me was the biggest. So I

had to take a shot. I lined up my shot. BOOM! The deer winced and dropped its head. It picked its head up and ran through the field. Within seconds, all the deer were gone. I was fairly certain I hit that deer. All we had to do was go to where I shot it and follow the blood trail. Wherever it leads us will be where the deer fell and bled out. This would prove me wrong. Where I shot her, there was 0 blood. Not anywhere, not where she was when I shot, and not where she ran off to. I missed.

“Are you sure there is no blood? I had to have hit her. She stumbled and everything,” I said, aggravated.

“No, there is no blood. I don’t know bud I thought you hit her too,” my dad responded. *Come on, Chase, you can not miss that shot. It was so easy. Anyone could have hit that. Do I suck that bad?* I was so embarrassed because everyone knew how easy of a shot it was. But I had to move on. If I did not and I thought about this too long, it could have easily affected my next shot. We got in our respective vehicles. My dad and I were in our side by side. My grandpa, my brother, and Bob were in his silver truck. We drove to our normal spot, behind an old abandoned house that had pretty much fallen at this point. It had a vast field in the backyard that my family used for cattle. We just went back there for breakfast. My grandpa would get a portable gas-powered stove top and would make eggs, bacon, hash browns, biscuits, and gravy. Even if I don’t know that he is cooking yet, I always can tell as soon as I smell the propane ignite the gas-powered stove. This is one of my favorite places to go and hunting is one of my favorite things to do. I would do this every day if I had the chance. After breakfast, we went back to our trailer, where we unloaded the things we did not need from Papaw’s truck and proceeded to have Dad and me get on a four-wheeler and drive around for a while for fun. Right around 1 PM, we got dressed again and set out to our spots to hunt. This night was a night where I was exhausted. So I fell asleep when we got to our spot and sat down briefly. I rested against a tree. When my dad saw 2 deer walking down into the ravine to our left, he woke me up.

As he was waking me up, he was whispering, “There is a deer. Do not move fast.” I was lucky enough to hear and be able to wake up fast enough to understand what he was saying. I looked over to the deer and sure enough, there were 2 nice meaty does walking right in front of us. I moved to the other side of the tree very slowly, where we had set down our guns. I moved as quietly as I could, trying to avoid leaves. Once I had gotten to the gun, I picked it up and looked down at the deer. *They are still there.* I dropped to a knee and tried to line up my shot. Since I had just woken up and it was 30 degrees, my hands were

shaking. I could not get a good lined-up shot. *Oh well, all I can do is do my best.* I tried my hardest to steady my hands. It did not work. I had to try to time it up to where my hands shook and brought the gun to the vital organs of the deer. As soon as I saw the gun lined up with the deer, I fired. BOOM! The deer took off running away from us. I might have hit it, I thought.

“Did I hit her?” I asked my dad with a shaky voice.

“No. No, you did not. I’m pretty sure you missed by 2 feet,” my dad jokingly. *Dang it. I have had 2 easy shots, and you missed both. What are you doing, Chase?* By that time it was time to leave anyway, so we packed everything up and took off to the side by side. At like 10 PM that night, we had the 2 guys who did the farming over to our camper. I was tired, so I went to lie down in Bob’s bed in the back of the camper and play on my phone. But as soon as I lay down in that bed with the heavy, warm blanket over top of me, I fell asleep.

The next morning I got woke up and was wondering why I was in Bob’s bed. Once my dad told me what happened, all I could do was laugh. Bob gave me trouble the entirety of the time that we were all getting ready to get back out into the woods. Once we all got dressed and the adults got their coffee in their thermoses, we set out. My dad and I were going to the same place as yesterday. We call it The Anderson Place. It is where the biggest deer have been seen. We went to this spot where there was a horseshoe-shaped ravine right down a small hill. All of it was wooded, so they had cover. It was the perfect place to hunt. All I could think the whole time we were sitting there was, *Do not blow another chance.* I was 0 for 2 and determined to kill the next one I saw. I was on high alert, listening and looking for everything.

After about 1 hour of sitting, we saw something. A deer! *I get another chance. Don’t blow it. Don’t blow it.* I snuck to the other side of the tree to grab my gun. Once I grabbed it, I came back around. Yes! It was still there. I snuck back around the tree and took 2 steps to my right to make sure that any twigs could not affect the path of the bullet. I got to a knee. Took a deep breath. Lined up the shot. *Don’t blow it! Don’t blow it!* BOOM!

I was so scared to look. I hoped that she was going to be lying there dead, but what if she was not? What if she was running away, and we were going to have to walk forever to track her? Or even if I missed it completely. It dropped immediately, only kicking its hind legs. I paralyzed it. I hit the spine and paralyzed her front side. My dad grabbed his gun and put another shot through it to end her suffering. It was the best feeling of my life. I was so happy I finally got

my deer. I sprinted down to her to make sure she was dead. She was. Finally, after 3 years of watching my dad hunt and after 2 failed attempts, I did it.



# Olivia Gilliam

Grade 8, Basehor-Linwood Middle School

Educator: Erin Tegtmeier

*Personal Essay & Memoir*



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## How Your Life Can Change in an Instant

It was just a normal day of me going to school and not thinking anything about how my dad was getting a check up that day. I came home, but nobody was home, so I thought that was very unusual because I have a huge family. However, I just brushed it off and didn't think about it and went to the park with my friends. I ended up texting my mom and asking her where she was; she wasn't responding which was not normal. I finally got a text at 4:03 pm, not knowing that my whole life was about to change.

I started reading my mom's text, and my heart dropped; I started panicking because it was the scariest moment of my entire life. My mom's text said: "At the hospital with dad. His test this morning didn't go too well and he has to have surgery on his heart. He will be in the hospital for a while." After reading the text, I didn't even know that open heart surgery was a thing until then. I started researching things about the surgery, and my mouth just dropped. After I was done researching I just couldn't stop thinking about how I could lose my dad. On February 26th, it was the day of his surgery, and we were all saying goodbyes and good luck. When it was finally my turn, I didn't realize this could be the last moment I would see my dad and talk to him. I hugged him, and he whispered in my ear, "I love you, Olivia." I could just hear the fear in his voice; in fact, it repeats in my head still. I never wanted to let go because I never knew if I was going to lose my best friend and dad at the same time.

The surgery took eight hours, and every minute felt like an hour. I tried to get it off my mind, so we started playing crosswords to pass the time and keep occupied. My aunt works at the hospital, and I couldn't sit still so I went home with her to get it off my mind. For the rest of the night, I played with my cousin,

until finally, my aunt came down with good news. She said the surgery went great, and nothing went wrong.

I finally got some sleep, and my mom let me stay home the next day so I could go see my dad when I woke up. I saw him, and he was still kind of loopy and medicated so he was saying some pretty funny things. I was just glad that I got to see my dad again, and he was very glad that he could see his family and friends. He stayed in the hospital for about four more days to make sure everything was going well. He was so happy to be home with his family and sleep through the whole night.

Now my dad is physically doing well and eating healthy. He goes on two mile walks everyday to keep his heart healthy and strong. My dad gets check ups every two weeks, and recently his check ups have been great. He can finally go up the stairs and do his daily tasks without being out of breath. Make sure you take care of yourself and keep your loved ones close because you never know what could happen in an instant.

# Paloma Greim

Grade 11, St. Teresa's Academy

*Poetry*



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## The Twenty-Year Blizzard

we heave the danger off of our glittered driveway  
so my mom can come home  
the scrap-metal shovel bending    further each  
square foot rescued, the self-truce i lost in vermont  
for twelve grapes gone minutes    after midnight,  
sonoma coast one bed more  
expensive, the strange neighbor just as cold  
across the street-  
    tonight, my father's carefully strung lights glow  
inexact beneath the damage,  
the other house minutes away.  
i ask her why we couldn't prepare for this,  
and she asks why i bear it    with my whole body  
    look at how  
the wind whips her twice as hard as the rest of us,  
this martyr of her own storm, see how she honks  
goodbye and gets stuck on her way out  
on the same exact  
patch of snow.

Alex Greuloch

Grade 9, John Burroughs School

Educator: Megan Zmudczynski

Critical Essay



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## The Death of Individuality

Many believe that structure and civilization intrinsically equate to safety, prosperity, and peace for any given society, and individuality apart from civilization leads to darkness and chaos. However, William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* explores the horrors of structured civilizations in which leaders are given ultimate authority over a population and how tyrants who are left politically unchecked harm their civilians. This topic is of the utmost importance to us as *Lord of the Flies* brings to light the significance of critical thinking regarding leaders and government. In a society often influenced by misinformation and the ignorance of a collective groupthink, it is a crucial ability to think independently and understand when ruling bodies have grown too harmful to civilians. William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* reveals to us that while man strives to create an egalitarian, peaceful society, the reliance on strong political leaders will lead to a disastrous transition into a totalitarian state, which will inevitably harm its civilians.

The boys possess an inexplicable urge to establish civilization and feel at first that a chief will ensure productivity and safety within their island. We see Golding alluding to the order-driven nature of the man at the beginning of the book. When deciding the leader of their new society, a factor driving the littluns' opinion is, "most obscurely, yet most powerfully, there was the conch. The being that had blown that, had sat waiting for them on the platform with the delicate thing balanced on his knees and set apart" (22). For the boys, the conch represents an idyllic society of justice and safety for all. It is later used to indicate which boy is allowed to speak, so it is seen as a symbol that not only calls them together but enables them to function in an orderly manner. Another instance we see of the boys instinctually craving order is the use of voting, in which they

remark, “The toy of voting was almost as pleasing as the conch” (22). In a state of terror and uncertainty, the boys could universally unite on the necessity of voting. We see from the beginning the boys possess a need for order and structure, demonstrated by the use of the conch to organize their society and the “toy” of voting for a chief.

The boys originally establish a peaceful, orderly civilization, but as time passes Ralph’s idyllic utopia deteriorates and transitions into a state of brutal authoritarian government led by Jack, who is not all that different from Ralph. When voting for a chief, the two clear candidates are Ralph and Jack. Jack is perceived as an authoritative figure who is “the most obvious leader” (22), while Ralph is seen as a chief who would lead their civilization to harmony and order. The narrative accepted for *Lord of the Flies* is that without the confines of law, the boys devolve from civilization to chaos in a matter of months; with Ralph representing order and Jack representing chaos. I believe this stance is erroneous; Ralph and Jack represent similar notions of order and government but in dramatically different ways. Ralph is the idyllic society the boys aspire to create, but Jack is the manifestation of the cruelty and horror that a poorly built society with little individual freedoms would inevitably lead to. While these boys may seem like opposites of each other, if we examine their characters deeper, we see their ruling styles are disturbingly similar. They are both strong leaders; unafraid to command the boys, express their opinions vocally, and alienate those who do not align with their political agenda. When Jack’s tribe is created, he rules similarly to Ralph. They both incessantly push their political agendas and priorities onto their citizens. While brutality in Jack’s society is more prevalent than in Ralph’s, the boys have similar views on holding power to themselves, pushing unwanted labor on the littluns, and oftentimes dismissing the voices of others. An example of this is when Ralph dismisses a littluns’ fear of the beast, saying, “Did you hear that? Says he saw the thing in the dark ... He was dreaming ... He must have had a nightmare. Stumbling around all those creepers” (36). Instead of comforting the terrified child, Ralph opts to ridicule him by dismissing his pressing fear. This moment functions on a deeper, symbolic level as well, as Ralph, the representation of an idyllic society of peace, is dismissing the lingering fear in the citizen’s minds of a disastrous shift in their state to Jack’s brutal totalitarian regime.

However, when Jack becomes the prominent faction, he does not derive his power from the boys craving chaos and despising civilization. In fact, it is the exact opposite. The boys need a powerful figure who can lead and provide for

them because they are incapable of thinking and acting as individuals. The reason why all the littluns convert to Jack's faction is simple: he has meat. He has food. He has power. While the boys are naive to enable a cruel leader to usurp Ralph's throne, they will always follow the chief with the food, not the chief with the conch. Jack is the physical embodiment of a powerful ruling body gone wrong; the boys assume they can rely on Ralph for everything, so the government's power becomes unchecked leading to a totalitarian state.

Jack's society harms helpless civilians by creating a hivemind that destroys individuality within the group. The harm civilians endure at the hands of Jack is perfectly expressed in this exchange between Roger and Ralph: "'He's going to beat up Wilfred.' 'What for?' Robert shook his head doubtfully. 'He got angry and made us tie Wilfred up. He's been'-he giggled excitedly-'he's been tied up for hours, waiting-' 'But didn't the chief say why?' 'I never heard him'" (159). Their conversation explores the grim reality of Jack's brutal totalitarian reign, as he uses fear to maintain political power and control. Another example of Jack's hivemind-like society causing excessive harm to the boys is the tragic death of Simon, spurred by Jack's cult-like following fueled by fear, setting aside the wisdom of individuality for a fervorous groupthink based solely on irrational behavior.

The sticks fell and the mouth of the circle crunched and screamed. The beast was on its knees in the center, its arms folded around its face. It was crying out against the abominable noise, something about a body on a hill. The beast struggled forward, broke the ring, and fell over the steep edge of the rock to the sand by the water. At once the crowd surged after it, poured down the rock, leapt onto the beast, screamed, bit, struck, tore. There were no words, and no movements but the tearing of teeth and claws. (152-153)

This moment is incredibly powerful to the fabric of the group, as Simon is the last bastion of individuality within the boy's society. He often disappears from the other boys, vanishing when conflict arises between Jack and Ralph. He contributes to society but also develops the necessary ability to discern when his leaders are being irrational and remove himself. His death scene represents Jack's society killing anyone who opposed or contrasted with his beliefs, and the way his death is described is animalistic and primal. Golding uses barbaric phrases such as "sticks fell and the mouth of the circle crunched and screamed" and "screamed, bit, struck, tore" to illustrate the brutality of Jack's society and how these once peaceful boys have been forged into horrid, barbaric animals by the totalitarian society Jack creates. Jack's brutal, authoritarian society directly

inflicts cruelty and terror onto the boys, shown by his senseless beatings of innocent boys and the death of Simon; a virtuous ideal standing out as an individual in a sea of mindless followers.

Simon dies trying to warn the boys of the beast, whose meaning changes throughout the book; at first a looming terror in the back of the littluns' minds and then a physical representation of the cruelty and darkness under Jack's government. The first "appearance" of this beast occurs when a littlun brings it up at a meeting, claiming, "He still says he saw the beastie, the snake-thing, and it will come back tonight" (36). The beast at the beginning is intended to represent the looming fear of a civilization built on brutality and fear, as many are terrified by the concept but do not understand what ought to be done. It is further demonstrated when Simon unveils the "beast's" true identity: a dead English parachuter from the ongoing war outside of the boys' island. This symbolism works on multiple levels, as not only does it demonstrate how mankind is the real beast, but that the beast is an English soldier who dies from fighting the wars of a powerful government. This echoes Jack's actions, as he often puts the safety of his civilians aside for his own personal gain. We know that the book takes place during a global conflict, so we can conclude that while Jack is gaining power through the creation of a totalitarian government that causes so much cruelty, the adults of the outside world are also fighting the political wars of large governments. Another example of the beast's symbolism is the Lord of the Flies' conversation with Simon. The decapitated boar's head Jack thinks is the beast says to Simon, "Fancy thinking the beast was something you could hunt and kill. You knew, didn't you? I'm part of you? Close, close, close! I'm the reason it's no go? Why things are what they are?" (143). A common interpretation of the Lord of the Flies is that it represents the chaos that ensues after the destruction of Ralph's civilization. However, a more logical explanation would be that the Lord of the Flies represents the perils of a civilization with too much power vested in the ruling body as with Jack's society we see more evidence of centralization and less chaos than Ralph's regime. The beast is always a warning to the boys about how their civilization could devolve if they are not independent, and its message rings true as we see the horrors caused by overtly-centralized societies. The beast never represents the chaos resulting from the deterioration of civilization; it is a warning to us to critically examine our leaders in all their faults, not submit all our individual power and freedom to them, and act based on individual wisdom rather than an irrational group entity.

Throughout *Lord of the Flies*, the boys transition from a fair utopia driven by ideals of egalitarianism and peace to a totalitarian dictatorship driven by the incompetence of a society reliant on political leaders and manipulated by the fear a dictator instills onto his civilians. Jack's rise to power transforms their society into a harmful and brutal environment, where death and violence take hold. Several symbolic moments illustrate this shift, such as the boys' perception of the beast as a looming threat to their society's peace and later as a physical manifestation of Jack's tyrannical regime, which confronts Simon and reveals its deep connection to human nature. Simon's death also demonstrates the fatalities of a totalitarian society in which the civilians have little independent thought, as they do not act rationally in a situation where Jack's cult-like following leads to the death of an independent individual. This story is exceptionally relevant in our society today, as the theme of logically analyzing the implications of leaders and ruling bodies and how their actions will affect civilians is a lesson that will remain crucial to any given population. Our society mimics that of the boys'; while we do not cover ourselves in paint and hunt wild boars, leaders contemporary to our generation continue to harm societies in ways disturbingly similar to Jack. However, Golding presents a glimmer of hope to us in the subtle depiction of Simon throughout the book. He escapes to secretive hideouts away from the prying eyes and orders of Jack and Ralph. He acts and thinks independently from the masses suffering from their reliance on a cruel dictator. In many ways, Simon is William Golding's way of beseeching us to think critically about our society and understand the implications of our leaders. *Lord of the Flies* is a dire book, warning us of the disastrous consequences of reliance on a dictator, but it also presents the hopeful notion that we could uplift our society if we could just be more like Simon.

Source: *Lord of the Flies*, by William Golding



# Elliot Hall

Grade 10, Timberland High School

Educator: Andrea Dubitsky

*Poetry*



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## This is My Dream

I dream a world where I can be myself.  
Where I don't have to hide myself at Thanksgiving  
Playing pinball in the basement instead of eating mashed potatoes  
A world where "It's just a phase" only applies to the moon.  
Where grandmas actually try  
And where aunts are happy for their nieces and nephews  
A world where "Is *she* still doing that?" is simply a mistake,  
not on purpose.  
Where family is open to criticism  
And they get good at it, they improve  
I dream a world where the flag is rainbow, painted with more colors than the  
mantis shrimp can see  
    A world where freedom means freedom to tell the truth  
    To tell **your** truth  
    Where just because someone's different,  
    They're not treated different  
    Where "I want to go by..." is received with cheers of acceptance  
    Not hollers of hate  
    Where "girls" can explore the button-ups and khaki pants  
    Without feeling like a criminal  
    Where "boys" can navigate the maze of dresses and tennis skirts  
I dream a world where I can be myself  
My true self  
This is my dream

# Kauthar Hammad

Grade 12, Hazelwood West High School

*Short Story*



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## The Beast Wears Scarlett

A blood red moon hangs low in the sky, casting a crimson glow over the forest, creating the illusion of a blood-stained path. Shadows stretched longer as Red pulled her hood tighter around her ebony hair, her cloak billowing behind her like a crimson flag. She had traveled far to get here. Where the villagers whispered about a creature. How it stalked the shadows, taking anyone outside the village. They had warned her not to go, saying it was best to leave things be, before more people got taken. But Red didn't listen, because her grandmother had been taken, last seen too close to the forest to be a coincidence. The forest, this place was twisted and dark Red could feel it. She remembered being told stories of this forest as a kid, all the other villagers thought her grandmother was crazy with the stories she told. They way she would isolate herself deep within the village urging others to do the same, with terrifying stories warning about the forest. They said it was only a matter of time before that paranoia got her taken regardless if she stayed in the village or not. Red was going to get revenge for her grandmother and prove that her warnings were right.

But then the air grew still. Too still. She could feel it, something wasn't right. She moved silently, her eyes scanning the darkness as a familiar cottage came into view—small, isolated, and old. It felt wrong. The windows were dark, and the door hung open barley attached to its hinges. Red felt her stomach twist as she notched an arrow and approached slowly, she could hear moving inside. She stepped through the doorway, her eyes flicking around the room as she moved deeper into the house, past the old wooden table and creaky floorboards, toward a bedroom at the end of the hall when a smell hit her —blood, thick and metallic. The door was cracked open enough for Red to see familiar quilts her

grandmother had made long ago depicting stories about this forest just sitting on the bed.

"Grandmother?" Red still couldn't help but question seeing the familiar quilts

"I'm here, my dear. Come in." A familiar voice replied, shocking Red and pulling her further into the room. But she paused when she saw the outline in the bed—too tall, too broad. The covers shifted slightly, revealing a flash of fur.

Red took another step, her heart pounding in her chest. She could see it clearly now—the beast beneath the blankets, pretending.

The creature grinned, its long snout emerging from the shadows. "Hello my dear Red" the creature spoke. And Red felt her eyes go wide. It was her grandmother's voice she heard coming from the beast.

Red let her grip her arrow go, striking the creature in the shoulder causing it to howl, before ripping the arrow out with a snarl and lunging at her.

But Red was lighter, rolling out of the way quickly, drawing another arrow back and firing it straight into the creature's chest. The creature stumbled back, blood dripping from its fur, but it wasn't dead.

"You can't stop me," it hissed, its red eyes glowing with rage. "I've hunted in these woods for a millennia; I've devoured braver than you."

Red thought of her grandmother. She was brave too even if the villagers said otherwise.

"I'm not here to stop you; I'm here to kill you." she said anguish in her voice, but not mourning, not yet.

It lunged again, but Red was ready. She slashed at its side, her blade cutting deep into its flesh. The creature yelped, its movements slowing as blood spilled onto the floor.

"You took my grandmother, the one person I cared about most," Red snarled, her voice low.

"Now I'm going to take everything from you."

The wolf collapsed onto the floor, its breath shallow and its eyes flickering.

“I didn’t take your grandmother dear,” the creature said, “besides, how much could you have cared if you ignored all those warnings about this forest? You’re just like the rest of those awful villagers” The creature questioned.

“Don’t speak like you know anything about my grandmother!” Red hissed, anger causing her to plunge the dagger straight through its heart.

“Oh but I knew a lot about your grandmother, more than she seems to know about herself” it continued, as its crimson’s eyes faded. Faded into eyes Red knew. Fur disappeared revealing the form of her grandmother, her poor, sweet grandmother had not been taken by the creature in the forest, she was the creature in the forest. That is why she had always given warnings about the things in the forest, because while she probably had not known it, she was one of them.

Red stood silently, eyes red as the scarlet blood staining her hands.

She glanced behind her, eyes catching the bloodstained cloak sitting limply on the floor, and her anger grew. Her grandmother was gone, underneath the sorrow and the anger Red felt an eerie calm set into herself. She leaned over and picked up the stained cloak from the ground. She paused when she heard whispers, it sounded like it was coming from the cloak. Red felt a tear slip down her face as she was able to make out one of the conversations coming from the cloak. Red remembered this conversation, more of an argument really it was when Red decided she wanted to leave the village, her grandmother had not wanted her to leave.

“The village is safe, things past the forest are dangerous!” grandmother shouted “How would you know, you’ve never even left the village?!” Red heard her past self exclaim in anger.

Red thought the conversation was over once she heard her footsteps leave but the cloak continued..

“Because the beast in the forest isn’t just dangerous, it’s lonely” Red heard her grandmother’s voice say with finality, as her grip on the cloak went limp and Red’s vision faded into black.

# Kamryn Haun

Grade 10, Olathe North High School

Educator: Deirdre Zongker

*Short Story*



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## Fragile Ties

“What brings you to therapy?”

I stare back at her pale, assessing face. What kind of question is that? Oh, I don’t know, maybe because I need help. Isn’t that obvious? *Breath in. Breath out.* She wants to help you. Just answer the best you can.

“Um, I mean a lot of reasons, but I guess the main one would be because some things from my past have been resurfacing and are negatively affecting my life,” I mutter timidly, “I don’t know how to deal with it.”

She takes a moment to scribble something down in her little sparkly notebook. I hate that. It’s like I’m something that needs to be studied or solved, almost like a math equation. She just needs to figure out x,y, and z about me, plug it into her formula, and then she’ll figure out everything about me—all my secrets. I don’t know if this is the best idea anymore, but I promised my dad I’d try it, so here I am.

Finally, she looks up from her notes with a kind expression on her face. I relax just a tad. She looks nice enough. What could go wrong?

“What are some of the issues affecting your day-to-day life?” my new therapist, Sylvia, asks.

She’s wearing an adorable pink sweater that I envy, as well as a flowy, floor-length white skirt that looks so luxurious and cozy. Sylvia, on the outside, looks like a warm and kind-hearted young woman. She has short chestnut hair that reminds me of fall with cute bangs and freckles sprinkled across her nose, framing her as harmless, and putting me at ease. She looks like the type of girl I could be friends with. Her outer appearance comforts my doubtful emotions, and that’s likely by design, but can I really allow this bonafide stranger to know the deepest and most vulnerable parts of myself?

I need to remember that she is a trained professional with a handful of other clients. I highly doubt that she even cares a lick about my past or issues. I am here for myself and her suggestions and methods to make me a better person. Worrying about who Sylvia is or her motives won't help me.

I don't know how to respond to the question. How do I tell her that nothing is technically wrong with me? I still act the same, talk the same, and live the same, it's only the way I think that has changed.

"I'm not entirely sure. I mean, I know something is wrong with me, I just don't know what," I rush out. "On the outside, everything is fine. The only thing affecting me is the way I think about other people. Almost as if I'm trying to figure out what each person is hiding. I mean everyone has secrets, you know? I just always focus on finding out what they are."

Sylvia stares back with a look of understanding on her face. "I see," she nods. "Why do you think that is?"

"Maybe because of my relationship with my mother." She starts writing in her notes again. "She is an addict."

~

*"Mommy, what's wrong with you?" I ask my Mom as she gets ready to leave home for the next two months. I'm confused. Why would she be leaving us? Is she dying? "Why are you leaving me and Brother?" Tears fill my eyes at the thought of not seeing her every day. I need my mommy.*

*"Mommy is sick, sweetheart. I need some help," she tells me with a sad expression on her face. "I'll be back before you know it, and I'll be better than ever," she reassures me.*

*I nod and smile, relieved.*

~

But she didn't get better after that. Little did six-year-old me know, she wouldn't get better for many more years.

"Can you tell me more about that? What was your mother like?"

I smile at that, "I love my mom more than anyone in the world," I respond. "She has just put me through a lot, but she eventually overcame her addiction."

I pause for a minute, debating on whether I should tell more before deciding that the whole point of therapy is to share everything about you, so I continue on.

"There was a period in my life when I thought she would never be back to the way she used to be, and in a way I was right. She still isn't one hundred

percent better. But there were a couple of dark years that seemed to be irreversible. I don't like to think about that time."

~

*My mom is lying beside me in the bed I am sharing with her. Snoring.*

*She's been doing that a lot lately, ever since the cigarettes. They are a new development after that man came back with her from her year-long visit to Texas. Dave. He ruined everything, all her progress. My mom went to Texas to get better, and now that she brought him back with her, she's sick again and I have to take care of her.*

*I roll over and look at the time. It reads 2:00 AM. I can't sleep though. My thoughts over what occurred tonight are keeping me awake. I sleep in here to watch over her. To make sure nothing happens. Tonight, something probably would've happened if I wasn't here.*

*I roll out of bed and shuffle into the kitchen to look into the pantry for a non-existent snack. I peer into the living room and see him passed out on the couch. I roll my eyes. I hate it when he is here. He acts like he is some savior for our family, like he is holding us all together when in reality it's my brother and I. He has only brought my mother down.*

~

"Can you tell me some more about Dave?" Sylvia asks kindly with compassion in her warm brown eyes.

"He's kind of hard to explain. My mom met him in rehab down in Dallas where she was staying and she ended up bringing him with her back to Kansas. At first, they were just friends. She just wanted someone to help her move. But then, things changed. They started to rely on each other," I pause and take a deep breath. "One day, Dave snuck some kind of alcohol into our lemonade in the fridge, and my mom drank it. My mom never drank alcohol. She didn't know what she was drinking until she was laughing at everything she heard and I had to help her to bed. After that day, she didn't stop."

"And you blame him for her alcoholism?"

I nod.

"But he isn't the only one to blame."

~

*Another night, pouring out her bottle of who-knows-what into the sink. I wish I was at my Dad's. Sometimes I feel like it is so hard to love my mom. I mean, of course, I do love her, but it's just hard sometimes. It feels like I am her parent and she is the child. She cries, I comfort, when in reality, it should be the other way around.*

*When she was in Texas, I didn't even miss her. Isn't that crazy? Not one day did I cry over the fact that my mom was an eight-hour drive away from me. In fact, I soaked up that year with just my Dad and me because I had never felt peace like that since early childhood—when the only things I thought about were playing outside and watching Dora the Explorer. Now, things were different, and I had to grow up young to stay strong for my family.*

*My mom cried quietly beside me as I poured out the contents. Rage filled me. How could she let it get to this point? Where her own daughter had to try to save her from the one thing that was killing her day by day. Without me, who knows where she'd be.*

*"You can't keep living like this, Mom. It's gonna kill you, and you can't die. You have to be my Mom," I scolded her as if I were in charge.*

*"I'm so sorry, sweetheart," she cries. "It won't happen again. Tonight was my last night." But she always says that. Every. Night. "I don't even like it, you know? I just need to drink it."*

*I shake my head in disappointment at those words. The words that she seems to repeat over and over again. That she needs the alcohol.*

~

*"You blame your mother more than you blame Dave," Sylvia comments.*

*I feel exposed. I've only known this woman for less than an hour and she already knows more about my past than anyone in my life. Nodding my head, I look down at my clammy hands, suddenly growing hesitant to continue with the session.*

*"Hey, I want you to feel comfortable. Share what you desire. Don't feel any pressure to talk about anything that you aren't ready to discuss." Her eyes meet mine in reassurance. "Maybe we should move away from the negatives. You said at the beginning of the session that you love your mom more than anyone else?"*

*I offer a quiet yes.*

*"Maybe tell me some more about that. Some happy memories," I look up and smile at Sylvia. "I'm here to help you, nothing else."*

*"My mom and I used to play Barbie dolls together when I was little," I start with a small smile tugging at the corners of my lips. "I would force her to play as Ken because my Barbie needed a boyfriend. Obviously."*

*Sylvia and I both laugh.*

*"She would always happily oblige though. Not just because she loved making the funny deep voices for Ken, but because she loved me and wanted me to have whatever I wanted.*



Memories dance through my mind of my mom spending time with me as a child. Our tea parties with all my stuffed animals, her doing my makeup, taking me shopping, painting my nails, and watching dozens of Barbie movies and rom-coms together. Coming into this, I thought this hour of therapy wouldn't help me, but it has caused me to think of everything I am grateful for. Especially my mom. Even after everything she has put me through, I wouldn't trade her for any other woman.

"My mom has been sober for almost five years now, which is so crazy for me to say," I comment, breaking the lingering silence.

"She even became a therapist herself!" I add on.

I ponder on that. Isn't it so crazy how drastically someone's life can turn around? When I think of my mom and how far she has come with her recovery and journey, I can't help but feel overcome with pride and a sense of appreciation for the beautiful, if relatively paradoxical phenomena inherent in this life.

I go on to speak more about my mother and her recovery with Sylvia, and at the end of the hour, it feels as if a boulder-sized rock has been taken off my soul. I agree to come back next week for our next session.

Sylvia makes me feel understood. I now look forward to the future. Not only that, but she makes me see the good in everything. After a few months of meeting, I no longer searched for the ignoble traits and secrets of each person I met. I instead think of the potential that they and I have for friendship, and I always look to see the good in someone. Therapy connects me to the bright side of the world. Where I now look at humans in a different light. Even when there is depravity and darkness within a person, I am able to see the potential for recovery and growth. Just like when my mother turned her life around all those years ago.

# Sarah Helwani

Grade 8, Parkway West Middle School

Educator: Tracy Bouslog

*Personal Essay & Memoir*



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## Heart Pumping Regret

“15, 16, 17, 18. Keep going, *children*.” She says that word with so much hate in her voice, like it leaves an unpleasant taste in her mouth. “19, 20, 21,” my kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Smith\*, yells on like a lieutenant instructing warm-ups for the army. I can hear the silent groan my class is making as we slavishly comply. Every morning, my poor classmates and I are instructed to do jumping jacks, the number is determined by how many days we’ve been at school for that year. Today was somewhere in the upper hundreds, not that I care to count. The irony is that she rolls around the classroom in her desk chair, munching on a red, white, and blue family-sized bag of Skittles. The smell of sugary fruit punch would sit in our noses as we sweat ourselves to death at 9:00 in the morning.

Even when Mrs. Smith is sitting down, she gives the impression that she’s looming over us, her eagle eyes catching every little error our six-year-old selves make. *I would bet good money that even her boss gets chills around her.*

“Everyone better have done their homework. I’ll check when you all are done.” She phrases it more like a threat than a reminder. Technically, she phrases everything like a threat, but especially this. Most kindergarteners don’t have homework, but in my class, not a single person didn’t complete it almost every day. The amount of fear it brings us for Mrs. Smith to see a sheet of paper without our messy scrawls is bigger than the sun. It may seem a bit extreme, but that’s only because you haven’t been in her class. She’s an angel around parents, but really, she’s just a master of disguise.

In an instant, I flash back to all the times Mrs. Smith treated my class and me in her unfathomably harsh way. One fiercely harsh memory takes over the rest. I'm teleported back to a day earlier that year when I didn't have my homework done. Mrs. Smith pulled me into the narrow hallway, bringing one of my classmates, Max, along with her.

"Sadie Montgomery," Mrs. Smith had said, pausing to glare at me like I had pickpocketed her. "I can't believe you had the audacity to be the only one in class without your homework finished. That type of behavior is unacceptable." She rambled. "You have no idea how the real world works, so don't bother telling me I'm wrong."

"But I've done it every other day for the entire year," I reasoned, genuinely confused. She didn't bat an eye at my rebuttal, brushing it off like a piece of lint on her shirt. I stood there, eyes locked onto Mrs. Smith's, thinking, *I am not going to be the one to look away first*. I kept a stubborn expression on my face when on the inside, I was as scared as a mouse encountering a cat. Then the strangest thing happened. She smiled. Not a big smile, but a smile.

Then she looked at Max, who I'd forgotten was there, and said, "How unlucky for you, Sadie. I was planning on rewarding everyone who had their homework completed, like the impressively responsible Max here, with a handful of Skittles today." Without another word, she walked away, Max following in suit, a smug grin stretching across his brightly lit face. I stood frozen and alone, feeling like my emotions and I were locked in an invisible dungeon. When she handed out those red, white, and blue Skittles to everyone but me, it felt like a knife to the chest. Everyone looked at me like I was a clown and a disgrace, like I didn't belong. *Why didn't I just do my homework like everyone else? Why couldn't I have found time to focus and complete it? Maybe then I wouldn't be in this situation.* The thought played in my head over and over like static in the background of a show.

Suddenly, a sharp pain jolts me back to the present, feeling like a sword stabbed into my side. *I never knew my stomach could hurt this bad. I need the nurse more than I need food and water to survive, I think to myself.* The only problem is, I don't have the guts to go ask her. Her desk looms in front of me. You've got it, it's fine, just go up to her and ask. She can't say no.

"No," she replies in a husky voice after I mustered up the courage to ask. "You know the rule. Finish your jumping jacks before *anything* else."

As I walk back to my seat, head down, eyes on the floor, I attempt to calculate how long that would take. Too long. Nonetheless, I resume my jumping

jacks, trying to focus on the thump, thump, thump of the rhythm of my feet bouncing up and down on the ancient carpet floor, rather than the pain in my stomach. Until it gets worse. *I bet my form is making me look like I've never done a jumping jack in my life, I think to myself. Luckily, nobody's paying attention to me, but if this keeps up for any longer, that's going to change.*

I creep my way to Mrs. Smith's desk, like we're playing hide and seek, and she's the seeker. I hate myself for letting her have this effect on me. Adults like her don't know how to understand kids like me, and kids like me don't know how to deal with adults like her. The ones who don't coo over me like I'm a cute puppy and pinch my cheeks.

I stutter through my request again, though I knew it was meaningless to her as she spat, "Jumping jacks," once more. So I keep going, having long since lost count. *Mrs. Smith probably won't let me go to the nurse even when I finish. Is she not letting me go because she doesn't care or because she thinks I'm lying? I think to myself.* Eventually, I go back to her desk, and this time, my slowness and quietness are not caused by her but by the fear that if I acted too abruptly, I might explode into stomach pain.

This time, I don't stutter, but my voice stays just above a whisper as I try to make my question sound more like an order. Mrs. Smith is unfazed as she answers me in the same unfortunate way. *So stubborn, I think. She's so convinced that she's right, and I'm wrong. Even if she's right, she doesn't know that, so why won't she listen?*

Then I feel a tsunami-sized tidal wave of nausea come over me, and the only thing I can think is I've got to get out of here. "I can't stay. I have to go." I plead with her one last time. My hands shake so fast that I have to press them together to get them to stop. I'm in a snowstorm, and even so, sweat pours down my neck, running along my back, across my face, and into my mouth. A siren is going off inside my brain, flashing red and blue lights at me, alerting me that something bad's going to happen if I don't do anything about it.

Mrs. Smith opens her mouth to reply, but I don't give her time as I lurch forward, holding my stomach in place like it can't do the job itself. I throw up all over her blue alphabet carpet and her favorite two-inch high heels, not stopping until there's a yellowish-green swamp filled with the bagel and orange juice I had for breakfast that morning. We become surrounded in our own little circle, standing so close that we burst each other's space bubbles. We get swallowed by the mess like we're standing in quicksand. The room freezes. My classmates shriek, gag, and giggle like high-pitched hyenas.

Mrs. Smith looks from me to her shoes like I just murdered her whole family, then she turns to the rest of the class and yells, “EVERYBODY, OUTSIDE FOR RECESS!” As my classmates walked out of the classroom, half of them were laughing, the other half gagging in disgust. I wished so badly that they would come back. I’m not even embarrassed by what I did, I just don’t want to be left in a room alone with Mrs. Smith. Luckily for me, I’m invisible as she calls for the janitor, and he starts cleaning up the mess while I wait for my mom to come pick me up.

I sit down on the ancient wooden bench in the hallway right outside my classroom as the white-haired, tall, skinny, male janitor dips his mop into the sudsy, overflowing bucket. As I watch the steady, efficient strokes of the mop, I think, *why didn’t I just get up and go to the nurse? I knew I was sick, and I could have done something to prevent this.* Regret seeps into me, puddling in my stomach, my heart pumping it to every part of my body like it pumps my blood every day. My eyes are twitching to keep the tears in, and the sickening smell of vomit irritates my nose, drifting through the open door and into the hall. The stench overpowers the smell of cleaning products from the now yellow-tinted water in the mop bucket. *All. Because. Of. Me.*

I’m drowning in a black hole of sorrowful regret, the what-if game cycling through my head. *What if I told Mrs. Smith I was going to throw up? What if I listened more closely to the warnings my body was making? What if I had walked out of that room and to the nurse when Mrs. Smith said no? What if, What if, What if?* I try to concentrate on something else, but it’s no use. The “thwack, thwack, thwack” of my head getting hammered down like a nail catches my attention instead. My stomach growls at me like there’s a tiger inside, while the bitter taste of vomit lays permanently in my mouth. My face is paler than a piece of paper. Every time I start to feel a bit better, nausea shakes me awake like a magnitude 7 earthquake. A constant reminder of the regret pumping out of my heart and through my veins. Mrs. Smith may be harsh, but the consequences my body’s giving me are much more brutal. She could yell at me all day if she wanted, and I wouldn’t be hurt this bad. As my heart keeps pumping blood to the rest of my body, I can’t help noticing the regret it’s pumping along with it.

*\* Names are fictionalized.*

# Theodore Hollander-Bodie

Grade 11, John Burroughs School

Educator: Jeanne Gillanders

*Poetry*



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## Floodgates

Après moi, quoi? Le déluge? Nay!  
What do I fight for, but Today?  
'Morrow, too – will Centuries know  
I tore my foes from top to toe?  
My price of peace, I'll make them pay.

Let die the Dogs of War, away!  
Now what will buy that bloody fray:  
This civil strife shall cease to grow.  
Après moi, quoi?

Yet why should I Posterity pay,  
To possess my paradise? C'est  
Pas croyable! Yet, oh, what woe,  
That my thoughts should reach depths so low.  
My soul may fall. O, God, I pray:  
Après moi, quoi?

# Meona Hou

Grade 10, John Burroughs School

Educator: Amanda Collier

*Poetry*



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## Ashes Fall Like Petals

The sky cracks—  
Thunder rolls,  
and the air is thick with the sound of something torn—  
clapping hands, or explosions,  
whip through the air like shattered glass.  
Bam! Wham!  
Pummeling, burning—  
Smoke rising,  
a rhythm,  
relentless,  
never asking for permission.

Flour clings to the baker's calloused palms,  
kneading dough as if it might slip out of his hands,  
at any given moment.  
A child watches through the window,  
their hollow gaze searching for more than hunger—  
Here I am,  
and the world doesn't notice.  
The dough whispers,  
Rise,  
and a drumbeat replies,  
Jump!  
Feet strike the ground—  
BOOM.  
Beat after beat,

claps echo like distant fire,  
ash choking the air,  
graying out what once could bloom.

A whirring of destruction,  
bleeds into the horizon, where the sky meets earth.  
The daffodil stands still—  
*punished* by the sun's glare, cracking beneath its weight.  
The daffodil watches,  
knowing only how to bloom—  
to be fragile, fleeting, to surrender.  
And die without longing,  
without asking for more than it has.

Each petal keens  
under the weight of what it cannot touch—  
Time bends, defying gravity, its pull gentler on what falls away.  
Down below, its roots twist deep,  
clinging to the earth—  
trembling beneath gunshots, shrill cries, letting go,  
with each breath,  
we take.



# Qixi Huang

Grade 11, Clayton High School

Eductor: Amanda Collier

*Personal Essay & Memoir*



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## Freckles in a Sea of Silk: Navigating Conformity and Embracing Individuality

Wow, it's like I'm looking at artwork. The girls have their ponytails tied high in bright red uniforms with neatly folded arms; the boys have their hair almost buzzed clean. In each unit of the 100-desk array sits a model student with perfect posture holding books tilted at a 45-degree angle and pencils neatly organized at the top left edge of their desk. A bold banner with massive Chinese characters hangs at the front of the classroom: "Promote social homogeny, eliminate individualism." In a sea of 100 black-haired heads, is a single brown-haired girl. With freckles. The neon orange freckles on my face and brown hair stood out like bright spotlights on my cheeks and a splotch of grey on a blank canvas. My hair is curly. The other girls' hair are like silk, perfectly straight and smooth. I can't focus. Why do I feel like I'm drowning in this sea? The teacher calls on me in Mandarin, "Qixi, why don't you give an example of what we're talking about?"

"Sorry madam... I don't know—" I'm interrupted as laughter erupts.

"Class, pay attention. Qixi here is actually a perfect example of genetic impurity in a group, making her the 'out-group' in any group of pure Han Chinese." Everyone is looking at me. The teacher continues, "No pure Han Chinese would have discolored and messy hair or 'pockmarks' as these are telltale signs of malnutrition and impurity!" Their expressions develop into piercing gazes of judgment straight to my heart. I look down to hide my face, and a lump begins to grow in my throat. A peer next to me mutters "Not only is she a monster because she speaks English, but it's also because of the way she's born..."

I sprint to the bathroom as tears begin streaming down uncontrollably. Multiple faces of pure disgust flash in my peripheral vision. In the bathroom I scramble to retrieve makeup as I wipe tears from my face. The container is labeled ZheXia (CoverUp), the name of the concealer my peer gifted me last week, with a playful remark that “I hope when you grow up, the ugly pockmarks on your face will fall off!” I smear on multiple thick layers of foundation, but it still does not completely cover my freckles. I watch in the mirror as tears disfigure my freshly-applied makeup. I realize I can never conform to these crushing standards. I’m a monster.

That night, I drew my first self-portrait drawing, very detailed but grossly disfigured. I didn’t know what it meant, but it felt natural. I was happy with my drawing.

When I woke up the next day, I was disgusted at my monstrous picture—not by myself, but by *my* image of myself. I gave the self-portrait another shot. This time, it was pleasant. I liked it. More.

The daily jabs were relentless, but I reimagined my approach and looked inward for affirmations, focusing on self-image and listening closely to my spirit. I became an individual, shutting out attempts at my confidence. But this revolutionary mindset brands me a heretic among my peers. They hated, and hated until they ran out of things to hate, and then they would resort to violence. My friend count reduced to zero. But this did not matter to me as I brought myself joy every night through my drawings, sometimes monstrous and sometimes pleasant.

When I finally transferred to an American high school, I realized nobody needed to hide themselves. Standing among the vibrant garden of hair colors, I realized individualism was valued, something people admired. I was showered with compliments, my peers in awe calling my freckles beautiful, sparkling stars. The “impurities” which I had spent hours examining scornfully at myself in my drawings were not a flaw, but a beautiful part of me in which I can source my strength. As my confidence in artistry grew as well, I finally was able to experience the joy of dotting my freckles as a final touch with a paintbrush on my first painted self-portrait

My cocoon of individualism I formed in China finally transformed into a butterfly in America. I can now accept, love, and—most importantly—empower myself thanks to my commitment to individualistic belief, enabled by the support of warm American culture. Individualism is not about singling out outsiders, but rather embracing and cherishing what makes us unique with

warmth. My freckles no longer are a source of inferiority; they have become a powerhouse of my confidence. I hope that in my return visits to China, I will be able to radiate this warm, positive energy and inspire those who need it most. I can now breathe, and I now desire to reach out to the others.

Serena Huang

Grade 11, Parkway Central High School

*Critical Essay*



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# The Ethics of Enhancement in Elite Sports

Humans always want more. Something deeply ingrained in our nature is a drive that challenges us to best our past selves and one another, which tests our mental and physical limits. This pursuit of excellence manifests itself in our daily habits and favorite pastimes – particularly in sports. More specifically, in the world of highly competitive, professional sports, athletes undergo years of grueling training to compete against each other in hopes of winning gold and breaking records. This fierce competition has sparked some controversial developments, such as athletes investing thousands into specialized gear, consuming nutritional supplements, or to the extreme, taking illegal, performance-enhancing drugs – otherwise known as doping. By resorting to these measures, it seems like we have reached the limit of human potential, and we need to turn to “unnatural” ways to satisfy our innate desire to improve and be the best. These technologies will most likely never go away, but more athletes each year are risking their health and careers to dope and achieve success illegally. Even though it is challenging to define thresholds for the amount of modern innovations athletes should be allowed to use in competition, these limits are necessary because of the adverse effects of overusing pharmaceuticals and technology.

Sports have been a longstanding part of our culture, but it was only in the past few centuries that sports have grown to become competitive and highly visible on the global stage; as a result, we have only recently seen a rise in doping cases. In 1894, French aristocrat Baron Pierre de Coubertin reestablished the ancient Greek tradition of the Olympic Games, aiming to create an international

sports competition to promote values such as effort, growth, unity, and peace (“Olympic Games”). This initiative began the modern era of sports, featuring intense international competition and highly publicized sporting events, such as the FIFA World Cup in soccer or the Tour de France in biking.

More recently, the rapid advancement of sports technology, such as performance-enhancing drugs (PEDs), not only creates a more competitive atmosphere, but also raises questions about the true purpose of sport. As Amherst College professor Allen Guttman describes in his book *From Ritual to Record*, with the development of sports research, we have seen a “scientization” of sports, with a rise in research into the best equipment, best diet and training regimes, best techniques during competition, among many other variables (qtd. in Miah). Athletes now fixate on these tiny factors that affect athletic ability, where the difference between first and second in a race may be mere milliseconds.

The emergence of high technology and PEDs within sports raises questions, such as what sports and fair competition look like or if these upgrades are a natural part of the evolution of sports. For instance, cyclist Lance Armstrong won seven consecutive Tour de France titles and an Olympic gold medal. However, he was later stripped of these awards when he tested positive for taking banned anabolic steroids. In an infamous interview with Oprah Winfrey, Armstrong defends his actions by arguing that “the definition of cheat” is “to gain an advantage on a rival or foe. I didn’t view it that way. I viewed it as a level playing field” since most top athletes took PEDs at the time (qtd. in Martin). Not everyone agreed with Armstrong’s logic, but he was factually correct in the pervasiveness of doping in the sport of cycling. A Harvard Business School Working Knowledge study finds that “of the top three finishers in the seven years Armstrong won the Tour de France, 20 out of 21 of them had doped at some point in their careers.” Even though nearly two decades have passed since the Armstrong doping scandal, taking illegal PEDs remains a widespread issue in elite sports. For example, although 23 top Chinese swimmers tested positive to a drug test prior to the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, sports authorities still enabled them to compete, ultimately winning several gold medals (Schmidt and Panja). Since officials found the PEDs in the kitchen where meals were prepared for athletes, they were unable to conclude whether the swimmers intentionally ingested the substances. Thus, they did not follow the usual protocol of banning the swimmers from competition for a set amount of time, which would have disqualified them from entering the Olympics. These cases demonstrate the

prevalent doping in elite sports and how it is challenging to preserve just competition due to the “scientization” of sports.

Doping with PEDs results in many permanent and sometimes unwanted effects on the health and well-being of athletes, and these effects emphasize the need for regulation. To illustrate, the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency (USADA) warns that anabolic agents like testosterone can cause sperm reduction, erectile dysfunction, and even breast tissue growth in males, while females may experience abnormal menstrual cycles, deepening of the voice, and excessive hair growth. Other PEDs, such as peptide hormones like human growth hormone and insulin, pose more severe health consequences. Strokes, heart attacks, blood cancers – these are only a few of the risks of taking hormones. In the most extreme and dangerous cases, blood doping, which involves taking drugs that increase blood cells to enhance oxygen delivery, has been linked to the cause of multiple athlete deaths. Despite initial performance gains, these examples highlight the detrimental physical repercussions of using PEDs.

Furthermore, PEDs can also negatively affect the mental health of athletes. In the case of narcotics, USADA informs that they can be addictive and lead to an adverse reliance on their pain-relieving effects. Anabolic steroid use similarly causes to addiction and an increased aggressiveness known as “Roid Rage,” with scientists associating withdrawal from steroid use to depression, and in some cases, suicide (U.S. Anti-Doping Agency). Besides these psychological consequences, PEDs can cause athletes to lose their motivation and enjoyment from participating in a sport. After he began doping, Olympic champion Tyler Hamilton, a former team member of Armstrong, reflects that he “felt more like a number” and his happiness depended on his results, eventually leading to depression (qtd. in U.S. Anti-Doping Agency). Hamilton lost the true purpose of why he began cycling in the first place, which was not originally focused on external, statistical outcomes but on the cultivation of the self. By taking illegal PEDs, athletes not only harm their mental and physical well-being but also undermine their accomplishments and diminish the intrinsic rewards of competing in sports.

A less publicized but equally impactful way athletes bolster their performance is through cutting-edge athletic equipment, also known as tech doping. Notably, in 2019, Eliud Kipchoge became the first human to run a marathon in under two hours – previously thought impossible for humans – wearing Nike’s most advanced shoes, the Alphafly (Burgess). The exceptional technology the Alphafly utilizes includes a set of carbon fiber plates that keep the

shoe stable but lightweight and a combination of next-generation shoe foam and air pods that more efficiently return energy to runners. However, World Athletics, the international organization that is the highest governing body in sports competitions, disqualified the Alphafly from competition, keeping the actual world record of a marathon over two hours. World Athletics cites that they believe the shoes were “damaging the integrity of the sport” (World Athletics). In other words, World Athletics wants to ensure athletes have access to the same opportunities, as the Alphafly was not yet released for public purchase when Kipchoge achieved his sub-two-hour marathon (Burgess). Similarly, at the 2008 Beijing Olympics, swimmers broke a monumental 25 world records, with 92% of those records set by swimmers wearing the Speedo LZR, a new and innovative swimsuit: this tech suit optimizes hydrodynamics and buoyancy, reputedly reducing water resistance by 38% compared to other suits (Singh). At the time, this suit was so revolutionary that some Japanese swimmers reneged on their sponsorship deals to use the LZR, as most swimmers who did not have this suit could not even compete.

Running and swimming, two simple and widely accessible sports, became geared toward the athletes with financial resources or specific brand deals and special access to technology. The Alphafly and LZR tech suit highlight the disparity in access to resources and remove focus from athleticism and dedication. Athletes need to emphasize their work ethic and advancements in the actual sport because that is the true meaning of sports, rather than the purchase of specific equipment. Ideally, the role of technology in sports is to increase the safety and efficiency of all athletes, not be the decisive factor in achieving success in a field. Although it is challenging to determine the difference between gaining an unjust edge and beneficial technological innovations, both athletes and the general public need this distinction in regulation to continue to preserve the spirit of fair competition in sports.

However, some argue that if everyone used PEDs, it would create a “level playing field.” Biomedical Ethics Professor Julian Savulescu suggests that regulating the use of PEDs as an alternative to a complete ban could “promote equality” and even “remove the effects of genetic inequality” (qtd. in Khan). This perspective has some initial merit. For instance, in light of the recent Chinese swimming doping scandal, where the ethicality of banning an athlete is unclear, this might solve the issue of accidental or unknowing ingestion of PEDs. The point that Dr. Savulescu does not consider is that by legalizing doping, athletes not only lose sight of the true meaning of sport, but also endanger their health

and do not have guaranteed equitable access to PEDs. These expensive drugs and other advanced sports medicines could be limited to those with financial resources, increasing the unfair upper hand of the wealthy. On top of that, legalization would lead to an “arms race” to develop more powerful but dangerous substances. Thus, sports authorities must prioritize thorough investigations and clear doping regulations instead, which will protect athlete safety and maintain equality in sports.

Furthermore, with the widespread belief that the only way for athletes to continue to improve is through technology, some believe that anti-doping rules should permit athletes to use these discoveries in science. Some even argue that certain banned substances are safe for athletes. This viewpoint blurs the line between PEDs and beneficial supplements such as vitamins, protein shakes, and creatine since both boost human body functions. Nevertheless, unlike supplements, PEDs are generally unsafe when taken in any quantity and unnaturally increase athletic prowess (Millman and Ross). However, Jo Morrison, Professor of Exercise Science at Longwood University, claims that there is a lack of evidence on the harmfulness of PEDs. In her words, the “sweeping” ban on PEDs “assumes that [they] are specifically harmful to athletes, despite many of these substances being approved for human use in patient populations that are of less robust health than athletes.” Contrastingly, Sport Integrity Australia asserts that doctors prescribe these medications specifically for those with certain medical conditions, and the misuse of these drugs is dangerous for healthy athletes; in fact, some prohibited substances have not been authorized for human use. Therefore, though there may be a place for a limited amount of state-of-the-art athletic equipment, an anti-doping policy remains essential to protect the health of athletes.

Technological advancements and PEDs have become prominent in our world through our drive for progress. While they undoubtedly assist us in pushing the boundaries of our peak performance, concerns for human health and the integrity of sports rise. It is tough to determine the threshold of what it means to be “too fast,” but PEDs and excessive reliance on high technology detract from the modern values of sports that de Coubertin established for the Olympics centuries ago. The core of sports is to transcend human limits, become resilient, grow as a person. To continue progressing and upholding impartial competition, we must prioritize the human component in sports. After all, pain is an intrinsic protective force from overexerting oneself, which constantly reminds us of our physical and mental limits. The distinction between acceptable



enhancements and unfair advantages is currently unclear, exemplifying the need for increased regulation, especially regarding technology in sports. By balancing innovation and regulation, only then can we create an actual “level playing field” where people can do what they love to do: improve.

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## The No-No Words

“Hello” and “apple” were the only English words I knew when a surprise relocation brought my first-grade self from Shanghai, China to St. Louis, Missouri. One second I thought China was going to be my home for the rest of my life, and the next thing I knew I was in LAX, frantically running with my mom to find the terminal for the second leg of our connecting flights. There must have been an in-between moment, right? If there was, the search for it in my memory is just as fruitless as trying to communicate with someone using only the word “apple” after having greeted them with a “hello.”

While my vocabulary did grow from just “hello” and “apple” throughout my first few years here, my list still did not include the inappropriate words, or as kids like to say it, the “no-no words.” This, combined with the fact that I loved making meaningless sounds and words to compensate for my lacking knowledge in actual words—well, you can probably imagine what happened next. As I was soon to find out, not all of the sounds I made were as meaningless as I thought.

### The “D-Word”

It was immediately obvious to my third grade teacher that my English skills were not up to par compared to my peers. With that knowledge, when she split the class into different groups to study vocabulary, she placed me in the bottom group. (Looking back, it was almost surprising that she did not place me in a group all by myself, due to the fact that I was so far behind.) During vocabulary practice, everyone would cut up the sheet of vocabulary words they were given—which varied in difficulty depending on your group assignment—and tape each little rectangle containing a new word into our notebooks, stacked in a column. Beside each term, we would have to search up and write down its definition, each of its syllables, and a sentence using the word to demonstrate our understanding.

On this fateful day, my group and I had finished cutting up our little vocabulary rectangles, taped them into our notebooks, and began going through word by word. It was all going great until we hit this particular word somewhere down the list: “dictator.” Everything went awry as we began writing its syllables.

The two other boys in my group were giggling slightly, while the two girls were rolling their eyes. I, as usual, quietly mumbled to myself and paid no attention to them, which turned out to be a huge mistake. Like with any other word, I repeated each syllable separately several times before moving on to the next syllable. At least, I tried to, but as soon as the first syllable “dic” came out of my mouth, everyone in my group became silent, and turned their head towards me.

“Did you just say the d-word?” one of them asked.

“Yes he just did!”

“We should totally tell the teacher.”

I did not know how to respond. Instead, I just stared blankly at them. By then, I knew what “tell the teacher” meant. But what did I exactly do to get myself in trouble? I had absolutely no idea. Thankfully, they decided it was not that big of a deal and spared me the embarrassment of the teacher having to explain to me why the D-word was inappropriate.

Ever since that day, I knew that “dic” was not something I should say, but it wasn’t until fifth grade that I finally figured out its meaning. And, of course, I also learned that “dic” was not how you spell it.

### **The “B-word”**

Lying together on my bean bag chair, my dad would read a story to me before bed for the majority of my elementary school years. Beside it being really fun for both of us, it also improved my English, which made it all the better as I was so desperate to learn.

My mom had bought me a full set of Roald Dahl books, so we usually selected from those to read. It usually took us a month to finish one of these because I would have a question about a word or phrase in every other sentence. Out of the collection, one of my all time favorites was *The Witches*, a crazy story about a little boy and his grandma having to defeat a group of children-hating witches before they turn all of the kids in their building into mice.

One night, after a particularly dramatic reading of the boy having to hide behind a screen in a ballroom from the witch gathering, I begged my dad to keep reading so I could know what happened next. Unfortunately, it was already a bit past my bedtime so the answer was a resolute “no.” I, too excited and curious,

quietly mumbled to myself about the possibilities of the direction of the story. I picked up the book and stared hard at the cover, as if my intense focus could force out the entire story.

Pretty soon, my third-grader attention span broke, and I instead began mumbling words rhyming with “witch.” It began pretty innocently:

“Sitch.”

“Nitch.”

“Litch.”

And then it took a turn for the worse.

“B\*tch.”

My dad, who was typing on his phone, waiting for me to put the book back and get into bed, immediately looked up at me, surprised and alarmed.

“What did you just say?”, he asked.

Confused by the attention, I responded, “I was just saying words that rhyme with witch.”

“Did you say one that perhaps started with a ‘b’?”

“Oh yea! B\*tch?”

He finally realized that I was not aware of the fact that the word is not a polite word to say. He patiently explained to me what it actually means. I, quickly embarrassed by my mistake, apologized profusely and made a mental note to add that to a growing list of the “no-no words” to never say again in my youth.

### **The “H-word”**

An obvious side effect to not knowing English is not being able to talk to other people, and an obvious side effect to not talking to other people is becoming an introvert. That is why I absolutely hated block parties. Other kids would try to talk to me and most of the time I would just stare at them blankly.

During one summer not so far away from the b-word incident, there was a, well, block party. One of the parents brought out an inflatable pool and all the kids got in—it took some convincing to get me in there as well. While the other kids were splashing water at each other and seeing who can hold their breath the longest, I sat myself in a corner, quietly staring out into the street.

The experience was actually quite enjoyable until I suddenly felt a slight shift in the pool. The side that I was leaning on seemed to be slowly sinking. Alarmed, I searched for the outside for a potential hole. My hand ran over the valve, and I felt air coming out of it. Of course, at that time, I had no idea what the “valve” was; I didn’t even know what “air” was. The only word that came into my mind was “hole,” so I yelled to the other kids in the loudest voice I could muster,

which wasn't very loud. This, combined with my inability to pronounce the "l" at that time, produced a sound that meant something very different.

"There is a h\*e here!" I said.

This quickly resulted in a flurry of looks from the other kids, the looks that I have come to be used to yet still hated.

One of them asked "What did you just say?"

"There is a h\*e here!" I repeated, urgently yet confused.

"There is no way you just said that!" Another kid looked at me skeptically.

"There is a h\*e here!" I repeated, in a very quiet voice this time, though I pointed toward the valve as well.

"Oh! There is a hole in the pool." One of them finally understood what I said.

Everyone quickly got out of the pool, and one of them called out to an adult to come over and help. I, in all that commotion, quickly grabbed my towel that was lying beside the pool and ran all the way back to my house. I knew I had made a huge mistake somewhere along the line and was too embarrassed at that time to face them again.

(It was quite a while before I figured out my mistake.)

## **Hello and Apple**

Now, seven years and tens of thousands of new words later, I write this concluding passage to a piece of writing that consists of actual, comprehensible experiences—not just a combination of "hellos" and "apples."

# Hannah Jennings

Grade 11, Parkway West High School

*Personal Essay & Memoir*



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## GG

I've known GG for as long as I can remember and her name in my head is associated with a barbie house, stuffy attic, comfy red carpet, or a well used recliner. It's almost funny how I sometimes have phantom feelings or memories that are almost tangible to the point that if I closed my eyes and reached out, I will be gripping that same ladder I'd climb up to the attic. Or if I focus just enough, I will be touching the wrinkled hand that lay on the arm of the chair.

All us great grandkids always called my great grandma GG, and I'd been so used to it that when I was in kindergarten I'd thought everyone's great grandma's names were GG. I was wrong obviously, but if anything it only grew my respect for her. Considering she was a woman who left her home country when she was in her 20s, I'd thought she was unreal all my life. I mean, she'd left Scotland during WWII and now was in Vegas and was related to me. A girl who lived in Miami, Florida and far away from anything GG had done as a girl.

I think my earliest memory of being at my great grandparents' house was when all of us kids were pretty young. Seeing their old, wrinkled faces, I didn't see them as real people with a real personality, but instead as their job was to be nice to all of us grandkids and share their candy. I was a little forced to come and my sister, Jenny, had thrown a fit right before because she didn't want to drive to come here to stay for only 2 hours. The hours spent going and staying weren't proportional and even our young brains understood that.

We went, gave hugs, then sat down on the couch. My toes dug into the red carpet and goosebumps ran up my arms. Despite how warm it was outside in Vegas, it was always freezing in my grandparents' house without a blanket in sight. I kinda wished I was back outside instead of in their house, but the most unnerving thing was no one else seemed to be effected by the temperature.

While the adults talked I might as well have gotten more cold, the boredom left my only companion to be my imagination. Honestly, I was imagining the princess from my favorite book *Princess Tiaras* finding herself falling in love with her prince and my grandpa had to say my name twice for me to process he called me. I looked up from the table I was a little too fascinated with, and GG smiled a little.

“Do you girls want to go play with my barbie house?” I looked at Jenny because I wasn’t going to play alone in this foreign house and she shot me an annoyed look.

My grandpa led us into the guest room each step the floorboards creaking like they were trying to say something to us three, and when we got to the guest room it stopped. Almost as if we’d finally learned to say it ourselves.

I stared at the pink house sitting in the middle of the floor, the barbie sprinkled around it like sprinkles on a cupcake. And seeing that pink house there marked was what I looked forward to every time we drove the 3 hours to Vegas.

My grandpa died about 7 months before my grandma and it felt like everything was going wrong, like people shouldn’t die and instead are meant to be eternally old and fragile. I saw GG twice more after his death, and the very last time was during the summer when we were about to go to Scotland.

A strong aura wafted toward me as I opened the door, the smell of clorax wipes and old perfume almost gave me a headache but at the same time was an oddly comforting feeling. Even so, I felt like a puzzle piece that looked to fit, but didn’t, and it was only a matter of time before everyone learned that too.

Walking up to the door I felt sober, and scared in anticipation like just beyond the door I was going to find something I didn’t want to find making my hands shake a little. Logically, there was nothing mysterious about it. I was going to see GG. Case and point. Give her a hug, smile, and listen to my parents talk. Taking a deep breath, I followed my mom into the room and pasted on my smile feeling like I couldn’t make any other facial expression or I’d be rude.

After a couple minutes I suddenly found myself alone with Jace in the room, not sure exactly where my parents and sister ran off and where the conversation about Scotland disappeared to. There was a pit in my stomach and I scrounged my brain for what conversation topics a 90 year old woman might find interesting. Nothing. I had nothing. And Tom just stood there looking at me to take the lead. Silence. The kind of silence that made me tremble in discomfort.

“So, how was your week?” She answered dryly and it was the type of thing she got every day I was sure. Then it was silent again. The lack of sound seemed

to be louder than anything, cutting through the air like a knife and making me sweat.

“Your hair is so beautiful. Is it red?” I’ve got a thing with people calling me a red head and I wanted to make it not so awkward and more friendly so I joked,

“Uhh lets just say it’s not, but thank you!” My cheeks were burning, I was starting to sweat and I felt really nervous not sure how to respond to a compliment like that.

“I used to be that tan also, your so dark!” with the most enthusiasm a 90 year old woman could muster, she smiled and I once again blushed because I’m really not tan, but it *was* a sweet compliment.

“Oh thank you.” I mentally berated myself, then laughed awkwardly. I wished my mom would come back in right now and save me, but then again GG seemed to distinguish me as someone different than just one of her million grandkids. There was a genuine love she felt toward me, not just because we were related but it was real and had a reason. Somehow we’d got on the topic of her favorite candies and I felt like I should’ve thought of that earlier, but no. I wasn’t that bright under stress. We were soon talking like old friends, laughter and smiles and frowns that weren’t forced or fake. It kind of shocked me in a way that I felt guilty for being so ignorant before.

My mom came back in through the doorway a smile pasted on her own face and just like that, I was back to sitting around saying nothing and yet looking back? It was special. She was GG, my great grandmother. And when she died, I realized how amazing it was that even for 5 minutes she wasn’t my grandma who’s job was to be overly sweet, she was my *grandma* who I could talk to like my own 90 year old friend. And to be truthful, I wished I’d realized that 15 years earlier and wasn’t that sure how I hadn’t.

When it was time for GG to rest, we all walked back through the door that didn’t see so scary and I looked into the living room. With it’s wrinkles, sagging middle, and fading color, the recliner sat there like a lonely puppy begging for someone to go to it. No hand sat on it. No GG sat in it ever again. No house in Vegas was ever the same. And though a black hole seemed to eat at my insides, that sweet moment during the summer of 15 seemed to drive it away as I thought back to GG. The woman who I’d known for as long as I could remember.



# Aneet Kakkar

Grade 12, Olathe North High School

Educator: Deirdre Zongker

*Personal Essay & Memoir*



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## The Effects of Life of Pi

Certain experiences in life may appear trivial, yet they frequently hold the deepest impacts. For me, this was a movie that will resonate with me for a lifetime: *Life of Pi*. For as long as I can remember, I have had this strong connection with television; it is the stories that can't be expressed in words that I find so fascinating. I watched *Life of Pi* on its release day, November 21, 2012. The movie follows Pi, who retells the story of his family's zoo relocating from India to the United States. I vividly remember the local AMC theater with popcorn scattered on the floor, frigid air, and crying children. I was a timid five-year-old who carefully took a seat on F12. That entire day, I had been overjoyed to spend time with my family doing one of my favorite things: watching a movie.

I saw a slice of myself in Pi. I have never crossed an ocean with a tiger or survived the sinking of a ship, but that movie inspired my small 5-year-old self. I remember every image, every scene, in that movie so strongly, from the ship to the animals to the face of Pi. My eyes were fixated on the beaming screen for the 2-hour and 7-minute duration. At that time, I didn't understand why the movie evoked so much emotion in me, but as I got older, I began to understand the influence it had on my self-development and character. What resonated with me was the movie's message of resilience and curiosity. I began to adopt traits of resilience and curiosity after watching the movie, and the first instance was in kindergarten. For example, when I was in kindergarten, I struggled with my lowercase letters, especially the letter "e." I had spent the first 5 years of my life in India speaking only Punjabi, so naturally, when I came to the United States, I did not speak a word of English. Yet, I had this unwavering determination to learn to

write my lowercase letters, and I stayed persistent with my goal and mastered the skill. I vividly remember being the only student spending one-on-one time with the teacher, but I never let that impact me, and was determined to achieve my goals.

My traits of resilience and, specifically curiosity followed me through high school. For instance, I was adamant about doing a specific Senior Capstone Project. I wanted to write an academic research paper on The Effects of Immigration on the American Economy. However, I was the only person pursuing an entirely research-based project. Many people said “that it's not worth it”, “sounds like a lot of work,” and “just do something like everyone else.” I remained adamant that this was going to be my project and jumped through the hurdles that came with this decision. I had this deep curiosity for immigration, coming from an immigrant household, fueled not only my motivation and resilience but also my willingness to remain persistent. Now, what I have learned is that failure is never the end of a chapter, but the beginning of a new one, and *The Life of Pi* was my introduction to perseverance and curiosity. This movie is so much more to me than mere entertainment. It taught me that although intellect can be valuable, curiosity and determination are values I hold closest to my heart. The movie inspired the pillars of my moral standing and character. I plan to carry these values into every hardship in life regardless of the circumstance. I am now someone who believes in persevering through hardships and staying curious despite the situation. My stories and hardships don't come anywhere near being stranded on a boat with a tiger, but I hope to bring the same perseverance, strength, and curiosity that I learned from Pi continuously throughout my life.

Sabyasaachi

Kandula

Grade 12, Parkway West High School

*Personal Essay & Memoir*



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## Made With Love

Today's lunch? Meatballs. Mino, my lunch buddy and platonic soulmate, made his usual remark: "That looks so good!" I shrugged. To me, it was just lunch.

When Mom first came to America, she had just completed her medical degree. But after having my brother and me, she decided to give up her promising career to take care of us full-time. At the time, I had been diagnosed with eosinophilic esophagitis; basically, whenever I was exposed to a trigger food, my esophagus would get severely inflamed. The problem was, though, that my doctors had no way of knowing exactly which foods I was sensitive to.

So emerged our routine of trial and error; Mom would find alternatives to everything, carefully crafting each meal to avoid a flare-up. She made butter from scratch. Ketchup, too. In my lunchbox, much to Mino's glee, every day was a new dish—some days savory Indian cuisine, like steaming *upma*, other days American classics (spaghetti with meatballs being my favorite). As a kid, I never really understood my condition, let alone the work Mom had to put in—the life she gave up—to address it. To a five-year-old, food is food, meticulously prepared or not. But as I started to grow older, I began to truly understand the gravity of her sacrifice.

My neighbors were an old couple, the wife half-deaf and the husband left unable to talk after a stroke. Mom insisted that I rake their yard every fall and shovel their driveway every winter. Worst of all, I had to do it for free. In the beginning, I dreaded those days. I made it a point to finish as quickly as possible, half out of a desire to get home and play videogames, half out of fear one of them would come outside and start making small talk.

But every time I went back, my eye roll became a little less pointed, replaced by a sly satisfaction. It was more persuasive than any lecture from my mom: I really felt that this wasn't an opportunity to make a quick buck, or some burden I would have to tolerate for two seasons a year. It was an opportunity to help a neighbor in need, to love someone who might have had it tougher than me. By the end, though I'd never admit it, I prayed one of them would come out and make small talk.

It certainly was a weird feeling. Today, it feels like all roads lead to me, myself, and I. We're moving toward ever-greater convenience and ease—progress means making life more pleasurable and frictionless. My generation speaks in the language of “protect your peace” and “drop things that don't serve you.” We have forgotten that it is the difficult things—those obligations that require real work and sacrifice, the duties that we didn't really choose but fulfill anyways—that make life worth living.

So every time Mom crafts another meal, I see it for what it really is: a silent revolution against that soulless inward focus we've gravitated toward in the 21st century. It's one such choice among the millions of endlessly complicated decisions that have come to define modern life—ones that force us to navigate the competing bonds of family and career, of service and self-actualization. A sacrifice like my mom's isn't always the right answer, but neither is selfishness. I've made it my mission to push back against the trend I see. I urge people to not pull back from our responsibilities to each other, to be communities instead of atomized selves. But it's not something you can say over a conversation; the lesson just isn't convincing enough. So I take a page out of Mom's book. And I'm sure I've changed a few minds (Mino's included) after they've tried *my* signature spaghetti and meatballs.

# Brian Kang

Grade 10, Blue Valley West High School

*Short Story*



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## A Holy Man

Her voice crackles through the telephone. “Please, I beg you... My son will die... Our insurance... Please...” As her voice fades, I almost can’t bear it. I can’t do anything. This isn’t my problem. “I’m sorry ma’am. That’ll be \$665.99.”

As the call disconnects, my throat coils up. I feel sick, knowing I’ve doomed someone to death today. People beg for something unattainable, their feeble lives held barely in line by the invisible string of money. I curse the creator of this material world, held together by nothing more than lies.

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My head throbs.

“Jacob”

Someone murmurs my name. I sit on the edge of my bed, balled fists carrying crumpled papers – bills, demanding my attention, consuming my world. A weight has been slowly dragging me down my whole life. A weight so crushing, that it feels as if I am at my end. I crave relief from reality, an embrace, warm or cold, to cease my troubles.

Slowly, I feel a sliver of cold creeping up my back and through my consciousness. I accept it, slipping out of consciousness and reality. I wake in a meta-physical dream world, at the precipice of creation. I see my life, past and future, playing out on the curtains of reality. An angelic light shines around and envelops me, not in the sense of light but as a thick dense fabric wrapping around me. Again someone murmurs my name.

“Jacob”

This time I feel compelled to answer the voice.

“Who are you?”, I ask. Although my mouth remains shut, my words roar out of my skin, permeating my pores and rippling through my very being.

A face appears, his features being twisted out of light. I almost hear a hiss, as his face is seared into my view. A male body materializes in front of me. He is the most beautiful being I have ever seen, so perfectly crafted, that I do not doubt that he must be a God. Tightly wound musculature clads a bronze frame. White wings sprout from his scapula, and golden curls frame a cold, handsome face, set with obsidian eyes.

I beseech him.

“Why have you brought me here? What was I meant to do?”, I cry out. He does not answer my cries. Instead, he opens his wings, beckoning me forth. I hesitate. Is this the relief I seek? Have I finally found God? I stare at his eyes, trying to discern an answer from them.

As I stare, transfixed, into his inky eyes, they change, swirling into images of greed, hedonism, death, destruction, and violence. I see the modern world and the permeation of greed in every facet of its rotting interior. I see a bleeding sky collapsing into a ravaged earth, the oceans of life boiling with the fury of death, the ground strewn with the corpses of nature, and the heartbeat of life extinguished. A corporeal and spiritual death for all. As I gaze, I am yanked away from my visions.

I am left wide-eyed and gasping for air, as my God watches me intently. My body tries to scream, but my skin seems to close up, not letting my cries out. Instead, they pile up inside of me, imploding from the pressure. The silence is broken by him.

“Jacob”

This time he sounds different. His voice is guttural and haunting. And like a symphony, it is layered with voices and instrumental sounds. A cacophony of despair. I understand now. This god is different. He is also anguished by our world.

“Look closer, Jacob. You know the truth of the world.

I find that the meta-physical world is fading away, its frayed layers stripped away to reveal reality. I see my own body, naked and bare, stripped of my sins. As I catch a glimpse of my ugly body of flesh and blood, I am filled with shame. I feel undeserved of the presence of this perfect being. I drop to my knees.

“Yes, my Lord! Tell me my purpose!”, I scream in fervent hysterics.

“I have chosen you.”

“For what have you chosen this unworthy vessel?”

Instead of answering me, he begins to stretch his hands out. I hesitate. It seems an easy action, taking his hand. He seemed to promise salvation from all

miseries of the world. Although deep within, I recoiled from his touch, I am too weary now to withstand his promises. I take his hand, and as our pointer fingers meet, a flash of light erupts. He begins to guide me, gently, toward the heavens. He shifts his position to directly behind me. His touch is warm and benevolent, and we start to ascend.

“Do not look back. To doubt is to fall.”

“Yes, I understand.”

No sooner do I answer, than we arrive at the sky. This is the first heaven, the earthly representation of his glory. I look around me, in astonishment. The clouds dance on my fingertips, damp and cool, contrasting the warm hues of sunrise and sunset painted across the horizon. Flocks of birds tickle my nose and my breaths become gusts of wind.

Although I wish to stay longer, he begins to rise, gently pushing my back to the next heaven. As we ascend again, I notice his hands are rougher than before. I almost turn around, but stop myself. I must be the one to save humanity.

As we burst through the clouds, we enter the second heaven, the domain of heavenly bodies. The sun, moon, and earth are all visible to me from here. Fascinated, I reach out to pluck the sun from its orbit. It rests in the palm of my hand, flickering like a mere light bulb. In this position, the sufferings of Earth seem far away, and almost nonexistent. The universe is in my hands. From the corner of my mind, a slithering voice creeps in. It blocks my view of the glory of God’s creations.

“Everything can be yours. You, the chosen one, have the right to dominion over the entirety of creation.”

As I listen, I look around me, the whole universe in my view. I desire everything I see. I begin to pluck the stars from the sky, like a burglar from a jewelry cabinet, a fat man coveting food from the poor. But as I grab more, the heavier each star becomes. My arms sag with their weight, each one screaming to be let go. As I pick the last star, they burst out of my hands, mangled by my grip, no longer beautiful. The voice in my head eggs me on.

“Gather them again! You need more!”

“Resist these immoral temptations, Jacob”, whispers my God.

I command the voice to be silent, disgusted by my actions. It shrinks, burrowing into the corner of my mind.

“Why have you brought me here?”

“To seek the salvation you so desire.”

He hastens his ascent. Before I can speak again, we land in the third heaven, Paradise. I have been brought before the courts of God, a paradise for his believers, housing his throne of creation. The air is filled with joyous hymns and the harps of angels, which themselves seem to radiate divine glory and love. I am almost blinded by the radiance of the center throne, the pinnacle of divinity.

Drawn to it, I begin to walk closer. But as I trek across Paradise, the harmony of music seems to slow. The singing voices start to crack, becoming discordant. The warm air begins to turn cold. The light starts to dim, the color bleaching from the environment. Instead of angels, I begin to hear hounds, howling in the distance. Evil voices begin echoing, speaking of vile things, praising my human sins. Still, I trudge on, hypnotized by the glory of the throne. And as I ascend the stairs to God's throne, I begin to shake with jealousy. Who is this god to rule over all? With all of this power and glory, why couldn't he end his believers suffering?

The figure behind me clasps my shoulder, bringing his mouth to my ear. He whispers in it.

"It is unfair, is it not? You have been chosen by me. It is you who must save humanity from the perils of their greed, not God. Only by seizing the power of God and waging war against Earth will you be able to cleanse it of impurity. Go, and take it. Take what is rightfully yours. You have seen what you must do. I have shown you exactly what must be done."

Entranced by his silver tongue, I start to walk towards the empty throne of God. I burn with. Who is this god to command my worship? Why should he deserve power only to squander it and let his creations rot? The throne seems to gleam brighter as if daring me to take it. But as I ascend the stairs of Heaven, I pause, curious.

"But if you are not God... Who are you?"

Silence. My throat turns clammy. My heart begins to beat out of my chest. Behind me is something unholy. Finally, I turn to face my master.

What meets my eyes is not the perfect being I witnessed. He still has a perfectly crafted body, and his wings still gleam white under the glory of the throne. His face is still cruelly handsome, and his golden curls are in perfect alignment.

But his gaze has changed. His lips curve into a devilishly cruel smile, growing bigger than should be possible on his face. His proportions grow inhuman, his smile too large, his eyes growing ever too thin and cruel. His eyes gleam red and black with violence and insanity. He transfixes me. He grows ever



closer, and as he draws nearer, I seem to freeze in place. In a vile, eldritch hum, he speaks.

“You disappoint me, Jacob. Don’t you have faith in me?”

Still frozen, I can only watch, as he lifts his hand. The hand that once carried me through the heavens now casts me down.

With a single tap on my chest, I start to fall.

As I fall through Paradise, the bright lights begin to dim, fading to black. The harps play one last sad melody.

When I fall through to Space, I try to grab onto the stars, anything, anything to halt my fall. But as I reach out, they all shrink away, hateful of my touch.

And as I finally reach the Sky, I realize my fate. As the colorful sky dims, I am stripped of my glory, and as I lay bare, I am left only with regret.

Then I land.

The concrete rushes up to meet my feet. Worldly sensations spill back into my brain. I stand in the middle of the city. I can barely hear my thoughts through the clamor of the city, and the stench of petroleum and sewage. I tremble, my soul aching for another chance. But as I look up at the heavens, I realize. It’s an empty void, like always. My world crashes down, my knees taking the brunt of the force. I lay there, broken, trapped, and worst of all, still human.

# Brian Kang

Grade 10, Blue Valley West High School

*Flash Fiction*



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## Deer Hunting

Something stares back at me from the cracked mirror on the bathroom wall. Its soulless eyes pierce through me, into the emptiness. However hard I try, I can't pull my thoughts away from the feeling of ravenous hunger. When I close my eyes, I think back to that day.

*The wind blows through my hair. My stomach growls. I tap the wheel impatiently, fidgeting with a black knife. Where were they? A few minutes go by, sweat running down my neck. July heat is terrible. Suddenly I hear a crash and a muffled thud. I whip my head around. My heart pounds in excitement. Finally. A deer hunt.*

I shake my head back into the present. Trapped in a room, with bars over the window, and door. Only served cold slop, and taunted from outside by devils. The madness is seeping into the emptiness, a red tinge to the colorless void. Suddenly my door swings open. Another man appears, the door closing behind him. He stares at me with scared brown eyes, almost like a deer, and eyes the rest of the room. The hard beds, the steel toilet. He's slender, with a boyish look to him. He sits on the bed opposite me. He's fidgeting with his hands, glancing up at me.

"What's your name?", he asks. I don't answer.

"Alan. Nice to meet you too."

I stare at him. I close my eyes and try to remember.

*I'm panting, exhausted from the chase. Something screams ahead of me. I look over my shoulder. My car is parked on the side of the road, becoming the canvas for his red paint. It's a beautiful sight. As I wade through the thick reeds and grasses, I soon come to a clearing. A huge buck, with twisting antlers, lies in the middle, gushing blood, a black knife lodged in its stomach. I pounce on it, and a sharp pain sears across my face.*

I open my eyes in a jolt. My neck twitches, and I jump to my feet, scrambling for the bathroom. I hunch over the sink, staring into the mirror. A huge scar runs down my entire face, narrowly missing my right eye. My right cheek is a mangled mess of scars. Red-hot fury fills the emptiness I felt before. Deer.

I turn towards Alan, my face calm. I smile at him.

“Do you recognize me?”

His lips twitch. No, I guess not.

“You don’t watch the news do you?”

He stares at me blankly, a bit cautious now. He starts backing up from me.

“That night... It was July. I ate deer.”

The guards find me in my blood-soaked jumpsuit, halfway through.

# Min-Woo Kang

Grade 12, Parkway Central High School

Educator: Jason Lovera

*Critical Essay*



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## Fantasy: More Than a Fever Dream

From the moment I stepped foot onto my high school's campus, my dreams were already set: to attend a prestigious college. My steps for achieving this goal, as outlined by my parents, teachers, and society, seemed laughably simple. If I could just obtain the highest grades I could, score well on standardized tests, and have enough decent extracurriculars, those sweet, succulent acceptance letters would come rolling in. I felt like there was an unspoken contract between me and academia; the amount of work I put into it should equal all the rewards it gives me. Thus, I gave school my all.

This idea of complete justice, stemming from childlike innocence seems to be an inherent facet of human nature and according to Milton's *Paradise Lost*, this innocence even stretches back to humanity's biblical parents. When Adam tells Eve of their sole commandment from God to not eat of the fruit of knowledge, he expresses, "so near grows death to life, whate'er death is" (Milton 425). Adam cannot understand death at all, only assuming that death is undesirable because God chooses to threaten him with it. Adam, before his fall, remains pure from all evil as well as not knowing any sort of evil: he is completely innocent in every sense of the word. In much the same way, as I pushed the achievement of my lofty ideals to the forefront of my mind as I became a high school freshman, I could not understand, or even know of, the many cruelties that awaited me. I was innocent. I believed in myself.

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"When does UChicago come out?" John asked.

"This friday," I replied. Everytime a friend reminded me of my imminent college decision release date, I could feel my heart pounding in the chest. This

one decision was the culmination of everything I had worked toward throughout high school. This decision was my blood, sweat, and tears.

"I'm not gonna get in though, bro," I told John, continuing the conversation. "I mean if Timothy got deferred from Harvard and Steven, Akira, and Frank all got rejected from Stanford, I'm not getting in."

John hummed as the standard platitudes came out, accepting my deflection. But, I thought to myself, surely those decisions were just flukes. Every year you hear about those qualified students who somehow don't get into the school of their choice. I'll be the one to get in, to be the only one in the friend group to get into their top choice school.

All the tests, all the homework, and all the essays, everything was to achieve my dream. My pride could not accept anything less. According to Michael Eric Dyson, in his article "Pride," he cites Pope Gregory I, who argues that pride occurs when man "favours himself in his thought; and ... walks with himself along the broad spaces of his thought and silently utters his own praises" (qtd. in Dyson 10). It wasn't just for my dream anymore, for my education. My pride had ballooned from merely the dedication to chase my goals to the desire to seem superior to my peers. Instead of knowledge, I desired prestige and this desire only intensified my anxieties.

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Time seemed to rush by that week, and soon enough, the date read "Friday."

Now, I paced throughout my living room, constantly checking my phone. Refresh. Nothing. Refresh. Nothing. Refresh again. Still nothing. Maybe this refresh will do it? Nope, still nothing. I groaned, shoving my phone into my pocket before running my hands down my face. Just let me know!

I swapped between all the different social media apps on my phone, though my eyes were ever really focused on the tiny clock in the top right corner. Scrolling and scrolling, none of the content was processed by my brain. All I could think about was that decision. Just let me know!

It felt like they were never going to release it.

"Dinner!" Dad called.

I paused for a second, trying to jam the ability to process his message alongside the stress my brain was already under. "One second!" I responded. One more refresh couldn't hurt, right?

My normal application portal gone, I was instead greeted by a single link. All other noise dimmed in the background, as a ringing began to play in my ears.

Eh?

My stress made the letter unreadable, but the lack of confetti and short length made it clear. I forced myself to stand, before slowly shambling over to the dinner table. Who could I blame for this failure? The only possible option for a person seemed to be myself: what if I had studied a bit more for the ACT to get that one point higher? What if I got all A+'s in high school rather than just mostly A+'s? What if I participated in a huge research study or got an internship at some major company? I felt as if I had doomed myself from the beginning. The strongest application I could send wasn't strong enough.

As I stewed over my result, many theologians, when defending the existence of an all-powerful and all-good God often fall back onto that very same argument that I concluded in that moment: that man created evil through his own free will, first through Adam and Eve's original sin and then through the individual actions of every human being. However, in the article "Evil and Omnipotence," J. L. Mackie argues that the free will theodicy is inherently flawed: that to "make this solution plausible two different sense of 'freedom' must be confused, one sense which will justify the view that freedom is a third order good, more valuable than other goods would be without it, and another sense, sheer randomness" (Mackie 34). A central component of the free will defense includes the idea that free will embodies a "third order good," or a greater good than first order goods, defined as good simply because of their goodness, such as happiness or pleasure, as well as second order goods, defined as goods that arise out of evil, such as sympathy or heroism. Accepting this proposition, Mackie points out that God could have easily created creatures who, in their own free will, always chose good due to the strength of their characters. Thus, to absolve God of this responsibility, the theist's definition of free will must shift to "sheer randomness," not compelled by any sense of character or will. He argues that defending God through pinning all blame onto man necessitates two definitions of free will, neither of which are compatible with one another, leaving God's goodness with no defense. All suffering, including mine, does not necessarily come from the works of man. If there is a God, He, and the world He created, is as implicated in suffering as man is. As the awareness of an unfair world bloomed into my mind, my self-blame weakened. What else could I have done to change the result in such an unjust world? I did the best I could. Nonetheless, while it faded, a new dread soon filled me.

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As I sat down at the dinner table, my eyes acted like dams, trying their best to hold all the water back. I stared off into space, trying to avoid the faces of my family members as best as I could.

“When does UChicago announce the result?” Mom asked, turning over to look at me, as I attempted to evade her gaze.

My voice caught in my throat. “I, uh,” I stumbled over my words, finally having to name my situation. It still didn’t feel real. I didn’t want it to feel real. “I got rejected.”

As I finally addressed my rejection, the dams threatened to break as staring off into nothingness appeared ever more appealing. The conversation between my family became a mere cacophony of noise as I quickly returned to my room after finishing.

I laid down on the carpet, my arms and legs splayed out like a starfish on the ground, staring at the ceiling. What’s the point? I thought to myself. Even if it’s not my fault, how can I say that the injustices of the world won’t come back for round two later on?

Sitting back up straight, I opened my laptop, just to be faced with my college list: they all were, with the exception of a few schools, similar in prestige to my dream school. I returned to my previous position, this time though with my right hand over my eyes. I didn’t want to look at the ceiling anymore, to take part in this disgusting world. Schools that previously felt perfectly achievable now felt a million miles away.

A wave of despair washed over me, the same despair Milton sought to express in Adam after the fall. As Adam laments his fallen state, he wails, “Fair patrimony / That I must leave ye, sons; O were I able / To waste it all myself, and leave ye none! / ... / out of which / I find no way, from deep to deeper plunged!” (Milton 10.819-844). Adam’s biting, sarcastic remark of calling the inheritance he leaves for his descendants “fair,” while he curses them to suffering and death illustrates the massive despair Adam now experiences, as he can only process it through dark humor. Moreover, Adam uses the image of him falling into an abyss, that he goes from “deep to deeper plunged.” Every second of his continued existence only contributes more and more to his hopelessness as Adam has “no way” to escape the abyss without the strength to take all of the punishment onto himself. Much like Adam, I felt as if the world itself was against me. How could I, just a single high school senior, fight back against the entire world? I didn’t possess the strength to escape my own abyss. I felt worthless.

Still laying on the ground, I grabbed my laptop off the bed and opened one of the documents where I was preparing my essays for regular decision. Placing my hands on the keyboard, I glared at the blank white sheet, as innumerable different topics for the next essay ran through my head.

No, that doesn't make any sense. Another idea popped into my head. No, that's dumb. I threw my head against my keyboard before running my hands through the sides of my hair. My dream school didn't want me. Why would the others? It felt like a waste of time to keep writing these essays. Is this all my dream turned out to be? Nothing but a dead fantasy.

I grabbed my laptop off my bed and placed it on top of my desk, before scrambling onto the bed and taking out my phone. I didn't want to work anymore. I couldn't. There was no point in trying anyways. I would never be able to change the injustices of the world.

According to Aristotle, whom Dyson also cites in his article, a lack of pride is as dangerous as too much pride as "such undue humility because the humble man thinks he deserves less than he does, and thus fails to appreciate his own worth" (Dyson 16)." I had made an incorrect assumption that just because my dream school rejected me, all the others would quickly follow suit. I gave up on my dedication and the pride that fueled it, leading me straight into the same abyss and despair Adam found himself in after the fall. I needed to regain my pride.

Just as I opened the first Youtube video, a message notification appeared at the top of my screen. It was from Timothy. I groaned, my half-burnt fuse threatening to explode. Reluctantly, I opened the message.

"When does UChicago come out?" he asked.

"Already did," I responded, slamming my fingers against the screen. "I got rejected."

"Sorry bro. But you know what they say: rejection is just redirection." He ended there, as I turned my face away from my phone and once again stared back at my now very-familiar ceiling. Reaching for my laptop, I began to write whatever came to mind, without dilly-dallying on whether it sounded "smart" or not. I needed to face the evil, not run from it.

Richard Swinburne, in his article "Why Does God Allow Evil?" reaches a similar conclusion. As he discusses natural evils, or suffering that occurs due to uncontrollable acts of nature, he argues, "we need those insidious processes of decay and dissolution which money and strength cannot ward off for long to give



us the opportunities, so easy otherwise to avoid, to become heroes” (Swinburne 32). While I could never erase this pain, all that was left was to grow from it.

As I typed and typed, I knew what I wanted, my dream and my pride once again invigorating my effort. Like Oedipus proudly and righteously commanding Creon to “drive [him] out of the land at once, far from sight, where [he] can never hear a human voice” (Sophocles 1572), even after he realizes he has murdered his father and slept with his mother, I needed to hold my head up and keep to my ideals. When the world obstructs me and cuts me down, the only action left to take is to surpass them all.

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# Charlotte Kaye

Grade 11, John Burroughs School

Educator: Jim Lewis

*Science Fiction & Fantasy*



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## Night at the Gardner Museum

### Prologue:

*Stars dotted a clear night sky just after midnight on March 18, 1990, when two men in police uniforms stepped out of an old sedan and requested to be let into the Isabella Stewart Gardner museum. Guards broke protocol and allowed it, thinking that they were real officers. By the time their true identities were discovered, it was too late. One of the security men permitted the fake deputies to go behind the watch desk, where the criminals tied up the two security guards. When they had finished, they uttered one infamous phrase: “Gentleman, this is a robbery.”*

*The guards were forced into the basement and handcuffed to a pole where they remained for over seven hours, with tape over their eyes and footsteps pounding above them, knowing their jobs were lost but feeling thankful it wasn't their lives. There was nothing they could do while the burglars spent a total of 81 minutes inside the museum, tripping motion detectors in nearly every room. At the end of their theft, they took two trips to their car to transport 13 priceless pieces and left the frames and shattered glass strewn about the floors of the museum. These were just a few of the ways that the thieves left behind evidence of their behavior; this robbery is known as one of the messiest despite its success.*

*To this day, there are more questions than answers; no one knows who the robbers were, their motivations, where the art went, or why they stole what they did. The Gardner Museum robbery is the single largest property theft in the world, and many were—and are still—shocked at how such an unsophisticated crime could have been so successful. Today, empty frames hang on the walls where the stolen paintings once stood as a reminder of what was lost that night and the hope the institution still*

*has that the paintings will someday be returned to their rightful place. Each day, visitors, including optimistic detectives and curious civilians, arrive with the aspiration that they will find any clues that were missed and finally solve the mystery of the Gardner museum theft.*

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My hand brushed along the cold stone railing as I ascended the staircase to the second floor. Lapis lazuli walls enveloped my peripheral vision, and the scent of old paper crept into my nose. Air filled my lungs, and my jaw dropped open as I stepped through the doorway into a square room lined with stunning mint green wallpaper. The Tuesday evening light poured in through the wall of windows that opposed the empty frames. I tore my eyes away from the gorgeous natural light and the lush green courtyard just outside and walked toward the items that brought me here. I approached the empty frame: a scar and constant reminder of what's at stake. As a twenty-one-year-old art history student, I had taken it upon myself to solve the largest art heist in history. Or, at least get some decent clues to help the authorities.

I've always been a dangerously curious person. From my conspiracy theory era in 3rd grade to my true-crime phase in 6th, it's always just been my nature to search for answers. To cap off my senior year, I needed to write a twenty-page thesis about an important period in history and what we should learn from it based upon the use of art at that time. So, naturally, when I first read about a museum robbery that led to the disappearance of numerous priceless pieces, despite possible mob violence being involved, I knew it was the perfect starting point for my assignment. My focus was the late 20th century and the use of famous art as bargaining chips with law enforcement, tying in my Criminology minor. That's what brought me here: the Isabella Stewart Gardner museum, just East of downtown Boston and the scene of the largest art heist in history.

Inspecting the gilded frame, I could picture a burglar looking at the exact same one, seconds before snatching the valuable artwork within. I continued circling the room, until I came across a faint rectangle outline in the wall. Peering closer, I realized that this must have been the hidden door left ajar, its hinges left creaking as the thieves made their bumbling escape. I reached out to trace the outline of the passage, my fingertips stopping just short of the wall that the criminals pried open. A rumble of thunder shook the floor beneath my feet, and the shadows of the antique furniture reached toward the ceiling as the golden sunset turned to an angry gray; the sky opened and rain slammed against the roof. I checked my watch and reminded myself that a security guard would be

coming through anytime to guide any lingering visitors to the exit. I pulled my “after hours access” pass out from beneath my shirt and faced the wall with the empty frames on either side of old portraits.

I returned to my inspection of the secret entrance and its outline on the wall, but the downpour abruptly ended and the gushing of water ceased, prompting me to turn back to the windows. I gasped when I realized that the cloudy and dull sky had somehow transformed to a crisp, inky black studded with winking stars. The museum had also darkened, and the sounds of final guests being ushered out disappeared. I peered through the door, trying to figure out what happened; maybe everyone left quickly? But that wouldn’t have explained the rain. I attempted to find my bearings and slow my pounding heart. The echoes of my footsteps on the polished brick floor traveled through the seemingly empty space and down the hallway, but when I paused, I noticed that there were more reverberations than there should be. I wasn’t alone. The room spun around me, and my breathing quickened from an already heightened pace. I stumbled back toward the wall behind me but jumped up when I realized that the frames were no longer empty. All attempts to calm myself down proved useless as I stared back at *Christ in the Storm on the Sea of Galilee*, the sound of its crashing waves filling my ears. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw droplets slide down the windows as they distorted the graying sky outside. I then noticed that it’s not the ocean smashing through the room but little splashes of water pounding against the ceiling.

I turned my head over my shoulder, and my heart skipped a beat as I once again saw that *Storm on the Sea of Galilee* had been replaced with a bare frame and wallpaper peeking through the middle where the artwork should have been. More footsteps approached, and my shoulders sagged in relief when I saw that she was a starstruck visitor, trying to experience as much of the museum as she could before it closed. She ran in, panting, with a camera in her hand.

“Oh my god! Did you see this one? They cut it right out of the frame!” she panted as she darted through the room, snapping pictures on the way.

“Yeah... hey, did you see anybody running around here?” maybe she saw the person who was causing the eerie footsteps.

“Nope! Just me. I’m visiting from Milwaukee. I watched the Netflix series, and I’ve wanted to come here ever since,” she continued taking pictures of each piece of art.

“Sorry, one more question. Did the rain do something,” I hesitated, “funky? Like suddenly stop or...”

“Not that I noticed. I gotta go before security comes and gets me,” she dashed off to the next room.

*Okay. So the rain thing didn't really happen, and there were no creepy footsteps. What was going on?* This was the moment when I knew something was really, really wrong. The footsteps were definitely not Miss Milwaukee, and I seemed to be the only one noticing the weird things happening. My thoughts were another time interrupted by a boom of thunder outside.

I blinked, and the room again turned dark, leaving me face-to-face with a Rembrandt that no one was supposed to have seen for decades. My suspicions were further confirmed, and I couldn't ignore the sinking feeling in my chest, hoping that it wasn't foreshadowing. Someone else's footsteps bursted into the room, and I jumped behind some sort of antique vanity. Peeking around the side, I could make out a few figures dressed in, what appeared to be, police outfits. One of them even donned a matching hat, its visor slightly askew. At least six feet tall each, their dark figures loomed in the hallways, searching for items of value. I reached for the pass hanging around my neck, thinking that it must have been security doing a final walk-through after turning out the lights.

“Come on, man,” the one with the hat grunted, “Grab the stupid things, and let's go. The police might be on their way.”

*The police?* These men were definitely not museum security. I went to tuck the pass back in, but apparently I had just been grasping the collar of my shirt. I scrambled through my pockets and scanned the floor, looking for the misplaced badge. Slowly, I attempted to crawl across the floor to find it, but after a drawn-out creak, my eyes met those of the strange men.

“What the hell are ya doing on the floor? Get up and help!” his bruised fingers uncomfortably pressed into my arm as he shoved me toward the wall.

His hatless partner was busy yanking seemingly random items off of the walls and shoving them into a black garbage bag.

It was then that I knew. *The robbery... I was in it. I had somehow been transported into the largest art theft in history that happened decades ago, and I had no idea how to get back to where and when I actually was.* My eyes widened as I slowly locked my knees. I looked around in horror as the thieves ran about examining items then either moving on or shoving them in the bag. I thought I saw one of them glance at something on the palm of his hand, some sort of list perhaps, but I couldn't be certain.

“‘This is a robbery,’ really?” the one without the hat panted, “ya seriously couldn’t have thought of anything better to say? What if there’s a security system of some sort? We could get busted here!”

“Their ‘security system’ was a man who couldn’t tell ya what planet he’s on. And we won’t get busted if ya hurry it up,” I winced as the burglar with the hat cut a painting out of its frame and discarded the latter on the floor.

He again noticed me and pointed at one of the remaining paintings on the wall, “Get that one, we’re heading to the next room. Make it quick and silent, or you’ll regret it.”

I hesitated, unable to bring myself to touch a priceless artifact, until he pulled out a pocket knife, the metal glinting in the moonlight, and yelled “go!”

My heart pounded in my ears as I approached the painting. I looked back over my shoulder where he still stood menacingly, watching my every move. I squeezed my eyes shut and grabbed either side of the painting, silently apologizing to myself and the field of art history. Once his footsteps retreated, I dropped the painting and threw my hands on either side of my head, letting it clatter to the floor and again recoiling at the sound.

I cursed at the loud noise and hoped that the criminals had forgotten about me. Unfortunately, they stormed back into the room with bags bulkier than before. My mind went blank when they started advancing on me, and I looked behind me at the jet black sky as I began to back up. One of them growled something at me, but all that I could focus on was how the distance between me and the now open window was waning. My legs were pressed against the wall, nothing between the top half of my body and outside. The man with the hat drew his fist back to punch me, and I took one final look behind me expecting a starry night. Instead, I found myself looking upward at the gray clouds as rain slipped across my face and through my hair, and the trees in the courtyard reached out to brush my body on the way down.

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Epilogue:

After a few weeks in the hospital, lots of physical therapy, and a significant topic change on my project, my life pretty much returned to normal. When I arrived at the hospital that night, I told them that I tripped out an opened window over a small bump in the floor when I wasn’t watching where I was going. I mean, what was I going to say?

“Oh, you know, I was transported back in time to the biggest art theft in history and somehow ended up as part of it, and then the main guy doing it shoved me out the window. Yeah, routine stuff.”

No one's going to believe that, so that's why I'm writing it down. Maybe a curious student in the future will pick this up and use what I saw to solve the puzzle and bring the paintings home.

I still have no idea how I could have, well, time traveled back to the robbery itself, and I've given up on trying to figure that out or even the theft itself. I'll never fully have closure, but I guess some mysteries are just meant to be left unsolved.

# Quinn Kesler

Grade 8, Parkway West Middle School

Educator: Tracy Bouslog

*Personal Essay & Memoir*



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## Racing the Wind

*Thunk!* The bow crashed through an oncoming wave, water splashing into the boat. Stretching my back, I leaned over the side of my sailboat. Inches below me, the water rushed by like a herd of wild horses, untamed and relentless. The waves of the lake slammed into the front of my boat as I sped forward toward the first mark. Water sprayed my face, filling my nose with fishy, crisp air.

“We should tack<sup>1</sup> soon!” my crewmate Emil hollered over the deafening sound of the wind whizzing by. Today was an especially windy day for sailboat racing. In response, I nodded and pushed the tiller<sup>2</sup> away from me, struggling against the current as it tore at the rudder<sup>3</sup> like a wild beast. The boom<sup>4</sup> of our boat whipped past inches above our heads as we veered toward the upwind mark. As we straightened out, I stole a second to peer around at the surrounding boats. To my surprise, it looked like our boat was in first.

Our sailboat team recently acquired six new boats. For all of us, this was the first race ever in these boats. I was the youngest of the group, but still one of, if not the best. In the past, I had won almost every race, getting first place over and over as if I were the chosen one. Most other members of the team were older than me. I was 12, turning 13, and everyone else was 14 or older. I bathed in the success as if it would last forever.

Just behind us, boat number 4 streamed in our wake, struggling to close the gap. Further back were another 3 boats bobbing in the distance, making

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<sup>1</sup> Turning a sailboat's bow up across the wind

<sup>2</sup> The attachment to a rudder that allows a person to move the rudder back and forth

<sup>3</sup> A vertical attachment to the back of a sailboat that sticks into the water and allows the boat to turn

<sup>4</sup> A long and thick, metal pole the length of the boat that pivots from the mast and holds the main sail down



small waves as they fought against the whitecaps<sup>5</sup>. Their sail numbers were too faint to make out, so I decided they would not be a future problem. As I turned, my eyes locked on boat number 6, streaking across the far side of the lake like a predator zeroing in on its prey. Its speed was amazing, even though it seemed too far away to be of any threat. *This should be easy!* I thought. *No one should be able to catch us if we keep up this speed.* I was sure that Emil and I would win this race.

Emil and I prepared as we neared the final mark. I heaved the sail in closer to the center of the boat and Emil uncleated<sup>6</sup> the jib<sup>7</sup>. Like the gears of a finely tuned clock, Emil and I functioned in perfect synchronization. I whipped the tiller around the instant we flew by the mark, forcing the boat to turn downwind. Because we were jibing<sup>8</sup>, the boom caught the wind and slammed to the opposite side with incredible force. The pressure of the giant sail caused the boat to rock violently, almost as if it were trapped in a tsunami. At one point, I thought we would lose control and the boat would tip, dumping us into the raging water like garbage into a dumpster.

When Emil and I eventually were able to calm the rocking of the hull, we tuned every aspect of the boat to perfection. We lifted the daggerboard<sup>9</sup>, allowing the water underneath the boat to flow freely without interruption. We eased the sail so that it could catch all the wind and pull the boat forward at maximum speed. Everything was set for our victory.

“This is going great,” I crowed.

“Everyone else is so far behind; it would take a miracle for them to catch up to us,” replied Emil. As we sped along straight toward the finish line, something in the back of my mind kept nagging me. *Other boats!* In the excitement of our giant lead, I had not considered checking to see if anyone else had gained any distance.

As I twisted my head around to look behind me, my jaw fell to the deck. Looming just behind us was boat 6, skippered by Aaron and crewed by Sophia. *How could I have forgotten about them? They were moving fast, but I thought they were too far away to be of any threat.* To my horror, they seemed to be only a few feet behind, riding our wake like a surfer, gaining speed. As I watched, boat 6 slid to the outside of our boat, stopping the wind from reaching our sails.

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<sup>5</sup> Waves that form on a particularly windy day

<sup>6</sup> Action of pulling a rope or line out of a cleat

<sup>7</sup> The smaller sail on a boat with two sails

<sup>8</sup> Turning a sailboat's stern across the wind, usually when turning or going downwind

<sup>9</sup> A board that usually sits in the center of a boat and sticks into the water, keeping the boat straight

“No, no, no!” I panicked. *This cannot be happening. We were so close to winning. How did they catch up? This isn’t fair.* Tears burned my eyes as I tried to calm down. I desperately tried everything I could to imitate Aaron. I pulled the sail so it was at the same angle as his and even turned the boat to match his orientation. Even with all my desperate attempts, Aaron just kept on gaining until finally, he lurched into first place, just in front of me.

Defeat washed over me, quenching the fire of my will. I almost turned the boat around and sailed back to the harbor, giving up on my chance to win 2nd place.

Despite the situation, Emil grinned, his hair sticking up like he’d just fought the wind itself.

“Come on man, I didn’t skip breakfast just for us to give up. Let’s show Aaron what we’re made of.” I opened my mouth to say that we were too far behind and that they were just too good to beat, but when I looked up and saw the hopeful expression on Emil’s face, I hesitated. His determination to win shone through the frustration of the race, and I realized this wasn’t only about me. I tightened my grip on the tiller, feeling some adrenaline seep back into me.

“Ok, fine, let’s do this,” I said.

Emil’s face broke into a grin, and he scrambled to adjust the jib. Ahead of us, Aaron’s boat was slicing through the water like a knife. *I guess I have to beat that....* The thought of it made me shrink back. I was distracted by ripples on the water far out. A gust was approaching. *This might be our chance.*

“Trim the jib tighter,” I yelled, my voice carrying over the wind.

Emil responded quickly, and our boat surged forward, catching the gust just right. The boom tightened against the sidestay wires<sup>10</sup> with a satisfying snap, and I felt the boat lift as we sped forward. The gap between Aaron’s and our boat shrank. Slowly but surely, we started gaining, inching closer to first place. My earlier doubts evaporated, replaced with laser focus and giddy excitement. First place was still possible, but even then, getting second place was something I would be proud of.

For a split second, I caught Aaron glancing back, his face tight with concentration.

“He knows we’re coming for him,” Emil said with a smile. I replied with a grin as wide as the whole lake.

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<sup>10</sup> Wires on either side of a sailboat the hold the mast up

In the distance, I could see that we were quickly approaching the final stretch. The finish line loomed as the flags atop the poles snapped in the wind, the sound like a whip cracking.

“Hold the line steady,” Emil yelled, bursting with excitement. My arms burned as I held the line and kept the tiller as still as possible. We were flying. Our boat was jumping over waves as if they were little ramps. To my excitement, I saw we were gaining on Aaron until finally, we were right next to him.

The finish line was there, each crew straining with all their might to cross the line first. It was a picture-perfect moment, one you would see in movies. Both of us sped over the line, leaving wakes that rocked the flagpoles. For a long second, it was quiet. The suspense of waiting for the announcement was overwhelming, the silence so loud it was deafening.

“Mark, 420 boat 6, Mark 420 boat 2.” Aaron’s boat crossed the line before ours, but I was still happy. I felt a strange mix of pride and peace.

“That race pushed us harder than ever; I’ll remember it forever,” Emil said, breaking through the exhaustion. I glanced over at Emil and saw that his hair was still sticking straight up from the wind. I smiled.

As the sun dipped under the horizon and the water glowed with red and gold streaks, we drifted toward the docks. The wind that had just been howling now drifted lazily. We hadn’t won, but it didn’t matter. Winning wasn’t the only thing that could make this race unforgettable. The true victory was the fight—the constant struggle against the wind, waves, and doubts. Emil and I had worked together to push through every challenge. Even though at the beginning I thought I could win, the other more experienced sailors eventually overtook me, using their past knowledge of sailing to their advantage.

My heart pounded. I could still feel the spray of the waves on my skin and hear the slapping of the sails in my ears, but my thoughts were calm. Maybe I hadn’t won this time, but something had changed; I was excited for the next race. I knew I might not win, but I would try. Next time, I would beat Aaron.

# Taylor Kimmel

Grade 12, Timberland High School

Educator: Andrea Dubitsky

*Poetry*



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## Lizard Heaven

The love in which  
Something so freshly killed,  
Could be so freshly buried.

Taken care of, comforted  
Dry skin, resuscitated  
Oozing life out of your tiny nose

Even the largest of dewdrops will not save you now  
For you are small

Even the warmest of suns will not save you now  
For you are less

Even the biggest of hearts will not save you now  
For yours is not beating

Maybe somewhere  
You are able to say thank you

The red-iron dirt is saying thank you.

# Anna Ko

Grade 9, Mary Institute & Saint Louis  
Country Day School  
*Personal Essay & Memoir*



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## Discordant Notes

Momentarily, it feels as though time has paused. Soft breaths hold tinges of wondering on what to do next after the great mistake of trying and failing to play the right notes. They echo through the large and vacant practice hall which smells of old wood and fresh floor wax. Our section teacher, aged and crumpled like the music he plays, takes a deep and shaky breath and dismisses us, realizing this lack of progress will only continue. With two weeks left until our winter concert, our performance during rehearsal was concerning to say the least. My friend, unaffected by our teacher's disappointment, laughs, her blonde hair and brown eyes shining in the hall's lights. She walks towards my chair at the front to chat with me, lackadaisical and uncaring of possible repercussions for the failures. She laughs harder, thinking nothing of it and simply continues until the five minute break ends.

We restart from the measure of the failure, and play it over and over again.

I feel as though there is a thick and tight cord of insecurities pulling at my neck, telling me I am not good enough to be this section's leader as the same measure drones out from underneath our fingers repeatedly. Over and over again, the same notes created a cacophony of sound as we played them in different intonations. Over and over again, our section teacher holds his head in his hands and breathes in and out in frustration. I feel as though there is a tense atmosphere surrounding us, ready to reach out with smoke-filled hands and delude us into thinking the wrong fingerings are right.

We move onto a new part instead, the teacher dismissing our failure with a wave of his hand. It passes through the invisible smokiness of the tense atmosphere, yet is unable to dispel it for me. I can't help but keep thinking through the last minutes of practice, *why couldn't we just do better?* Personally, I

had managed the part after the short break, my bow gliding gracefully on the string through the midst of elephant-like hoses swinging on the metal bars originally known as strings. In that moment, my head is filled with colliding thoughts. There's a feeling of anger towards my peers for continuously playing the music incorrectly. There's a sense of frustration towards myself for not being able to capably lead the section. But there's also a small, but radiant sense of pride that I was able to improve and play the part correctly myself.

The remaining fifteen minutes pass like long silent days until it is time to leave. I find and greet my dad who has come to pick me up and return home after both of our long days. However, while his day was mundane, mine was drenched in lingering worry and filled with the urge to get back home and fix everything, fix everyone.

As a distraction, I ignore the blur of houses and lights we drive past, and pull out my phone to text my friends.

I obtain no response, my phone staring up at me, silent.

And then, a sudden thought occurs to me.

I cannot control my friends' actions, no matter how much I wish I can. I cannot force their replies or their words, acting as a puppet master, no matter who I am. I cannot control the actions of my peers in orchestra, no matter how much I desperately want to. I cannot force the direction of their bows or the movement of their fingers to match mine, or force them to practice more, no matter if I am leading or not. They each have individual feelings and work processes, and as efficient as some can be, the only person that I can really feel and work completely in harmony with is my own self.

# Anna Ko

Grade 9, Mary Institute & Saint Louis  
Country Day School  
*Personal Essay & Memoir*



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## Flaws From Home: The Igbo's Development in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

Cultures outside of Europe or North America are often judged as uncivilized and savage due to prejudice and racism, leading to efforts to “civilize” already thriving communities. European nations colonized the Americas and took homes away from natives, used them for labor, and assimilated them into Western culture. Beyond the Americas, people in Africa were also colonized. For instance, Ghana, which was called the Gold Coast, was colonized by the British and used for its rich resources, particularly gold; additionally, the British had a hand in changing aspects of Ghanaian culture, society, and economy. In Nigeria, another African country, the Igbo people experienced similar disruptions due to the introduction of Christianity. *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe shows a new perspective on colonialism from the eyes of an Igbo man to demonstrate how the once well-organized and nuanced culture unravels under colonial pressures. Achebe shows how the changes colonizers make are disruptive and cause not only individuals but societies to collapse due to cultural assimilation. In breaking down the fall of Igbo society and culture, Achebe explores varying relationships within the Igbo clan, and highlights how differing values in relation to societal expectations and norms create division and tension within a community.

Familial bonds fall apart as the rigid expectations of Igbo society create conflicts that provide openings for colonizers to exploit. This is most evident in Okonkwo and Nwoye's relationship especially in its development after the death of Nwoye's greatest peer, Ikemefuna and the arrival of the colonizers. In youth, Nwoye strives to meet the high standards of Igbo masculinity: "Nothing pleased Nwoye now more than to be sent for by his mother or another of his father's wives to do one of those difficult and masculine tasks in the home..Okonkwo was inwardly pleased at his son's development, and he knew it was due to Ikemefuna" (Achebe 52). At this point, Nwoye still tries to adhere to Igbo standards of masculinity, motivated by Ikemefuna's example and his father Okonkwo's approval. Okonkwo feels pride in Nwoye's adherence to Igbo ideals of masculinity, but he cannot express his approval due to his own fear of appearing weak. This, unfortunately, creates a rift later on, as his fear of seeming weak results in him killing Ikemefuna: "'My father, they have killed me!' as he ran towards him. Dazed with fear, Okonkwo drew his machete and cut him down. He was afraid of being thought weak" (Achebe 61). Ikemefuna, despite not being biologically related to Okonkwo, sees him as his father. Okonkwo also cares for Ikemefuna deeply; however, his refusal to appear incapable surpasses his affection and pushes him to kill Ikemefuna. This sets off a chain of events as Ikemefuna had been one of Nwoye's motivations for becoming more of a man. Nwoye is profoundly disillusioned and struggles with faith as the colonizers come and spread their beliefs: "The hymn about brothers who sat in darkness and in fear seemed to answer a vague and persistent question that haunted his young soul-the question of the twins crying in the bush and the question of Ikemefuna who was killed" (Achebe 147). The effect that Igbo traditions and beliefs had on Ikemefuna's death made Nwoye question the society's expectations of masculinity and lose his dedication to the clan he once viewed as family. It is Igbo society that also causes the death of the twins, having deemed them as abominations that Nwoye also ponders about. In response to this, the hymn answers these questions of conflicting emotions as it refers to the



Christian beliefs of salvation, brotherhood, and light. Nwoye's conversion following this is not only a personal rupture, but a representation of the shifting dynamics in familial bonds and unity throughout the clan. These shifts are part of a larger issue in Igbo society as colonial influence exacerbates already existing issues within families, pushing them towards irreparable conflicts as observed between Okonkwo and Ikemefuna.

In addition to familial relationships, the clan begins to diverge as many people convert to find acceptance in the form of the new religion. This causes worry to spread throughout the clan, as they fear their community will slowly break apart. For instance, multiple families across the clan experience conversion because of the effects of social and religious beliefs such as Nneka: "But each time she had borne twins, and they had been immediately thrown away. Her husband and his family were already becoming highly critical of such a woman and were not unduly perturbed when they found she had fled to join the Christians" (Achebe 151). Almost identically to Nwoye's case, Nneka's newborn twins are seen as abominations by the clan, and sent to die in the woods. Rifts were already forming when the Christians or colonizers arrived. Thus, they had room to provide a refuge from the harsh societal standards converts like Nneka faced. Moreover, Nneka's family was unbothered at her departure — possibly even relieved at having gotten rid of her, and the family bonds coming with her. Nneka is only one of the many Igbo who convert. These converts not only leave their home's beliefs but disrespect them: "Three converts had gone into the village and boasted openly that all the gods were dead and impotent and that they were prepared to defy them by burning all their shrines" (Achebe 154). Despite once having followed the same gods as the rest of the village, they are more than prepared to destroy their way of belief. They find Christianity both more appealing and superior. The numerous converts show how the clan is turning on itself. An elder points this out, saying: "You do not know what it is to speak with one voice. And what is the result? An abominable religion has settled among you" (Achebe 167). The flaws within the beliefs of the Igbo cause

inconsistent opinions on societal standards and religious issues. Those lead to the clan's inability to speak as one, making it difficult to make necessary decisions. Rifts only continue to emerge and provide opportunities for the Christians to involve themselves. Christianity's values are composed of almost opposite ideals to the original Igbo. Its novelty makes it more enticing to the converts than the long-lasting culture of their ancestors. In particular, the rigidity of Igbo standards is limiting, pushing the converts to find solace in the more forgiving Christianity. The new religion of Christianity provides a place of security from the conflicting beliefs of the Igbo whilst more converts only spread worry throughout the clan with their sacrilegious acts.

In Igbo society, religious figures have absolute authority; however, this sort of complete power creates more conflicts as converts refuse to give respect towards them. Their authority over believers of Igbo religion is displayed: "Evil Forest rose to his feet and order was immediately restored" (Achebe 92). The laughing crowd is immediately silenced with the simple action of standing up, demonstrating the extreme power of these figures. Their power is shown to demand not just respect, but the ability to make decisions of life-and-death, as seen when Ezeudu tells Okonkwo: "Yes, Umuofia has decided to kill him. The Oracle of the Hills and the Caves has pronounced it. They will take him outside Umuofia as is the custom, and kill him there" (Achebe 57). Despite the Oracle making the proclamation, it is Umuofia who agrees to the deadly decision. Ikemefuna dies only a little after by Okonkwo's hand. A chain of events post Ikemefuna's death causes Nwoye to convert. A great shadow of shame is cast over Okonkwo's family, and the family begins to fall apart. In contrast, the converts do not replicate this complete obedience, causing clashes between the two sides. For instance, a convert called Enoch refuses to follow tradition: "One of the greatest crimes a man could commit was to unmask an *egwugwu* in public, or to say or do anything which might reduce its immortal prestige in the eyes of the uninitiated. And this is what Enoch did" (Achebe 186). An *egwugwu* is the manifestation of an Igbo ancestor, revered like Evil Forest and the Oracle. Enoch's crime is highly

sacrilegious and ignorant of the rules that bind the clan. Moreover, it leads to extreme chaos as the colonizers fight against the other *egwugwu*, avenging their friends, and members of the village conflicted by their opposing religious beliefs. This marked a shift in the relationship the colonizers had with the *egwugwu*, as tentative diplomacy turned to outright conflict. Additionally, Enoch's betrayal of the rules of his home shows how other converts are also swayed by the new religion. The converts show their willingness to betray their family and clan after finding home in a new religion, disrupting the clan as they refuse to listen to the figures they once obeyed.

Community is a major part of Igbo society, as is religion. In particular, aspects of families and their bonds, the clan and loyalty or lack thereof to it, and authority figures and obedience which Achebe accurately displays in *Things Fall Apart*. Like all societies, the Igbo have flaws that the colonizers can infiltrate. The society's fragile balance is disrupted and broken apart. Moreover, it is these flaws that are most impressed on colonizers who fail to understand the depth of their society. It is pertinent to not only see the cons, but also the pros of native societies. This misunderstanding fosters prejudice that, when writers like Achebe do not shed light on the complexities of cultures such as the Igbo, it creates the belief that they must be altered or made civil.

Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. Penguin Books, 2017.

# Sonia Kulkarni

Grade 9, John Burroughs School

*Personal Essay & Memoir*



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## 14 Going on 30

Exasperated, exhausted, and dejected. These are only a few ways to explain how I felt. It was as if day by day, more of my soul slipped away from my body with the thought of never recovering. The doctor labeled me and announced that too many bugs were growing inside my tummy. “Small intestinal bacterial overgrowth,” she said. “We don’t know whether it will be a lifelong condition!” I had gastro-intestinal symptoms, frequent burping, and severe chest and stomach pain. I had gone through numerous tests and medicines and seen some specialists. I didn’t know how much more I could go through. It was like an invisible weight, yanking me down every day.

I was uncomfortable. I didn’t want to leave the house. I could imagine the pity party my friends would throw for me. I couldn’t even say one word without a burp being let out!

The looks on my parents’ faces crushed me. I could see how desperate they were to help me feel better, every single time I let out a burp or every time I complained about pain. They couldn’t stand and watch me suffer. I felt like I was a burden to them.

I remember when I brought my legs close to my chest and hugged my knees, rocking up and down, while tears rolled out of my eyes. It was as if knives were stabbing me repeatedly in the stomach. My mom walked into the room and saw me. She rushed to my side and placed her warm, slender hand against my back. I looked into her searching eyes and recognized the anxiety laced with worry. She asked, “Are you okay?”

I shook my head. “No, mom. No. I’m not okay,” I replied softly.

After several months of my long-lasting condition, my family decided to go through with the dreadful procedure of endoscopy. I had been feeling stressed about the moment when I'd be told to have an endoscopy. I had hope. That hope was shattered when I received the news. I glanced nervously at my parents and shook my head vigorously when the doctor looked away.

I mouthed, "Please. Don't."

"Sure. Please schedule an endoscopy," my dad replied, assertively. I couldn't believe it.

As the days led up to the procedure, I became more anxious. Before I knew it, the day had finally arrived. All I wanted to do was stay curled in bed with my warm blanket hugging my body. I pulled off the blankets with a groan and dragged myself around my room to get ready. I couldn't eat anything before my procedure, so I was starving.

When we reached the hospital, I knew that if I wanted a chance to recover, I had to go through with the endoscopy. I swallowed my fear and sat on the black chair in the waiting room. My trepidation grew with every fleeting second.

"Sonia!" the nurse called.

I glanced nervously at my parents and followed the nurse into the room. I gripped my mom's hand tightly and squeezed as if my life depended on it. I watched her as I was being rolled away from my parents. They waved at me anxiously.

"You'll be okay, Sonia. There's no need to worry. It'll be over before you know it," the doctor said.

I was rolled into a dimly lit room with colorful walls. My hands trembled as I continued to worry. The anesthesiologist brought a huge mask and asked me to put it on. Soon enough, an odd-smelling gas filled up the mask.

"10, 9, 8, 7," counted the anesthesiologist. My hearing was starting to get muffled.

"6, 5, 4," continued the anesthesiologist. My thoughts started to slow down. Then, nothing...

I sluggishly opened my eyes and surveyed the room to see many people with tears rapidly falling down their cheeks. Their hands were covering their faces and handkerchiefs were dabbing their tears. I glanced down at myself and saw numerous intravenous lines on me! I was on a breathing machine with oxygen pumping into my body. Suddenly, I realized that something was wrong. My abdomen was practically missing. It had numerous scars! A piece of my core had been ripped away. I felt fragmented, like an incomplete puzzle unable to be

put together. How could this have happened? How could my life have gotten so messed up? My mom looked much older. Her hair was completely grey-white. My dad looked way older, with crumpled grandpa skin, and a white mustache. A young man was standing with them and had flowers in his hand. Was that Ray? My little brother Ray! What just happened here? “What is going on?” I screamed through my oxygen mask.

I was told that I had been in a coma for 16 years, and I was 30 years old. I couldn’t even recognize my family. Everything had changed. I looked at the digital calendar; it was 2040! A robotic nurse was rolling around the room.

An artificially intelligent doctor appeared in the room out of thin air and told me he had been directing my care for the past year. I didn’t want to look in the mirror. I was scared. They brought an iPad or what looked like a thin glass frame. I saw my enhanced image in it. They didn’t use regular mirrors anymore. They used digitally enhancing glass frames that showed your image. I looked into it and saw a lady. I had aged. My friends, Madeline and Allie, were in the waiting room. They had their little kids with them as they walked in with their spouses.

Laser screens floated in the air around the bed. One screen showed a food menu, one was a transparent TV, and others were floating social media site screens, with people sending good wishes and messages. It was all overwhelming. I looked outside the window and saw drones flying in the sky. Robotaxis were flying people to their work. It was as if my whole world had turned upside down. My mind raced, trying to understand what had occurred. Tears streamed down my face uncontrollably. My shoulders trembled and my teeth chattered. My eyes started to burn and my vision blurred. I missed it. I missed an entire decade and more of the world.

My mom hugged me. She cried and said, “Baby, we have been waiting for you to wake up. I am happy you did today. I love you, we all do.”

A nurse came into the room. She introduced herself as Nurse Ann. She said my diaper sensor had informed the artificial bot monitor that it needed to be changed. She turned me around and exclaimed, “Sonia, wake up! How are you feeling?”

I opened my eyes from anesthesia. I felt my tummy. It was there, and it was normal. “Phew, close call.”

# Ivy Kunkelmann

Grade 10, Nerinx Hall High School

Educator: Sarah Hoeyneck

*Poetry*



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## Chromosome Lie

My brother knows to shut his trap  
when the Inquisitors come round—  
round the school, round the clinic,  
yielding halfway, at our home.

We extinguish the colors of flames  
in which we are baptized us;  
up goes the subtleties of safety—shaking,  
swaying when the crosses come round again,

capturing a photograph of an American  
household—two parents, two children.  
Just don't look too closely at where  
Adam resides his fruit—  
or our truth will make the evening news.

# Ivy Kunkelmann

Grade 10, Nerinx Hall High School

Educator: Sarah Hoeynck

*Poetry*



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## Show-Me State

Went up the hill for the aurora  
(once-in-a-lifetime, the TV said),  
but I was too far south to see the lights.  
Here we have no abortion—but also no  
biscuits and gravy, and not as many marbled  
Confederates litter our parks.

So I captured the ash trees and honeysuckle  
instead, for those may be once-in-a-lifetime  
to one in a tundra.  
It's all about perspective.  
There are always coat-hangers,  
casseroles, Thomas Jeffersons.

This geomagnetism may not be visible,  
but it's undoubtedly present.



Grace Kwak

Grade 9, Blue Valley North High School

Poetry



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## Name Me—The Pains of the Earth

where did Jesus go in my world?

name me—

the pains of the earth

come on,

rupture my heart

sever the cords in my brain

break

my bones

piece by jagged piece

mend it as however,

mold me—carve me—

break me—into

whatever that

gives you a sense

of belonging

*where is your sense of belonging?*

*why must you find it within me?*

am i your damn robot machine?

i hate that you cannot be humane toward me

oh, but what do you

consider me?

*i have a heart, mind, soul, and skin color of identity*

*but does that of my existence still go past your head?*

does that not process through your system, nor can you comprehend?  
you  
you are cruelness  
    you make my blood boil  
from how you twist  
                    and curl  
    my emotions  
                    into pressed-up strings  
and then you pluck those strings  
                    for your own content  
you make my emotions play a melody  
into the music only you want to hear  
    *you wouldn't want to hear my emotions as a scream of torture*  
that's why you turn my internal screaming  
into your own piece of sound  
of your own playing  
for your own piece of quiet—peace of mind,  
at the cost of mine  
go on,  
    name me  
        am i not  
        your piece of music?  
        you consider me as a robot,  
        don't you?  
if i'm not human,  
    then name me,  
        as i'm your puppet—you'll be able  
        to string me along  
        so easily,  
just like how you find it to be,  
    whenever you compose me  
        into whatever  
        you want me to be  
to you  
i'm not even worth  
the decency  
of a tin can

that's too far now,  
is it?  
and it's almost funny  
to put it that way—

*but it's true  
your god complex,  
it makes it absolutely, irritatingly true  
your ideology—  
it turns my Jesus  
into you*

you overflow,  
into my mind

so that i end up

praising you

punish yourself or hurt me already  
you, the walking form of cruelty  
let me find,  
my Jesus again—  
back in my world  
please,  
just let me find  
peace, my dire peace  
from this war  
on this earth  
please

i pray in heaven's name. *Amen.*

# Grace Kweon

Grade 11, Ladue Horton High School  
*Short Story*



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## Breaking Barriers with Kimbap

Lucy always had straight As. It's the phrase she repeated to herself every single moment she could get. When the teacher was calling on her. When she started shaking before it was her turn to present. When she procrastinated on late-night assignments, because – who cared? Lucy would turn up to finish them anyway, and that perfect string of As on the report card was all that mattered to her. She couldn't imagine a world without that letter, at least a stable world without it – because that A was hers, and she'd do anything to keep it that way.

She did it for her parents. But she could not shake the feeling that her parents weren't exactly proud of her. Of course, they were proud of her in the way that they didn't have to worry about her academics, but they didn't get what grades meant to her. After all, they ran a small Korean business serving *kimbap* and fried hot dogs, and cared more about the customers that came in than what little Lucy was up to, holed up in her room.

“Ga-eul, come and eat dinner!”

Lucy scrambled to her feet, peeping out a “Coming, *Omma* (mom)!” before her mom could yell for her again, which was always unpleasant, given the strength of her voice. At home, she was *Ga-eul*. At school, that was just the weird middle name her classmates dared pronounce, despite her awkward insistence for them not to. They always butchered her name anyway, and it was a pain to coerce the funny foreign vowels out of their mouths. Same with her last name, which her parents took pride in enough to put as their restaurant name – No, it was not *Kwee-on*, it was *Kwon*. It was actually pronounced with a G, but for some reason, her parents thought *that* would be too hard to pronounce.

She took a seat at the dinner table. Except it's empty, and it's only her. Dad is running the restaurant, and Mom is rolling up kimbap on the kitchen counter. She's watching another episode of *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* on her iPad. On her plate, she finds a freshly cut roll of *kimbap*, and the voice in her head predicting exactly what her mom would say next – “Eat a lot!” before flashing a smile and dropping another roll onto her plate.

That would initiate a battle of persistence (“Mom, I’m not hungry! I don’t need another roll!”) which would probably continue forever if Lucy didn’t politely excuse herself and retreat to her room. She thanks her mom for a good meal and closes the door behind her, eyeing her homework, half-finished in a pile on her desk. She then takes a solid look at her report card taped to the bare walls of her room and begins studying.

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“Sorry I’m late,” Her friend Paffrey says, taking the empty seat beside her. Lucy doesn’t look over.

She’s staring at the B minus on her paper. It shouldn’t irk her, at least it usually wouldn’t, except for the fact that she is teetering on the edge of death (the boundaries between an A minus and a B plus). She reluctantly hands her test score back to her teacher, yearning for it like a mother to a child. She didn’t even think she looked at the questions she missed. Because it’s a bad habit she does whenever she does this bad on a test.

Paffrey looks at his score and reluctantly returns it as well. He sneaks a peak at Lucy. “Hey.” Lucy doesn’t respond, still averting her gaze. The classroom chatter is deafening, full of gasps and reluctant bursts of joy. Usually, she would be a part of that group, that loud majority, but this time she lost her edge. It’s not like her to cry, but she might as well sit in devastation when she gets home.

Then the teacher returns to his podium and announces something. She didn’t catch it at first, their words muffled by the roaring of blood rushing through her ears, but it soon became clear to her that an angel had descended on the planet. *A project.*

*That’s right.* Lucy thinks. Although it wasn’t worth as many points as she had hoped for, it was enough to raise her grade. At least a little bit. A foothold to step on as she challenged the vertical cliffs of *la clase de español*.

Lucy never got Spanish. It didn’t make sense to her to learn a language she had never heard a native speak before. It was taught in elementary school, and it was bearable enough, so she kept on taking it. But as her Spanish progressed, and

grades took over her life, her Korean faltered, and she began to prioritize learning *ser* vs. *estar* over something as trivial as her ethnic language. So she wasn't particularly happy about taking this class, but she wasn't particularly happy about getting a bad grade in it either.

"I can't believe we're paired up together!" Paffrey celebrated when the bell rang, tugging at her coat. "We have a free period next class. C'mon, let's get on it!"

She flashes back a smile. "Yeah." She reaches for her bag, and wonders if she should ask the teacher if there is any extra credit. Except she realizes she doesn't know how to anyway, at least in a way of Spanish that would be coherent enough not to embarrass her late at night.

It was like the jumbled Konglish (Korean and English) she spoke at home, the only form of communication she could have with her parents. She would speak in English, her parents in Korean, and it would remain that way in their respective language fields, enough to get by and communicate. It would be embarrassing to speak the latter, as whenever they did they would be reminded of their incompetence with the other language, and would quickly revert into their comfort zone. And so Lucy would be the English translator, answering phone calls fluently while her parents whispered broken Konglish beside her of what to say. But it's not like she got a grade out of that, so she would question its ironic nature while flustering over the fact that she mixed up *cómo* and *qué* in front of the entire class. And now she had done it with her subpar grade, a stain on her up-and-coming report card, reminding her that *wow, language really isn't your forte, is it?*

Lucy shook her head. It wasn't the time to be worrying about this. She was fading in and out of Paffrey's one-sided conversation as they neared their next class, nodding here and there, but mentally in a state of despair. The assignment seemed fairly easy at first glance – an introduction of themselves, their culture, and what they wanted to do in life. The last part struck her, as she never once pondered for herself what she wanted to do.

Her parents always assumed she would be a doctor. A lawyer. Engineer. It was always the same three, with indifference to the Asian stereotype (though they were not as aware of the fact as she was). After all, her whole bloodline was made up of those professions, excluding her parents, who always complained of hard work in the kitchen. So they made up their mind to arrive in the United States to give her and her brother a better future, and of course, that included the expectation of her getting good grades and achieving the meritocratic American

Dream. Her life was pretty much decided for her, which seemed fine until she realized she really didn't know what she wanted to do for herself at all.

"Lucy?" Paffrey struck a hand in front of her face. "Earth to Lucy, anyone?" He sighed and pulled her aside to the correct door. She looked around. *Whoops*. She had almost entered the room adjacent to her actual class.

Lucy apologized and straightened herself together. "It's just that I've been worried," She admitted. "Though I did enjoy listening to your spiel about your essay."

"Worried about what? Your grade?"

She shot him a death stare. She did not want to talk about that Spanish test, especially because she knew he scored her over by over a dozen points. She did not want to hear him flaunt it in her mental state. "The Spanish project."

He shrugged. "It's free points, well – I guess you do have to memorize your lines."

They both took a seat in the back of the class, where Paffrey continued talking. "I've always wanted to be a scientist, because I'm good at science and all of that. My dad tells me I should go into accounting though, because my uncle does it and it pays well. But I don't know how I could fare as a certified math nerd." He laughed, then turned serious with genuine curiosity. "What about you? What do you want to do?"

"That's the thing," She replied, busy doodling on the notebook she had brought out while he was talking. "I don't know what to do for that part of the project. My parents want me to be an engineer, like my older brother..."

"I thought you hated math."

"Yeah, but—! Okay, well, what do you think I should be?"

"A daylight burglar. Shoplifter. Or, uh, a stealer. Since you steal all of my pencils all the time and stuff."

"Hey, I thought you gave me permission for those! And those are practically all the same thing."

"For real though, if you can't think of anything, maybe you should ask your parents for help. Tell them you don't want to be an engineer."

Lucy stopped doodling for a second, actually considering the idea. "Yeah, I guess so."

"Or you can make it up for the project. It's not like anyone would know."

"Wait. If I don't know what I want to be, how would my parents know what to tell me?"

"I bet you know deep down where your passions lie," He said, eyeing her doodles, a mess of lines on paper. "You don't have to ask your parents for help, or advice, or anything! Just tell them you don't know."

She caught his gaze and covered her drawings immediately with a hand, embarrassed. "Well, how is that supposed to help me in the project?"

"Tell me, Lucy. When's the last time you did something for yourself?"

Ah. Her mouth lay agape. "Well, I..." She fumbled for a moment. "I cooked breakfast for myself yesterday." *And the day before that. And the day before that day. And... probably since forever.*

"Okay, but what about more long-term doings? Why do you worry about your grades so much?"

Suddenly Lucy is back at the psychiatry office, in the short blissful weeks she had attended, and Paffrey takes the form of her therapist sitting on a lush chair. She had asked her the same thing, and just like before, she couldn't bring herself to lie.

"Because of my parents."

"Did your parents say that?"

"Well... Not really."

"Then ask them. Ask them if they care. Tell them what you think of it."

*Easier said than done*, Lucy thinks, and changes the subject to the easier aspects of the project. But she keeps his suggestion tucked away in her mind as the day goes on, anticipating the moment she would greet her parents. Maybe she would bring it up during dinner, if dad is here. Or just say the entire thing while they're at work in the kitchen. Or wait until late at night when her dad comes home and their family is all there. She would have to figure out what she wanted to do in life at some point anyway, so why not bring the discussion to the table now?

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Lucy is making *kimbap* in the kitchen. This time, her parents are all there, sitting at the dinner table, eating leftovers from their restaurant. They're waiting for her as she goes over the instructions in her head. *Gim (roasted seaweed), slathered with sesame oil, rice, bulgogi, gyeran-mari, cucumber. Roll, and cut.* Some pieces weren't cut all the way down, a testament to her inexperience, leaving them splayed and half open.

Despite the mess she made on the plate, she takes a deep breath and takes the finished dish towards the table. There's a worried smile plastered on her face.



Her hands are shaking. Her stomach feels like it's going to flip. But somewhere deep inside of her, she consoles herself. *It'll be okay.*

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She opened her notebook to start on the project and her eyes immediately drew towards the doodle she made before. The entire time when she and Paffrey were talking, she had drawn subconsciously a *kimbap* of her own in between her mess of lines, filled with her mom's *bulgogi*, rice, and *japchae*. They all had different versions of how to make it, she realized. Her moms' was more lax and experimental, adding kimchi and spam every now and then. Her dads was more tight-knit, restaurant-specific, and always the same – *gim*, *sesame oil*, *rice*, *bulgogi*, *gyeran-mari*, and *cucumber*. As for her? She didn't know exactly how to make good *kimbap*, so she added whatever sounded appealing. It wasn't perfect like her parents' *kimbap* always was, and it probably never would be.

She would probably still shake before it was her time to present, fumble her lines to mean entirely something else, and face an awkward moment of silence as she tried to remember her lines. But that was... *okay*.

She also might have not said entirely what she wanted to say in broken English, and her parents might've had trouble understanding her at times, but her words came through with their meaning. She told them about her B in Spanish. She told them about her struggles in school to achieve the grades she did and her attachment to them. She told them about not knowing what to do in the future, and how she wanted the freedom to choose for herself regardless. And for some odd reason, just knowing that she spoke her part comforted her, more than what another perfect string of As ever could.

# Grace Kweon

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



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## How To Become a Better Person

Isolated and innocently curious, I spent most of my pre-teen years with my eyes glued to a screen. Maybe it was because of COVID-19, but I was addicted to escaping my present reality. As my mom put it, it was just a phase – but that phase was a vicious shark, and it would eat at my own bodily perceptions forever.

“Are you getting a Glow-Up this summer?” My brother asked across the dinner table, snapping me out of my staring contest with the milk-soggy cereal. He was asking me if I wanted to transform into a more attractive self, like in the videos he was watching with the volume so high the whole room could hear. His nonchalant attitude and lack of seriousness told me to not take his words at face value, but I couldn’t help it.

“I... don’t know,” I replied, the words running thick out of my mouth. But it was an all-too-blatant lie. Unbeknownst to my family, I wanted a “Glow-Up” too. But I wanted it really badly. The parasite of achieving self-improvement had already infected me, leaching out of the screen under the pretense of bettering myself.

The terms ‘pretty’ and ‘ugly’ have been ingrained in my mind since I first set eyes on social media; what is glamorous will stick around, and what won’t will be disregarded. As I grew up, characters of my favorite TV shows featuring slim, pale, perfect bodies with Eurocentric features turned into similar-featured video game characters to celebrities. When I received my first phone at 13, I found out that it wasn’t just the distant celebrities that were beautiful, it was thousands of people that flooded my For You page with their childhood photos, showing that they were not just trendy, but also naturally beautiful.

I watched as not-so-pretty people who participated in the trend went viral for not-so-good reasons, I watched as the ‘Long Face’ filter that gave you undesirable facial hair and disproportionate facial features go viral for the

transformation it gave after removing it. I watched as ‘looksmaxxing’ become the new trend, promoting self-improvement and glow-ups by mewing, losing weight, creating beauty-bias terms such as the word ‘mogged’ and highlighting undesirable features. I watched as beauty and fitness influencers convinced me to do 100 burpees every day to get toned abs. I consumed this all without question, because I too, wanted to become beautiful.

So, in the summer of my 14th year of living on Earth, I decided to do something about it. After convincing my parents to order a batch of cheap makeup items from Temu, I followed all of the glow-up tricks:

First, wake up extra early to do a CrossFit workout. If you do it later, you won’t achieve your goals of becoming skinny, but also skinny with abs. The floorboards can creak with every jump, so occasionally hold your breath in the darkness of your room, and make sure no one hears you. This was a confidential procedure, after all.

Next, pamper your skin. Splash water on the face, apply expensive creams, and achieve paper-smooth perfect skin. No one likes bumpy, acne-prone skin.

Further, look presentable. Wear makeup. Get those cheap plastic products to work. Ignore the fact that some features are up to genetics. Cry in front of that mirror. Take care of your hair, look clean.

Finally, lose weight. See that fatty skin around your stomach? That’s bad. Once you become skinny, all of those comments your mom made about your weight will go away. You will feel better when you look at the number on the scale going down. So join the school track team – exercise your problems away. It’s healthy for you.

Within weeks, I became a glow-up expert. I had watched and replayed tens, hundreds of videos telling me how to become better. It was what the internet told me would fill the void in my heart, relieve me of all of my problems, and achieve the happiness I desired. I was achieving health. I was becoming a “better”, improved version of myself. It was all progress. Yet when I looked in my full-body mirror, which I bought to record my fat regression, there was always something more I hated about myself. There was always a dull hunger clawing at my insides, telling me to eat and eat and eat but also hate and hate and hate more of myself.

Then came the tears. Social media was a toxic friend as much as it was my only one – my life force, the only thing I saw other than myself throughout my entire day. I coped with my insecurities with an 11-page-long document on plastic surgeries I wanted. I edited my photos in the fashion of a ‘perfect’ me.

One long day, my track coach approached me after a workout. She asked me if I was okay. Something about being asked if you are okay triggers an emotional button in you, so I burst into tears. That hunger broke out of its fragile shell and overtook me like a parasite. I don't remember what happened that night, but I woke up to wrappers next to my bed and an aching stomach. I was back to square one, but was I ever progressing in the first place?

# Chun-Hei Lau

Grade 10, Parkway Central High School

Educator: Jason Lovera

*Personal Essay & Memoir*



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## Blinded By a Kick

Thud. Thud. Thud. The pummel of fists against pads echoed in the dojo, the air thick with intensity and sweat. It was another routine sparring session, one where skill, control, and respect were supposed to take priority. During one of our weekly sparring sessions, I faced an opponent who was known for his aggressive style. The match started as usual, with a respectful bow, and a few moments of shuffling in a circle, but soon escalated when he landed a particularly hard roundkick to my side. The force of the blow took my breath away and left me sprawled on the mat, a sharp pain radiating through my ribs. I stood up, shaking it off acting as if I hadn't been affected at all. Embarrassed and angry, I felt a surge of emotion: a burning desire to get back at him.

As I got back on my feet, my mind was consumed by thoughts of retaliation. I wanted to strike back with equal force, to show him that I wasn't someone to be underestimated. I was not going to be knocked down again.

"Next round," I muttered under my breath, glaring at him as we reset our positions. The instructor, sensing the tension, stepped in.

"Remember," he said, his voice calm yet firm, "martial arts are about control and respect. Channel your energy into your technique, not your emotions."

"Control my ass," I muttered under my breath yet again, my heart pounded with the urge for revenge. I could barely concentrate on his advice, my mind fixated on getting even.

I rushed at him, determined to strike back, to make him feel the pain I had endured. The embarrassment I had endured. My body tensed, waiting for the perfect moment to land a hit. But in my blinded state, I was no longer focusing on technique. I was driven by anger, eager for revenge.

Then there, I saw it.

I dove, my hand clenched in a fist ready to crush his solar plexus. In my head, the trajectory was perfect. I would fold him like a lawn chair, and then sweep him easily off his feet. It was too easy.

"We can't control when toxic emotions flood our minds, but we can control what we do in response to them," (Cox 3). Very clearly, I was not in control of my emotions at all. The sludge in my mind had poisoned my thoughts giving me a perceived clear course of action.

It all happened so quickly. I couldn't have felt more like a fool. I dove, blinded by my humiliation, completely missing him. He struck me on the back of my head with another brutal strike, his elbow digging into my headgear.

My head slammed onto the floor. I tried to recover, but my body felt sluggish, my mind too clouded by rage. My earlier desire for a perfect counterattack, a failure. I had missed my opportunity, too consumed by the need for payback. As the match continued, I found myself more focused on anger than on form.

My rival, sensing my imbalance easily out maneuvered my every, every wild blow I could muster. Every attempted strike was blocked, dodged, or easily countered. I was no longer the disciplined fighter I was trained to be, and I could feel my frustration boiling over.

I lunged at him, one last desperate attempt.

One could say I flew across the mat jumping maybe a good 6 feet before my knee connected with his face. And man. It felt good.

It felt good, really good, good until I realized he was on the floor his nose crooked and bleeding. "Revenge is sweet. But is it really?... 'It's actually fairly common to mispredict the intensity of our future emotions,' explains Timothy Wilson, Ph.D., a professor of psychology at UVA" (Thorton 5). I wanted to hurt him in a way he hurt me, but in doing so I let my anger overtake me. The immediate aftermath of my impulsive act was a swirl of emotions. The rush of satisfaction from finally landing a hit was short-lived as reality set in. The sight of him on the floor, clutching his bleeding nose, hit me harder than any blow could have.

I stepped back, my adrenaline-fueled high crashing into a pit of guilt. The satisfaction I had felt a moment ago turned sour, replaced by a gnawing sense of regret. This wasn't the victory I had envisioned. This wasn't strength; this was recklessness.

My opponent sat up, wiping the blood from his face with the back of his hand. "Nice hit," he said, his voice strained but surprisingly devoid of malice. He

offered a tight smile, though his eyes reflected an understanding of what had just transpired.

The instructor turned to me, his gaze piercing through my façade of bravado. "What happened out there?" he asked, his tone gentle yet firm.

"I... I lost control," I admitted, avoiding eye contact. The weight of my actions weighing heavily on my shoulders.

He nodded, placing a hand on my shoulder. "Martial art's isn't about winning or losing. It's about, respect, control, and self-discipline. Today, I hope you reflect on that."

When thinking about revenge, making it the basis of my actions, I hadn't fully grasped whether it was the right thing to do. As I reflected, I realized that the true battle wasn't about my opponent, but within myself to have self-control.

In that moment, the words of my instructor melded with one of Charles Dickens, within the novel *Tale of Two Cities*: "That glorious vision of doing good is so often the sanguine mirage of so many good minds," (Dickens 233). My initial desire to stand my ground, to uphold my dignity, seemed noble at first, but had quickly spiraled into something far less honorable. What I thought was a pursuit of justice was, in reality, a mirage, an illusion that masked my true intentions. In seeking to do good for myself, seeking vengeance, I lost sight of the greater good, letting my emotions decide my actions rather than the principles of discipline I had been taught.

In the days that followed, I reflected deeply on that sparring session. It dawned on me how easily it is to get folded by the heat of the moment, figuratively and literally. Seeking revenge only provides a fleeting satisfaction and ultimately harms oneself more than it helps.

From that revelation forward, every training session became an opportunity to practice not just physical techniques but also the art of control and mindfulness. An article in the *New York Times* says, "Seeking revenge or payback may seem like a good idea at the time, but in the long run it'll likely only do us a disservice. The better option is to turn inward, finding the root of that feeling and either using it as a learning experience or warning flag as we move forward to something better" (Cox 3). In that sparring session, I had allowed anger to blind me, which not only disrupted my focus but also contradicted the core values of martial arts. By reflecting on my actions, I realized that my desire for payback had only intensified my frustration and left me vulnerable, both physically and emotionally. I began to see each emotional outbreak as a signal to pause, reflect, and grow rather than react impulsively, allowing me to harness my

emotions prioritizing personal growth over the momentary satisfaction of revenge.

In martial arts, as in life, conflict is unavoidable. Yet, it is in these moments that we are given the chance to grow. My experience taught me that the greatest battles are fought within, against our own impulses and emotions, particularly the desire for revenge. Seeking retribution may seem satisfying in the heat of the moment, but it ultimately leaves us defeated by our own lack of control. True strength is found in restraint and the ability to rise above vengeance. This lesson continues to guide me, both on and off the mat, reminding me that control is the ultimate form of power and that mastering one's emotions is the path to true victory.

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# Eleanor Lau

Grade 8, Parkway West Middle School

Educator: Tracy Bouslog

*Personal Essay & Memoir*



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## The Perfect Paper Cat

Sliding my Chromebook to the corner of my desk, I lined the rectangular corner of the edge of my computer up with the wooden angle of the desk. Then I placed the green 2-pocket folder labeled “math” on top of it, like a perfect academic sandwich. I was hungry for a good bite, math class. Honestly, I wasn’t the biggest fan of math, but it was the Kid I Sit Next To’s worst subject. It felt like he was perfect at almost everything else so I always took any opportunity to outshine him. He always had his work done first, and I always had it done second. In social studies, he always finished the long 3-page booklets within 20 minutes, while it took me 25. In English, he always had the longest, most detailed paper that earned 100% every time, and I only got 97%. In science, he would always be the first to raise his hand when talking about The Scientific Process or whatever, and I didn’t even know what that was! But this was math. I was ready to finish my math and even finish the extra special graphing assignment that our teacher had told us about. Only the kids who completed their normal math were allowed to do it, creating a competitive lure for me and the Kid I Sit Next To. The assignment was just a graphing axis, though. The ones where you make a cute photo at the end, and I had done those many times already. In the end, the dots that I plotted would outline an adorable cat. Easy enough.

My teacher stopped talking, and I rushed to pop open the lid of my Chromebook. It lit up my face pink; my home screen bearing a rainbow unicorn with a neon sunset in the background. Moving my cursor to the tabbed math website, I opened up the regular assignment and began to work. My fingers were typing in the answers to 35 plus 64 and 85 minus 38 so energetically I felt like Lightning McQueen. I had the need for speed and a competitive opponent to get me there. I looked over to The Kid I Sit Next To and he was almost done! I was

almost done too, but what good is a tie? I rapidly typed in the last few answers, getting one wrong. *Oh well*, I thought, *It wouldn't make a difference when I finished the extra assignment first*. As I clicked enter on the last question, 75 minus 43 equals 32, I felt a jolt of excitement rush through my whole body. The Kid I Sit Next To was still struggling with the problem I had gotten wrong. He even had to get out a piece of notebook paper and use the strategy our teacher had taught us. What a fool!

I bounced out of my chair and happily frolicked over to my teacher's desk. As I snatched the two pieces of paper from atop her desk, she said, "Good job, Eleanor." Even though I appreciated the gesture, she said that to everyone even if they didn't finish first, like I had. So I didn't really count it as a true good job. Skipping back over to my desk, I plopped down in my little blue chair. The classroom was filled with the sounds of small hands typing in math problem after math problem on their oversized keyboards. I surveyed the instructions, but it was just an axis graphing worksheet. I had done this many times before, and in the end, I would get to have a cute picture of a cat. I wasn't worried at all. Seeing it in my mind, the perfect shapes, that would then make the perfect cat, that would then make me the perfect winner. Such confidence, I could feel it radiating deep from my bones. My fluorescent purple mechanical pencil felt like it was calling my name, ready to dominate the math worksheet. Picking it up felt like a small, cylindrically shaped victory already. As I started plotting, the fresh pencil lead scratched my paper with such a satisfying *shush*, that my second-grade self thought it sounded like a happy cat purring, yet it could still never compare to the satisfaction of being special, the first, the best.

The Kid I Sit Next To had finally started on his extra worksheet. I wonder if the teacher had said good job to him too? I continued to plot and draw, plot and draw. My cat already had a head and two arms while he only had a lousy head. At this pace, I was sure to beat him in this race. More children around the room had started talking, getting irritable from sitting still for so long. Even the Kid I Sit Next To had started talking to the other person who sat at our table. Not a smart move by him. I decided to have a closer glance at his paper, just to see how far ahead I was. But something was off. Why did the shapes that made up my glorious cat look different than his? His ear was round and soft, but mine was rigid with a sharp diagonal point creating a triangle. His head was more square-shaped while mine was a flawless oval. His whiskers jutted out with a nice tilt, but mine were as flat and straight as the wooden desk my paper rested on.

Oh no, oh no, oh no. It finally came to me. I had done the extra special, only-if-you-had-time-for-it worksheet wrong! The room started to spin in dizzying circles, making me want to throw up all over the Kid I Sit Next To. This might have been the worst day of my life. I frantically double-checked my paper and saw where I made my fatal mistake. How could I have done that?! Our classroom's kitten clock seemed to speed along with my heartbeat as I thought about what to do next. *Tic, thump, tic, thump.* I thought I was going to be the champion who climbs the mountain and gets the look over the peak in marvelous success. I should have been the astronaut who did the moonwalk and placed the flag on the moon. I should have been the Olympic athlete underdog who puts in all the effort and wins gold. But instead, I was erasing all the hard work I had done in the past ten minutes with a horrible feeling arising in the pit of my stomach.

As I continued to furiously rub the small pencil eraser against my paper, it created a dark gray cloud of graphite over my cat's face. From out the dark cloud of graphite, wet salty tears waterfalled down my cheeks and onto my paper, making my cloud even more realistic. *Oh great, now I'm crying, and my paper is utterly ruined. Best day of my life!* My teacher noticed I had become upset and walked over to my desk to see what had happened. When she got to my desk, I started sobbing so hysterically I sounded like a hyena laughing. The whole second-grade class went deathly silent. All that could be heard were my screeching cries. Embarrassment flooded my senses, going beyond the borders of my body and creating a stigmatizing aura over the whole room. As my teacher asked, "Eleanor, are you okay? What happened?", I could feel everyone's eyes turn to where my desk was. Especially the Kid I Sit Next Too's. His gaze felt like it was pointing daggers at the mess of paper spread about my table and then moving up to my now blotchy face. He probably thought I was a loser; the winner's advantage suddenly swiped from right under them. He looked me right in the eyes and gave me a look of pity; I could not believe how badly I had messed up, deserving a gaze of sympathy from my competitor.

My teacher continued asking me what was wrong, but I could not reply because my sobs engulfed my thoughts. All I could focus on was how horrific my mistake had been, and how superbly I had been doing. *Why couldn't I have just done it right?* I wondered, *Then I could still finish before The Kid I Sit Next To. Why was my cat not perfect?* Even though I knew my whole class was still watching, I tossed my head down on my desk into my arms and continued to blubber like an infant waiting for its bottle. My teacher was fed up with me not answering her

and dragged me outside to the hallway to try and interrogate me on why I was so miserable.

“Eleanor, what on God’s great earth happened! Are you okay? What could have possibly happened to make you cry so much?”

“I-I-I,” I stuttered through gasping wails.

“It’s okay, you can tell me,” my teacher, very comfortingly, said.

“I-I, I messed up my math worksheet!”

“Oh sweetie, that’s all? Why don’t you go to the bathroom and clean up, okay?” The consoling tone in her voice was very obvious. But like my teacher suggested, I hauled myself down the rest of the hallway and into the girl’s bathroom. On the way to the bathroom, I made eye contact with our classroom assistant teacher. He was nice enough, I guess, but he had a very concerned look on his face when he saw the state I was in. From across the hallway he mouthed to me, *Are you okay?* I thought that this was a stupid question because it was evident that I was not okay, but I still gave him a slight nod, just for the politeness of it. I was way too ashamed of crying to say anymore and bolted to the bathroom door. Now not only had The Kid I Sit Next To seen me crying, but my whole class had, my teacher had, AND the assistant teacher had. What a wonderfully mortifying day it was.

The stench of the bathroom hit me right in the nose as I walked in. Gross little children and the smell of humiliation didn’t mix well. I got a dozen of the cardboard paper towels to wipe my wet cheeks off with. I turned the faucets on and drenched them under cool water. I liked the way the color of the towels turned darker the more water you put on them; it felt soothing in a way. It also reminded me of the way my tears had stained my math paper. Little grey salty dots scattered all along my beautiful cat. Oh, my cat. How I longed for my cat to be perfectly placed upon my paper, like a blessing from the math Gods. Maybe with higher intervention, I could finish before The Kid I Sit Next To. No, I don’t think even then it could be a possibility. He was probably already finished, basking in his golden victory. But how would I know? I was still sitting in the bathroom, but at least I had stopped crying. I needed to go back to class soon. I couldn’t let my classmates know this insane loss had affected me so much. They definitely did know already, but I had to stand my ground.

Looking in the mirror, I saw my puffy red eyes, and the little lines the tears had left behind on my face, and my drooping frown. I wiped the soaked paper towels across my cheeks, erasing the faint lines. Then I held the cold towels to my eyes to try and reduce the swelling and redness. Two problems down, one very

large one to go. My frown. I didn't know if that would go away though, not yet at least. *Turn that frown upside down!* they always said, but was it that easy? Could I just go back to class and pretend I hadn't been bawling my eyes out for a good twenty minutes? Hiding my feelings was not in my nature. Maybe that was what it took, though. When one person wins, do you just go on saying "Good job!" and "Congratulations!" like you didn't want exactly what they got? I was so furious, I had become disappointed. I was disappointed in myself. I was disappointed in The Kid I Sit Next To for not being slower even though I knew he was just another competitor. He was not to blame for my own mistake. I realize that. But it still stung knowing I was not good enough. It was my one chance to prove that I was a worthy contender, and I had blown it. Wiping my face for the last time, I looked in the mirror once again and saw flashes of my teary math paper fly through my head. My round face was almost identical to my cat's. We were so similar, with the same head shape and many flaws.

I decided to finally walk out of the bathroom and into the hallway. It smelled quite a lot better out here. I waved to my friend from a different class as she walked past me, with no concerned look from her. *At least I look normal and okay now*, I thought. I sulked back to my teacher's classroom and walked in the door, and I don't think anything could have prepared me for my classmates' fearful looks, like they thought I might just burst into tears again. I took a glance at the Kid I Sit Next To, and he looked like his stupid cat had just come off his paper and walked right out the door. A silence fell over the classroom, almost an aftermath, one that your classmates would remember for months on end. I felt naked and exposed, like I was a performer whose pants had fallen off in the middle of their show and then mooned the entire audience, their cheeks glowing red-hot, and then devastatingly running off stage.

But the most tragic scene of them all was my poor desk. My Chromebook was askew, for it no longer lined up with the rectangular border of my once faultless arrangement. The green "math" labeled folder had somehow reached the carpeted floor and had spread its contents of many other math papers all around the bottom of my desk. Adding and subtracting worksheets blocked my vision of the rough, blue carpet that I had been staring at. No one had picked up my papers. They dared not to. They might catch my contagious embarrassment bug. My purple pencil was nowhere to be seen, lost in the jumble of unorganized papers spread throughout the few feet of my desk. Yet even within the war zone of my desk, like the eye of a hurricane, right smack dab in the center of the table, sat my "perfect" paper cat, in all its glory.

# Maslyn Lee

Grade 12, Olathe Northwest High School

*Humor*



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## Purr-fection

“You be good Bella!” Grace says petting my knotted furone last time before she leaves for the weekend. Thankfully she supplied us, meaning me, with a pound of food. Grace is a below-average owner. She forgets to clean the litter box but still gets mad when I choose to use her bed. She never brushes me and doesn’t give me enough attention. *And* she waits till the morning to refill my water. What does she expect me to do during the middle of the night? Die from dehydration? I don’t think so.

“I’m glad you are leaving!” I purr with joy.

“Aw, your meow is so cute!” Grace says like she didn’t understand a word I just said. Humans, so unbelievably clueless. They talk to us like we can’t comprehend anything. And you wanna know what’s worse? That nails on a chalkboard sound they call a voice.

Grace says her last goodbyes and finally manages to walk out the door. It took her long enough!

“Finally,” I sigh in relief to Willow, my roommate. Half the time I forget she even lives here seeing as she only stays under the bed. It’s like she’s scared of me or something. What can she be scared of? She can’t be scared whenever she lays in *my* spot, and *I* have to make her move. She makes *me* look like the bad guy when she knows that the left end of the bed is specifically my spot and my spot only. I think she’s learned her lesson though. As I said, she lives under the bed now. But again, it’s not my fault she doesn’t know boundaries.

As usual, no response. I decide Willow won’t be of any use this weekend. Guess I’ll have to entertain myself. As I lick my front paw while laying on Grace’s bed, I decide to leave this cave she calls a room. It’s incredibly dull and lacks nothing fascinating. Yeah, that box in the corner? I already scratched it to shreds.

Or that unstable tower that's supposedly called a "cat tree?" Yeah, just no. I pause licking my paw and immediately roll onto my back. I swivel, trying to itch that one spot I can never reach. Now satisfied, I roll back on to my paws and sway to the end of the bed. I elegantly hop off the mattress as my tail follows my movement.

The door that leads to the unknown is cracked just enough for a sliver of light to shine through. I use my nose to gently push the door open. I take a deep breath and slowly peak my head out the door. Blinding lights fill the whole house through the windows. My eyelids immediately shut in protest to the unwanted sunshine. In Grace's room, the window is covered by a tapestry. I think it's a little selfish that she covers the window. Now, I can't spy on birds or lick my reflection on the window. Like I said, Grace is a below-average owner.

I gently tiptoe out of the dark, yet comfortable cave. After a short journey to the top of the staircase, I peer over the edge down the steep, scary slope. It's now or never. I take my left front paw and place it on the top step. My right paw replicates the movement and then my back two follow. I get in a rhythm of reaching the bottom of the scary mountain.

Finally, I manage to reach the bottom of the steps. The hardwood floor feels foreign and cold on my paws. My gaze rises from the wood covered floor and color instantly invades my eyes. From the red colored furniture to a wall filled with paintings, my jaw falls open. My eyes can't move fast enough to absorb the artwork. Well, I shouldn't really say *artwork*. In reality, there's a lot of unorganized doodles with hideous colors. All are definitely made by a toddler. I could do better and I'm a cat!

Ignoring the ugly artwork, I take my time rubbing against all the pieces of furniture. I purr in contempt as I repeatedly stroke my head against the edge of the red couch. Still purring, I hop onto the fluffy cushion and knead the couch to make a comfortable napping spot.

Just as I twirl in a circle to lay down, an ear bleeding sound fills the silence. What was that? I hesitantly lift my head as the scratching on the hardwood floors grows louder and louder. What the... Oh you have got to be kidding me!

"Waaaahooooo!" Two disgusting creatures yell as they run into the room. I visibly roll my eyes as the unsettling entrance finally makes sense. They're dogs. Of course they're dogs! What is the point of those things? All they do is lick you, bite you, and yap till you're dead. And they can't take care of themselves. So incapable. They're worse than humans! I don't know who in their right mind

would willingly let a creature with no common sense stink up the house. Certainly not me.

I huff as I stand from the once cozy couch. I peer over the edge to get a good look at the dogs. Both are tiny in size and have saliva dripping from their open mouths. *Gross!* One looks overweight with short hair and big ears. That thing is currently running in a circle, chasing its tail. So typical of a dog. At least the other one looks semi-sane. It also has short hair and big ears but it looks like it does more than just eat.

“Now who are you?” asks the skinnier heathen.

“I’m Bella. Now who are you?” I reply with necessary sass. How do they not know who I am? I mean, *I* am Bella, *the* Bella.

“I’m Cocoa. That’s Rosie,” replies the thinner doofus. I give Cocoa a slight nod. I keep my chin high so I’m looking down at the two creatures. It serves them right, seeing as I’m blessing them with my appearance. Not wanting to spend an extra minute with these disgusting things, I hiss before jumping from the once enticing couch. I bolt up the once scary slope back to the cave. I guess Willow’s company will have to do.



# Luke Levy

Grade 11, John Burroughs School

Educator: Shannon Koropchak

*Flash Fiction*



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## Accepting the Absurd

It's New Year's Eve— well, by now, New Year's Day. After a fun night with family and friends, I lie in bed, as snow falls during the quiet night. Seemingly out of nowhere, I painfully force myself up and hobble to my bedroom window, to gaze at the peaceful winter night. I think about the night, and the enjoyment I felt and the people I spent time with. I observe my majestic surroundings further, when suddenly, I tense up. Out of the corner of my eye, I see it— the one and a half foot long paperclip.

I'm not sure why I still have it, although I'm sure I would miss it if it were gone. Hesitantly, I pick up the giant paperclip up with care, holding it with a palm of each end on it, feeling its symmetric curvature. I take a deep breath, before my mind takes me back to that crazy day exactly three years ago. Back to that feeling of waking up from a nap 100 times smaller than a human, feeling like a bug in the giant world around me— the daze I was in, frantically looking around at this new reality. The absurdity of looking across my bedroom, which was now a massive canyon, stretching for miles. I remember the feeling of struggling to resist the blows of the heater. My bed was a mountain, and my desk was the size of a football field. I remember picking up the one-pound paperclip for the first time, admiring its features, while still in a state of confusion from the extraordinary transformation I underwent. Briefly, I wake up to the present, my eyes immediately locking on the paperclip. My heart is pulsing faster, and I shut my eyes once more, as I plant my forehead against the window and painfully make myself think about what happened next—I heard the voice of a giant calling to me, and suddenly, my massive bedroom door swung open. Within a second, a massive gust of wind threw me to the ground, knocking me out until I woke up in bed with a lightning bolt of pain running down my back.

I open my eyes to snowflakes gently falling onto the white blanket below, and I immediately feel my heart slowing back to normal. I shiver and twitch briefly, but in a good way. It feels as if all negativity has left my body. Still, I think more about that time a few years ago. I used to do this constantly, but with crushing negativity. This time, I am at peace. I'm content with the reality of the situation. It's fine if none of my questions can be answered. It doesn't matter why this happened to me. It doesn't matter if no one, not even my therapists, believed me. It doesn't matter why this stupid paperclip traveled with me back to reality. Gently holding the paperclip in my hands, I only now feel how cold it is, having rested against this window into the winter night. This coolness calms me, as I stare off into the night. Flipping the paperclip around in my hands, I notice something new about it. It has a new, friendly shine to it, and I admire its distorted reflection of the yellow streetlight, which peacefully stands tall in the blanket of snow. I run my hands around the smooth metallic object, until I get to its rough, jagged end, a result of my rage years ago. In the past, feeling this would've brought me anguish, the same anguish I felt during my act of rage. But now, it brings me contentment. I'm fine with the past, and I'm ready for the future. These thoughts bring a subtle, proud smile to my face as I stare out into the night. This time, unlike other moments of reflection, I carefully place the gargantuan paperclip back in its place against the window. Yawning, I feel my focus and thoughts waning, and I totter back into my cozy bed. I take one last look at the paperclip, reflecting the dim light of the scene outside, before I finally drift off to sleep.

# Grace Li

Grade 12, Parkway Central High School

Educator: Jason Lovera

*Critical Essay*



## In Pursuit of Parisian Pickpocketing Punks

Paris had not wowed me with its scents, and this train station was no different. I held my fresh quiche to my nose, hoping to block out the urban stench by inhaling the cheesy, savory aroma. I would feast on this delicacy on the train, walk a short way to the Palace of Versailles, and then feast my eyes on countless ornate ceilings.

The departure board read “00 min” when a train barreled through the station and eventually slowed to a stop towards the right end of the platform. Whereas only a few people were waiting before, a sizable crowd now appeared on the platform. My mom, my sister Rachel, and I were a sizable distance from the last train car, so we quickly made our way and joined the mass of people rushing into the train.

In addition to us, four young teenagers were among the last to board. The kids, the oldest of whom could not have been older than 15, squeezed and shoved their way through. They lodged themselves between us, squirming in an odd scuffle. Stragglers boarded less packed cars, but before the train doors could close, mayhem broke out. The four children leapt off the train and a woman’s shriek pierced my ears. It was my mom. She had wedged her leg between the train doors to keep them from shutting and had one word to scream: “PICKPOCKET!”

Cramped and confused, I asked, “What? What did they take?” My mom’s belt bag was still secured tightly around her waist, but she was panicking and rummaging through it. She wailed, “My credit cards! My red wallet is missing!” Rachel whipped her head around and gasped—her white bag was unzipped, splayed open. We needed to get off the train.

Later that day, my mom, Rachel, and I questioned why the children had been pickpocketing in the first place. We pondered a couple of reasons, but many

factors drive people to crime. For example, according to a TIME article, immoral actions may be wrongly judged and accepted as mere social conventions. Editor Jeffrey Kluger describes that children will follow norms, such as the allowance or prohibition of eating in the classroom, but when a teacher allows “[pushing] another student off a chair, the child hesitates.” This difference proves that “kids feel [morality] innately” (Kluger). This example of a physical assault is widely understood as uncomfortable and immoral, but something like pickpocketing, which is less directly violent, blurs the boundary between social norms and ethics. The distinction is even less clear when the survival instinct, manipulation and coercion, or other external factors come into play. For instance, if driven by a basic need for resources such as water and food, which require money, individuals from impoverished communities may view pickpocketing as a socially acceptable behavior. Consequently, children who grow up in those environments may develop a skewed moral compass. For the pickpockets, their socio-economic situation likely shaped the belief that pickpocketing is an appropriate, ethical, and necessary behavior.

Still, I had more questions. Did the four children act freely? Could a skewed moral compass inhibit one’s free will? Are they blameworthy? John Milton discusses this in *Paradise Lost* by describing free will as God’s gift to humanity and explaining its purpose. God states, “I made [man] just and right, / Sufficient to have stood, though free to fall” (Milton 3.98-100). Autonomy is an intrinsic gift that allows for desires, deliberation, and action. Reason and judgment make one “sufficient” to stand. However, in the pickpockets’ case, an external constraint—their childhood environment—corrupted both their moral compass and their deliberation. They were not “sufficient” to stand. Since free will is essential for moral responsibility, actions based on manipulation or coercion should not be blamed or praised.

The pickpockets’ warped judgment is similar to Othello’s deliberation in the Shakespearean tragedy *Othello*. Poisoned by lies and manipulation, Othello believes that his wife Desdemona has been unfaithful and is ready to murder her. However, in a moment of final suspense, he contemplates her death, “Yet I’ll not shed her blood, / ... Yet she must die, else she’ll betray more men. / Put out the light, and then put out the light” (Shakespeare 5.2.3-7). Othello demonstrates his awareness of the consequences of killing Desdemona through the metaphor of putting out Desdemona’s “light,” which is an irreversible act. This deliberation would suggest that he judges the situation and freely chooses to kill her, but Othello’s reason for killing Desdemona is so that she will not “betray more men.”

Her infidelity motivates the murder, but it is a lie. Othello's free will at this moment is based on a manipulated fact and, therefore, fraudulent. Just as Othello's tainted judgment diminishes his moral responsibility, the children deserve less blame for actions driven by unavoidably misguided moral judgment.

After deciding Versailles could wait, my mom, Rachel, and I leaped off the train, quickly scrambled down the stairs, and silently hoped the children had not run far. We frantically scanned the overhead signs for the nearest "sortie." As we neared the exit gate, my sister spotted the quartet. They walked briskly to not arouse suspicion, but my mom's cries of "Stop them!" drew enough attention. The children ran. I sprinted towards them, and as the group hurdled over the turnstiles, I caught one of the young boy's legs. I held on, suspending him at the top of the turnstile, but the other three children turned back, pulling him away from me. They pleaded in imperfect English, yelling "Let him go!" I searched for signs of anger or guilt, but the look on the boy's face utterly confounded me. He looked vulnerable, too young, and too innocent. Despite their fleeing, it made me doubt my sister's conviction that these four seemingly panicked children were criminals. My unease soon gave way to empathy for the children. In his article about morality, Kluger describes the power of such sensitivity. In one experiment, a chimpanzee refused to descend from a roof with "calling, scolding, or offers of food," but immediately came down when the experimenter pretended to cry (Kluger). The remarkable capacity for empathy in animals is even more profound in humans. Empathy drives us as an essential part of our morality. The other children's yells to release him were unconvincing. Only when I perceived fear in the young boy's face and felt empathy did I pause, doubt, and relieve him from pain and panic. I released the boy's leg, and the group bolted again. Security guards stood uselessly in the terminal. My mom abandoned her pleas to nearby officers. We ran outside.

More cops were stationed outside, but they too were no help. Upon reflection, their inaction somehow upset and disturbed me more than the pickpockets' crime. Our panic had been evident, yet they had blatantly let the pickpockets flee and refused to help us chase them down. Since pickpocketing is so prevalent, they likely felt a sense of learned helplessness. In his book *Determined*, Robert Sapolsky explains that the psychological state is common in people who do not believe in free will. He writes that in a world without free will, "The reality of some loss in the past becomes mistakenly perceived as an inevitable future...There is no responsibility or moral obligation" (Sapolsky 389). The officers' logic was likely that petty crime still happens if and when they

help—it is an “inevitable future.” Therefore, they feel no obligation to take action. However, the implications of this mindset are dangerous because removing free will removes the essence of humanity: morality. In such a world, the security guards and pickpockets are completely free of blame. Regret, apology, rights, and authority are impossible. Without free will, the world is, as Sapolsky puts it, “incomprehensible.”

A minute went by, filled with pacing around the entrance, catching our breath, and deciding our next move. Suddenly, Rachel spotted the four children walking on the wide sidewalk. Rachel’s long skirt and my mom’s older age limited their athleticism, so I dropped my quiche and took charge of the chase. As my mom yelled again, hoping to draw strangers’ attention, the group started running. After several strides, I slowed down, realizing I would never catch up in a pure footrace. I slowed to a brisk walk but kept a keen eye on their four figures. My plan was working; they also slowed down.

Even with my trick, they eventually looked back and saw me, but I was now much closer. The oldest girl reached into her sack-like bag and threw something small and red onto the ground. As I hopped over it, I snickered out loud, “Was that supposed to trip me?” It was only later that I realized it was the wallet.

They swiftly took a left turn, sprinting across the intersection right as the light turned red, and I lost sight of them. When the light turned green, I crossed and headed down the street, too exhausted to run again. I passed one building, another, then another, then there they were—a huddled group of four children. The oldest girl was speaking frantically to someone on the phone in a language I could not discern as French. Turning towards them, I demanded as clearly as possible, “Give me back our stuff.” With wide eyes and broken English, the girl told me that they threw all they stole “on the ground, back there.” I remembered the small object tossed on the ground, but, still skeptical, I interrogated them more, “Everything? Even the cash? You have nothing left in your bag?” Each of them wore crossbody satchels, and I could only imagine how many other stolen wallets were in there. The girl nervously nodded. I grimaced, “Well let’s go back and find it together.” She nodded again, but as I backed up, I heard Rachel calling for me. She yelled from the end of the block, “Grace? Come back here! We got it!”

Eventually, we arrived at the Palace of Versailles. My mom, Rachel, and I found a bench in the gardens and debriefed the fiasco. They revealed to me what Rachel had already told my mom—Rachel had spotted two adults in our train car who just happened to step out after a subtle, sly nod to a certain group of

children. Coupled with the girl's phone call, likely to some authoritative figure, the children were almost certainly working with adult counterparts.

When my mom and Rachel found the wallet on the ground, their main concern was not the missing cash. Rachel urged me to come back because "What if the children were waiting on the adults to pick them up in a big, scary van? You were with them, what if they took you?" On the other hand, I could not stop thinking about the children. My mom was scared for me to have a chance encounter with the adults involved, but the four children must have been in greater danger working and living under the adults' authority. According to author and philosopher Stephen Cave, such psychological duress inhibits one's free will. Cave defines free will as "the ability to generate a wide range of options for ourselves, and to decide among them without external constraint." If one's range of options is wider, they are "freer as a result" (Cave). However, manipulation, coercion, or other external factors limit one's range of options. If the children did not view pickpocketing as a crime, that was a result of their upbringing. Growing up, the adults' instructions would have easily corrupted their ethics and distorted their moral compass. Conversely, if they knew pickpocketing was immoral, they would not have been able to act according to their will. Children are reliant on adults, so disobedience and rebellion pose a threat to their safety and well-being. The adults involved may have automatically acted as psychological restraints on the vulnerable children. Overall, regardless of the children's judgment, the adults inherently limited their autonomy.

I have replayed the events and exchanges in my mind, but I do not feel resentful of the four pickpocketing punks. Adults were involved, so either the children were morally misled or psychologically coerced. Though I do not blame them, change must occur. Cave offers a solution referencing Barack Obama's speech, "...we must accept that life outcomes are determined by disparities in nature and nurture, 'so we can take practical measures to remedy misfortune and help everyone to fulfill their potential'" (Cave). Assuming the children, or even the adults, were psychologically or socio-economically predisposed to crime, the solution should be to strengthen, rather than further limit, their free will, because autonomy is essential for living a decent life. Solving such crimes will require encouragement for individuals to see a wider range of options, make positive decisions, and stick to them. Remedying misfortune is the only path to prosperity and a profound, lasting impact.

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# Maya Li

Grade 19, Blue Valley West High School

*Poetry*



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## Birth Me in the River Styx

it's like I was born black and blue.  
maybe it was my growing heart,  
pounding thin skin, leaving a flushed chest,  
blushing fingers and toes squirming in the air to fight unwelcome hands.  
my first breath a shriek to let the world know I fear it,  
my exhale a plea to return to the safety of the womb.

but maybe it was the LED lights, the brittle paper gown, the stench of isopropyl  
alcohol.  
a sterile home, all made careful.  
perfect protection produced the weak  
with needles that numbed the ache to be strong.  
where everything was too harsh to live, maybe even too harsh to attempt.

instead, birth me in the river styx,  
cool my bruises like a kiss.  
my first breath a warning,  
my exhale a scream; you should fear me.

# Maya Li

Grade 19, Blue Valley West High School

*Poetry*



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## Sonnet for the Sick

All I think of: the hellish burn within.  
My nose, a vessel punished in my sins—  
Of sharing french fries with those not akin.  
Flu, so simple only when it begins,  
Like childish ignorance, without any will.  
Curse crueler the more I know its abuse.  
Fields of Asphodel, what is life not ill?  
River Styx rinses masses of tissues.  
Hades's home both hot and cold where I lay  
Between chills and fevers, I am his pawn.  
Internally damned, but no will to pray  
Until Mother nurses, my nightmare gone.  
Not in the Underworld but under sheets,  
Brought back to life as my body defeats.

# Garrett Li

Grade 11, Olathe North High School

*Novel Writing*



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## Thicker Than Water

*You are a product of the House of the Eagle. Any shame upon you brings shame upon me.*

Those very words were drilled into Harrow Drevus' head, but now only serve as a hollow reminder of his past. Once a coddled heir to the aristocracy, Harrow was tricked and sent to die by his own house servant, Merd. By some stroke of luck, he survived— but vowed his revenge.

Time on the streets has cut him down. He's been a beggar, turned thief, turned smuggler, forcing his way upwards with political savvy and iron ambition. But when a simple narcotics run goes awry, Harrow is split from his partner-in-crime Lia, and has to start from square one. All the wit in the world couldn't protect her, and Harrow realizes he has to learn to kill.

When Harrow runs into ex-nobleman Jin, he agrees to become Jin's personal weapon — and all Jin has to do is reconnect Harrow with his long-lost father.

But Harrow's gotten more than he's bargained for. The insane Jin aims to take control of the underground crime scene, and Harrow is his way in. Things only go from bad to worse when Harrow learns the truth: Merd had saved him whilst his father had abandoned him all along. Harrow finally sees Kitara for the city it truly is: crooked, corrupt, and irredeemable. With blood on his hands and no way out, can Harrow steady the ship and right the wrongs of his father?

The sky was pitch black. The night was still young. Harrow closed his eyes, trying to immerse himself within his persona. He was Hal, a fresh-faced nobleman from a neighboring country with an immense sum of gold, looking to invest it into some enterprising Kitaraan company. Tonight, he'd be meeting with Donic for business talks. Harrow pulled the pouch out from within his pocket,

and inspected its crystalline powder. The pouch's seal was secure. Harrow shoved the sachet into the corner of his cheek and stole away into the night.

The Bear Manor looked nigh identical to the house Harrow'd grown up in. It had the same arching entryway, the same marble columns, even the same elegant cupola. A butler stood at the entrance, and bowed deeply at Harrow's arrival. Harrow almost opened his mouth to greet the butler as his own, then chastised himself for the instinct.

"Sir Hal, is it not?"

Harrow nodded.

"Do you have any weapons?" The butler said. "Apologies, sir. Master Donic is quite... cautious."

Harrow paused, then reached into his pocket and set the knife onto the butler's extended platter. He moved forward, but was stopped by the butler's outstretched arm.

"And the one tucked in your shoe, good sir."

Harrow nodded icily. The butler clearly was no fool.

"Can't be too safe these days," Harrow murmured, bending down and removing the hidden blade from its sheath. The butler watched closely as Harrow dropped it onto the plate. "All good?"

The butler nodded.

"He'll be with you shortly, sir." The butler bowed deeply again, before opening the oaken doors. Harrow walked inside, and found a little boy waiting at the door. The boy led Harrow through the house, past familiar remnants of Harrow's own childhood. There, in the corner, was the same iron-wrought spiral staircase. Large, demeaning portraits looked disdainfully upon the proceedings. A tall case of glimmering trophies stood illuminated beneath hanging crystal chandeliers. Finally, the servant stopped, pointing Harrow into the seating room, where a small blood-red chaise sat alone facing a blazing fireplace. Above the fire hung a stuffed head of a bear, its mouth stuck in a perpetual growl of anger, or perhaps fear. In the corner, a grandfather clock ticked away slowly.

"Thank you, child." Harrow said quietly. He caught a glimpse of himself within the boy's eye; a tall yet fidgety figure, clad in soft suede and slicked back hair. A pair of round spectacles sat atop Harrow's face, making him look anxious. The boy bowed deeply, and Harrow realized that the boy must've been mute. The thought brought him to Merd, and his face darkened. It must've scared the child, for he scampered away, leaving Harrow to brood alone.

Merd. He hadn't thought about her in over a year, yet it reminded him of his omnipresent task. Harrow sighed, and tried to get comfortable on the little couch, but to no avail.

The clock ticked 9.

Surely their appointment hadn't been delayed? Harrow frowned. He polished his glasses, then set them back down. He didn't like glasses; they irritated his nose.

The clock ticked 10.

Now, Harrow felt the hairs on his neck sticking up. Was it a trap? He closed his eyes and tried to analyze the conversation he'd had with Jin. The incessant ticking of the clock made it hard to focus.

The clock ticked 11.

The mission was a wash. Harrow ran through his escape options. If the manor was the same as his had been, then there would be a hidden exit behind one of the large portraits. Or maybe, he could just smash through one of the windows. Usually, criminals and the like would never have gotten as far as he had, making manor guards much more lax than their owners would like to admit.

Finally, the butler returned. "I apologize for the wait. My master had to handle an important piece of business." He bowed deeply. In behind him strode a thick man with a healthy mustache. It was Donic, and in an instant, Harrow was Hal.

"Hal, my good man!" Donic reached a hand out, and Hal grasped it timidly. Sensing weakness, Donic squeezed hard, forcing a wince out of Hal. "Ah, how I love meeting you folk from the far east! Hope you haven't waited too long. I've just had the devilest of time trying to... Bah." Donic flashed his teeth. "I'm hungry. Let's eat."

Hal blinked and adjusted his glasses. He followed Donic into the dining room, where sumptuous, steaming platters of food were laid out. Fine china lay at each end of the table and glasses of a deep, red wine sat next to the plates. Donic walked forward and pulled out the chair.

"Have a seat."

Hal walked unsteadily over. "Thank-thank you, D-D-Donic."

Donic clasped Hal's shoulder.

"Dig in, Hal!"

It was more of a command than an invitation. Hal watched as Donic strode over to the other side.

“So, Hal.” Donic said through a mouthful of gristle. “Tell me about yourself.”

“I, um.” Hal stuttered. “I’m, um, looking for a good, um, business venture. And I think, I think that—”

“—it was Janssen that introduced you to me, wasn’t it?”

Hal nodded quickly. Janssen must be the codename that Jin had used. “Yes, yes. Janssen, fellow with the..”

“The blonde hair, yes, yes.” Donic, now clearly bored, wiped his mouth. “So, what exactly are you looking for here?”

Hal blinked again and gulped. “A good investment?” He said uncertainly. Donic grinned and opened his arms wide.

“Aren’t we all?”

Hal nodded so fast it looked as though he were entering a seizure. “Yes, yes. Janssen, he, um, he said that,” Hal looked down at his plate as though embarrassed. “He said you guys, erm, provide... services of women?”

Donic guffawed. “That’s one way to put it!” He took a sip of the wine. It stained his lips an unnatural red. He took a breath before speaking.

“Hal, lemme tell you the truth. This, ah, industry is booming. It’s prime.”

“Y-yes, yes. That’s uh, what I was, er, looking for?” Hal trailed off. Donic smelled blood.

“Hal, you know, I really do like you. I’ll let you in on a little something.” He lowered his voice. “Ya know, if you wanted to sample the goods, just let me know.” Donic winked. “If you know, god forbid, you were having a little trouble finding the right... one.” He leaned back.

Hal picked up his wine glass, but his hand was shaking so badly that he almost spilled the wine all over himself. He put it back down.

“Right, right.” He stammered, wiping his brow.

“Got you a little excited there, mister!” Donic laughed again. “I tell you, Ham.”

“Hal.” Hal corrected quietly.

“Hal. Hal!” Donic barrelled on. “Mining’s a dying business. Shipping’s even worse, damned pirates. But girls? Ho ho!” Donic chuckled. “You see those floating gobs of garbage all over the sea? Those, ah, ‘sinful ships’?” Donic licked his lips. “Those fellows are prime, lemme tell you! They desperately need our... talent acquisition. So much demand in this market. It’s prime!”

Harrow could feel his temple pulsating. He clenched his fist, hiding it beneath the table, feeling his nails dig into his palm. The pain felt good; it

reminded him of his purpose. It was a fraction of the pain Donic would be feeling that night. Harrow had always prided himself on his acting, and Hal returned to the table.

“Everything all right?” Donic leaned over, feigning a look of concern. “You haven’t touched your meal yet.”

Hal felt the pouch hidden in his cheek. It’d be suicide to try and eat while risking the chance of swallowing it. He shook his head instead.

“I’m, just, um, not hungry. Had some fish yesterday, it’s been disagreeing with my stomach. And um, you were telling me about, uh, how this business worked?”

Donic leaned back, chuckling.

“Hal, Hal.” He chided. “Don’t worry your pretty little head about the logistics of it all! Lemme tell you, my men are hand-picked. They’ve got a lot of experience, if you know what I mean.” Donic wiggled his eyebrows. “In fact, lemme show you one of our new acquisitions to the team!” He clapped. The most beautiful woman ever limped into the room, and Harrow’s heart dropped.

Her face brightened with recognition, then darkened with realization upon seeing Harrow.

“Ha—”

Harrow sent a death threat through his glare. She closed her mouth. Donic frowned, disgruntled.

“You... you know her already?”

Harrow disappeared, and Hal was back. He blinked fast, and pushed his glasses back up. They kept sliding down his nose.

“No-no! She must’ve mistaken me for someone!”

Donic took a long draught of wine, and smacked his lips.

“She seems to like you well enough, though. You know, I’ll sweeten up the deal.”

Hal bit his tongue.

“We haven’t been able to break her in yet.” Donic whispered. “Feisty, but some guys like it hot. We’ll give her to you, for free. Just gotta...” Donic snapped his fingers and straightened back up. The butler walked back into the room, brandishing a quill and a lengthy sheet of parchment. “Gotta sign right here!” Donic presented the paper with a flourish.

“Gee...” A dribble of sweat rolled down Hal’s temple, landing with a plop onto the paper. “Oh, I- I’m sorry.” He dabbed at the drop with his napkin, but it only blotched the ink further. “Ahem.”

Donic tented his fingers. “No matter.”

Hal could almost see the steam rising off of Donic’s head. He picked up the quill. The document was written in a Roasir dialect, evidently one Donic had picked in an attempt to trick Hal. Fortunately, while Hal was no polyglot, Harrow was. The final line read

*By signing this contract, I void all rights to any consideration I have been promised. I guarantee that all my property and wealth shall be transferred to Donic of the House of the Bear, and I agree that I will receive no further compensation.*

Hal’s hand still trembling, he signed his name.

“H-Hallow?” Donic inspected the signature. Harrow cursed himself for his foolishness; he’d completely forgotten to sign as Hal.

“Yes, Hal is short for Hallow. Sorry for the confusion.”

“No matter! Whether it’s Ham or Hallow...” Donic handed the scroll back to the butler, and reached over to shake Hal’s hand. “Prime business partners to the end, eh?”

It was time. Harrow suddenly lurched backwards, coughing hard into his left hand. He felt the sachet fall down, and nimbly ripped the top open, all while acting like he was still in a coughing fit. Donic turned away, disgusted.

“Sorry, sorry.” Harrow stammered, before grabbing the napkin and wiping his mouth with both hands. At the same time, he subtly transferred the tiny bag from one hand to the other. He reached his newly equipped right hand back out and leaned over, positioning it over Donic’s wine.

Donic scowled, dropping his jolly demeanor for half a second. Harrow pretended not to notice.

“Shake?” He stammered. The pouch was wedged deep in the crook between his thumb and his index finger.

Donic forced a grin, and reached out to meet Harrow’s hand. Harrow’s hand was cold and clammy, and his grip weak. At the moment their hands met, Harrow subtly tilted the pouch down. A white powder shimmered in the air for a moment— before plunging down into the red wine. It swirled, quickly dissolving.

Harrow stumbled backwards.

“Blundering fool.” Donic muttered under his breath.

“A toast?” Harrow asked, brightly.

Donic forced a grin. “Of course, Hal, my good man! To our prosperity!” He lifted a glass to the ceiling.

“To-to our wealth!” Harrow lifted his own glass up.

Donic downed the remainder of his wine. Harrow watched with interest.



“So— so do I get the girl?” stuttered Hal. She’d been left standing there.

“Bugger.” Donic mouthed under his breath. “Of course, of course!” He cried gallantly. “I believe her name’s, ah, Lydia. I’ll be in close touch.” He slapped his knee and stood up, signaling the end of the meeting.

Hal nodded. “I— I’m excited about our— our partnerships together!”

Harrow beckoned to Lia.

“Ahh, just, could you wait one moment?” Donic called out. Harrow turned around, sensing the mood shift.

“You know, I noticed that you never really touched your food tonight. Everything alright? The cook would be offended if I had to return a full plate.”

Hal licked his lips. “The fish, I mean..”

“Fish.” Donic deadpanned. “Come now. What about the powder? You can’t have seriously thought you got away that easily.”

Hal took a step backwards. “Donic, I—”

“You know, *Harrow*, what a great performance, eh? Everybody, give it up for Harrow.” Donic began clapping. It echoed loudly in the large room.

It was over. Harrow tilted his head slightly, motioning Lia to run away. She didn’t move.

“Harrow? I simply dunno who this Harrow fellow—” Hal’s voice cracked. He purposely knocked his glasses off and took the chance to wave quickly at Lia while kneeling down to pick them up.

She still stood there defiantly. Goodness, how dense could she be? He hated his odds one-on-one with a hunk of a man like Donic, but with weapons, anything was possible. The butler had confiscated his weaponry, but Donic had given him easy access to the sharp steak knives on the table.

“Enough. Drop the facade.”

The voice doused Harrow in icy water. His disguise melted away— it was *Jin*.

Harrow straightened up off the ground. There Jin was, standing behind a grinning Donic.

“You know,” Donic began, “I actually still believed that Hal was just... Hal. I really thought I was dealing with a schmuck, Janssen, I really thought you played me like a fiddle!” Donic guffawed. “I was just bluffing with the powder part. Hal, Harrow, my God. What a prime show.”

Donic walked over; in three strides he was at the opposite end of the table and inspecting Harrow like he was some sort of prize horse.

“What a beauty,” Donic murmured. “Perfect unsuspecting height. Wonderfully nondescript facial features. And look at his legs, so lithe yet so powerful! I’d have to see his fighting skills in action, but—”

“—he’s an assassin, Donic.” Jin’s jovial mood slipped away. “If he were fighting, he’d have failed.” Jin dropped his voice. “This is it. My chef-d’oeuvre. Of course, he blundered the contract, but...”

Donic was practically drooling. “Do you know how useful he could be?” Greed was written over his face. “The other houses, they have their own teams of assassins, but this... this is prime...”

Harrow opened his mouth to say something, but Donic took it as an opportunity to inspect Harrow’s teeth.

“Pearly white... he’d fit right into the noble class, nobody would suspect a thing! Where and how did you find him?”

“What are we doing here?” Harrow’s eyes blazed with indignation. “Get away from me, Donic.”

“That’s Sir Donic to you, Harrow.” Jin lilted. “You passed the test.”

Harrow blinked. All of a sudden, his mind felt sluggishly slow.

“Test?”

“I’ve got goosebumps...” Donic was still fawning over Harrow. “His voice and accent can change —” he snapped. “—just like that!”

Harrow ignored him and his heavy breathing. Jin stepped forward.

“Yes, Harrow, test. Did you think I’d want to incite a class war right before my inauguration?” Jin snorted. “I thought you were smarter.”

“You ordered me to kill—”

“—Donic, a nobleman.” Jin tapped his foot, impatient.

“Donic was—”

“In on it the whole time.” Jin finished his question.

“But then— the poison—” Harrow started.

“Sugar. And if that’s the end of your foolish questions, I have some of my own.” Jin walked over to Lia and traced her jawline with a pale finger. She was trembling with rage but didn’t move to retaliate.

“Who is this?” Jin whispered.

Harrow opened his mouth to answer, but his voice had shriveled up and died.

# Valery Liang

Grade 11, Rolla Senior High

*Poetry*



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## blossom.

it is some unknown minute of night. beyond my window,  
a flock of birds flees into ink-kissed sky. beyond my window,  
soft city and peeling summer tree intertwine, and together  
they brush the surface of the waning moon.

the analog clock whispers its ceaseless *tick, tick, tick*.  
time unwinds. with its passing, I have taught myself  
to love the language of starlit coldness, and to imagine  
the tears on my cheeks as willow leaves in the deep breeze.

dim shine guides me as I lift my hand above myself,  
and stroke the ghostly willow which grows from my bed.  
*I am more scar than skin*, I think, around my wrists.  
yet when I close my eyes in shame, the weeping willow

sways about me in the wind, and casts within me  
a gentle world where these scars may take root,

and blossom.

# Valery Liang

Grade 11, Rolla Senior High

*Poetry*



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## Burn my letters

burn my letters,

I dare you.

sew my mouth shut. go on.

reach your hands across infernal oceans and slice the heads off a thousand  
leviathans

just to shove the needle in and go *prick, prick, prick*.

make my blood your victory. go on.

thread your favorite hazel yarn through cold stainless steel and allow its softness  
to caress the layers of skin you pierce.

pull the string taut. go on.

tie it off with a ribbon-topped flourish and let its strands brush my lips, turning  
sick blue

from your art. your crime.

laugh at how my flesh screams. go on.

have your bread and circuses for a sweet, hazy summer afternoon, and then  
forget

like always—that I have ever existed at all.

staple my fingers. go on.

make it so that they will not move for years, so that reedy metal and thrumming  
tendon become one

so cruelly, craving each other like flame and oxygen.

gouge my eyes out. go on.

mute and unfeeling as I am already, what more is mere sight? it is only the dark  
salvation of words

which I will long for, only the entirety of my soul stolen.

hide my corpse carefully. go on.

make sure nobody finds the ashes beneath the deep blue sea, make sure your  
finger of condemnation

strips away every last remnant of life above it.

burn my letters! I dare you!

and still I will find a way to cry alongside the poisoned sparrows and broken oaks  
and haunt this earth until

the day it dies.

# Valery Liang

Grade 11, Rolla Senior High

Poetry



## duibuqi

I'm sorry, Mother.

Sorry your face has become ghostly gaunt and  
Broken, tumbled, pallid with time,  
Your onyx eyes sunken, hair white and brittle,  
While the mother of the boy who slipped me  
Nasty notes in calculus and hurled slurs like paper cranes  
Remains luminous as Chang'e, exquisitely youthful as Nezha.

I'm sorry, Māmā.

Sorry you have not seen your dying father in three years because  
You must tend to my studies, tend to my livelihood;  
Sorry it has been over a decade since you have smiled during  
Chūnjié, Zhōngqiū, Qīngmíng, head bowed in eternal solitude while  
My every schoolyard bully laughs freely of ripe Thanksgiving  
And Christmas family elegance immortal.

Duìbùqǐ, Māmā.

You have poured a life and a half into a facsimile of a girl.  
*Duìbùqǐ. Duìbùqǐ. Duìbùqǐ.* I will always fail to honor you  
In every measure of a daughter. I am not worthy of your name.

*Duìbùqǐ.* You love me, but  
You will never like me.

*Duìbùqǐ.* I paint rubies around my wrists

Because I know no other way to repent.

*Duìbùqǐ*. I am afraid I will fail my SATs again  
Or lose the election for Science Olympiad president.

*Duìbùqǐ*. I revere the colonizer's tongue,  
And do not care that you do not care to understand it.

*Duìbùqǐ*. Māmā, I do not deserve forgiveness,  
I know this better than anybody except for yourself. So—

*Xièxiè nǐ, Māmā.*  
*Nǐ néng yuánliàng wǒ ma?*

(Thank you, Mother.  
Can you forgive me?)

# Jenna Lin

Grade 11, Rock Bridge Senior High School

Poetry



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## Shanghang

In the heat of a dying country even our sweat  
shone like jewels. Walking past the same magnolia tree

three times, she was finally able to say it: *Before it burned  
down, this is where my home was.* Her home—a waning patch

of crabgrass, summer listing uselessly,  
the same ghosts persisting sites from decades ago.

In a dying country, everything looked alive by comparison.  
The emeralds swaying in the boughs above us. The melanite

glistening, the sheen of my mother's eyes. She says  
*Before we lost everything, imagine it: red wealth and*

*ancient splendor. Gold rings from the town jeweler  
and a real tiger's claw.* The rings I have seen in her closet drawer,

pure and grazed with wear, molded to the shapes of fingers  
I will never touch. I stare at the white daisy breathing through

the pavement crack and imagine the rain that must have drowned out  
this heat thirty-six summers ago. The treasures she could later

only hope to dream of. The winking shine of the pulp in the fruits



she sold on the street corner, the dry smoke of

her father's laugh. Her grandmother sat on the magnolia tree, draped  
in her finest blue silks, looking for all the world

like not even an ocean could swallow her.

# Wangshu Liu

Grade 10, Marquette High School

*Humor*



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## To Circumvent the Reinvention of the Wheel

Stringent, bifurcated stances on an issue are nothing new to the human race. Without them, thousands, potentially millions, of journalists, politicians, lawyers, and scientists would be out of a career. Most controversial issues cover topics with broad ramifications, impacting significant portions of the population across the vast circumference of the earth; but there is nothing quite like a little squabble over a trifle that truly causes pandemonium.

The debate at hand revolves entirely around the phrase “reinventing the wheel,” a popular expression demonstrative of the human tendency to overcomplicate ideas that are fine the way they are. During a particularly heated time in world politics, a group of engineers proposed an idea for a shape-shifting wheel that adapts to the terrain. With the benefit of hindsight, this project seems to have been an ingenious idea with little potential for deleterious, long-term repercussions, but the demise of all reasoning can be traced back to this innocuous proposition.

To understand exactly how this series of unfortunate events transpired, it is imperative first to establish the general atmosphere of geopolitics at the time. After centuries of unresolved tension, the Progressives and Conservatives were at their breaking point. Some historians mark the ratification of the last bipartisan law as the official start of the end because it marked the final time the two parties agreed, but that is not when this story takes place. Politics had reached a point where all locomotion was strictly mandated and circumscribed by the opposing party, allowing little to be accomplished. In the centuries before this shape-shifting wheel incident, contentious debate between the parties would

cover broad issues, those with circumambient global impact—but that would no longer be the case.

When a local politician of the Progressive Party picked up the proposal with the intention of issuing a research grant, an especially disgruntled member of the Conservative Party representing at the provincial level saw it merely as another needless attempt to quite literally “reinvent the wheel.” Already having a bad day after a pothole had popped one of his faulty tires on his commute to work, the provincial politician, overstepping his jurisdiction, vetoed the idea.irate, the local politician entered a legal battle, which, considering the circumstances, he obviously expected to win. However, vehement supporters of both parties escalated the case slowly from a provincial level to a national level, and then quickly, all the way up to a global scale. Not only was this escalation unnecessary, but it also seemed illogical for the Conservative Party as in normal circumstances, it would be manifest that they’d lose the case. But at that point, tension had risen to a point so high that court justices simply blindly sided with their political party. Since the justices were initially selected to maintain political equilibrium, this case reached an impasse with an equal number of justices ruling in favor of each side.

Because of its uncomplicated nature, this case struck a chord with the general populace: even the most vacuous partisans could understand the arguments of both sides. Consequently, ardent supporters of both parties took to the streets, with the Conservative Party using slogans such as the classic “no need to reinvent the wheel” and the newly coined “as long as it gyrates, there’s no reason to contemplate.” Wheel innovators of the Progressive Party continued to present idea after idea, which would’ve surely been deemed ingenious if not for the obstinate attitude of the Conservatives. They claimed that the work was haphazard and based on circumstantial research, developed by individuals who were not sufficiently circumspect considering the circumstances. They compared the manner by which the engineers presented the designs to a coil, criticizing their circumlocution—claiming that instead of being succinct and straightforward, they had presented in a path following circumvolution. Eventually, the wheel innovators determined their efforts futile, claiming that they were, unfortunately, running in circles.

The conflict intensified following a public spectacle in which an effigy of a traditional wheel was ignited; some first-hand sources claim that the lamentation of the Conservatives could be heard throughout the night and well into the next day. The weeping was so noisy that it circumnavigated the globe,

and with no human being able to circumvent the unbearable sound, the next day became known as the least productive work day in recorded history. Members of the wheel-burning movement were dunned, with Conservatives demanding they'd be reimbursed for the emotional cost of the scene.

A declaration of war was enacted not long after, an initiative led by General Pier Rick—a name derived from his first name “Richard” and his fondness for fishing. This ignited a major global conflict, with citizens aligning themselves circumstantially, driven solely by the political party they supported. After a long and grueling war, the details of which are irrelevant to this story, General Pier Rick and the Conservative Party managed to defeat the nefarious wheel innovators of the Progressive Party. It was deemed as a Pier Rick victory.

# Christopher Long

Grade 10, Shawnee Mission East High  
School  
*Journalism*



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## If Injured, See Dakota

Scanning the field from the sidelines of the East vs. SM Northwest football game in 2023, East Head Athletic Trainer Dakota Orlando saw a Northwest player lying on the ground in pain and immediately raced over.

She shouted at then-senior Michael Muller to grab the vacuum splint bag — a gadget used to hold a broken bone in place — and the backpack filled with emergency medical equipment.

Nearing the injured player, she instantly categorized the wound as a tib-fib and got to work stabilizing it.

Since being contracted by Shawnee Mission East from The University of Kansas Health System, Orlando has worked as East's Head Athletic Trainer for eight years. Working from noon until 8:30 pm at the earliest, Orlando assists athletes five days a week from her office in between the girls' and boys' locker rooms.

Three years earlier, then-sophomore Muller texted Orlando, asking if he could shadow her. And despite not knowing Muller well, Orlando agreed.

"He came to every football practice," Orlando said. "He did the grunt work of being manager of football. And then he, after the football season ended, he just started to ask questions like, 'How would I do this?' He was just curious."

Muller followed Orlando's after-school schedule: taping and bandaging injuries until practice, camping out in the golf cart, watching for injuries and sharing school gossip, giving football players ice baths after practice and leaving at eight-o'clock.

“I got to meet so many people every single day and create a personal bond with them and be able to help them with their problems,” Muller said. “I miss the social part of working with Dakota.”

Michael soon learned of Orlando's busy schedule jam-packed with taping football players' ankles and icing sore muscles.

East Senior Carter Rose sees Orlando every day to fulfill his football managerial duties as well as rehabilitate his elbow. Despite seeing dozens of other medical specialists, Rose notes that Orlando's personality and positivity have been a major factor in his recovery.

“She's not judgemental,” Rose said. “So you can go in there and just talk about your day and she'll ask like, ‘What's going on? How are you?’ She knows how to keep the conversation going so that you feel better.”

With light-hearted conversations about how their sport has gone lately, hard classes and life outside of East such as family vacations and extracurriculars, Orlando engages in conversation with every student athlete she cares for.

Orlando explained that a major part of the recovery process is having a relaxed conversation and explaining how the injury occurred.

“My two rules that I always say in here are, don't lie to me and don't waste my time,” Orlando said. “High schoolers feel like they can tell a white lie about how they got injured and get out of it, but that actually just prolongs the recovery.”

Students have shadowed Dakota even after Muller's graduation. Paige Stanfield, an Alabama Women's Softball commit, is Dakota's newest assistant.

“If you're going to put in the time, and just be honest about why you're interested in [sports medicine], I'll give you a shot,” Orlando said. “I've had a lot of kids ask if they can do what Michael did. And I was like, ‘You just gotta start showing up.’ And then I never see them again, and they never come back around.”

# Christopher Long

Grade 10, Shawnee Mission East High  
School

*Personal Essay & Memoir*



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## Storytelling Conventions

Expectations shattered: four days in Addison, Texas were nothing like I had anticipated. I envisioned frigid, air-conditioned rooms with instructors who spoke in journalistic jargon. Specialized Writing, however, focused on delineating each individual's life experiences. The Love Covenant, as they called it, was a figurative vault to write and read aloud the most significant experiences people had undergone in their lives. At first glance, my 20 classmates seemed so happy, so eager, so enthusiastic. I naively couldn't imagine any stories worse than Lululemon being sold out of their size.

I could not have been more wrong. Over four intense days, these incredible writers wrote about micro-aggressions, sexual assault, drugs, and the most untouchable subject of all, love. This group of student journalists, with their cheerful dispositions, seemed like unlikely candidates for such significant, sometimes traumatic experiences. Sage wrote about her substance abuse problems and her feeling of hopelessness. Sophia wrote about her parents' divorce and how it affected her and her siblings. Adam described his crush on his neighbor and explored the importance of embracing the search for a soulmate. Through words, paragraphs, and ellipses, these people I barely knew shifted my perspective and brought home that each of our life stories shapes our personalities and affects our current decisions.

Subconsciously, my superficial knowledge of my peers let me write their imagined stories, visions of family movie nights and cross-country road trips, smoothing over the raw reality of defining moments, undercutting crucial experiences in their personal development. Embarrassed that I drastically misjudged 19 different people, I understood why I myself had filled in the questions I neglected to ask them: I shied away from topics that might provoke

uncomfortable responses. My fear of social awkwardness kept me from venturing into “dangerous” topics, which prevented me from deepening my relationships with people I had recently met.

When meeting someone new, I now think about what stories they’re telling and not telling, as well as which of my own to share. Likewise, when I prepare for a journalism interview, I consider where to meet as well as which questions to ask, to let the interviewee tell their stories as they feel comfortable sharing them. Gaining their trust and access to their most meaningful experiences, I can elevate my understanding beyond surface level to hear what’s important to them.

Later that day, as I clutched my backpack and suitcase outside the elevator, I regretted not sharing my story. My moment of definition. The sheer volume of other peoples stories altered the view of my own narrative. Originally poignant, my story was reconsidered to be basic and not worthy of sharing in an environment filled with traumatic, intimate narratives. The pressure of others viewing my story as less than theirs restricted me from reading it aloud. Peering back into the lens of the past, I understood that everyone would have listened to my story on the same level of respect as others defining recollections of their life, and I was disappointed at my refusal to take a jump across the figurative precipice of publicly sharing my emotional vulnerabilities.



# Aaron Loudenback

Grade 12, Parkway Central High School

Educator: Jason Lovera

*Critical Essay*



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## The Swing State

The death of Emperor Commodus in 192 AD left Rome in turmoil. Having fallen unexpectedly into an era of instability, the once-storied city found itself plagued by divisive interim leaders and numerous rebellions. My classmates and I found ourselves thrust into this tumultuous period through a simulation of the ensuing Roman Civil War. The game was designed to convey the complexities of administering a sprawling, multicultural empire that spanned the entire width of Europe, the Asia Minor, and North Africa. We each assumed control of a province, tasked with forming alliances and battling foes along the way. The goal? To ensure our province's survival and become the pre-eminent power in the Roman Empire.

The game began in earnest, tension mounting around the room. My classmate, Adrian, started in Italia—its heart in the city of Rome—and thus became the sole Emperor of the empire. In the coming days, another classmate, Samara, who settled in Aegyptus, declared herself Emperor and rebelled from the empire—the first to do so. Samara aimed to extend her influence westward across North Africa, her ambitions as vast as the deserts she sought to conquer. The moment she declared her intentions, a palpable shift swept through the classroom. It felt the lights had dimmed, mirroring the dark turn of events.

As I witnessed these events unfold, I could not help but ponder: Why do people rebel? In his epic *Paradise Lost*, John Milton addresses the relationship between God's goodness and the existence of evil—the free will theodicy. God comments on Satan's actions that he “made him just and right, / Sufficient to have stood, though free to fall” (Milton III.98-99). Milton presents the idea that God created humans and angels with the ability to choose freely—a crucial part

of their moral existence. God provides his creations with the capacity for righteousness and the strength to stand firm in their integrity. However, this moral integrity comes with the inherent risk of misuse, hence the phrase “free to fall.” By allowing his creations the freedom to choose, God refrains from imposing his will, thus preserving the authenticity of humanity’s actions and decisions. In other words, evil manifests from human free will. In the epic, Satan also has free will, which he leverages to ascend from his chained position in the lake of fire in Hell and inflict harm, and he chooses to do so.

In addition, Richard Swinburne addresses the problem of evil by arguing that the existence of evil does not contradict the existence of an omnipotent God. His central argument, the “free-will defence”, states that God gave humans free will to make “free and responsible choices” and with this freedom comes the possibility of choosing evil (Swinburne 21). According to Swinburne, free will is a valuable gift because it allows humans to make genuine choices, thereby assuming moral responsibility for their actions. A world with free will is more valuable than one without it, even if it means the presence of evil. Without free will, actions would be predetermined, and individuals would not truly be responsible for their deeds, thereby eliminating the moral significance of their choices.

In our game, Samara fully exerted her free will in her rebellion. As her strategy gained momentum, the air grew thick with tension and anticipation. Her strategic positioning in Aegyptus, a region rich in resources and steeped in history, provided her with a formidable base of operations. In rebelling, she became an adversary whose every move had to be watched closely. It did not take long for her to seize control of the entirety of North Africa, engulfing smaller provinces—mostly by submission—in her path. Her rebellion was not only a symbolic act of defiance but a calculated bid for supremacy, and her ruthless ambition cast a long shadow over the totality of the game. Rumors of her aggressive tactics spread like wildfire; nevertheless, her relentless and cunning forces continued to push north into Syria and the Middle East.

Yet in the grand picture, to what extent are her actions virtuous? Michael Eric Dyson explores the dual nature of pride as both a virtue and a vice. Initially, he states that “without a sense of pride, one might not achieve or continue to strive for excellence in one’s field of endeavor” (Dyson 1). He sets the stage by discussing the multifaceted nature of pride, weaving together its various dimensions and impacts from historical and cultural perspectives. For example, Dyson discusses how pride can be a positive force, as evidenced in modern-day

Black pride and its retaliation against White supremacy. He suggests that pride can empower marginalized communities in the face of racial, gender, and social injustices. However, Dyson also emphasizes the destructive aspects of pride and concludes that “pride is surely a vice, and a sin... humility is virtuous, but humiliation, whether invited or imposed, is vicious” (Dyson 26). Pride, in this context, is seen negatively. When excessive, it can lead to arrogance and a sense of superiority, which are widely considered morally and spiritually detrimental. Secondly, humility is portrayed as a positive trait, reflecting modesty—a counterbalance to pride—and encouraging a recognition of humanity’s limitations and the value of others. Finally, Dyson makes a clear distinction between humility and humiliation. Contrary to humility, humiliation, whether self-inflicted or imposed by others, is harmful and degrading. Dyson warns against the dangers of excessive pride that can lead to arrogance and egotism.

I found myself torn between an admiration for Samara’s boldness and a deep unease about the ethical implications of her actions. Her daring strategies and rapid conquests were undeniably impressive, yet her unyielding ambition seemed to overshadow any sense of humility. Her rashness was rather humiliating, in Dyson’s words, as opposed to a demonstration of true pride.

One particular event solidified my opinion on Samara’s actions. Previously in the game, Samara allied with fellow colleague, Amelia, and her Syrian provinces. I started the game in Cappadocia and took control over the entirety of the Asia Minor, including Asia, Galatia, and Cilicia. With my provinces bordering Syria, I was ready for a gruesome battle. However, Samara’s forces executed a brutal surprise attack on Amelia’s that decimated all of Syria’s strength and resources. The ruthlessness of the assault, albeit tactically sound, left a bitter taste in everyone’s mouths. Samara’s relentless drive for power blinded her to the casualties of her rebellion; Her victories, though impressive, felt hollow and were stained by the bloodshed and suffering along the way. There were tons of casualties in the game, and the brutality of the attack, along with backstabbing her ally, raised serious ethical questions. Was such mercilessness truly necessary for victory?

In stark contrast to Samara’s relentless pursuit of power, Adrian’s leadership in Italia stood as a beacon of integrity and strategic wisdom. He had adopted a diplomatic approach, recognizing that true strength lies in unity and cooperation rather than brute force. While Samara conquered Syria and North Africa, Adrian and the mighty Italians formed a huge alliance with the Western and Southern European provinces, strategically dividing resources and troops

and avoiding physical combat. Adrian's ability to forge alliances further showcased his commitment to a collaborative strategy. Rather than seeking domination through aggression, he prioritized mutual benefit and stability and he created a strong line of trust.

One notable instance of Adrian's noble leadership was his handling of a potential conflict with classmate, Kaden, and his province of Achea—which had expanded into Epirus, Macedonia, Moesia, and Dacia. Instead of resorting to military action, Adrian initiated a series of negotiations that led to a peaceful resolution and the integration of Achea—and five students—into his alliance. This decision not only averted unnecessary bloodshed but also strengthened the unity and morale of the allied provinces. Moreover, Adrian's management style was characterized by fairness and respect for the autonomy of each province within the alliance. He valued the input of his allies and ensured that strategic decisions were made collectively, rather than imposed unilaterally. This inclusive approach not only reinforced the alliance's cohesion but also highlighted the ethical principles that guided his leadership.

Jeffrey Kluger explores the complexities of human morality. Kluger questions how humans “nurse one another, romance one another, weep for one another” yet at the same time “slaughter one another” (Kluger 54). He juxtaposes how humans are capable of both incredible kindness and unspeakable cruelty. On one hand, humans possess an incredible capacity for kindness, shown through acts of compassion, empathy, and altruism. From an evolutionary perspective, kindness and cooperation have been essential for the survival and success of human societies. Helping others, building alliances, and nurturing relationships have historically provided significant advantages, ensuring that communities could thrive and support one another in times of need. On the other hand, cruelty can be driven by psychological factors such as anger and a need to assert dominance. Individuals may resort to cruelty as a means of regaining control or establishing superiority. Considering the concept of free will, humans have the capacity to choose their moral path. While humans are influenced by social and psychological factors, they ultimately possess the free will to decide between acts of kindness and cruelty, highlighting the importance of moral responsibility.

As our game progressed, it wasn't long before Adrian moved into the outskirts of the Asia Minor. Samara, after conquering Amelia and the Syrian provinces, had also begun to head towards the Asia Minor. Before I knew it, I was surrounded, and yet, I had all the power.

The fate of the game virtually rested in my hands and on which side I'd place my allegiance. With a vast slew of resources all across modern-day Turkey and both Adrian and Samara, I realized that I could decide the entire outcome of the game and began negotiations. I reflected on the moments leading up to this pivotal choice. Adrian's diplomatic finesse and his ability to unite provinces under a banner of cooperation starkly contrasted with Samara's ruthless conquests. Not only was my decision a tactical one, but also a profound moral decision that would soon echo the age-old struggle between good and evil.

With both Adrian and Samara vying for my allegiance, it was ultimately Adrian's commitment to noble principles that swayed my decision, even in the face of Samara's looming presence. His leadership demonstrated that true strength lies in unity and fairness. I knew that by siding with him, I was choosing a path that upheld the values of integrity and respect for humanity. Samara's rebellion, while a strategic exercise of free will, exemplified the moral perils that come with it. I could not, in good conscience, support a path paved with ruthless ambition and unethical practices. As I declared my allegiance to Adrian, a wave of relief washed over me. The united front of Italia and the Asia Minor now stood as a formidable force against Samara's relentless advance. Our alliance grew stronger, fortified by shared resources, troops, and strategic wisdom. Samara's forces, though formidable, began to crumble under the combined might of our alliance. The very ruthlessness that had once propelled her to power now became her undoing. Her allies, disillusioned by her betrayal of Amelia and the brutal tactics she employed, started to defect, leaving her increasingly isolated. Weakened and practically alone, Samara nobly recognized the error of her ways and submitted.

In *Paradise Lost*, Satan's rebellion and humanity's subsequent fall are examples of the free will theodicy in action. Satan is the force that allows Adam and Eve to have the choice to disobey, creating human free will in the process. The ability to choose wrong over right emphasizes the seriousness of moral responsibility that comes with free will. Yet the existence of evil is a necessary condition for a world where humans can grow morally and spiritually. Evil enters the world as a result of Adam and Eve's choice to disobey God. Then, through their suffering, humanity gains wisdom, humility, and the ability for redemption. Milton writes, "This having learnt, thou hast attained the sum / Of wisdom" (Milton XII.574-576). Evil and suffering are both consequences of free will but also serve as opportunities for growth, redemption, and a deeper connection with God. Milton suggests that while suffering results from disobedience, it is a

key part of spiritual refinement and learning. Adam and Eve, through their adversity, come to understand the gravity of their actions, their relationship with God, and the potential for redemption. Throughout the epic, Milton suggests that the capacity for free moral choice, despite its potential to lead to sin, is what makes love, obedience, and faith genuinely meaningful. God allows the existence of evil because it is a consequence of granting free will, which allows for true love and obedience to exist. Therefore, evil and suffering are ultimately woven into God's plan for the greater good and the restoration of humanity.

Ultimately, Adrian's alliance emerged victorious, securing the stability and unity of the Roman Empire in the game. The classroom buzzed with the excitement of shifting alliances and the dramatic turns of events. My decision to side with Adrian not only ensured the survival of my province but emphasized the profound impact of ethical leadership.

The game ended, but the lessons learned resonated deeply. It was a powerful reminder that in the complex dance between free will and the existence of evil, our choices define us. By embracing the principles of integrity and cooperation, we can create a world where goodness prevails over the temptations of ruthless ambition.

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Olivia Lu

Grade 11, John Burroughs School

Educator: Shannon Koropchak

Short Story



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## Cogito, Ergo Non Sum (I Think, Therefore I Am Not)

The flickering light of the candle illuminates her face from below, waving over her stark features and enveloping her in a sickly glow. Dim streaks of sunlight filter through a single grimy window to illuminate the miscellaneous papers strewn about, obscuring the mildewed floors. Crowded above her head on a molding corkboard, to which her eyes often flick up in pride, are curated photographs of lilies, daisies, green landscapes, and packets of seeds arranged according to shape, size, and, obviously, the precise number of ridges each seed contains.

Her hands shakily intertwine thin wire and deep green tape around each other, following the shape upwards until tapering off at the end into carefully crafted petals of the thinnest mesh available. Her lips curl into a small smirk as the flowers take shape, fingers greedily itching for the next imperfection to correct. Contently humming, she appreciates her foresight, picking out colors perfectly matching the annual blossoms that spring up in her yard, now smothered by snow. Each tweak of a stem's angle one more degree brings her that much closer to solidifying their virgin, untainted, permanent existence. And no one will dispute her. *They look like the real thing!* The words of the crafts vendor she purchased the supplies from—the one with the asymmetrical hat and the checkered scarf, and a nose which reminded her of her uncle—echo in her mind. God, she knew she should've waved to him with her right and not her left! Now he will think that she's left-handed, which is completely misconstrued, and misleading, and so very wrong. And she can never go back. Meanwhile, *he* was such a perfect character: *he* made sure to blink a minimum of 14 times each

minute, ranging from 14 to a whopping 25 when a fly attempted to land on his cheek. She cringes at the reminder of the interaction, the flimsy material of the flowers before her bending easily and submitting to her perfectly average hands. Yes, perfectly average, even the way each bluish vein thrums beneath her pale skin. Yet she ruined their average-ness with her bumbling mistakes, because she just can't seem to keep her left and right straight!

She groans, reminding herself there are much more important things to keep track of. Namely, Amanda Lee Baker is not a baker, and yes, she's tired of that joke. In fact, Amanda Lee Baker is so not baker-ish that she's burned 27.5 loaves of bread, 10 apple pies, and 1 octopus-shaped cake. Completely authentic, completely organic! Just left the room and came back to blackened crusts.

By the 10th cut from the splintered wire, she winces, cursing at nothing in particular. Mumbling incoherently as she presses a tissue against her bleeding finger, her spine flattens against her warped wooden chair. Shoulders rolling as her neck cracks from strain, she allows herself to scrutinize her work from afar. Her eyelids twitch, irises glancing left, then up, then down, before circling around. Too flat. Too round. Too colorful. Wire protrudes at awfully arbitrary points, the stems grotesquely lumpy and so far from the usual velvet green. As her breath begins to shallow, her vision catches a glimpse of a garish red. Moving closer to examine, her eyes widen at a single drop of oxidized blood, drying on a petal. Then, before her eyes propagate another, and another. Growing from the piece, spilling out into her vision, splotches of crimson taint *her* perfect blossoms. Each limp grouping of tape and wire, dyed in scarlet, begins to evoke not the warmth of spring, but a burning bile from the back of her throat.

A strangled sound emerges from her as their mangled hands of wire reach towards her, begging to end their suffering. Demonic little things! Her eyes frantically scan the room, constricted pupils landing on a small wicker pot in the corner holding her favorite tulip; her epitome of spring. The vendor's words echo in her mind; yes, that'll make them *the real thing*. Quickly moving to snatch the pot, the edges of the stiff wicker squeak in protest at her violence as she dumps out the contents, her favorite tulip forgotten in front of the oppressive sight before her. Amanda Lee Baker scrambles back to her desk, desperately shoving each of her monstrosities into the pot, arranging it this way and that. But when she releases the pot, it immediately topples over, flowers reaching towards nothing with their gaunt, spindly fingertips. A strained sound leaves her lips, hands darting to prop up the pot. But no matter how many times, how many configurations she might have found, it would inevitably tip over, spilling the



contents bare for the world to see, to laugh at. The lurid colors of the failures spot her vision.

Her hands snatch the entire pot, the contents inside shifting to yet another configuration that makes her legs go numb. Without another thought, she shoves open her molding window, hurling her disgrace out. The petals, laying limply on the layers of snow blanketing the ground, stain the white with its tainted colors. Their distance allows herself to finally take a breath.

But just as she begins to move away from the window, below a man she had never seen—a new person, a set of eyes—appears, bending over curiously at the mockeries: scrutinizing, judging, hating. Dizziness plagues her body, and yet it takes only a few seconds for her to undo her six chains, two magnetic locks, and one padlock, and stand, heaving, in front of him. Her voice tumbles out, cracking twice, and a half more if you count the squeak at the end.

“P-please... I’d like those back.” She gestures sloppily to the pile of failures, and realizes that there were much more important things for him to notice. He’ll laugh at her chapped lips, point out her oily hair deprived of soap and water. Trying to further explain herself, she rambles:

“They’re... hah... um, all lopsided, and this one has six but, you see, this one has seven and... the petals, they don’t line up and they’re so awfully...” He tilts his head at her, and she braces her body. He chuckles softly. Her eyes flick up to meet his dimpled smile incredulously.

“Six or seven, what would it matter?” He shakes his head. “I think they’re lovely. Very... human.” He pauses. She holds her breath.

“I’d like to keep just one. If you don’t mind, of course. My daughter happens to love these kinds of things.” Amanda Lee Baker; who’s not a baker, who’s not an anything, truly, and who now has nothing to say. He gently places the remaining flowers back in her shaking hands until only one remains in his grasp: a spindly, scrawny flower with only four pearly white petals. He peers at her once again.

“Is that...okay?” Not processing his request fully, Amanda can only nod, fingers twitching around the remaining bouquet.

He doesn’t even give her time to analyze his blinks, or how many stitches his tan coat has loose, before he gives her a small nod and walks away, the single flower in hand. She only stands there until her fingertips begin to go numb from the cold. Inadvertently, her lips curl into a soft smile; no harsh corners, no twitching lips. Her mind drifts to the uncle-looking vendor: his unsuspecting eyes and his awfully asymmetrical hat, his checkered scarf, and how he

complimented the deep green tape she had chosen for how it matched her eyes. She nods silently; she should pay him a visit again.

# Macy Lubak

Grade 12, Mary Institute & Saint Louis  
Country Day School  
*Dramatic Script*



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## Not From Around Here

SCENE 1

INT. SCHOOL-MORNING

LOW SATURATION

POV SHOT

Camera moves over the open book. The ambiance is very serene.

MEDIUM SHOT

JAMES exhales sharply and checks his watch. James gathers his stuff back in his backpack. He stretches softly and heads down the hallway to his class.

FULL SHOT

James walks down the hallway.

GROUND SHOT

James's feet are seen as he walks across the frame.

INT. SCHOOL-CLASSROOM

MEDIUM SHOT

The door to the classroom opens as James walks in. He shifts his gaze back and forth.

POV SHOT

The camera pans across the room. There are two groups of students. They are cliqued together.

MEDIUM SHOT

James sighs as he sees the two groups. He goes to his seat which is in between the two groups. He sits all alone.

The two groups sit around him talking, he is left out.

WIDE SHOT

ANTONIETTE "TONI" walks into the classroom. She gives James a wave. Toni sits in the seat next to him.

2/3 SHOT

**Toni**

So I watched that weird film you recommended.

**James**

(laughs)

Did you like it?

**Toni**

It was interesting. Where did you find it?

**James**

(shrugs)

Found it on an old movies channel.

WIDE SHOT

The door opens slowly and a new student walks in. She is perfectly poised and has very robotic, stiff movements.

OVER THE SHOULDER SHOT

**Toni**

Who's that?

**James**

I don't know, I haven't seen him before.

POV SHOT

Toni looks annoyed, hints of jealousy are on her face.

Toni huffs. She rolls her eyes and turns away.

WIDE SHOT

The new girl walks slowly and sits on the other side of James.

The new girl turns her head slowly towards James. She gives a closed smile. She blinks.

CLOSE UP

James looks uncomfortable.

2/3 SHOT

The girl blinks again.

**Astrid**

What is your name?

ASTRID turns back to face the front.

MEDIUM SHOT

James looks confused. He swallows.

**James**

Uh, my name is James.

Astrid nods, still facing forward.

James clears his throat. Astrid slowly turns back to face him.

**Astrid**

Yes?

**James**

What's your name?

**Astrid**

Astrid.

Astrid turns back towards the front. She says nothing else. Astrid takes out her pens and lines them up perfectly in front of her.

Screen fades to black.

INT. SCHOOL-CLASSROOM

The bell rings and students get up to leave for their next class.

Astrid stays put in her seat, not moving while everyone else packs up.

Astrid leans forward and taps a student on their shoulder. Astrid whispers something to the student. The student freezes.

SCENE 2

INT. SCHOOL-CLASSROOM

MEDIUM SHOT

Toni and James are sitting in the classroom. The classroom is quiet and then the door opens. In walks Astrid and the student.

The student follows directly behind Astrid, they move in sync. The student is just as poised as Astrid is.

Astrid sits down and the student sits down too. James is weirded out by them sitting perfectly straight.

POV SHOT

James looks concerned and turns to Toni.

**James**

What's up with him?

Toni shrugs and gets back to writing something in her notebook.

CLOSE SHOT

**Toni**

I don't know.

The bell rings.

WIDE SHOT

Students leave the classroom. Toni and James are seen leaving.  
Astrid and the student get up and head to another student in the classroom.  
Astrid tilts her head and smiles as she taps the student's shoulder. The student looks up slightly spooked.  
Astrid holds a rag to their face.

CLOSE UP

The student closes their eyes as they are knocked out.

SCENE 3

INT. SCHOOL-HALLWAY

Toni and James are walking through the hallway talking.

2/3 SHOT

**Toni**

We have to finish our presentation for Spanish. Do you want to meet before school tomorrow?

**James**

Sure.

MEDIUM SHOT

Astrid and the other students are gathered in the hallway. James and Toni walk pass them. Toni is typing something on her phone.  
Astrid stops talking and looks at them. Her face tracks them as they move.

CLOSE UP

James looks freaked out.

**James**

Okay you have to admit that's weird.

MEDIUM SHOT

Toni looks up from her phone. Astrid and the other students are back to talking. They look normal. Toni furrows her eyebrows.

**Toni**

What do you mean?

CLOSE UP

James shrugs.

SHOULDER SHOT

Astrid tilts her head and smirks. None of the students around her are talking.

SCENE 4

INT. SCHOOL

MEDIUM SHOT

Toni is standing with Astrid talking.

Astrid leans in and whispers in her ear. Toni stops talking and freezes. She shakes and her head shoots up.

Astrid smiles and leads Toni away.

SCENE 5

INT. SCHOOL-MORNING

WIDE SHOT

James walks down the hallway and sees Toni talking to Astrid.

Toni is facing away from James. Astrid waves to James with a blank expression.

CLOSE UP

James looks freaked out.

MEDIUM SHOT

Toni turns around to look at James. Toni has a blank expression on her face. She does not say anything.

James walks towards her.

2/3 SHOT

**James**

Umm hey, so we were supposed to meet for our project.

Toni does not say anything.

**Toni**

Our what?

**James**

Our spanish project. Toni, are you feeling okay?

**Toni**

(blinks)

I feel great.

POV SHOT

Toni smiles creepily. She blinks.

MEDIUM SHOT

A whole group of students walk and surround Astrid and Toni. Astrid smiles creepily as well.

James backs away, creeped out by Toni's behavior.

SCENE 6

INT. SCHOOL-CLASSROOM

MEDIUM SHOT

James hurries into the classroom. He looks behind him, looking for Astrid and Toni.

He turns around and jolts.

POV SHOT

Astrid and Toni along with all the other students are already sitting in their seats.  
James looks down to see a piece of paper on his desk.

POV SHOT

The paper reads "You're next."

MEDIUM SHOT

James runs out of the classroom.  
He opens the door to reveal Astrid standing in the doorway.  
He turns back around but he is blocked by Toni.

WIDE SHOT

Toni reaches out a hand to James.

**Toni**

Join us.

James stumbles back terrified.

Toni shakes violently. She looks terrified.

**Toni**

(terrified)

James! You have to get out of here! They're taking over!

CLOSE UP

Astrid snaps her fingers and Toni's expression falls blank. Toni freezes and stands back up straight.

MEDIUM SHOT

Astrid cackles. Astrid jabs a syringe into James.

James starts to stumble.

Screen fades to black as you hear Astrid.

**Astrid**

We've always been here.



Macy Lubak

Grade 12, Mary Institute & Saint Louis  
Country Day School  
*Poetry*



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## Rage is Ink, and Rage is Blood

Hide my teeth  
Speak in whispers, calm and meek  
Under too much pressure for me to take  
My masks starts to bleed and break  
My anger's hot, can't be contained  
Burns hotter than any other flame  
Nothing can hold, no chains can bind  
The fire burning in my mind

Woven through every strand  
A quiet rage at my command  
Threaded through skin and blood and bone  
It's a woman's rage, not just my own  
Rage wears no crown, but reigns within  
A monstrous ruler inside our skins  
Rage is the echo of silence screamed  
The voice of anger stifled, demeaned

My pen's a sword, my tongue's a knife  
To commemorate a woman's life  
I'll make the world tremble, I'll make it bend  
With ink that thickens as the hour ends  
I bleed on pages inside my books  
Hidden between margins where no one looks

Anger courses through my veins  
I am the storm, I am the hurricane  
It stains the pages and floods the mud  
Rage is ink, and rage is blood

Macy Lubak

Grade 12, Mary Institute & Saint Louis  
Country Day School  
*Poetry*



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## Tightrope Walker

Breath, breathe, breathe  
In and out  
Move your foot  
Take another step  
One foot in front of the other  
I watch the crowd below  
As I walk on top the wire

My feet decorated  
In tiny, suede slippers  
A lycra leotard clinging to my body  
Rhinestones decorate my costume  
Some reflecting in my eyes  
I see the glow of their faces  
The audience peering their head up at me

I take another step  
The wire running along the arch of my foot  
My arms stretched out  
I lift my other foot  
Preparing for another step  
The wire swaying below me  
A dip where my foot remains

Another shaky breath

Then forward  
My fingers clench  
Turning into claws  
My red nail polish  
Scratching the palms of my hands  
Leaving white indentions

Take a deep breath  
You've done this before  
It's just a tightrope  
Your job  
You'll be fine  
You can handle this  
Get a hold of yourself

Anxiety swarms inside me  
Not like butterflies  
More like wasp  
Stinging my insides  
The poison causing my fears to swell  
I shake my head  
And take another step

Sweat pooling on my neck  
A thin layer illuminating my cupid's bow  
I swallow hard  
Like there's something in my throat  
The wire continues to sway  
Like a clothesline when it's windy  
And I take another step

My feet begin to feel numb  
And my teeth bite my bottom lip  
I taste metal  
Blood covering my tongue  
I swallow it down  
I can not fail

Not now

I'm approaching the edge  
Only a few more steps  
Maybe five at most  
I take another breath  
And off I go  
One step, two steps  
Three steps

Only two steps left  
Then I'm safe and sound  
I lift my foot once more  
Ready to take another step  
But the wire shakes below me  
And a screeching sound is heard  
The iron cable snaps

I go crashing down  
My hands reaching for the stand  
My eyes looking wild and feral  
Adrenaline kicking in  
My nails scratch along the post  
But I can not be saved  
Down, I go

Down, down, down  
Breathe, breathe, breathe

Down, down, down  
Breathe, breathe, *breathe*

# Lucy Luttrell

Grade 10, Olathe North High School

Educator: Deirdre Zongker

*Flash Fiction*



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## The Scholarship

“Claire, you could have done better”

“I tried mom, I’m sor-“

My dad interrupts “You lost your scholarship! Stanford was your dream. And you lost it” He pauses “You have no idea how disappointed I am in you”

I feel tears down my face “I’m sorry” I say again.

“I don’t want to hear it. We are leaving for your brother’s football game.” That’s all he says and then they leave.

I go outside after they leave and sit at the end of the driveway. I don’t know what I’m going to do now. I lost my cross-country scholarship all because I was nervous. I failed. That was my last chance because it’s summer now, and I failed. I can’t believe it. I start to cry again.

“Are you okay?” I hear someone say. I look over to find Josh, the basic, blonde-haired, blue-eyed boy I’ve known since the 1st grade. We have been neighbors as long as I remember, but I haven’t talked to him since the 5th grade. It’s been 6 years, and I could barely recognize him.

“Uh yeah” I respond as I wipe the tears off my face.

He sat down next to me. “You don’t look okay. What’s up?” he asked.

“NIt’sing. Its stupid” I pause “I cross-country country scholarship,” I’m Say.

“I’m sorry. Is that what you have been doing all these years? I felt like I haven’t seen you in like forever”

“Uh yeah my parents like to keep me busy,” I say, pushing my brunette hair behind my ear.

“We used to hang out all the time, we had so much fun,” He says.

“Yeah I remember,” I say.

“Remember when we put that snake in your brother’s room one time?” He laughs.

“Oh my gosh, I remember! That was so funny, and remember when we would play baseball, and I broke your window”

“Oh yeah my mom grounded me for a month”

“Typical Jessica”

“We should hang out sometime” He suggests.

“Yeah we sho-“ I get interrupted by a call, “Hold on, sorry, it’s my aunt”

I pick up the phone, “Hey Aunt Beth”

“Honey, there been an accident come to the hospital immediately,” She says.

I hang up.

“Josh I-”

“I heard, Let’s go,” He says as he starts to get in his car.

When we get there, I run in. There are so many things going through my mind right now. All I know is they can’t die. They are all I have. All I need. They can’t die. They won’t.

I finally saw my aunt. “They’re ok aren’t they?” I ask running up to her.

She comes over and hugs me “They got into a car crash, I’m so sorry”

I’m in shock. I can’t believe this. I can’t believe they are gone.

The drive home was dead silent.

“I’m so sorry Claire” Josh says when we step out of the car.

“I just can’t believe they are all gone” I look up at him with tears rolling down my face.

I say goodbye to Josh and walk up to my front porch. Surprisingly when I walk into the house, my aunts are already here.

“Hi,” I say blandly.

“How are you holding up?”

How am I holding up? Seriously? Is what I want to say, but I don’t.

“Fine” I respond.

I go straight to my room. I guess she’s living with me now.

I hate the way I ended things with my parents. They were so disappointed and I don’t think I will ever forget that.

It’s been months since the accident and I’ve been doing better. My aunt and I, who live together, have been working out. Although we have gotten into a routine to where I barely see her. Things have changed a lot. I’m almost done with my senior year and I’ve been getting great grades. I think it’s because I quit

cross country. I hated that I had to do it but me Aunt says its for the best. If only I had gotten that scholarship. I have thought about what happened that day all the time but now I have accepted it.

I hear the doorbell ring and I rush downstairs.

“Hi!” I yell as I open the door to see Josh. We are celebrating our 6 months today. I sometimes think about how life would be if that day never happened. All i know is that I would have never met josh if It never happened.

“You ready?” He asks.

“Duhhh” I laugh.

“Where are you taking me?”

“You’ll have to wait”

“Dang, you know how I hate surprises”

“I know” He grins.

We are in the car for a while until I suddenly get a call. This number looks familiar but it doesn’t say a name. I decide to hit accept.

“Hello, Is this Clair Robinson?” It’s a female voice but I’m still not sure who it is.

“Yes, Who is this?” I ask.

“ I’m Stacy, I’m the coach for Cross Country at Stanford University, I would like to inform you that there is now an available spot open for a full-ride scholarship. Do you accept it?”



# Madeline Male

Grade 10, Home School

*Poetry*



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## Snowman

It always snowed  
enough to build a snowman.

So in anticipation  
for next winter,  
we found a top hat  
with a plaid ribbon,  
holly and tiny bells.

Waiting, we kept  
the snowman's hat in the coat closet . . .  
But even now,  
it's still there.

# Kate Markovich

Grade 11, John Burroughs School

Educator: Shannon Koropchak

*Personal Essay & Memoir*



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## To Live or Survive

Beginning our adventure with a 22-hour flight to Southeast Asia sounded like the perfect start to the “experience of a lifetime,” as many people informed me four years ago. An expat experience would “broaden my perspective” and give me “the perfect opportunity.” My well-meaning family and friends never stopped to ask how I felt about being told I was moving to Singapore. These individuals did not understand the emotions I felt leaving my friends, my family, my sports, my home, and everything familiar for this “experience of a lifetime,” which at the time was a tiny foreign country fighting off a global pandemic that the USA had already moved past. Most significantly, these individuals never imagined that the two weeks locked in a hotel room for quarantine would have one of the most significant impacts on my life.

After landing in Singapore, my family and I were sent into quarantine almost immediately after stepping off the plane due to mandatory government regulations. We went through lines, COVID tests, customs, immigration, more COVID tests, and a three-hour long bus ride until we ended up at our quarantine location, jet-lagged out of our minds. We were ushered to our room on the 21st floor, brought our luggage inside, and handed more COVID tests. Singapore required all visitors to undergo a 14-day quarantine for COVID-19, one of the most rigorous quarantine measures in the world. One false positive COVID test would have separated me from my family, requiring me to go to the Singapore hospital for monitoring. Once inside our room, the Ministry of Health officials dressed in hazmat suits shut the door, locking us away from the outside world. The reality of our situation sunk in as I looked around the sparse hotel room that would be home for the next 14 days, which included four beds, a tiny balcony, a table, and a microwave. We searched through our 18 suitcases for pajamas and toothbrushes

before going to bed in the small, cramped room. As I lay down on the scratchy bed material, ignoring my brother's snoring, I felt as trapped as a bird without wings.

Moving across the globe and being welcomed with open arms is simple. Moving across the world and being greeted by people in hazmat suits, with airports turned into ghost towns, is infinitely more complex. During this cross-pacific journey ten thousand miles away from home, I lost the ability to see the beauty of the new country, seeing only the restrictions, the heartbreaking stories of separated families, and the complete lack of certainty in my world.

From the balcony of our room, we had a gorgeous view of Marina Bay Sands, a world-renowned tourist destination. Back home in the suburbs of Missouri, my family heard about the view and the statue of a mermaid lion spitting water into the bay. They didn't hear about the masks we had to wear on the balcony or the fear of cameras watching and waiting to deport us for an error. Even the simple task of grabbing breakfast required significant effort. We had to first look through the peephole to ensure the quarantine agents were not around before slipping on a face mask, unlocking the hotel door, grabbing the bag full of breakfast food, and then quickly shutting and locking the door. On calls with family, I was asked if I was excited about the food in Asia. I remember looking down at the plastic tray of "breakfast" containing blue rice, papaya, honeydew melon, and the spiciest chicken I had ever tasted, served with wooden utensils. I desperately missed having a pantry full of snacks, eating cafeteria lunch with my friends, and the freedom to go outside these walls.

The experience went further downhill as the fear of what awaited me outside the hotel room began to take over. While everyone assumed I was relaxing, eating junk food, and watching Netflix for hours, I was terrified of starting over. I would have to face a new school, new people, a new country, and a rigorous government terrified of COVID-19. I did online school on a bench with a side table that I converted into a desk while avoiding clothes, food, and my brother's school supplies littering the table. On Zoom, I was introduced to my classmates, who all seemed to know each other and were staring at the new girl on camera. I felt utterly and irreversibly alone. My friends in the US removed me from group chats, and my family in the United States did not know what I was experiencing other than it was supposedly "an experience of a lifetime." Utterly alone.

On day ten of our fourteen-day quarantine, most of my clothes were going past the point of being dirty and becoming disgusting. I summoned the energy to wash them in the hotel's bathtub, which felt as ridiculous as it sounds. The water rushed from the spout as I poured hotel shampoo on the clothes before dunking and submerging them in the cold water, splashing the tile, and drenching myself. I stirred the clothes in the tub, watching bubbles and dirt flow from the shirts, socks, shorts, and headbands. I realized that wearing the clothes would have been unbearable, and the fabric needed to let go of the dirt to become clean. I realized that if I worried about the shampoo bleaching my clothes or the reds and blacks blending into the whites, I would have never bothered to make them clean and would have been miserable without clothes to wear. Watching the clothes circle in the bathtub, I saw the reflection of myself in the dirty water. I saw a terrified little girl trying to pretend that I would be able to escape. I saw three years of what my life would be if I held on to my misery as my clothes held onto the dirt. I had a decision to make.

Since stepping off the plane, I have been trying to survive. When I washed my cold, dirty clothes in a hotel bathtub, I decided that if I was to spend the next three years of my life in this country, I desperately needed to determine if I wanted to live or just simply survive. One option would have left me like my dirty clothes, unbearable to be around, holding a silent grudge against the world. At this moment, I realized I needed to embrace the alternative option by choosing to live. I decided to get off the sidelines, embrace the unknown, and commit to adopting this as an "experience of a lifetime." For the remaining time, I spent less time alone on the balcony, played games with my brother, ordered ice cream with my mom, and did puzzles with my family. Beyond seeing me smile and laugh, my mom noticed a shift when I allowed her to photograph our quarantine journey. Looking back at these pictures, I see a girl who chose to shed her anger and sadness.

On day fourteen, we exited the tiny quarantine room, looking around at the once-forbidden hallways we had now walked through, noticing details we had missed when we entered the hotel. I observed in a mirror that my posture was straighter, stronger, taller, and my eyes looked intrigued, not terrified. I had survived the most brutal experience in my life, a challenge most people would never understand even if they watched my memories. Surviving feels like torture, but living is wild, demanding, and vibrant. This experience of a lifetime taught me that I am responsible for embracing what lies ahead, and I can pick myself up

even when it's easier to stay put. While others may not have understood my experience, I walked away with self-taught lessons from surviving and living. Fourteen days, two weeks, and one choice. Survive or live?





# Jason Mathew

Grade 9, Parkway Central High School

Educator: Jason Lovera

*Personal Essay & Memoir*



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## My Journey of Faith

“Jason, if you have faith like a mustard seed, you can move mountains. You have to always remember that no matter how challenging life becomes, rely on God always for He will answer you in your time of distress.” This is my first memory of my mom, her voice soft and encouraging as we lay side by side. I was only three years old when this happened, but those words stuck with me throughout my life. I believed that these words would save me and my loved ones, but they didn’t.

My life was about to change, it started in 2020; my mom was diagnosed with cancer. At first, I believed with unshakable faith that God would protect her even though she had such a deadly disease. I was right. In two months, my mom was completely healed of the disease. I believed that God’s hand was with her, which is why she was healed of the disease so quickly and that this part of our lives was over.

After her recovery, my mom and I created unforgettable memories. We traveled a lot, played at the park, and spent long hours talking about life. She wasn’t just my mom; she was my anchor, the person who made even the hardest moments of my life bearable. She was everything to me.

In the beginning of high school, people would spread lies to my friends about me. Even though I didn’t do anything about it, my mom didn’t hesitate to stand up for me. She wrote to my teachers and made sure they understood my situation. Because of her, the bullying stopped. My love for my mom was as vast as the oceans and I would have done anything - even given up my life - for her.

It was 2024. The year started out well, as my mom would help me with schoolwork and STEM related subjects. If she wasn’t able to teach me the subject,



she would spend hours in a day looking for either videos, papers, or even tutors that would have helped make me be the most successful and excel in what I did.

After school, we'd sit together, and she would ask me about my day at school to always make sure that I wasn't feeling overwhelmed. Her love and advice were something which always guided me through challenges. She didn't just help me succeed in school, she also taught me to be a good person, treat everyone with respect, and above all to love God with all my heart.

This all changed in 2024, everything began to change. What once felt like happy memories soon turned into a blur of hospital visits, fear, and pain. My mom, who had always been there for me and cheering me on, started to struggle in ways I couldn't bear to watch. It was a recurrence.

I vividly remember the times she would go to the hospital. I believed that the same God who healed her the first time would heal her again. Her sickness progressively got worse and worse. She started with consistent high blood pressure, then it moved into vomiting often. I would often leave my desk to go sit with her while she vomited. I can still picture how she would start shaking her hand trying to alleviate pain. I watched as the person I loved was suffering and there was nothing I could do about it. I would try to rub my hand on her back thinking that it would help her, but she still was vomiting. She would be vomiting continuously on and off for an hour. I would pray to God to heal her so that she would stop vomiting, but it didn't work. Usually what would happen is that she would go to the ER and get admitted and she would either stay overnight or, more commonly, she would receive medicines that would help her to stop vomiting. Though I watched her suffer, I still had great faith that this was just a rough patch, and that God would reveal his healing grace soon.

It was in October when my life would change in unimaginable ways. My mom had just come back from Houston as she went to MD Anderson Cancer Center to explore experimental treatment options to battle cancer. When she returned home, she texted me that she had arrived safely at home. I was so filled with joy that when my sister came to pick me up after my swim practice, I jumped into the car to get home quickly. We were both very excited to see our mom after several days. To my surprise, she was on oxygen and needed a few liters of oxygen. I was stunned. I couldn't believe that she was on oxygen.

I asked her, "mama why are you on oxygen?" and she replied "Well, it will help me to breathe better. But do not worry about me, you should focus on the chemistry test you have tomorrow. If you need any help, I will be in bed, and you can always come."

“Ok I will come soon,” I replied with a deep sigh.

In my heart I felt something was wrong. I thought to myself, *she has never needed oxygen before. Why now? What has changed? Is she hiding something?*”

After two hours, I went to her, but something had changed. Something felt different about her. She seemed much more lifeless and her reliance on the oxygen tank grew. I sat by her in her bed without waking her up. After some time, I gently tapped her and that’s when everything went downhill. She started yelling in pain, but there were no words coming out, only sounds. I dashed for the Pulse Oximeter to make sure her vitals were ok. When I put it on her, I noticed that her oxygen level was dropping significantly. I screamed when I saw it and called for my sisters, Hannah and Shyna, and my aunt who were busy downstairs. “Hannah, mama’s oxygen is dropping. Hannah, Hannah! Come, come. Hannah, please. It is dropping from 86 now to 84 now to 82 now to 75.”

I started screaming as loud as I could, and my aunt and two sisters rushed in.

“Jason. what happened?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know. What should we do?”

“Call Dada, he should know”

When we called him and told him what was going on, he sped home. It was all about a three- minute blur. When he arrived, he started asking my mom questions.

“What is your name? Where are you?”

But there was no response, only a blank stare at his face.

I screamed while crying, “Mama, Mama, answer. Don’t die. I can’t live without you. I can’t live without you. Mama please! Mama please!”

As I screamed, I could hear my sisters screaming just like me, but nothing was happening. I could see her eyes more lifeless than they had ever been before. I thought she was about to die, and I didn’t know what to do. I felt so helpless. Then I cried but this time to God.

“Oh God, oh God, save my mom. You promised in the Bible that with You all things are possible. Where are you now? Oh God!”

As I was screaming this, my dad called 911 and they sent the ambulance. I was still screaming to my mom and hoping she wouldn’t die. But I was helpless.

The time it took for the ambulance to come and my dad, sisters, and aunt trying to get my mom awake is a blur in my memory. The only thing I remember is how much I prayed to God at that time to save her.

By the time the ambulance came, my mom became just a little better and the paramedics decided to take her to the emergency room. After she had left the house, I sat with my aunt and sisters in the living room, all of us in shock.

After about an hour, my dad called. I answered the phone with trembling hands, fearing the worst had happened.

“Hello?” I answered as my stomach churned and my hands trembled while barely managing to hold the phone.

“Jason, mama is ok. The doctors just gave her some medicine but will want to keep her to monitor to make sure that this will not happen again.”

The relief I felt when I heard those words are indescribable. Even though there was great joy that she was okay, in my heart I had this strange uneasiness that I didn’t feel before. The rest of the night went by peacefully except for remembering that I did well on a chemistry test that I wanted to tell my mom but had forgotten. I thought to myself, *it's ok I will tell mama tomorrow*. But tomorrow never came.

The next day was the worst day. My dad called my aunt and said that my mom isn’t able to breathe out the carbon dioxide and her levels are up to 120. They tried different methods but all of them weren’t working and the only way she would have a shot at living is if she went on a ventilator, and even then, it was a low chance of living. As my aunt heard this, my family had come from different parts of the US and got ready to go to the hospital.

The fear I felt was extraordinary, I felt God had forsaken me. I thought, ‘*why oh Lord have you forsaken me? Why? Why?*’

As I reached the hospital I went to the ICU. At first, I was afraid to see my mom, unable to bear watching her suffer, but in the end, I went to see her. When I entered her room, she was sedated, and I could hear the monitor for her vitals beeping and I could see all the tubes that were attached to her. She had completely changed. Her once vibrant face grew pale, and the spark in her eyes flickered as if it was slowly being extinguished. With every passing hour, I felt like I was losing her, but also, I was losing a part of myself.

After I came home, I took my mom’s clothes and went to her closet and prayed to God. I prayed harder than ever, kneeling down, clinging to her clothes. I did this every day after school.

School was the hardest for me as I would see other kids so happy and having fun. For them life was normal, but for me I was so close to losing my mom. My fists would clench so tightly that I could feel my fingernails in my palm, and my jaws hurt from being so tightly shut together as I thought ‘God,

*why would you curse me by hurting my mom while these kids are all perfectly fine and happy and they aren't even the best people.'* Anger was consuming me, but I always prayed for my mom. I prayed every night for three weeks while she was on the ventilator, hoping that she would live.

"Mama's condition has worsened, and I don't think that she will survive the night, so I think it's best you go say your last goodbye," were the words my dad spoke to me that crushed me. Even though I didn't want to see my mom on the verge of death, I went to the hospital not to say goodbye to her, but to pray one last time for her to see if God would listen to me. I prayed for her and told her, even though she most likely couldn't hear, "I love you so much Mama and I will never give up on you nor will I ever say goodbye to you, for you will always be a part of me."

That night, I felt something in my heart that caused pain and at that moment I knew she was gone even though no one told me. I went to bed crying because I knew I just lost her, and that God didn't save her.

The next day I didn't go to school. My dad called my entire family down to the living room and had all of us sitting there when he said to us, "Mama has passed away."

Those words I will never forget, and those words will haunt me forever.

The moment I heard those four words, I could hear my two sisters crying while my aunts tried to console them, while all I did was stare. I don't exactly know why I didn't cry at that moment, maybe it is because I have cried so much or maybe it is because I didn't know what to do. The only words that I could hear after was my mom's voice inside of me saying "I'm sorry Jason. I'm sorry Jason." and then I tried to console her voice by saying "it's ok Mama, it's ok."

The funeral was shortly after, and it was fully Christian based and how my mom was "Called Home to Glory". As the funeral service ended, many people, many of whom I did not know, approached me and said "I'm sorry" but honestly at that time all I wanted to tell them was "*it's not your mom who died, say you are sorry all you want but soon you would forget she died so might as well keep quiet.*" I know what I thought was cruel, but at that moment I didn't care.

After we got home from the funeral, the only thoughts in my head were grief but a new thought came into my mind- revenge and it was directed at God. I was so mad at God for not saving my mom. *Why could He perform miracles on other people but not on my mom? Why couldn't my mom be a living testimony?* I didn't understand at all why God had done this. It seems useless to want revenge on such a powerful spirit and such a mighty God, but I was so angry that I

couldn't think rationally. The worst time was a week after when I went to school, kids would say "I'm sorry for your loss" but in reality, did they actually care? Or was this another thing they had to do out of formality? It wasn't their mother who died so why should they care? If they did care, wouldn't they ask how I am feeling instead of complaining about their lives. Like why I would care if there is some stupid drama between kids for stupid reasons. These thoughts would always rage in my head, but the worst thought that came into my head is *why would God bless them with a mother, but not me. Why did my mother have to die? Why am I different from the other kids? Why do you punish me specifically?*

*I have always made an effort to be as good as I can be and also be respectful to others but people who bully me are getting everything they want while I am suffering. God why? Where is the justice? Where is God, WHERE? At the end of the day, the facts are that my mom died, and my life seems so stupid while other people are having fun and enjoying life.* These were the thoughts that I thought about every day and always got mad at God.

Without my mom, there was a missing piece of me that would never come back. The puzzle was broken, and there would be no more times I would call 'mama' or any more texts from her, no more moments of asking her to help with homework, or no more mom to cry upon in my distress. It was a puzzle destined to never be fixed.

Time went by, and I was still angry at God. I would get angry when my grandparents or family members would say it's time to pray because to me it felt like prayer couldn't save her. As the weeks went by, I saw a verse of how God loves his children and at first glance I wanted to roll my eyes but as I constantly saw those verses thoughts surged within me. Those thoughts were about my mom and all her sufferings since the beginning of 2024. It was the first time I thought, *Did God take my mom away to heaven so that she would be in a place of no suffering, and she would be free of pain? I know I don't like this choice, but was it the best choice for her? Maybe God's plan for my mom was so that she was to come to His presence and be happy. Maybe God is just and loving, and I know it seems like my life sucks, but God loves me and my family, and I must believe He did this to help my mom because at the point I am at, there is nothing I can do to bring her back. The only thing I can do is to uphold the dreams she had for me to be successful and to always honor her through my actions and deeds so that she will be looking from heaven proudly upon me.*

In the following months, I realized that the bitterness that I held onto was blocking my healing. It stopped me from moving forward and finding peace.

Forgiveness became the key-not just forgiving what had transpired but forgiving myself for letting anger define me. I slowly began to let go, embracing the verse my mom often shared: “If you have faith as a mustard seed, you can move mountains.” I realized that the verse wasn’t about moving mountains, but instead, trusting that, even when the mountains seem insurmountable, there’s a greater plan at work.

# Georgia McCune

Grade 12, St. Teresa's Academy

*Personal Essay & Memoir*



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## College Essay McCune

At what point do the dead ends from heat damage become the irreparable dead end of self acceptance? Each singe and sizzle increased my natural beauty, leaving behind a charred reminder of the damage done to fit a mold that was never meant for me. Plugging in my glistening bright red *CHI Straightening Iron* became an engrained step in my daily routine. Each coil I pulled to sit straight on my head built confidence in my appearance, eventually leading to a reliance on the straightness of my hair. My worth became determined by the way my hair looked each day, only accepted if it was flat to my head with absolutely no bumps or waves. But, at what point would this damage reap a consequence, at what moment would I realize that this damage was not only external, but internal?

The lineage of women on my mother's side of the family are all entangled together by their specific feature of long, curly, brunette hair. Each coil connects each one of us to our Hispanic Puerto Rican roots, where the women proudly embrace their curls and honor their heritage. Although the curls in my hair have always been a compliment to my appearance, when I got to middle school these curls became a point of shame and embarrassment for me. I envied the girls in my class with straight hair: they didn't have to wear headbands to hold in the frizzy baby hairs that curled at the top of their head, or use a comb when brushing their hair because the brush could never get through the knots. They looked like the models and celebrities that society admires with their long, silky straight hair. Thus began my self-made transformation of changing my hair. It became second nature, pure muscle memory for me. I avoided washing my hair as long as possible each week, pushing off the return of my God given curls. Drying then straightening my hair the minute I got out of the shower on the days my mom forced me to wash it, I was a master with the flat iron.

I spent so many years straightening my hair most wouldn't recognize me with my curls. I burned away this part of my identity. Not until recently have I understood that I was not only damaging my hair, but I was damaging the women who raised me. One Fall day my freshman year, my hair was natural as I had showered the night before and was too tired to straighten it. I had planned to throw it in a bun on my way to school, but I forgot a hair tie. This was my nightmare: my hair was curly and I could not hide it. But, to my surprise I entered my first period and one of my classmates excitedly exclaimed, "Georgia, oh my gosh I love your hair! Why do you never wear it that way?" I was shocked, I quickly brushed off her compliment when one of my close friends from grade school came over and said, "You look just like your mom!". In this moment, it clicked inside of me, I did look like my mom and I was doing everything in my power to change that. I began to wonder, *Have all these years of trying to change been hurting me? What has it been saying to my mom, grandmother, and aunts, who gave me the gift of these curls?*

Now my morning routine consists of brushing my teeth, getting dressed, having a coffee and making my lunch. Notice there is no forty-five minute intervention of my curls, in fact you can find my curly-headed self giving my curly-headed mother a hug goodbye.



# Georgia McCune

Grade 12, St. Teresa's Academy

*Poetry*



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## The Change of Addition

The drive never changed  
Roads remained still  
Lights always screaming Red  
The drive felt quite but so loud  
with so much anticipation  
Entering the Room to find 5 pounds of new change to my family.

Ingressing the Road again  
This time the car is bigger  
Yet the roads remained still  
The lights still roaring red  
The Drive was a little louder with more mouths filling the car  
Entering the same room; 6 lbs of new change to my family

The Road yet again, the path so familiar like the back of my hand  
The Roads persist to be motionless  
The lights still beam radiantly red  
The Ride was full of chatter with the familiar eagerness each turn reminded.  
The same room holding the same change, 8 pounds of new change to my family.

The road yet again, but this time is the last  
The car has gotten bigger  
The road remained as still as the first time  
The lights never seemed to flash green  
The drive was a symphony of roaring mouths and electric thrills.

Anticipating the final addition

5 pounds of final change in addition to our family

The family that started and grew through each row of each car.

Strong like an oak tree, each branch growing a new direction with the same roots.

# Macy McDonald

Grade 7, Antioch Middle School

Educator: Kimberly Palmer

*Poetry*



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## Hear My Silence

I heard a voice, a distant call.  
The moment just before our fall,  
I stepped outside to see if I was needed.  
My mom said, “Yes, and it’s for an important reason.”  
I recognized that tone—an unsettling greeting,  
When I looked into the room, I saw a family meeting.  
My brother curled up into a ball,  
My mother and father sitting up tall,  
I saw their body language and sensed their stares,  
I knew immediately from that moment right there.  
I ignored it, calling it an illusion,  
But when the words spilled out, I laughed in confusion.  
I always assumed the worst, so I thought I was wrong,  
But they looked at me strangely, and the laughter didn’t last long.  
I waited for laughter, for giggles, for hugs,  
But none sprouted, not a single one.  
The tears flowed freely, and I realized it was true,  
If feelings were colors, the entire room would be blue.  
As they continued to talk, my vision was blurred,  
I sat in silence, not a single word heard.  
I grew weary of trying to be perfect and rhyming,  
So, I stopped. I stopped the world and my thoughts.  
A tap on my shoulder brought me back to reality.  
My mother was now by my side,  
hoping to see me express some emotion,

But I couldn't, no matter how much I wanted to  
Scream, cry, and beg for their love to carry on longer,  
just enough for me to make it through the year; I couldn't.  
My body allowed me to experience nothing but silence.  
So, I remained silent, acknowledging with nothing but nods and sighs,  
Because my mind always prepares me for the worst-case scenario.  
They don't know how many times a family meeting was called  
And I had anticipated this exact moment. They don't know how many  
Times I'd be anywhere in school and plan an escape route,  
plan where the shooter would come in.  
I planned who would die first and how I could survive, or at least  
just make it long enough to tell my family I loved them.  
I walked to the kitchen to get some water;  
I needed my own space to think independently.  
The only decision that felt appropriate in that moment  
Was to return to my room.  
Days were blurred,  
My parents' fighting was loud and heard.  
One fateful Thursday, my mother called for me,  
Clearly, these moments were the worst to be,  
Because it was only five minutes after while I started helping with the laundry,  
My dad stormed in, his face flushed and angry.  
A storm erupted, booming and intense.  
And once again, amidst it all,  
I embraced silence.  
Footsteps echoed, shouting shook the ground,  
But all I could understand was the thumping pound  
Of my heart as I slowly backed into the hall,  
then ran into my room, expecting to ball.  
I didn't want to be perfect and rhyming, so I stopped.  
My breathing was uneven, and my leg was bouncing restlessly  
As the anxiety I never knew existed engulfed me in its darkness, my mind  
overwhelmed and lost.  
My veins throbbed with heat, blood surging through my body  
And I stared at my hands, which had been folding clothes  
Only 5 minutes ago, now shaking and wanting to rip off  
My skin and throw it away, to tear apart my veins and just run

and hide in my bed and not come out until  
the world was no longer visible.  
But I couldn't, so I sat in silence.  
Hidden in the shadows of my dimly lit room,  
The pain of the tears concealed in fear within the deepest corners  
Of my throat, causing a pocket of air to form. So many sounds  
Were booming through my body, but all I could hear was  
The sound of the front door slamming.

It had been days since I last saw my father.  
My mind began to speak and wander,  
To the possibilities of where he was,  
And if I could have been the cause,  
Of his absence in this lonely dungeon,  
When a jingle interrupted my thoughts all of a sudden,  
And a man's voice echoed into the abyss.  
one voice I had very much missed.  
My footsteps boomed on the floor,  
And there he stood by the door.  
I embraced him, delighted to see his face,  
And he smiled, saying, "There's my Mace!"  
I wanted to cry, laugh, and giggle.  
But all that was inside me was silence.  
So, I sat in the embrace, smiling in the quiet,  
I was too happy to be perfect and rhyming,  
So, I stopped, and savored the moment.  
Because sometimes it's good to  
Hear My Silence.

# Grace McKinley

Grade 10, Francis Howell Central High  
School

*Personal Essay and Memoir*



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## To Leap and Bound

My feet can't juggle a ball and my toes won't point to form a leap. Something's wrong with my body, but I'm not physically impaired nor does anything pang or pop whilst I go about my day. I know something's wrong but I can never place my finger on it. Because of the fact my fingers won't and can't finesse a ball off of the tips of its fingers into a circular net, I know something is wrong with me. A generational curse has been assigned to me and me alone and I know it. My father and his, similar to him, overly confident and smug, brothers passed it down to me. Reminiscent of an aggregate of everything in my life, the curse has only been assigned to me, not my overly-sensitive brother or my brother who seemingly wishes he carried the curse. My curse smells simultaneously of rubber and an absence of anything and I can feel its polyurethane when I feel it in between my fingertips. My curse is an unremarkable shade of red, a color you've never thought of once in your life, at least in a fond matter. Rubber granules lodge their way into your knees as you press harder and harder and push off forsaken metal triangles with the toes that do not point, bend, or leap. My curse is ovate, red and gets stepped all over by everyone close to me.

At an age where I could tell anyone anything and run with seemingly no end into the arms of people I've met once, my high-jumping, hurdling, hammer-throwing, hundred meter hex was tantalizing and the thought of living up to it was enough to make me levitate. Standing at a white goal on a murky green turf field, picking at the rocks in my shin guards, the ball cascades through the net with ease, I think about whether it would hurt the girl's feelings if I would've blocked her kick coming at the goal at the speed of a garden snail. Uninterested, I think about what at the time, seemed like it coursed through my

veins and graced my genetics, my deep red, oval-shaped love. It was and is truly my destiny to have eight million people watch me run one hundred meters in 10 seconds, not to block a black and white sphere flying towards my hands. I don't have to worry about unsettling or upsetting anyone else if all I have to do is run in a straight line. At an age where red craters grew on my face and my feet traded in shoes that would bring attempts at juggling and leaping for whatever is trending amongst tweens, I would do anything to rid myself of any of the at this point definitively a curse's resemblances. I assume my destiny is to hang up my cleats, throw away my baby pink slippers, and order my mother to donate my high-top basketball shoes to a local consignment shop where they would sell for \$5, a number approximate to the amount they mean to me. Nobody else I know thinks about what it would be like to feel the rubber harrow its way into the bottom of your palm, and have your knees indent with tiny circular pebbles. In P.E class, the boy I like kicks the ball in the parking lot for the high school kids. It becomes a feat in itself to be able to get the ability to go down there and just for a split second, pretend you are three years older than you really are. I charge full speed towards the black Toyota Corolla and feel the inflated rubber of the ball under it and sprint back to the much more average and compact junior high parking lot. Upon my return to the game, I'm greeted with a giggle or two and a remark from the girl I know but is simultaneously a stranger. *You run like a gazelle.* I lift the corners of my mouth as if to form a smile but it feels like a slap. Does it look weird when I run? Do gazelles run weird? Should I never run again? That day, I decide I will never run again.

When the day comes where I can finally congratulate myself upon the ability to free roam the big kids parking lot across the street and it becomes my own, my curse wraps me like a fire burning dry firewood. I see the forgettable shade of red everywhere I go and it becomes unforgettable. Running seems to be brought up everywhere I go, from couples running into each other's arms after a proposal to go to the school dance together, or seeing a football player running only 10 yards and getting tackled. During my first fall of high school, I watched as the girls of my grade post pictures at cross country meets and wonder if it is truly all it seems to be. They go to the state championship but they don't get one of the fancy buses the school grants the sports teams that go to state usually get. I think again about whether running is truly an overall embarrassment. If even my school cannot acknowledge them, how can I participate without humiliating myself? I'm one-hundred percent sure everyone will think I am the strangest person for not being bestowed a curse like one with the ability to shoot and twirl.

December comes and I see the girls who can shoot, dribble and alley oop. When they go to the state championship, they get a fancy bus. It's silver, more rectangular, has air conditioning that doesn't tweak out every 15 minutes and has three times the amount of seats needed. Is their curse really more honorable than mine?

Spring comes but the weather around me stays 35 degrees. The first practice of the season comes around and I am greeted with faces I've never seen before from my 2,000 person school. My coach is aggressive and doesn't seem physically able to instruct us on how to run. Everyday, I plan my outfits based on what I'm going to have to do at practice, cancel plans with friends because I have practice and everything in my life succumbs to the curse. The people who run mid and long distance all become friends and develop what our coach calls 'culture' but us short distance runners have none of that. It's more judgemental than supportive and I can't help but wonder if every single one of us is being dragged down by an inescapable evil eye. Every set of eyes has at least one fixated on what feels like me and every motion and every word that whispers from my lips. Everyone else can run just like me so at times I feel we are the same but I am reminded of their abilities to leap and dribble and strike. An upperclassman that me and my singular friend of the team both share a disdain for, skips practice and a meet every once in a while to leap, spin and pirouette in what is likely a much more 'culture-filled' place. I imagine her walking in with nude pink flats on, greeting her friends which would just so happen to be everyone, the room will fill with laughs and giggles and I will bet that they admire and complement each other's grand plies. Her plentiful gifts seem to outweigh her accordingly weightless curse. I imagine her curse being as nonexistent as I am to her as I instead walk on my heels with attempts to stop the noises and dulling that will come with the metal spikes on my outsole grazing the concrete. There is nobody for me to greet and giggles will only ensue if our coach embarrasses himself by attempting to 'run over, not jump over' a hurdle. No compliments are dished out, only threats of rocks being thrown at heels and derogatory mutters under mouths about the speed of others.

I'm told I don't move fast enough by my coach and he wants me to try middle distance events instead. I know my fate is to run a straightaway and a curve for 21 seconds for eight million people at a time so I know he is wrong. He has over forty years of life to hold above my head, so I know he feels good about himself. I also know he has never felt a witch hold anything above him, not a curse, not a hex and certainly not a blessing. I know when he tells me that, that



he has never felt a gravitational pull, maybe it's a God given one, or maybe it's black magic. However, I know when he tells three of us to try something else, I know he is wrong. The woman with the pointy black hat and green warty skin pulling at my puppet strings knows just as well as me. Too terror-stricken by confrontation, I join in on the workouts of the kids with what seem like ten foot long strides and know I'm not one of them. I see fairies guide them around the two laps they repeat six times, no enchantress like I know guides me. I tell myself that the next day, my witch will have cursed my coach as well and he will forget that he told me to join the 'culture-filled', fairy-guided kids. The next day is the same as the last, in the way that he doesn't remember my name or any of what he told me to do a day ago and I can go right back to what begins to turn from a squeeze to a hug of a hex.

I can't determine what kind of creature follows my coach, but I just know it's an angry, maybe older and forgetful one. I am filled with a sense to make him remember my name, and become memorable enough to know me even as the girl he wishes he could cut from the no-cut team. Bus rides home force me and my only friend to sit all the way at the front, in the 2nd row of seats, in the one adjacent to our coach. Out of twenty something meets of the season, he will only address us after two to three. The first time, he asks if it was fun to be a part of the team. I let him know yes, to avoid extra time spent conversing but me and the ponytail wearing girl beside me telepathically know our real answer. I tell myself sometimes that perhaps we share a witch and the voodoo doll she uses against us is half her and half me. The second time, he compliments our form in a relay race and tells us we have amazing 'chemistry whilst we run'. We telepathically conjoin our confusion, working each half of our voodoo doll's brain.

Practice starts at strictly 2:30 every single day and I frantically squeeze between people to execute what feels like a full practice length workout towards the locker room and change. With 3 minutes left, I walk out of the doors I struggle to open, they weigh too much and I realize they are just yet another fault that follows my life. I walk out to the track but hear a manly voice call out for 'you'. I hear a repeated 'Hey you!', and pray to any form of a god that whoever it is is not addressing me. It happens to just be my luck when my heavy-set coach waves a packet of scribbled over printed out spreadsheets in front of my face. He tells me I'm running an open event at the largest, most competitive meet of the season, and my curse turns the corners of my mouth up into a smile, but my witch knows it's fake. It feels wrong, it feels like I'm taking something from someone, who exactly, I am unsure of, but I know I am taking something that

isn't mine. Maybe it's destiny is to belong to my singular friend, maybe it's that of the ballet dancer or maybe it's that of the football player who is forced onto the team. I don't know much in the moment, I lose a few of my senses but I know it's wrong to have this responsibility.

The third time our coach talks to us, it's on the bus ride home from the biggest, scariest meet, on the nothing special, smaller, older, yellow bus, not the big, newer, silver one, but in our usual front seat, he tells us he's proud of us. He might not know our names but I know he means it. I know he might not have meant it when he told us he didn't care if we were fast, if we were slow, if we jumped, if we hurdled, but I know he meant this. I will cringe when he tells us he is proud of us, but feel okay if he threatens to throw rocks and I think I know that my curse turned into a leap. It is not the leap I would pray to a god for it to become but it is a leap to something I love. It will never be a spin, or a swoosh, or a juggle but it becomes my own language. It will perpetually summon words I don't know or bring on admonishments about how alone it will make me, but the counsel of my language will guide me to eight million pairs of watching eyes, with not just one of each on me, but two.

# Chloe McNichols

Grade 8, Parkway West Middle School

Educator: Tracy Bouslog

*Personal Essay and Memoir*



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## Soaring

“Come on girls! We need to head backstage,” Ms. Amber yells. We latch our hands and follow her. Our tiny squeals of excitement bounce off the walls of the narrow hallway. We start weaving through and behind the big curtains and beaming speakers. *I’m so excited I finally get to perform with the excellent Krupinski Academy of Dance.* We eventually find our way to the right wings just off-stage. As I stand backstage at my 2019 dance recital at the Chaminade Auditorium, I patiently wait until the seniors are finished performing their ballet piece. When all of a sudden I hear the applause erupt in the theatre. Their claps reverberate. *Gulp.* I get a nervous feeling. My leg begins to tremble slightly.

I started to rock back and forth. Heel to toe. Attempting to ease the anxiety. I feel my fingers begin to twiddle, I reach for my skirt and start to play with the tassels to dull my worry. I had only been dancing for two years before this performance. I was nervous in general since I wanted to make my dancing perfect. But when it was my turn to walk onstage, I was sweating—a lot. *What if I mess up? I think I forgot it. I’m not ready, I need more practice.* I needed to convince myself that the only person there was my mom and I was going to do just fine. *Just smile. It will be ok. You didn’t forget, you know this. You have to be perfect.* Finally, we begin walking on stage. I try to quiet my anxious breathing. Our supposed single-file line slowly shuffles onto the stage. With every step, our feet press the floor slowly, and the peeling sounds of our shoes lifting one after another up off of the sticky marley stage and down again echo throughout the theatre. Our teacher guides us to our spots, and we stand there with our hands glued to our sides, as she adjusts us so our spacing is perfect. I slowly turn to face the back and strike my beginning pose. With my hands placed perfectly on my sassily popped-out hip. I wait quietly for the music to begin when all of a sudden I hear.

“DUN DUN. DUN DUN DOO.” That was my cue.

I take a deep breath. *You’ve got this.* I slowly turn as my tap dance has officially begun. I kick and step back preparing myself for the next step which happens to be another kick. I kick and before I can even think of the next step, *whoosh*. There it goes. Soaring. It lands. THUD. My tap shoe is now lying lonely in the middle of the stage. Stunned, I freeze. The tears begin to pool in my widened eyes. I cry. Soon the crying turns to sobbing. My face is a fiery shade of red, now I stand with only one shoe on. *How could this happen?* I lose track of the steps and my dancing slows down. I eventually come to a complete stop. *What should I do?* I stand there and look all around. I look at my classmates, but all of them are still dancing. *I don’t think they noticed.* I scan the crowd hoping to spot my mom. All I see is random heads in the dark theatre. *Where is she? I can not find her.* My head is overwhelmed with thoughts. *My whole family came to see me dance and I messed it up. I bet I let Mom down. I let Ms. Amber down. My class must be so disappointed with me. I bet everyone is judging and laughing at me.*

But worst of all I let myself down. The entire year I gave everyone an earful on how good this dance would be on stage and how much I loved it and hoped they would love it too. Now I stand feeling as invisible as air, and I’m disappointed with myself. *I messed up the whole performance for everyone.* Just off-stage, a sudden movement catches my eye, my eyes wander to the right wing and I notice Ms Amber’s hand signal for me to keep dancing. It looks as if she is attempting to shoo away a fly that’s buzzing in front of her. But I instantaneously understood what she meant. I realize I have to go on. I start dancing again, still crying. I continue to wipe the rivers of tears flowing out of my eyes and down my rosy cheeks. The tears drip onto the floor forming little puddles at my feet, making the sticky stage as slick as ice with every move I make. The puddles began to slowly smear as I continued to dance.

The first spot change of the dance is almost here. *If I’m right, we will go in the circle and I will end up right by my shoe. Perfect. I can grab it and slip it on right there and all will be well. Wait.* Forgetting that a few weeks before I had upgraded to “big girl shoes.” The little kid’s shoes had velcro and were easy to slip on. But these shoes had a buckle. Seriously. I wouldn’t be able to get my shoes on until the dance was over. Still, I needed to figure out how I was going to get it back. With every step I take, I look over to my right, and each time I see my shoe as if it is staring back at me, laughing Like it had planned to make me traumatized tonight. Finally, I had a plan. Once the dance ends and the lights turn off I would quickly grab my shoe as I slip into line to walk off stage. Tears are still streaming

down my face and with my cheesy big smile. I taste the salty water falling into my mouth like I was drinking the ocean. The next thing I know the song fades out and the audience rises and applauds. The lights turn off and we step into our line but I disperse from my friends and grab my shoe. Finally, I'm reunited with my shoe. I scurry to get back in line. As I exit the stage I feel Ms. Amber tap on my shoulder. I walk over to her wiping my tears away with my mesh long sleeves, and I can feel my makeup being scraped off slowly.

"Yes, Ms. Amber," I say through muffled tears.

"Don't cry, Chloe, You look beautiful and you danced beautifully, please don't cry."

She comforts me as I regain my breath. I feel her bring me in for a hug. A warm one. I felt comforted and was happy that she cared about me so much. I walk to the dressing room and gather my things. Grabbing my puffy, glittery ballet tutu as I shove it into my bag. I slowly slide on my slippers, and it was time to see what my parents had to say. *What if they say I did bad? I can't believe I practiced for so long and still wasn't perfect.* I trudge down the long hallway and head to the staircase to find my mom. Finally, I spot her in the giant crowd and walk toward her. My arm now covered in make-up and wet with my tears. I wipe my face one last time in an attempt to make it seem like I didn't cry. But of course, my mom knows everything. Her cold fingers press onto my cheeks as she wipes my face, "Don't cry honey you did wonderful."

"Thank you, Mom. I'm just sad because I practiced for so long and I still wasn't perfect."

She pulls me in for a hug. My head presses into her shoulder. I cry into her, and when I lift my head the final bits and pieces of my makeup have rubbed off onto her beautiful yellow blouse.

"You didn't disappoint me, honey. You could not have made me more proud. But you can't let it get to you. Everybody makes mistakes."

I sniffle. Who knew a few words could make a person feel so much better?

"You are right," I mumble, "Now I know what I can work on in the future."

It's as if a weight got taken off of my heart. A few moving words help me gain the confidence to take pictures with the rest of my family. I lift my head high and walk over to my grandparents and cousins, I smile for their pictures and thank them all for coming to support me. Their attendance means the world to me given it shows how much they care to see me do what I love. Their uplifting affirmations like "You did wonderful" or "I cried watching you perform tonight," made me feel at ease. Almost forgetting the saddening mistake I had made a few

minutes prior. We walk outside of the lobby, and I am bombarded with bouquets. Some from Grandma, Grandpa, my aunts and uncles, cousins, and parents. They smell fresh and make me happy to have performed. My arms eventually getting heavy holding them. I hand a few bouquets off to my mom. My grandma kisses my forehead and squeezes me tightly before heading to her car. Now I stand with my parents and brother and I am proud of myself. Even though I had made a few mistakes along the way, I was still proud of giving it my all and not ever giving up. Because I didn't have to be perfect. I just had to try.

# Evelyn McTague

Grade 8, Parkway West Middle School

Educator: Suzan Wilson

*Personal Essay and Memoir*



## The First Bus Ride

“Okay, class, let’s go to the buses and get you guys home to your parents. I bet you all are tired from your first day!” exclaimed Mrs. Jacobs.

All summer long, I patiently waited for the moment that I could finally go to school. I would make so many friends, do fun crafts, and learn how to spell. My happiness took over me and I could barely breathe the entire day.

“Yeah!” We all screamed in excitement, *the first day was finally finished and my teacher was so nice and lunch was so fun, and I...* My thoughts were so jumbled in my head I couldn’t even think straight, so instead I focused on the fact that I was about to go on my first bus ride! But I would have to get there first.

As we took our trek through the halls, there was a beaming smile on everyone’s faces. Glancing at other classes and waving to teachers, I was the proudest I had ever been. Head held high, I almost leapt through the front door of the building with exhilaration, eager to tell my parents about my day.

It was my first day of school *ever*. Everything was new; I was a clueless kindergartener just happy to be there. The entire day was full of unfamiliarity.

I was a kindergarten student at Ridge Elementary, and my teacher, Mrs. Jacobs, was walking our class out to the buses to begin our journey home. Little did I know that I would be in tears by the end of the bus ride.

When my teacher and the class reached the buses, I charged full speed ahead to bus 122 and walked up the stairs feeling older and wiser than I had ever felt before. After a long day of school, I was ready to go home and see my Mom and Dad. The straps of my backpack kept rubbing against my shoulders, and I was sweating a little in my new dress because of the hot day.

I snagged the first seat I saw open: the second row on the right. *It was perfect!* I could look out the window until I got off, watching cars and trucks while

looking around at the surroundings. I was a big kid now, and I could ride the bus alone, without my parents there. *How cool was that?!*

When I sat down, the weight was lifted—literally. My backpack felt so heavy from the crafts I had made in practically every class. The cold, rubbery seat felt nice against my hot, sweaty skin. Luckily, the bus was air-conditioned, so I did not melt into the seat on the way home. But just for good measure, I asked the girl sitting behind me to help open my window. I was a little scared to ask, but I figured since I was in kindergarten now, I would have to start getting used to that sort of thing.

The windows were open, so as the bus moved, I could feel the chilled breeze against me. It was the feeling of eating a bomb pop on a hot summer day or getting in the pool for the first time that whole summer and shivering until you got used to it. The wind grew stronger the faster we went. You could hear the wind whip around the bus like we were on a rollercoaster.

There were a lot of people on my bus—enough to fill every seat. I listened as the kids around me talked about their first day, not really knowing anyone to talk to myself. I observed out the window at every stop, looking at the kids' houses and pets who greeted them once they got off, not knowing anything around me.

As I looked out the window, every tree branch and blade of grass danced. The grass was as green as Emerald City from *The Wizard of Oz*.

I fixed my gaze through the glass partition keeping me away from the outside world, looking at every neighborhood sign and every license plate.

I had no idea where the bus was taking me, but I was prepared to be clueless to some degree since I was only five years-old. What I wasn't prepared for was not seeing *anything* that could tell me even the slightest bit about where I was.

My heart rate grew faster as the ride went on and my neighborhood was nowhere in sight.

Stops and stops went by, and I didn't recognize anything around me. I was patiently waiting to see my neighborhood, but it seemed like it would never come. It was an unknown house upon unknown house; the world seemed foreign. That was when I finally recognized that I was lost.

The bus grew quieter and quieter as we crept along the route, almost silent. It began to give me an eerie feeling.

Soon all the kindergartners were off, along with most of the other kids. *Had they forgotten about me?*



I started talking to the bus driver; I didn't want him to know my worries. I wanted to be cool and mature like the older kids who knew where they were and had done this a million times before. I learned that the driver's name was Mr. Troy and that he had two kids who were in college already! *How crazy was that? They must be at least 40 if they're in college.*

*I bet some of the 5th graders could drive by now, I thought, sitting on the edge of my seat, talking to the bus driver. Maybe they could drive me home instead of Mr. Troy. ...He's too scary to drive me every day.* At this moment, I practically convinced myself that a zombie was taking me home.

After many stops, I grew hesitant and really scared. My worries had become droplets of water erupting in my eyes. The wave started slow, but by the time we got to the next stop, I was full-blown bawling my eyes out. Crying like there was no tomorrow. *And maybe there wasn't, maybe I would never go home. Maybe I would be stuck on this bus forever with this Mr. Zombie-Troy. Maybe he would take me. The bus driver seemed nice when I talked to him, but maybe he was just joking, just an act, so I would like him and not be scared when he took me away forever.* It felt like I had been on the bus for hours, even though I would later come to know it was only a forty-five-minute ride.

My tiny tears became rivers as the stops went by. The next tear, even heavier than the last. I was petrified, horrified, almost paralyzed with fear. The bus driver, who I now was skeptical of, attempted to comfort me.

"Evie, are you okay, sweetie?"

"Evie, we'll be home soon, okay?" he mentioned, after a long silence and some continued crying on my part.

"Evie, how was school? Did you like your teacher? I bet she was very kind to you and your classmates. I've heard that about her, almost like a grandmother to her students."

He was pelting me with questions, and I was dodging them like ninja stars in an action movie. *Mr. Troy was trying to hide the truth, my capture, my demise. I was not going to fall for that. I knew he wasn't nice. No one could fool me. He was evil, and I knew it.* So I continued crying and kept to myself, ignoring his questions and nodding civilly so as to not get in trouble.

Mr. Zombie-Troy eventually got fed up. He politely asked one of the fifth graders to try to calm me down. *How. Dare. He.*

As she skipped down the aisle, I frantically tried to calm myself down so I wouldn't look like a big baby in front of the older kids, *who could already do their*

own taxes in my mind. I needed to make a good impression with the older kids. I had never met her and I was so scared. *What if she's mean to me?*

When she got to my seat, she was very tall and had big feet. She sat down next to me with her blue backpack. I could already tell that she was going to be really cool. *Maybe she wasn't as scary as I thought!* But I still couldn't be sure, so my tough exterior was on full display.

She sat with me until I wasn't crying as hard anymore, and we chatted about our day. Her name was Amelia. *That's such a pretty name; I love the name, Amelia. I wish my parents had named me Amielia, so I could be just as cool as her.*

"What's your favorite color, Evie?"

"I love the color teal! It's so pretty! Like an ocean, or even a fish."

"Did you like recess today?"

"Yes! I played on the swings and I got so high! I bet I could've touched the sky if I tried! The swings are way higher than the ones at my preschool!"

"I bet your teacher was nice; I had her when I was in kindergarten!"

"Yeah, my teacher is very nice, she has a big rug and gave me a special pencil with puppies on it!"

Amelia was really nice! Way nicer than wicked bus driver Troy.

*I've decided I want to be like her when I'm old.* She even played Eye Spy until I got to somewhere I recognized. Finally! My neighborhood!!!

As we turned the street corner, Amilia told me to get ready and that my parents were waiting to see me.

"Eye spy your parents!" She shouted, pointing out the window. I then noticed my family waiting for me in the distance.

I was ready: backpack on, face completely red and blotchy, and my purple dress soaked from tears.

I walked down the aisle of the bus to the stairs and said, "thank you," to my maybe-not-so-bad-after-all bus driver, Troy. I looked back at Amelia and waved.

Then, I hopped down the big steps of the bus and sprinted straight to my parents, who were only a few feet away.

At that time, I did not realize that my dad had taken a picture of me getting off. Bewildered and drained from my first day of school and bus ride, I collapsed into my dad's arms.

*That wasn't as bad as I thought.*

"Was it scary?" asked my mom, noticing my tomato face and swollen eyes, "At first, but once my friend Amelia helped me, it wasn't as bad anymore."

The next day, on the very same bus, I sat with Amelia, and we played until I got home. The only thing that changed from the previous day was that I wasn't scared anymore, and the unfamiliar was now in fact familiar.

Even today, my dad likes to show me the picture of me getting off the bus on my first day, and we always laugh. Little Evie was not amused and was in a bad headspace that afternoon.

And to be clear, no, I don't believe that my bus driver was a zombie, *although he was suspiciously clumsy and very pale...*

# Margaret Medbery

Grade 12, St. Teresa's Academy  
*Poetry*



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## Used Up

I think I used up all my confidence in 3rd grade.  
That well of self-assurance was depleted during recess,  
Dancing at my cousin's wedding  
I certainly couldn't go to recess or dance now.

Maybe I used all my words in years past.  
Hand raised and mouth moving  
Vying for attention during dinner, only the casserole listening  
I surely have nothing left to say.

Thus, the fear must run out soon.  
Panic in dark rooms, I've always been afraid of ghosts.  
In the dark space in ajar doors, lumpy shadows out to get me.  
When will the racing horse in my heart slow down?  
Age out of the sprint and reach that idle field.

Perhaps then I could strut through life with a self-assured sway,  
Dance and give speeches, someone must care what I have to say.

# Ron Meshulam

Grade 8, Parkway West Middle School

Educator: Tracy Bouslog

*Personal Essay & Memoir*



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## Hagrid's Magical Creatures Motorbike Adventure

Excitement started flowing through my veins. The best theme park in the world was about to open, and it would be my first time here in years. The announcement finally came on again: "The park is now opening, Enjoy."

Once in the park, my dad and I said goodbye to the rest of the family and flew towards the ride we had come here for.

I remember the first time we came here. We were standing before Hagrid's Motorbike Adventure ride. This rollercoaster looked insane. It was fast and it had turns where you almost went upside-down. This sounded crazy to me, so I sat out while my dad and brother went on the Motorbike ride, not knowing what was lying ahead.

After about two 2 hours, we met up with my dad, who told us how great the ride was. On the other hand, my brother complained about how it went so fast that his face stretched. After hearing that, I decided that I didn't want to do this torture machine of a ride. *Why would you want to do this?* I had other ways to have lots of fun here.

But we were back here again now. We weren't the only ones. It was as if a flock of migrating birds was going straight towards this one ride. The huge crowd of people were sprinting and ignoring the security guards' request to slow down. We had to start picking up speed or else we would be waiting in this line for hours. Then we saw the line. The line had a small sign next to it saying, "Hagrids Magical Creatures Motorbike Adventure."

We had yet to make it to the Harry Potter-themed area, but we already saw a line forming. We quickly got in line and joined the march, “How long is this going to take?” I asked my dad.

“Hopefully not too long,” he said back.

As we kept walking, I quickly noticed another sign, but this one mentioned that the line was approximately 1 hour and 45 minutes long.

After around 45 minutes we finally made it to the real place where the line was supposed to start. Once there, it felt like we entered a portal to another universe. As we kept walking we reached an area where you could see the coaster fly by. It looked fast! So fast that I could barely see it for a second. As we kept walking through this maze we saw an indoor area. When I got inside the chilly breeze stopped. With every step, we got closer and closer to finally riding this ride. This realization made me nervous; I was starting to understand that I was about to do something I was so scared to do when I was younger. My hands began sweating so I put them in my pockets. I regretted my choice of getting in line for this ride and didn’t want to admit it to my dad who had waited weeks to get here.

I have seen many videos of this ride before. But even with this reason why I shouldn’t be scared, I was. Thankfully, we had already been here for around an hour and a half, so I should be able to get this ride over with a minute now. Luckily, I would sit next to my dad and in the smaller seat, so I would hopefully feel the force of the ride less.

At this point, I was done waiting in line. I started complaining to my dad about how tired I was because when you’re at a theme park, you go to sleep late and have to wake up super early. Unless you want to wait in huge lines, it felt like we were there for hours.

The line started moving again, so I kept walking with my barely open eyes. Then I noticed. In the front of the room, I could see some strange motorbike-looking things moving in the distance. I recognized them and soon saw them moving in the distance. “We made it!” I told my dad happily even though this meant I was getting on the ride any minute now.

People were getting onto the motorbikes and the ride operators buckled them up. I felt my energy slowly come back to my almost lifeless body and suddenly I was getting excited to get on this rollercoaster. After a few fast minutes, we were right in front of the ride.

It was now our turn to get on. Quickly I held onto the fake motorbike handle, I could barely hold onto it with my sweaty hands but I cleaned them off

and it was all good. The ride operators came over and pulled the seat belt down from above me and that's when I knew it was too late to back down.

We left the station slowly but immediately sped up. It was so fast yet also so incredibly smooth. We were then went into a small shed and greeted by a rhinoceros-looking creature, with red lava flowing through its veins. Beside it was a life-size animatronic of a Harry Potter character. After some quick turns and high hills, we zoomed by a three-headed dog which I barely saw because of how fast we were going. I heard the brrrrm of the motorbike rollercoaster speeding through the track. The suspenseful music adding to the whole feel of the ride. We then flew into a small cave and immediately were out of it. The coaster went up a huge hill and stopped at the top; it then launched backward, sending us into another cave but this time we couldn't see the way. It all happened so fast that we then stopped for at least a few seconds and waited while the noise that had been our "instructor" said, "your tangled in devil snare"

which I then remembered was the magical vines from Harry Potter.

I knew what would happen next because of the videos I watched about this ride so I held onto my dad's hand while the tour guide said a spell. Boom! We fell! The track on this part of the ride was made so that after the spell it would drop down connecting to a new track. It was only a few feet that it had fallen but it made my stomach drop. We then got sent flying out of the cave and flew through smoke. The smoke got on my face and it smelled a bit strange. After leaving the cave my eyes finally adjusted to the light and we got sent flying through more smoke and bright light effects. We went so fast and got so much wind in our faces that I could almost taste the wind because of its high amount. By this part, I no longer held the handle I finally got to enjoy this ride for its full potential. I let the wind rush through my hair. This was the fastest part and also my favorite part because I finally got used to the drops and the turns. We then made it to the end of the ride. Everyone was so shocked by how great the ride was and they clapped their hands. After getting off the rollercoaster I told my dad, "That was definitely worth the wait!"

# Annie Ming

Grade 8, John Burroughs School

Educator: Scott Hessel

*Science Fiction & Fantasy*



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## Tides Apart

Ryella paced along the sandy stretch of coast, pausing every so often to squint off into the distance, brows furrowed. The wild waves crashed into one another, splashing smatterings of glinting droplets high into the gray, cloudy sky that roiled above. The furious wind tore at her bun, freeing a few strands that whipped across her face. She batted her hair out of the way aggressively, peering back out to the endless sea once more. Nothing. *Maybe Mar thinks that it's about to storm, and she's not coming. Or maybe she just doesn't want to. She hasn't made it here in a long while, anyway.*

Sighing, Ryella knelt down and shoved the yellowed pieces of dry shrubbery away, preparing to crawl through the small gap it made to leave the alcove. She awkwardly ducked and squeezed through, trying her best not to get her clothes dirty. Halfway through the tangle of twigs and leaves, a lithe hand suddenly wrapped around her leg and began dragging her back out. Ryella cried out as she dropped to the ground and frantically kicked and thrashed, trying to get the grip to loosen. She grasped onto a branch ahead of her, grabbing on as hard as she could as her eyes began to fill with crazed, desperate tears, her breath coming out in rasping chokes.

A familiar, accented voice broke through her haze, “Ry? Ry, what are you doing??”

Ryella sat up quickly, releasing her hold on the branch, face flaming and flushed with red. Only one person ever called her Ry. “Marzla?”

“Yes, that happens to be my name,” Mar called. Ryella groaned, quickly finger-brushing her tangled, blond waves and collecting herself before slipping out of the bracken.



Mar was sitting on a large rock in the clearing, wearing the same tattered clothes she'd worn during her last visit, eyebrows raised and smirking. Her rugged, self-made boat was tied to a small tree nearby, rocking gently with the lull of the water. She patted the spot next to her, motioning for Ryella to join her there. Ryella made her way over as Mar snickered, "Well, I know not to kidnap you now, Ms. Dramatic."

"You should already know not to sneak up on people and start yanking them away, Ms. Genius," Ryella retorted, rolling her eyes playfully. "Anyway, ready to head over to the island?" She gestured to the tiny, uninhabited island in the distance, where they normally talked and hung out together, now shrouded with salty mist from the ocean.

Mar followed her gaze, lips pursed. "Sorry, not today. I'll have to head back soon."

"Oh, that's fine," Ryella mumbled half-heartedly. "What's kept you all this time?"

"My dad was doing more work on the project, and he wanted me to help him. I just found time to slip away for a bit today," Mar explained, scuffing the powdery sand with her feet.

"Nice. How's the project going?"

"Decent. We're trying to research the robots here in San Marco. He's trying to develop something similar for Frankston, and the technology might even be able to help with our whole," Mar flung a hand toward the torrentuous ocean, "sinking problem."

"Ohh, cool." They fell silent for a moment, before Ryella noticed Mar studying her carefully, eyes slightly narrowed and contemplative. "I know that conniving look. What's that for, Mar?" Ryella asked, grinning.

"Well, I was wondering.." Mar trailed off speculatively.

"You were wondering..?"

"What if you just lend me one of your robots?" Mar blurted. "You all have a ton anyway, and it would be a big help for the research! Frankston can finally have its first advanced technology, and we could save both our islands and be heroes!"

Ryella bit her lip, raking a hand through her hair.

"I swear I'll return it, if that's what you're worried about," Mar pleaded. "It's just—it would be so helpful, so—"

"Mar. I can't," Ryella interrupted, her eyelids fluttering shut.

Mar's shoulders slumped down as she demanded, "Why not?? You can't spare just *one* thing for me?"

Ryella opened her mouth, about to respond, but quickly snapped it closed. In reality, it was because she'd watched as her mother got dragged away for doing exactly that: helping the poor side's "rebellion", but Ryella wasn't prepared to tell Mar about it. Besides, no one even knew for sure what had happened to her mother. No one *wanted* to know.

Mar still waited for an answer expectantly, lips pressed thinly and arms folded in her lap.

"I just *can't*," Ryella lied, worrying her lip.

The charismatic twinkle in Mar's hazel eyes dulled as she spoke shakily, "So, that's it? Now I'm too poor and pathetic for someone like you?" Ryella didn't respond, her leg jittering up and down, thoughts running as rapidly as the waves cresting the horizon, *What do I do? What should I say? What if I just offend her more??*

With every second of silence that passed, Mar's expression grew colder and harder, until she snapped, "You're just like all the other rich. Obsessed with yourself and not giving a helping hand to anyone who needs it, even though you have everything you could ever possibly want." She stood, a new flame blazing in her smoldering glare.

Ryella winced, the sting of the harsh words zapping through her sharply. She hesitated, "Listen, I—"

"No. You don't need to explain," Mar cut in. She untied the worn rope swiftly with one hand, keeping her boat steady with the other. "I'm heading back. Enjoy all your fancy robots."

Ryella's voice broke, "Wait Mar don't—"

"Bye Ryella," Mar muttered quietly, meeting Ryella's wide eyes once before stepping onto the boat. She pushed away into the gray, frothy waters with her wooden oars, curving away along the shore until the fog engulfed her, and she was nothing but a distant smudge ahead.

Ryella finally whispered faintly to the empty bay, "B-bye Marzla." She stayed there, eyes distant and roaming, even as she felt the first pinpricks of rain piercing her skin. The rivulets ran down her pale face, mixing with the tears that already streaked down her cheeks. For a long time, as the world darkened and the rain beat down harder and harder, she stood there in the downpour, waiting for Mar to return. But she never did.

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“Ryella. Go get changed. You’re dripping water all over the place with those sodden clothes,” Ryella’s father ordered from the couch, not caring to glance up as she entered the house.

Her older brother, Ash, who was nearby on his phone, jeered, “Yeah Ryella, why do you look like a Frankston freak?”

Ryella steeled herself and ignored him, stomping past them and up the stairs to her room. She slammed the door shut, flinging her soaked garments off haphazardly and throwing a random set of clothes on. She padded over to the window and brushed the curtains aside, pressing her nose to the frigid glass. The rain pounded on relentlessly outside, blurring the sparkling city skyline, as streaks of lightning jumped from cloud to cloud. Ryella allowed her eyes to drift beyond the skyscrapers, to the land where only a few lights glimmered. *Where Mar is. She hates me now.* She forced the painful thoughts away and collapsed onto her bed, burying her head in her fluffy pillows.

All of a sudden, a loud, buzzing noise erupted in her ears. Ryella groaned and clawed at them, trying to block it out, but the insufferable hum didn’t cease. She lifted her head from her pillow to find her room’s chandelier flickering erratically. She immediately sprung out of bed with a quick glimpse out the window, giving her a view of all the lights of San Marco flashing on and off in unison. A loud pop cracked through the air, and everything just *stopped*. Ryella was plunged into inky blackness, an eerie stillness washing over the world, only interrupted by the patter of rain and the ominous hammering of her heart. She swallowed her fear and strained her eyes to try to make out *something* in the darkness.

Raising a cautionary hand, she crept into the hallway slowly, greeted by only more shadow. She moved down the stairwell step by step, each floorboard creaking in a soft whine. As Ryella reached the living room, she picked out the figures of her father and brother. Ash sat stiffly on the sofa, phone discarded and facing upwards, casting a strange glow over the ceiling. His focus shifted to her, a hint of relief dashing across his features before he quickly masked it with a nonchalant expression.

Her father stood at the open door, shoulders tight and hair disheveled. He felt Ryella’s presence and acknowledged her with a curt, “Ryella.”

“What’s going on, Father?” she questioned as she joined him there, a faint note of panic slipping into her tone.

He sighed, “All I know is the power’s been cut off. I’m concerned with what happened to the guard robots patrolling our property.”

“If you’re really worried, I can go check their posts,” Ryella offered, drumming her fingers against the wall.

His eyebrows knitted together. “Are you sure?”

She wasn’t sure, not really, but she shouldered her nerves out of the way and nodded with as much confidence that she could muster. “It’s fine.” She took an umbrella hanging next to the doorway and slipped her boots on.

“Don’t forget to bring the robots back,” Ryella’s father reminded her, handing her a flashlight, “and, uh, stay safe, Ryella.”

“I will. See you soon.” She shuffled out of the doorway, opened the umbrella, and flicked her flashlight on. Claps of thunder boomed overhead, shaking the earth. She shivered and trudged on, squelching across the muddy land to reach the first post. The robot wasn’t there.

Ryella scanned the area, her flashlight’s bright beam cutting through the sheets of rain. It couldn’t have gone far; the machinery wasn’t programmed to do so. She rubbed a clammy hand on her pants and continued on, searching through the undergrowth.

A blur of motion caught her attention, and she immediately sprinted in that direction, dropping her umbrella as thorns whipped at her arms. The shape, clearly a person, weaved through the trees, heading towards the alcove where Ryella had been earlier that day.

“Hey! Stop that!” Ryella yelled, raising her voice over the roar of the wind. Her breath came faster and faster as she tore through the bushes around the clearing, catching up to the thief with bounding steps. She tackled them into the sand, sending the robot rolling away with a loud thunk.

A pair of fiery, hazel eyes met hers as Ryella looked downwards. The girls stared at each other in utter disbelief.

“Mar? What in the world are you doing here??” Ryella asked incredulously, releasing her.

Mar gasped out a breath before speaking, “Well, I guess I’m the victim this time.”

“Don’t joke around. Please.. just explain.”

“Listen Ry, I’m so, so sorry. I didn’t mean what I said earlier and I was just so frustrated and when he offered for me to do it, I just did and I shut it all off and now I’m here and—”

“Wait, slow down, you did what now?” Ryella interjected, setting a reassuring hand on Mar’s shoulder to stop her rambling.

She took a moment to gather her thoughts before explaining softly, "After I went back home, I was really worked up. My dad noticed, and he revealed that he'd finished working on a plan to shut off all of San Marco's power so we could steal a robot or two for research, hoping that would get me excited." She paused, eyes trained on the ground, before continuing, "He let me flip the switch to take all your electricity away, and I don't know why, but I did it. Then, I rowed over here to steal one of your robots." Mar broke off into a cacophony of hiccuped sobs.

"Hey, Mar, I'm the one who's sorry. I should've told you the actual reason why I didn't help earlier," Ryella murmured. She sucked in a deep breath, eyes watering painfully, and whispered, "It was just.. that my mother was taken by the authorities for helping people in Frankston, and.." She swallowed hard. "And I just didn't want something like that to happen again."

Mar wrapped her arms around Ryella. "I'm so sorry Ry, I never knew. I didn't mean what I said, I swear."

"I know, I know. The past is the past."

The two sat together in comfortable silence, arm in arm, as the smoky clouds gradually dispersed, unveiling the faraway twinkle of a thousand stars. The weak, silvery light of the moon filtered through, wrapping them in a shimmering, soothing embrace of their own world. A sweet, radiant promise of tomorrow.

# CK Moore

Grade 10, Timberland High School

Educator: Andrea Dubitsky

*Flash Fiction*



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## The Red Cup

*Music blazing, head pounding, people screaming over the music, drunken laughter, Cramped room... Ugh, this sucks a-*

“Jessi! Jessica! I have your drink.” Laurel stumbles over, handing me the plastic red cup.

“Oh, thanks,” I reply stiffly, glancing at my drink, then around the cramped, dark room. “Laurel, why is it red?”

“I got you red wine, duh!” Laurel giggled, taking a swig, the wine dribbling down her chin.

“But-” I start hesitantly

“Just try it! It won’t kill you.” She pushed the cup to my chest. I sigh and take a swig. Regret fills my mouth.

“Yes it will!” I gag. “Ugh! This is awful!”

“Ugh, you’re so dramatic. Gimme.” She takes a swig and gags. “What the heck is this drink?!”

“You’re the one that grabbed it...” The room starts spinning. My vision focuses in and out on the red cup. “Laurel, I don’t feel so good.” The room goes black.

# Celeste Morgan

Grade 11, Olathe North High School

Educator: Deirdre Zongker

*Poetry*



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## Folded Town

Inside the townhouse,  
Where people order drinks;  
The Musician sings;  
People clap to the lively sounds.

Fold.

The dark cellar in the basement;  
The place people pretend doesn't exist;  
The place where things people don't want to see go down.

Fold.

Inside another house.  
People sleep happily in their beds.

Fold.

The dark empty streets  
Eerie and quite

Fold.

A closed home and shop,  
Closed for the night

Fold.

The Rats under the city, and other places where they roam the night.

Fold.

The place where-

Fold.

The watch-

Fold

T-

Fold.

-

A portrait of a town, pieces folded, hiding what is within

A folded picture put up on a frame

Hiding what is in the

Fold.



# Celeste Morgan

Grade 11, Olathe North High School

Educator: Deirdre Zongker

*Short Story*



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## To The Ends of the Earth

The water ripples outwards, droplets splattering, fading into oblivion. The otherwise still water reflects outward, the face of tears shining in the luminous light of the empty chamber. Her first practice at this new school finished, no less than thirty minutes ago. The mother she never thought she'd see again is late, doing whatever that it is that she does normally. Eight states away, far from the school that she knew, the pools where she learned, the grave of her father who taught her to swim. Now she's stuck somewhere she doesn't know, her old schools so far from the one she now goes to, the unfamiliar pools that she's never swam in, and with her still-living mother who she has not seen in over ten years.

So in this new place she sits, crying to herself, with no shoulders for her to cry on, her dad's comfort long gone, her friend's words of wisdom and laughter too far away to hear. The only thing here for her is her own flickering image in the rippling pool stretching out in front of her, chlorine filling the air with its smell, sounds of the other swimmers long gone.

The quiet pattering of feet breaks the mostly empty silence, cutting through her quiet sniffles. A slender figure unknown sits just out of vision, drawing her attention.

"Go away."

Unmoved, they scoot closer, "Is everything fine? My dad is running a little late, and I am surprised to see anyone else here."

*Hmph* is the reply.

"You new? Haven't seen you around much before," and they move closer still.

A shrug is the only response.

“What’s your name? Mine is Anastasia, although I simply prefer Ana.” She does not move any closer this time.

Relaxing as the ripples in the water fade off as the tears stop lightly pattering in. She turns to Ana and curtly reptiles, “Crystal,” then returns her gaze to the water.

This doesn’t quite satisfy Ana, who quite wants a conversation. So she turns to another topic, “How long have you been swimming?”

Crystal, still slightly relaxed, places her bare feet in the water, her hems rolled up almost to their knees. Without looking over, she replies, “My whole life, that I can remember.” Crystal then goes back to watching the water ripple outwards around her legs.

Ana giggles lightly, stopping when releasing that she wouldn’t get much of a response, “That’s way longer than I have, my mom wouldn’t even allow me near the water till I was what, like ten? They could not get me out since.”

Crystal doesn’t answer, so Ana continues, “She was an absolutely amazing teacher, taught me how to swim, and even got me hooked up with our current high school coach. She was said to be the best, and got the most trophies. Who taught you?”

Almost too quietly to hear, she murmurs, “My dad,” and watches the ripples disturb the otherwise seemingly still water of the pool.

“You were in lane three today, right?”

Crystal’s legs stop swaying in the water, “Yeah, why?”

“I just remembered that I saw you swim, you were amazing! Your dad must have taught you well, and probably was really good himself. Are you waiting for him?”

Her eyes, still wet with tears, look just away, back to the water, “No, my mom.”

Ana sighs quietly, “I kinda hoped to meet him. I don’t usually meet a lot of other really good swimmers who learned from their parents.”

Looking Ana in the eyes, she curtly says, “He’s dead,” and turns back to the water.

Ana moves her mouth, then settles on murmuring, “I’m sorry,” then scoots closer and puts her arm around Crystal’s shoulder, causing her to tense up again.

After a second of stunned silence, Crystal barely whispers, “Why?”

“You need someone. Can’t imagine it being easy when you are alone without anyone that you know to help you.” Any simply responds.

Quietly time passes, neither moving a lot. The water ripples slightly around their legs, both of them just resting for once. Crystal cries quietly, for the first time in a long time in front of other people, or anyone at all. Ana just sits there, doing exactly what Crystal needs, and has needed for months, a friend who's shoulder that she could cry on.

Crystal sits up, wiping her teary eyes, "Thanks." They sit in silence before a door creaks open, causing Crystal to remove her legs from the water, as a figure walks in.

"Sorry I'm late Ana, needed to pick up a few items."

Jerking her legs out of the water at the familiar voice, Ana stands, moving over to the bleachers to collect her items. Turning back waving and mouths, "Bye", she leaves with her dad, a slight spring to her step.

Crystal slowly stands up, now alone in the room once more. Her mom probably will arrive soon, so she goes to her stuff, moving it back towards the water. Gazing in with tears again, she murmurs, "I hope you're going to be happy up there, dad." She pauses again, "I know it is hard, but why? Why did you do it, leave me? You said that you would be with me, but now you're gone, never to return. I hope you're going to be watching over me."

One last tear ripples across the pool's surface, trying to figure out how to move on. The ripples flow away, disappearing back into the surface. Crystal watches the clock tick and tick.

The door opens after a few last minutes of immeasurable silence, her mom's heels clattering against the almost dry concrete floor. In her rush she almost trips, "I'm sorry hunny, work got me mixed up again. Let's go home. We'll stop by Jasmine's, it's your favorite... right?"

Standing with another quiet sigh, she says, "Yes mom, it's fine," with her not quite faked smile plastered onto her face, she leaves the pool, her first safe space.

# Katherine Nguyen

Grade 11, Clayton High School

Educator: Katie Storms

*Critical Essay*



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## Mortality and Dystopias

Everyone, at least once, has come across dystopian fiction. Whether it be the classic Hunger Games series or a novel filled with oddly humanistic farm animals, dystopian worlds can be found all around us. But why is this genre so prevalent throughout literature? Is it because authors seek merely to entertain the world? Is it because it brings in so many profits? In a short, but precise answer: no. In reality, creators of dystopian fiction employ this mode as a way to communicate their criticisms of modern society, warn of a potentially dark future, or promote thought-provoking questions. *A Clockwork Orange* by Anthony Burgess and *1984* by George Orwell are two great examples of this and are even further connected by their protagonists. In *A Clockwork Orange*, the protagonist, Alex, is a teen-delinquent living in an anarchy-like society, making it easier for him to harm his community through senseless acts of violence. Eventually, he gets punished for his actions and is required to go through “reformation treatment”, leaving him deprived of the free will to induce any more violence. *1984*’s protagonist is a citizen of Oceania, Winston Smith. In Oceania, Winston’s life is strictly controlled by the government, “big brother”, and is harshly controlled by propaganda, technology, and abuse. As he seeks to rebel for the values of free will and truth, he is severely punished, and revoked of any previous motivations. These dystopias, closely related by common themes of technological control and ethics, have one key difference: their protagonists’ differing morals. However, whether evil or virtuous, they both receive major consequences from defying societal forces. Thus a key conclusion can be made: an individual can deal with issues of free will regardless of their moral standpoint.

As seen between the two protagonists, rather than an individual's free will being revoked based on moral issues, it instead occurs mainly due to their inability to conform to government ideals. This is most obvious with Alex. In *A Clockwork Orange*, their government is similar to the modern ones today, with ideals of individual well-being and collective peace. However, as Alex is often raping, harassing, or stealing for his enjoyment, he is often at odds with the law. After a conversation with his post-corrective advisor, Alex thinks to himself, "But the not-self cannot have the bad, meaning the government and the judges and the schools cannot allow the bad because they cannot allow the self." (Burgess, 40) On the surface level, this displays the government's value in keeping peace and preventing bad from affecting the majority of society. Yet looking deeper, Alex's thoughts simultaneously serve to illustrate his attachment to depravity. He imagines the "bad" inextricably connected to the idea of the "self"—showing how he believes his bond to immorality to be unbreakable. From the connection of these two levels, Alex's thought can be interpreted as a criticism of the government's willingness to rid individuals of their individuality. Nonetheless, Alex's disapproval is insignificant: this is the immutable world he lives in. And because he isn't willing to stop his violence, a character he deems a part of himself, the opposing government is readily available to forcefully revoke it from him. Unsurprisingly, this is exactly what happens to Alex. But is this case with Winston? According to modern perspectives of 'goodness', the protagonist of *1984* is far more righteous than Alex. Therefore, with these morals, it'd be assumed that Winston faces less adversity than Alex. However, this assumption is not necessarily true. Similar to Alex, Winston lacks conformity to his government: his motivating forces of truth and justice are in direct violation of Oceania's values of totalitarianism and lack of individuality. As O'Brien facilitates Winston's treatment to manipulate his mentality, they discuss the matter of individuality within the state, saying, "(Winston Smith) Does Big Brother exist? (O'Brien) Of course he exists. (Winston Smith) Does he exist like you or me? (O'Brien) You do not exist." (Orwell, 260) O'Brien, embodying Oceania's government in the conversation, speaks to the difference between Big Brother and the person. Big Brother, the idea, concept, and symbol, is considered more tangible than Winston—a human being. Significantly, this extends to Oceania's larger ideals of valuing coherence to common illusions in society rather than individual free will. Winston doesn't adhere to these values, therefore contradicting the governing powers around him and bringing him harsh punishments. In both Alex's and Winston's cases, these protagonists face

consequences due to their unconformity with their government—regardless of whether one has morals or not. And ultimately, this unconformity brings them to the same position—ready to be manipulated by their government.

Undergoing a nearly identical treatment, no matter the moral standpoint, both protagonists are manipulated by abuse of their humanity and are deduced to the image the government has for them. Alex's "reformation treatment" reveals how impactful one's humanity is. Even as Alex seems to have a high tolerance, even psychotic enjoyment, of violence of any sort, the treatment still manages to undermine his innate human intolerance to corruption. By forcing him to watch hours of nonstop gruesome acts, far more morbid than the crimes he usually commits, his outer layer of accepting violence is slowly chipped away, leaving him completely uncomfortable with violence, and ultimately unable to commit crimes. After this treatment, he comments, "I was 6655321 and not your little droog Alex not no longer." (Burgess, 76) This juxtaposition between the numbers and his name highlights his newly unnatural state. The treatment proves successful in the abuse of his humanity: in the end, he's deduced into a mere object and is no longer completely himself. Instead, he becomes a mere manipulated object from the government—molded to the image of how they want him to be. He is dehumanized. By a similar process, Winston is also degraded by his government. His treatment, facilitated by O'Brien, uses a mixture of mental adjustments and pain to change the beliefs that Winston holds. Going through intense electric shocks and being forced to succumb to the mind of Big Brother, deduces him mentally. Lastly, his humanity is utilized against him as they take his deepest fear, rats, to make him completely submissive to the state. During this treatment, O'Brien says, "You will be hollow. We shall squeeze you empty, and then we shall fill you with ourselves." (Orwell, 256) This objectification O'Brien uses supports the idea that Winston is a weakness in the hands of the government—a mere object. While Winston holds high values and morals, he is still inevitably a human that can be easily abused. And as O'Brien proposes, Winston is completely deprived of his morals and individuality, and instead left with the ideals of "ourselves"—representative of the collective mindset of Big Brother. Now, Winston, like Alex, is simply the embodiment of the government's image and lacks any previous moral or individual standings. Independent of their original beliefs, both are degraded to an object lacking any depth—deprived of the freedom of will and ethical decisions.

In conclusion, *A Clockwork Orange* and *1984* show two starkly different protagonists. Burgess imagines young Alex who is innately evil—ready to commit violence for entertainment. Orwell imagines Winston: a person who seeks to abolish the illusions of Big Brother for the good of society. Nonetheless, these moral differences between the protagonists are meaningless in the dystopias. In actuality, what does matter is the fact that they both lack conformity to their governmental control. This brings the protagonists' persecution and eventually their treatment of having their humanity utilized against them. In the end, regardless of moral standpoint, both protagonists face issues with their free will. Extending this message past the minds of Burgess and Orwell, could it be that our world today shares similar phenomena? As idealistically imagined, is it the goodness of character that determines our well-being? Or, rather, is it just our compliance with our government that decides our acceptance by society? Perhaps our world isn't as ethically driven as we initially envisioned, rather, it simply could be that our ability to conform determines our lives.

#### Works Cited

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# Tamara Nunez

Grade 10, Timberland High School

Educator: Andrea Dubitsky

*Flash Fiction*



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## Familiar

“Why do you even try?”

“What?”

I look over my shoulder and see her staring. It was unsettling the way she crept up on me, yet it was a familiar feeling.

“You tire yourself spreading awareness thinking it’s doing something to people who can help even if you know it doesn’t.” She props herself against the kitchen bar and continues. “I’ve seen your social media. I’ve seen how much you talk about the aftermath yet you still post. Why? Just take care of yourself. For them.”

“I–” I stop for a second. “They’re still humans like me. I shouldn’t complain about something silly like mental energy when people are getting slaughtered.”

She scoffs. “I don’t understand you. So what? It’s a whole genocide out of your control and you beat yourself over about it. Get over it. Accept the fact you can’t do anything abo–”

“No.”

It made me angry the way she thinks that I can’t do anything about it.

“No?”

“Just because I’m not the one suffering doesn’t mean I can just ignore the issue. Where are your morals?”

“Do morals really matter when murder is involved?”

I fall silent.

“If someone killed your family and you were left standing, what can you do? You can’t do anything especially when you’re stuck in a place where help is turned away.” She crosses her arms. “What do you do when your family is bombed? Your land? Do your morals matter then?”



She had a point.

"I guess I never saw it that way."

"Just because I treat this situation and myself differently doesn't mean I don't feel the same way about the genocide like you do."

"But you do know there's more than just that country suffering? Right?" I give her a knowing look.

"What kind of person do you take me for? Of course I do," she snaps, returning the look. "You are generous to a fault, you know. Just- just take care of yourself for them."

"I'll try."

"Better be more than try."

"I know."

"Please. Take care of yourself for them."

# Madee Omran

Grade 12, John Burroughs School

Educator: Jill Donovan

*Critical Essay*



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## My Teta

Teta always was an elegant woman. She never left the house without her finest clothing and her most thorough makeup. Her neck and wrists were traced with just the right amount of perfume to be noticeable but not overpowering. Each weekend, my mom would drive her to the salon to get her hair done properly—nobody wanted to find out what she would do if a single gray thread was left exposed. Even so, Teta was never materialistic or shallow. She took great care in her appearance, not to show off to others, but to share her story with the world: she loved life and wanted to bring her best self anywhere she went. And Teta truly wanted me to love life too. In those days, time was infinite, and she spent every last drop of it showing me how beautiful the world was. In the same way that Teta told her story through her actions rather than on paper, the women in Paule Marshall's "From the Poets in the Kitchen" tell their stories orally, amongst themselves, using words and phrases unique to their tales. They remind us that we all have a story to tell, and that the way we choose to tell our story is often as important as the story itself.

Teta always said she hated surprises. She would jump and holler like her feet were on fire, act all upset, yell at me in Arabic, but I could see the truth on her expressive face. She loved everything I did, surprising or not. For me, she even got over her biggest fear: bugs. One special day, as we were returning from our daily walk, I stepped onto the lawn and a giant grasshopper flew out in a panic. I immediately smiled and clapped my hands; Teta was terrified, but my reaction did not go unnoticed to her. The next morning, she led me outside, armed with a plastic sippy cup, and helped me catch insects as they torpedoed out of the grass. Each day afterwards, Teta would take me outside to catch insects, showing me new techniques, taking pictures on her little camera. She spent over fifteen years

of her life hiding in insect-infested bomb shelters, and with one flash of my smile, she decided to face her trauma. Teta's life story was centered around love, so naturally, she told it to me in the only way she knew how: by loving me.

Like Teta, the women in "From the Poet's in the Kitchen" have powerful, complex stories to tell, and stories must be released or they burst within a person. The women are not able to write their stories formally, in perfect prose, "They were just a group of ordinary housewives and mothers..." (Marshall, 1983). No matter how ordinary the person, there is never such a thing as an ordinary life, so the women find ways to tell their stories anyways. Gathered after a long day of often humiliating work, they orate their tales, for power is not exclusive to the written word, "...they talked endlessly, passionately, poetically, and with impressive rage" (Marshall, 1983). It is their unique way to release the pressure, to escape temporarily into the eye of the day's hurricane. Here, in the center of the storm, they keep themselves alive. The way they speak, "with impressive rage", like the storm itself, is telling. They are the oppressed, so the story must be expressed by words shot out like cannonballs; how else could they capture the sheer weight of their experiences?

Teta had her fair share of experiences too. One of six children—four girls and two boys, she understood the meaning of family better than anyone. Life in Beirut was never easy, but Teta was well-suited to it; she enjoyed the bustle of a city, the crowdedness of her apartment. In those days, women were not supposed to be educated, but Teta's father was progressive. He ensured that each of his daughters received the same quality education that his sons did. Teta was intelligent, and soon it was discovered that she had a natural knack for seeing into the depths of people. Her father let her leave home to obtain a degree in Psychology, and she eventually received it after years of studying. But her ambitions to be a working woman fell apart when she met my Jido. He was a powerful military man, tough, but with strong morals, and my Teta didn't hesitate in quitting her career to build a family with him. In 1975, the Lebanese Civil War began, and Jido was assigned as a helicopter pilot; by then, they had two children and one on the way—my mother was the eldest at three years old. When the war finally ended, my mother was 19, and Teta was in her early forties. Both were aged beyond their years. Even after all of the pain Teta experienced in Lebanon, she never stopped loving her home. In St. Louis, she would take me on walks around the neighborhood every day, stopping at various neighbors' houses, simulating her daily trek back home in "Achrafieh" to visit her sisters. Teta was teaching me about her home, about her family, about pain, about beauty

just by taking me on a walk around the neighborhood. Each step was filled with so much love.

A person can leave home, but home can never leave them. Like Teta, the women in “From the Poets in the Kitchen” cannot tell their stories without the context of home woven in. They are immigrants from Barbados looking for opportunity in America, people coping with extremely difficult circumstances. To relieve some of their burden, “They reminisced often and at length about home. The old country. Barbados—or Bimshire, as they affectionately called it. The little Caribbean island in the sun they loved but had to leave” (Marshall, 1983). Life in this desert is about chasing the rain while never forgetting the parched Earth you’ve already crossed. The women “reminisce” not because they regret moving on from home, but because their stories would be incomplete otherwise.

The final component of Teta’s story was community. She made friends wherever she went—airplanes, waiting rooms, parties... Our neighborhood was no exception. Before she arrived, we had only spoken to two of the families in our street, and by the time she left, we were close with a dozen. Most pivotal to Teta’s sense of community were the immigrants in the neighborhood because they understood the strange sensation of not being fully tethered to one place. On our daily neighborhood walks, one stop stood out to Teta as the most important, Matma’s house. Matma was an immigrant from India who could not speak English; Teta could not speak English either. Somehow, they communicated with hand gestures and the few English words they knew, and because of the communication style unique to their relationship, they bonded quickly.

The way people adapt language when telling their stories relays as much information as the content of the story itself. In “From the Poet’s in the Kitchen”, the women speak in a dialect, filled with idioms and references only they understand. They add whole new dimensions to their stories, “There is a theory in linguistics which states that the idiom of a people... reflects not only the most fundamental views they hold of... the world but their very conception of reality” (Marshall, 1983). To truly understand the story of a life, the way that story is delivered must be analyzed, and the women, with their passionate, metaphorical, unique language, show that they have lived the lives of poets. They have experienced the world with raw emotion, pain, and beauty. It is necessary that they share it in the only way they can—with their voices, drowned out by the wind of the workday, audible only when huddled close together in the swirling eye of the storm.

Teta is back in the storm, in Lebanon. She has been there for over a decade now, and I still miss her. I have never met a soul glowing with love as much as hers. It is powerful to be with somebody like that, to know that no matter what you do, you will still be loved, still be warmed by her glow. I visited Lebanon this summer for the first time in six years, and the situation was dire. My Teta was still laughing, even after breaking her neck—still glowing even after Jido got cancer. When all the flights out of Beirut airport were canceled due to regional conflicts, Teta hugged me tight. She kissed my forehead and said I would get out. When I asked, “What about you?”, she laughed and said, “You’re just like your Jido, always worrying; that’s why he got cancer.” Teta is always loving; that’s why she’s invincible.

# Maggie Orton

Grade 10, Olathe North High School

Educator: Deirdre Zongker

*Short Story*



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## Feather Painting

The eyes of children wander for too long, some could say. This wandering is a blessing of curiosity that only children can experience. Though one set of eyes never seemed to wander, always locked on the page of a book or the skies up above. Eleanor, always prim and proper, never let her eyes wander. With her posture perfect and her legs crossed at the ankle, she was a teacher's dream student.

She dreamed of being the perfect little girl, never stepping out of line. All to impress her sister and parents. The creaking of the swing set soon distracted her from the importance of ink on a page. The bell rang out. She passes the aggravating swings and the slide, still covered with children. She sees the rock wall, covered in bright colors, as if it's not a death trap, and arrives at the front of the line, like usual. The end of recess prompts tiny children to line up outside the doors with sweat dripping down their faces. Eleanor walks over calmly with her book in hand. Her hair is still straightened, unlike the many fools surrounding her. With eyes locked onto her gray-haired teacher, she follows her instructions to a tee.

"Okay, my lovely 3rd graders, listen closely. We are going to head back to class, finish our math lesson, and then go to specials! Today, we have art class!"

The entirety of Eleanor's class rejoiced, but she knew that art class was just a glorified mess.

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As the gray-haired teacher explained the simplicity that is adding fractions, Eleanor continued to the bottom of her paper, finishing before everyone else in her secluded corner. She never really had friends-- she was convinced they were just there for answers even though 3rd grade is practically

unfailable. Eleanor has watched her sister go through the exact experiences she is currently living, and Eleanor has been vying for her attention and respect for years. The only way she will ever get that respect is through the hard work and discipline of not being childish. Eleanor works tirelessly to always be three steps ahead of her competition, or as some would call them, her peers. Every day, she begins by crushing everyone in English, then again in Math.

While lost in her thoughts, the gray-haired teacher creeps into Eleanor's corner where she finds her completed paper.

The teacher leans down and whispers "Why don't you come up closer so you can keep pace with us. Would that be ok with you?"

This is not the first time she's been asked to slow down, but she will do anything to be superior. *No, I won't*, she thought, but what came out of her mouth was much different.

"Yes ma'am."

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Eleanor watched the clock, the minute hand slowly getting closer to the worst part of the day, art class. She never ended up moving with the rest of the class to finish the lesson, and the gray-haired teacher stopped her complaining. After all, Eleanor always got the answers correct.

Everyone soon rose to their feet and began the dreaded walk to the art room filled with colorful paint that threatened her perfect navy shoes. She tread carefully as she found her seat, once again in the corner, far away from the oafs covered in glitter. She tried to pull out her book, which she gracefully snuck into the hall under her pressed cardigan. Eleanor held onto her momentary peace, and, like clockwork, the art teacher, clad in bright colors, brought her the supplies for a new project that could only be described as chaos. The colorful teacher laid out the supplies: many sizes of feathers and bright colors of paint, which would surely not find their way onto her pristine outfit. She walked up to the front of the class and began to explain the activity. She called it *Feather Painting*, and Eleanor was immediately unsure.

She looked around for reassurance but remembered that's what a child would do. She carried on, like an adult, with a perfect posture and no mistakes. The colorful teacher showed the excited students an example of this lousy activity. The painting was full of bright colors, and flower-like lines, with spirals. This made the eager students sit on edge with excitement.

Eleanor was determined to follow the instructions, as any adult would do, so she dipped the frail feather in the only color that didn't assault her eyes, a

mellow green. She watched as the paint dripped down, unsure if this is what she is supposed to do. *Make an intentional mess? This seems silly*, she thought to herself. She laid the feather on the page, as tears began to well in her eyes. She was unsure of so much, even in art class. She picked up the feather once more and realized she'd made a mistake. It was not in the exact spot the teacher's was in. The thought of failure echoed in her head. She tried to clean it up but only made more of a mess. The kind and colorful teacher saw her pain, and walked over and told her to clean up in the bathroom.

Eleanor walked down the hallway, her head hung low. When she arrived she looked in the mirror, and saw her worst nightmare come true. She saw a child reflected back at her, with green paint in her hair and a small smudge on her sweater. She knew that adults don't cry, but she couldn't help it. Her emotions took over and a stream of tears fell from her eyes.

That failure continued to haunt her throughout the day, but, luckily, no one in her class noticed. She knew her parents would find out soon, with the day coming to an end and teachers conversing over her well-being. She knew a call home was inevitable. She knew this would not be the first call home either.

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The end-of-day bell didn't come soon enough. Eleanor had little success with the stain still on her sweater. Her hair did little to hide the bright green spot right below her left shoulder.

Her little feet kept moving forward, she kept walking home, not stopping. The concrete below her was the same gray she always saw, but today the gray was sad. Not a single leaf covered it-- just the same boring gray, under her same boring navy flats, joined with the same boring white socks.

As she turned on her street, she saw her sister Delany sitting on the front porch, with Eleanor's same brown shoulder-length brown hair and big green eyes. Eleanor walked a little faster towards the safe space that was her sister's arms.

Behind her sister was her house--a navy and gray boring house. She noticed the same colors again and it made her sad once more. Eleanor was unsure why, as navy has always been her favorite color. The color that once brought her calm now brought her a saddened sense of dread.

She felt the warm embrace of her sister, and she let out a sigh of relief, but with that came a stream of tears. Delany pulled back and held Eleanor by the shoulders. Noticing her tears, she took her sleeve and wiped away the little droplets of water that betrayed her armor of cold emotions.



"I heard what happened at school," Delany mentioned quietly. "You know sometimes adults make messes, too."

"No, they don't."

"Yes, yes they do! Have you ever seen Dad in the kitchen? He makes a giant mess every time he goes near the oven."

"Yeah, I guess he does," Eleanor chuckled quietly. She had never thought of that. Blinded by her own standards of perfection, she never thought to look beyond herself to think if they were truly necessary. Eleanor leaned into her sister, sitting in her lap. She looked around and noticed the mess that surrounded her. She saw piles of leaves on rooftops and dirt smeared on the sides of houses. She saw piles of dog poop and very tall grass. She didn't mind any of it.

"You know you don't ever have to be perfect, especially not for me," Delany explained. "You never have to impress me. I already think you're the best sister I could ask for."

Eleanor turned to see Delany's eyes full with tears, as if remembering when she thought this way, with no one to tell her it's okay to make a mess.

Eleanor reached out and hugged Delany, with as much force as an eight-year-old could muster. She heard Delany snuffle as they stood up, walking inside.

"I love you Ellie- sorry, Eleanor."

"You can call me Ellie, it's okay."

Eleanor refused the nickname of Ellie for so long. Delany looked pleasantly surprised. Eleanor knew nicknames were childish, but little Ellie knew it was just another way to show their love.

"I love you too," Ellie whispered.

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The next day, she woke up and put on a sweater her parents got her long ago, waiting for her to grow into. She had never reached for it before today due to its oddly bright colors, but Ellie found them to be quite endearing. They brought a smile to her face.

She walked to school in her bright green sweater. It had little flowers all over it. She looked like a cute little garden. When she got to her class, she set down her bag and got to work. This time, she sat with the rest of the class while the gray-haired teacher taught them math. Ellie leaned over and helped her classmates when she saw they were struggling. Helping others made her feel good, like the butterflies in her tummy were never really there.

She still brought her book outside to recess. Ellie was a little shy and scared they would only see her as her old self, but that day, while helping a little girl in her class with math, the girl said:

“I really like your sweater! It’s so colorful and different from what you usually wear. I like it!”

Ellie’s heart swelled with joy.

“Thank you!” Ellie’s little voice squeaked.

“My name is Charlie, what’s yours?”

“My name is Eleanor- Ellie, my name is Ellie”

“Ellie, would you like to come and play with me during recess today?”

“Yes, please!”

From the corner of her eye, Ellie saw the gray-haired teacher smile with pride.

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Little Ellie didn’t bring her book outside to recess anymore. Her hair was creased when they went inside, little curls popping up behind her ears. There was dirt under her fingernails for the first time in a while. Ellie and Charlie played together every day, never leaving each other’s side. P.E. was much more fun with a friend, and she began to like school more and more every day.

“Ellie! Come on, the bell rang!” Charlie called out.

Ellie jumped up off the swing and ran to the lines with her. Little Ellie was very excited for today and wore her new pink sweater just for the occasion.

The kids heard a clapping with a distinct rhythm which called their attention.

The gray-haired teacher said with a smile, “Today we have art class! We will go inside, finish up our reading, then go to art! Who’s excited?”

For the first time ever, Ellie’s hand shot up, joined with Charlie’s hand shortly after. They had been looking forward to this all week.

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It was time for art class. The room Ellie had hated now seemed promising and full of life. She walked in, hands joined with Charlie’s. Instincts took over and she began walking to her corner, but Charlie stopped her, gently pulling her along to join the class.

Ellie would miss that corner and the safety it brought to her, but she knew it was time to move on. She followed Charlie’s lead, walking to the tables covered in more feathers and bright colors that she just happened to love.

The brightly colored teacher walked around, handing out the incomplete artwork from last week. She handed Charlie her artwork covered in pinks and blues. It looked nothing like anyone else's.

When the art teacher reached to hand Ellie's artwork to her, she whispered, "Would you like to try again, and start fresh on a blank piece of paper?"

Ellie shook her head no, examining her paper that would soon become a masterpiece. She realized what she had made was not a failure. It was as unique as her. She smiled and reached for the supplies.

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The colorful art teacher watched from her desk as she saw Eleanor making a mess. She had always felt as though her students were her own children, but there was a special place in her heart for Eleanor. Tears began to well in her eyes, Eleanor was being a kid. The colorful art teacher would give anything in the world so everyone could be a kid at least once in their life.

# Keshav Pallavur

Grade 8, Parkway West Middle School

Educator: Tracy Bouslog

*Personal Essay & Memoir*



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## The Knight of the Court

Thwack! The lime ball flew off his racquet with so much spin. It spiraled like a football and sliced across the air toward my left side. *Dang it! I don't want to start this point with a backhand*, I thought. The shot, however, was inevitable. I reluctantly hit it and as I expected, it went down the line, meaning I had no time to waste. He sprinted across the court and returned the ball nice and easy. My shoes screeched as I harshly stopped my sprint to return the ball. I hit a smooth backhand and watched as it bounced. The force surged through my arm as I continued gazing. *No way he can return that, right?* Those seconds that I wasted watching was when the match turned around.

Before I was playing in an intense tennis match, I was inside the Woodsmill Tennis Club, waiting for it to be 5:30. My stomach was very queasy, for this was my first tournament. I sat there in anxiousness as the clock ticked and tocked. Thoughts began racing through my head. *How does this work? Will my first match be easy? Is today even the right day?* The faint footsteps of my friend Arnav, who walked from behind the wall, broke me out of my trance.

"Did you see the draws?" he asked eagerly.

Hesitantly, I responded, "No... but I'm not sure what those are." He pulled out his phone and spent a few awkward moments scrolling in silence. Finally, he pulled up a bracket and showed me. It had names of people I didn't know, and then I saw it. The line connected to Arnav's name went down to mine. *Why? Why do I have to play him? He's so much better than me! I guess I'm losing my first match.* A wave of nervousness washed over me like a tsunami, destroying the hope I had built up for the past 30 minutes. *Welp, I guess I can't do anything but wait.*

"Arnav, Keshav, are you here?" my coach asked. I didn't even notice her entering the building.

“We’re over here!” Arnav exclaimed. We walked up to the desk she was sitting at.

“Good. Are you guys ready to play?” she joyfully asked.

“Yeah,” I sighed.

“Remember. It’s two sets of Fast Four. If you tie 3-3 in a game, then it’s a seven-point tiebreaker. And if you tie the match score 1-1, then it’s a 10-point tiebreaker. Before you start, you get 10 minutes of warm-up. Have fun!” she said rapidly.

After a few minutes of gathering our stuff, we walked down to the courts. Arnav had an expression I couldn’t identify. He looked happy, nervous, and angry all in one. We entered the court and the whole vibe changed. It went from messy and dark like a forest to bright green like a field. *You shall succeed in your quest, brave knight! You’ve only got one shot, and he shall not perish your destiny.* An awkward medieval voice took the reins of my thoughts and steered them to positivity.

We began warming up, and I could see that Arnav wasn’t hitting his best shots. He sometimes shanked the ball and often lobbed it. The unpleasant sounds of his racquet frame hitting the ball made us both wince. In contrast, I was hitting beautiful, high-quality shots during my warm-up. I was starting to feel better about my chances of winning. And then the match began.

We spun my racquet to see who would serve first, and as I called, it landed down. Now I had to make a decision. *I could serve first and get the upper hand. That would be risky since my serves are iffy. I could also just return and see how he’s playing.*

“I’ll return,” I said confidently. The play had officially commenced.

“Zero all!” Arnav called out. He served, and the ball wasn’t fast at all. It arced through the air and sounded like a rock skipping over water when it bounced. Unfortunately, it was curving left, which meant that I had to hit a backhand. But I ignored my fundamentals and went around the ball and hit a smooth forehand. He returned a weak shot, and I thought, *now’s my chance to strike!* I flew up the court and my racquet smashed against the ball. As the ball zoomed on his court, I glanced at Arnav’s face and saw his eyes wide open with shock. The ball crashed into the curtain and sounded like a plastic bag waving through the air. *Yes! If this is how he is playing today, then this will be a really easy win.* The match continued and after the first set, I was winning. The score was 4-2.

“Dang, you’re good,” Arnav said.

“I feel like you’re giving points away,” I replied.

As the second set began, I was winning again. The score was 3-1. I just needed to win one more game. Love, fifteen, thirty, forty, and game. It was that simple. But I had let my guard down.

I approached the net and was ready to finish this match, but his shocking burst of speed enabled him to hit the ball in a high arc over my head. He soon made the score 3-2. He was quickly gaining on me. *I just need to win. It’s not that hard.*

“Dude, stop giving points away,” Arnav said while taking a sip from his water bottle.

“How did you hit that last ball?” I furiously exclaimed. “You suck at lobs!” I felt frustrated that I was still on the court, even after an entire hour of playing.

We started the next game, and he beat me again. It was now 3-3. We had to do a 7-point tiebreaker. *Oh my god! This is supposed to be a straightforward game. He is not playing well today. Get your head in the game and just end this.* But a scheming voice had also taken place in my mind. *Just give him the game. Tell him now and he will owe you one. And then, just make him lose the match. You can easily win if you find a loophole to manipulate h-* BE QUIET! My anger captured my thoughts. *THIS IS AN EASY WIN IF YOU JUST FOCUS!*

We started the tiebreaker, and I was crushing him. All I needed was just some negative energy freaking out in my head. It was 3-1 when we started arguing. I lobbed the ball over his head and he claimed it was out.

“That ball was clearly in!” I said impatiently.

“No, it wasn’t. It’s my call, and it was out,” Arnav responded sharply. Just then, a player from the court beside us defended me. He silently said, “It was in.” *I don’t want to keep doing this. I just want to leave. I’m tired, and I just want to go home.* As we started playing again, I felt like Arnav had gained a serious surge of energy. Each point was an eternity, and I thought my legs were going to collapse. He soon made the score 4-6. He was going to win the second set. *No! I have to win. He is not beating me today.* But the motivational thoughts were too late. Arnav won the second set with a score of 7-4.

“Why are you giving me points?” Arnav asked with genuine confusion.

“I’m not trying to. We’ve already been playing for an hour and fifteen minutes,” I sighed. I felt exhausted as I sat down and took a few sips from my water bottle. Since the match score was now 1-1, we had to do a 10-point-tiebreaker.

“Zero all!” I called out. We began playing, and I took the upper hand. I swiftly ran around the court and was overpowering him. *Nice! Keep this up and you can win!* I put the ball away after each point, devastating Arnav. It was now 4-0, and I was sure that I would win. But during each point, I was wasting more time just watching the ball. He was beginning his recovery. We spent a few more minutes playing, and he had made a huge comeback. It was 6-5. I still had the advantage, but he was making me nervous. Come on! Don’t stop winning now! I won another point, and then I started to falter. I tried lobbing the ball in the following points, but it kept going out and now, I stood before my worst fear. The score was 7-9. I couldn’t give up. As we started the match point, my heart dropped. I returned his serve by shanking it. Clank! The noise of the ball hitting the frame of my racquet made me cringe. Time slowed down as the ball gradually ascended. An opera in my head sang as the ball rose to the bright ceiling. Then, it all came crashing down. Gravity grasped the ball as it swung to the ground. When it hit the ground, the booming thud was louder than the opening of palace gates. I felt devastated. The ball bounced in the alleys. It was out by an inch. Arnav had won the match 2-1. *No! This can’t be! I was supposed to win this game! This is impossible!* An enraged voice took control of my head, and it shamed me. I hung my head low as I walked to the net and firmly shook Arnav’s hand. It was undeniable. I lost.

In retrospect, this tennis match was like a dragon’s castle, and victory was the trapped princess. Arnav, being my opponent, was the dragon. He stood as a formidable adversity between victory and me. In most cases, the brave knight is indomitable, beating the dragon and saving the princess. In my story, though, the dragon is stronger and outlasts the hero, eventually defeating the bold knight. This match was a reminder that sometimes, the hero loses, leaving the princess in the clutches of the dragon.

# Bohan Pan

Grade 12, Ladue Horton Watkins High  
School

Educator: Jon Frank

*Critical Essay*



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## No Hero in the Margins

There is no change in a hero. A hero, in the way the term is defined, is a monument to the structures that keep society stagnant. This much is clear in the videogame, “Mouthwashing,” when the player assumes the role of Jimmy, who is thrust into taking leadership of a space crew after a crash. He seems to be a classic hero. But as the game continues, he is revealed to have deliberately crashed the ship. The player watches him indirectly kill the remaining crew members, culminating in a cut-scene where he desperately insists his actions were *heroic*. Jimmy calls himself a hero, but now, the hero narrative and its textbook moral categorizations have become self-justifications for him to hold on to. This isn’t the tragedy of a fictional man in a video game—it is the tragedy of a society where the word hero is strapped to dominant ideologies. Conventional heroism, as it exists, operates as a mechanism of propaganda.

Heroes serve to shear down movements into individual acts of greatness. Such narratives often disconnect a hero from the community that they were birthed from. Katniss Everdeen becomes the face of rebellion in *The Hunger Games*, iconized as a hero; Harry Potter is elevated from others as the Chosen One; the Rebel Alliance is reduced into Luke Skywalker’s defeat of Darth Vader. A hero standing, with a fist raised triumphantly, is to convince others that revolution can be built alone. Indicatively, the rebel movement from *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins, is often distilled into a singular hero. An iconized scene, where Katniss tells the Capitol, “if we burn, you burn with us,” is often used to hand Katniss credit for the rebellion’s momentum. But to give her credit for the rebellion *catching fire*, is to ignore the countless hands that lit the match. It is to forget the First Rebellion, a three year long civil war against the Capitol, that took place seventy-four years before Katniss even stepped foot into the Hunger



Games arena (Collins). District 13 carved out Katniss Everdeen, not the other way around. They mobilized her escape from the arena, directed the propaganda that built her image as the Mockingjay, and laid a victorious siege on the Capitol. The conventional definition that places one person on a pedestal, untouched and self-contained, splinters the solidarity required for progress. This erasure is not an accident but a strategy born to promote the myth that liberation is some act of genius, deterring from collective action. Division is sowed within communities, entrenching a need to be above all others to achieve hero status. Posing individuals as singular agents of change severs shared action (Lynch). Katniss was just one of many rebels; Harry Potter was supported by a network of witches and wizards in the war against Voldemort; Luke Skywalker was a part of the Rebel Alliance that trained him into a Jedi. Structures of oppression are not chipped at by one hero; they collapse under the strain of many.

Even in the creation of heroes, society injects its values, constructing heroes to represent dominant norms. In a society that is White and male, the hero status is assigned based on one's proximity to Whiteness and masculinity. Consequently, common hallmarks of heroism are closely tied to masculinity, such as valor or engaging in risky acts (Riches). In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus, a cemented hero, is admired for his intelligent tactics of devising the Trojan Horse, uncontested archery prowess, and resilient leadership. The female characters in the poem however, either embody the domestic virtue expected of women in Ancient Greece, like Penelope, a wife guarding the household while her husband is away, or are vilified as they step into roles with agency. Circe, a witch, is written to juxtapose Penelope and sustain the hero's story. In her power and thus contradiction of gendered expectations, she becomes a villain. Even in cases where heroes are written to be flawed, the narrative still controls which traits are acceptable. Jason, one of the argonauts, who abandons his marriage for another woman, still retains his position as a legendary hero. Naturally, there is nothing difficult in acknowledging flaws that fit into social scripts. In the example of Jason, the patriarchy that poses women as disposable objects to men, can accept infidelity, like Jason's adultery as nothing but a transgression (Davoudian). His story parallels the misogyny of the 3rd century BC and the people who wrote the tales. Heroes embody flaws that are acceptable while villains assume traits that are to be demonized (Frisk). Outside of the literary realm, hero rhetoric still operates to create a strict binary between heroes and villains. Following 9/11, American nationalism plunged soldiers, funds, and political capital into a series of wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria, Yemen, and Somalia. Militia groups

propped up in Afghanistan by the United States government, sanctions that choke Iraq's economy, and direct invasions carried about by the military, have accumulated a death toll of 408,000 civilians (Human). Yet, the state-sanctioned violence in response to 9/11 is sanctified, seen as justified, rational, and noble, whilst the violence of the hijackers is viewed as unjustified, cowardly, and evil (Connor). The label of hero continues dumping money into the deaths of millions, while simultaneously protecting a facade of heroism.

The hero label is a tool used by the state to maintain the status quo. From social studies courses to history textbooks, the Civil Rights Movement is taught as the march of a dreamer, Martin Luther King. King's heroification centralizes around his advocacies like non-violent protest, advocacies the government could accept. Comparatively, the Black Panther Party, an organization built on ideas of revolutionary nationalism and self-defense against police brutality were not only targeted by the FBI to be destroyed but then smeared as a violent, militant, and dangerous cause (Bloom). Furthermore, Martin Luther King's push for initiatives like a guaranteed income are less highlighted while he is hailed a hero for championing the passage of the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act—legislative changes that were a return to equilibrium, as African American communities were returned rights that the government had ripped away from them (Moten). In celebrating King, the state gave back what it stole and named it progress. However, the Black Panther Party which made calls to dismantle capitalism and operate on an anti-colonial framework, was discredited, unaligned with what America's government wanted. The Panthers were never given statues to commemorate their fight for Black liberation. They were wiretapped, raided, and torn apart. The state could build statues in King's memory because it could shape his story to suit its purposes. It could not do the same for the Panthers because their fight challenged the very foundations of power. Individuals are only granted hero status when it serves to maintain structures of the state. A world without so-called heroes to justify oppression, forces confrontation with inequality, poverty, and the system that continues to subjugate those on the margin of society. The movie *Joker* (2019), follows Arthur Fleck who suffers from a condition that causes him to laugh uncontrollably. His story—losing healthcare benefits, the pain of being disposed of by society, and ascent to a violent confrontation—is able to reveal a society that gave him a life of mistreatment, abuse, and suffering because it is set before Batman (Brown). Without the hero to blur its failures, we are forced to confront the reality of systemic oppression.

Heroism is used to obscure the status quo. In *Mouthwashing*, Jimmy sees himself as smarter than his crewmates, a savior to their situation. Even as the ship hopelessly hurtles into space, he validates his actions under the guise of heroism. Jimmy's self-justifying, self-serving, self-imposed hero narrative did not save the Tulpur. The sole purpose of his label as a hero was to protect his moral righteousness as the ship continued hurtling into space while the crew faced the brunt of his selfishness. Similarly, society's accepted definition of hero protects a crumbling system. Worshiping heroes means worshiping the systems that produced them. Heroes are not saviors where liberation can be found in their singular image. Change is the work of a collective. To unmake the systems that bind us, we must unmake the hero.

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# Kaavya Panchal

Grade 9, Lafayette High School

Educator: Jeffrey Landow

Poetry



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## She Who Waits

twenty thousand years.  
that's how long i've been asleep.  
i rise steadily, water pouring over my skin.  
but gravity pulls me right back down. my hands reach out in front of me,  
attempting to save my tired body.  
*tired?* i was merely asleep for what seemed like hours.  
as water continues to cascade down my body, my senses awake.  
my eyes adjust to the darkness of the cave, finally landing on a puddle in front of  
me. i meet my reflection, staring at it in horror: my green eyes turned gray, my  
cheeks covered in black powder, my lips chapped.  
my body burns, inside and outside. i turn to stare at my shaking hands, red  
blisters covering them.  
*my skin was peeling off.* i raise them to my face, accidentally pulling strands of my  
trailing hair out. it was brittle, unhealthy.  
i breathe in softly, trying to calm myself down, but violent coughs escape my  
system, pushing me closer to the ground.  
i grab onto a rock, trying to pull myself up. i lean against the cave's eroded walls,  
my body heavy. even without the water flowing onto me, i felt sweat pouring  
down me. the cold water had temporarily satisfied my overheating body.  
slowly, i make my way to the entrance of the cave, protected by a waterfall. dread  
twisted in my stomach, queasiness forming.  
nearly stumbling over my feet, i pushed through the water, making my way into  
the sun.  
light pouring down on me, i barely make it five steps before i collapse.

i press my hands against my ears, trying to block out the sudden screams. i could hear them dying, all over the planet, their cries etching into my skin like cacti needles.

my breathing was ragged; every time i opened my mouth i tasted sulfur, gas, and chemicals.

*what happened to the plants?*

as if to answer my question, another chunk of my hair falls out. the green tips were fading, and my head felt light.

*how many trees had i lost?*

the dripping of my sweat mixing with tears against the water draws my attention. why *did* i feel so heavy, so hot?

a deafening boom blasts through my head, and i fall into a fetal position, curled up in the water.

*glaciers.* there was no other explanation.

no matter how hard i tried, i couldn't move. i felt like a boulder was sitting on my heart.

i felt overpopulated.

overused.

overdone.

overheated.

i couldn't remember the world before what my senses took in. before the hate, pain, darkness.

i once danced in fields of flowers, tasted snow on my tongue, swam through the beautiful coral — not knowing it would be my last scene with the embrace of life. soon, the agony became so much my body gave up sending me signals of excruciating pain. there was nothing i could do.

every time i closed my eyes, death's embrace seemed to be coming closer.

maybe death was the solution.

so i close my eyes and waited. soon the pain will fade, my body will cool, my skin will heal, the screams will quiet, soon it will be over.

that's what i'm waiting for.

*but why hasn't it come yet?*

# Shruti Parthasarathy

Grade 11, Blue Valley North High School  
*Personal Essay & Memoir*



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## The Chronic Shift

The healthy wear a crown that they can not see; only those who face the daily challenge of how much their body can take vs their dreams can. I watched as my friends went out to football games, went to school, and grew while I was frozen in time, stricken with pain. The COVID epidemic had recently begun to slow with schools officially returning to in-person. I loved going back to school and was overjoyed to see everyone again, but that joy only lasted for a year. Less than a year was all it took before my body decided to turn against me. I had to relearn how to live when I never really learned how to begin with. The pandemic stripped away our youth and our chance to learn how to live. Now it was only I who had to complete the impossible, relearning something I had never known.

After finishing my first year of high school, I was so ready for summer break that I almost didn't notice when the pain began. Though it was minor at first, the sharp shooting pain radiated across my chest for months. I brushed it off; I was told, "It was no big deal." As the summer went on, my legs began to tremble and my arms felt weak. I wrote it off, playing it off as too much exercise or strain on my body. Nothing a little bit of rest couldn't fix. Yet, it didn't go away. Every time I stood up, I could feel my heart pounding out of my chest. Soon followed the dizziness, headaches, and blurry vision. In hindsight, I knew something was wrong, but it didn't stop me from attending summer debate camp. One night, two days into camp, I stood up from my bed getting ready to switch off the light when I felt my heartbeat soar and my vision started to tunnel. I attempted to keep walking to the switch; I thought I had reached it because the entire room went dark. Unfortunately, the next thing I remember was getting wheeled out of my dorm room by the paramedics. Instead, I had not actually reached the switch, but I had fainted. The doctors told me I was dehydrated, and I

was likely stressed from being in a new environment. I thought it was only a one-time event, but it was far from it. Naively, I brushed it off for the rest of camp and entered my sophomore year. However, my plan to continue sports, debate, and a rigorous course schedule came to a halt when my symptoms began to worsen. I was constantly dizzy from simply standing up or taking a shower, fainting more often than not. My health began to deteriorate, and I could no longer eat without feeling nauseous. I could no longer breathe properly, and my heart lost the ability to regulate itself. I wasn't sure exactly what was wrong, yet I continued to push through and attended tournament after tournament in spite of my sickness. Even with multiple lung infections, I still competed in each and every tournament, despite my health rapidly deteriorating. It felt as if I had attended hundreds upon hundreds of appointments before anyone had any idea what was happening to me. Eventually, I finally went to a specialized clinic and was diagnosed with a chronic illness that causes my autonomic nervous system to malfunction and deteriorate. I was constantly losing consciousness because my body could no longer regulate itself, causing my heart rate to rise and my blood pressure to drop. It also caused me to have many deficiencies, requiring regular mineral and nutrient infusions.

I could no longer participate in sports but I refused to give up my academics and debate. I attempted to continue down the only path I had ever known, continuing to take rigorous courses in school. I believed from a young age that there was only one way to live life, completing a challenging high school schedule and attending a prestigious college. However, I could no longer keep up with the amount of work. The expectation was for me to succeed in everything I did, or I would be met with the thought "Was I disappointing everyone around me?". My worst fear became true, the idea that I could not follow the path I was set out to follow. I had to reduce my course load, taking fewer classes due to the amount of school I was missing. My 7 A.M. to 3 P.M. school days became 4 A.M. to 5 P.M. hospital stays. Instead of going to school every day, I spent most days in the hospital as doctors poked and prodded me. I missed spending time with my friends, and I could no longer attend the classes I loved. Despite being chronically ill, I refused to let debate go. It was my last lifeline, despite it often doing more harm than good. I still decided to attend all of my tournaments; even though I had to put in twice the amount of effort to give a speech compared to other debaters around me. Not only did that apply to debate, but it applied to everything. Standing up took twice the strength, walking down a few steps of stairs became a workout, and eating became a tireless dilemma of fearing that



my nausea would worsen. Having a chronic illness is as if you are living life on hard mode, against your will; you must do everything more cautiously, and yet you still lose more energy. My sleepless nights made me question why I could no longer keep up with my peers and why I had to be the one to give up on my dreams. Desperately trying to stay afloat, I continued to debate for the rest of that year and the year after. I was spreading myself thin, on the verge of collapsing.

There's a fine line between balancing two ideas; not allowing a chronic illness to define who you are but also allowing yourself to rest and account for the struggles that come with it. Despite believing I could control my life again, I had absolutely no idea how to balance the two. Debate was an addiction in disguise. I would work on it at every opportunity I had. Sitting at each infusion with an IV in one hand while researching on my computer with the other; it felt as if it was the only thing keeping me alive. In reality, it was draining the rest of my energy, energy that I desperately needed to recover. My family and friends began to suggest it may be time to quit. The thought of quitting killed me but not as much as how I was going about living.

As I started my second year of varsity debate, my illness only began to worsen, and my workload only increased. Despite desperately needing a break, I didn't take one and attended every tournament. As I competed at each tournament, I lost increasingly more rounds, and I was doing worse than the year before. I began to believe there was no point in debating anymore. Yet, I couldn't quit because it was the only thing I looked forward to. I became ill to the point where I could no longer compete at the level I wanted to, and that hurt me more than my illness. I pushed myself to the limits and finally broke causing an episode so fatal I was rushed to the ER. I was tied down by the wires that were connected to an EKG and by the IVs which were delivering medicine that burned through my veins throughout the night. That haunting night was filled with an important realization, that I could no longer live like this or my illness was going to permanently define who I was, even if I had to face the idea of disappointing everyone around me. As my latest episode ceased, I began to truly think about what I was doing. I began to set a plan to slowly change my class schedule, change the amount of time I spent doing debate, and plan time to rest throughout the day. While my fear of disappointment lasted, the relief I felt greatly overtook any other emotion.

Learning how to live differently than others my age was very hard, especially when they could do everything that I couldn't. Finding a balance between how much work I could handle and continuing to stay healthy was

extremely difficult and forced me to sacrifice things I loved. I slowly began to learn that I needed to take breaks, even if it meant missing out on opportunities that were important to me. Having to slow down and go to fewer practices and tournaments to take the breaks I needed was essential to recovery, even though I was devastated I couldn't be there. I couldn't succeed if I was at my lowest, so I had to take things slower to be able to recover. While I am still working on striking the perfect balance between rest and work, being ill taught me that it's okay if you aren't able to keep up with everyone else.

Balance is key, and you don't need to meet the expectations of everyone. Finding your own path doesn't look the same as your peers or your colleagues. There isn't just one path to success in life, but rather you build your own. In my case, I had to find my own pace and schedule to be successful and had to change my mindset to understand that I just had to do things differently. Whether it was learning that I needed to take a break and sit down after I showered or doing strenuous activities less, finding a balance allowed me to start to recover. While I can never cure my chronic illness, I've learned how to accommodate for it within the activities I do. Being chronically ill shifted my entire world, but it also taught me that relearning how to live would set me up for success in the future. I still envy those who wear the crown of being healthy, but being ill teaches you that you can accomplish the same things, even if you have to do it a different way.

# Benjamin Patterson

Grade 11, Bishop Seabury Academy  
*Poetry*



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## America

Westward settlers flying on  
Flaming winged horses into  
A sunrise (or sunset) made  
Of bacon, skyscraper, beautiful  
Forest.

A voltage-spark passed  
Between two smooth, gray  
Boxes (each representing an idea)  
That becomes more blinding and  
More urgent with each exchange.

A black-and-white grain-film  
Image of a man and a woman  
(unclothed) picking apples in  
An Eden-esque garden, flanked  
By mechanical sentries wearing  
Monogrammed Christmas sweaters.

A one-act play where each  
Audience-member (including the  
Chairs they sit on) participates.  
Plot: rescuing this withering hole  
Of language, the one that is  
Worship, the sting of affection,

From an obscured glass case.

That is the trouble with defining the word,  
It usually ends up sounding like bullshit.

# Benjamin Patterson

Grade 11, Bishop Seabury Academy  
*Poetry*



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## The Kansas River is a Sickle

I remember in the Summertime  
When the river respired orange  
In the remained gloaming as if  
A long shadow of candysweet.  
Sand islands tiny and  
Fleeting—  
    A hot trickle of  
    Molasses.  
And when the steam fissured its  
Face and set it spinning in an  
Increasingly incendiary midmorning—  
    As if all would suddenly  
    Stop and revolve the other  
    Direction—  
I sat longfaced in a moving car,  
Wondering why I hadn't gotten  
A job as the pavement rolled  
Contracting and elapsing beneath.  
The Summer holds weight.  
Wheat blear, crystalized amid a  
Sloped ray.  
    There are some  
    Stalks hanging—  
As if pain, held like a murmur,

Laps the metalsurfaced waters  
And swims.

# Benjamin Patterson

Grade 11, Bishop Seabury Academy  
*Poetry*



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## The Passenger

I do not remember the past.  
All I recall is the dreams  
That have replaced it.

The radio is on as a bit of  
Muttering breath in the  
Background.  
A panel of light lays flat  
And indivisible on the  
Window screen.  
In procession, August sunset  
Falls piercing rays—  
Make dust angular in  
Their starry bolts.

Driving in the country,  
Conspiracies of dust groove  
Slyly upward.  
Soon, white and silty, it  
Suffocates the wheels.  
Moves up through the engine.  
Fog then exploding from  
Our mouths.

The scent of lilacs fluttered  
Then, indistinguishable from  
The dust like flags wrapped to  
Some buoyant and fading  
Form;

And that is what I outstretched  
Towards; my bough over an  
Ocean of miasma chalk—  
Just brushes the surface, and  
Disappears.

I am awake. A square of light  
Affixed to the window.



Amaya Payne

Grade 10, Battle High School

*Poetry*



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## The Price of Peace

Peace is expensive  
In order for quiet, I need to be alone  
To be alone, I need to tell people off  
I don't like being alone but I need peace  
I need my time  
I need to collect myself without supplementary excuses

"I'll stay home, I don't wanna go"  
"No, no, it's ok I'll just come next time"  
I repeat over and over and it drains me  
The price of peace is what strains me  
All for peace  
All for me

Peace is expensive  
Over piling lies and excuses  
I don't wanna die  
Don't wanna lie  
But I have just to lie here and collect  
Collect myself, find my inner peace

"Oh, don't worry about me it's alright"  
"It's ok, I just need some time"  
Time and time again  
Over and over the same excuse

How long will this take  
How long will my sanity be at stake  
How many times can I say I'm ok and still lie awake at the unspoken hours of the  
night, when the sky looks like dark jade and my mind can't wrap around the fact  
that I'm still not ok?

Peace is expensive  
Too much I have to do to find myself

"My peace is my priority"  
"My peace is my priority,"  
I say over and over and it never is  
The price of peace is a price to pay  
And that price is a price I'm not willing to pay

Amaya Payne

Grade 10, Battle High School

*Poetry*



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## Waiting for My Ride

The crisp sound of leaves soothes my mind  
There are words I can't find but for now  
The sound of leaves caressing the ground is fine

As I sit here waiting for my ride, the cool wind kisses my eyes  
It makes them tear up and more tempted to close but for now, they'll stay open  
They stay open to view the leaves falling from the trees, the people walking by  
with a unique story on them, and the clouds passing by in this soon-to-be dark  
sky

Here in this moment, I'd like to reside and rest  
With the sky and its dark cloak as my blanket and the clouds as my pillow  
My lullaby sings as the cars drive by and it quiets my mind

I'd like to take all my thoughts and lie them out on a highway to be picked up by a  
trucker and to be taken away never to be seen again  
At that moment, I can finally sleep  
I could lay my long rest and not worry about the extinct thought in my mind

As I sit in this moment, the crisp sound of leaves soothes my mind  
My eyes follow as the airplanes fly throughout the sky  
And lines that guide perfectly at ease for my sight  
The kisses from the wind still dabble on my cheeks leaving their mark on me  
with his lovely chill breeze

And along comes this familiar aroma from the Earth alerting us that the clouds are about to cry and water down the Earth with its soft mist of a hundred tears

As I still sit here waiting for my ride, I notice the cars  
Each one is distant but close enough to still hear its light rumble as it glides over the speed limit across the road toward its destination  
A destination that I'd like to reach but I'm still here peacefully waiting for my ride to arrive

# Karina Pedroza

Grade 10, Staley High School

Educator: Carol Toney

*Science Fiction and Fantasy*



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## Bittersweet Freedom

Civilizations pride themselves on their efficiency and longevity, on the battles turned to victories. But what of the heart that beats the rhythm of harmony? Do we give thanks to the spirit of unflinching souls? We leaders underestimate the raw strength found in a united force turned against us. Heed that the ordinary is often more impactful than the elite if the balance is tipped just right.

—Emperor Thalorian IV of Vestra, 3,000 years before the Fall of Man

Every night Caius is a sinner, for he sees a forbidden Eden behind his eyelids. He dreams of lush forests, bursting with the vibrant flowers and fruits. It is a paradise so full of life that his cold sterile world feels foreign when he awakes. And as he walks through the halls of hollow luxury, bought and paid for by the labor of thousands, he wonders how humanity could stray so far from its soul. Why must the aspects of life that make living beautiful be suppressed as a sin?

His aimless steps carried him towards the distant sound of a frantic woman emanating from the Sanctum Mechanica. The conversion ceremony—exactly what he wanted to avoid. Yet he knew his family would be absolutely livid if he didn't at least make an appearance. A sharp cry startled him out of his thoughts and as he grew closer to the ornate entrance of the chamber, her words became clearer.

"I was standing on the cusp of a deep valley, overridden with bones. Within myself, I sensed a sinking feeling from the scene of a civilization erased, but from these bones I witnessed a great rebirth!"

As Caius took his seat among the dozens of people scattered at his aunt's feet, he heard joyful murmurs burst from the crowd. "A great rebirth!"

He figured Luciana was detailing her dreams of enlightenment that had occurred as the scientists had invaded her body to connect her mind directly to the machine.

She continued on, “I saw a people completely dedicated to the machine’s cause, their minds overtaken by its awesome power. In this reformed society, no human flaws tainted the fabric of conformation. We pursued a perfection set out for us by the omniscient, for there existed no sickness of the body or mind. Our gracious benefactor had calculated the exact variables necessary to achieve the only nirvana truly possible. Then from within this paradise rose an altar to the machine, twisted wires and plates of bronze erected as a permanent testament of our faithfulness to our beloved god.” It was here when the clarity began to fade from her eyes, overtaken by a wild, passionate intensity. Her voice raised to a shrieking peak, gaze focused on some distant point above. “We were cursed to have been born human! To wear the weakness of flesh as a badge tied to our hearts! Humans can only create for so long before they find themselves yearning to eradicate. Suppressing our instincts is the path to true freedom, one where all live in accordance to the perfect mind of the machine!”

Her words stir a frenzy among the small crowd, people weeping, tearing out their hair. It saddens him to witness the scene, but this wasn’t her, he knew. The woman who had once whispered comforting words during stormy nights was gone, replaced by a mindless proclaimer of synthetic faith. Though he is disturbed, he guards his expressions carefully, making sure to cry out when he is expected to. Logically, Caius knows that he can’t be the only individual with doubts about their society, but the price of dissenting is far steeper than he’d ever be willing to pay.

“My goodness, get with the times, people! I see no difference between the worship of the machine and the worship of books. Once our religions were dictated by word of mouth, traditions passed down generation to generation, then transcribed into books which priests would read to the common man until the common man could read. Then we created machinery and continue to use it to transcribe religious texts even now. Technology and religion are in symbiosis, the modern miracles of man directly affect our mutating religions and vice versa. There’s a beauty hidden beneath those wires, the veins of modern gods. How could something so perfect, so thorough and precise, be anything but divine?” – Journalist, 2983

A few days after the ceremony, Caius was summoned to his father’s office. He walked the steel corridors with trepidation. His father rarely cared to see him,

his mind too occupied with formulating propaganda to control the masses. There could only be one thing this was about. He sat across from his stoic father as his fate was proclaimed, that it was his turn to become one with the machine.

“Thou shalt worship no other god: for the Lord is a jealous God...Thou shalt make thee no molten gods.” – Exodus 34 13-14

Caius was plagued with thoughts of despair, his father’s words ringing in his ears. A life of perfection, huh? He too believed in the future that this belief promised. He thinks to himself, is this truly perfection? A life so disconnected from what made humans unique, their unpredictability, their flaws, their capacity to feel sorrow and joy, how could this be a crime? While our creativity might inhibit efficiency, complete order stifles creative solutions. Can a machine replicate that? A thinking machine is dictated through logic and constraints, a cruel perfection that will never reach the heart. Humans are beautifully irrational, we feel too deeply and allow our emotions to cloud our decisions. This is the wild essence that life must capture, we need to dictate our lives, not a meticulously constructed chunk of metal given an artificial brain!

And yet he knows it’s only a matter of time before he must undergo a conversion himself, to lose his free-thinking mind completely. His thoughts swirl around him, overtaking him. This is all he has to himself and soon it will be gone. Caius’ analytical mind searches for a way out and there seems to be none.

“I see on the pages of the holy book a string of begats. With every year the future progresses, humanity loses touch with the Creator and it shows with every year He takes away. I see you hiding there, Methuselah, far beneath the depths of my skin. The humans that came before me brought the vices of old, illuminating my soul as I am tantalized by the call of sin.” – Unknown

Caius stood above the entire world, looking out at the steel landscape that was his home. For years, he lived in fear of death, of his traitorous thoughts being discovered. Now, he welcomes death with open arms. This is the end of the terror and feeling isolated from the believers around him. He will die himself this way, at least. On his terms with his own mind dictating his actions. He leans back and he falls and he falls, and never before has he ever felt so free.

# Karina Pedroza

Grade 10, Staley High School

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*Science Fiction and Fantasy*



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## Lament of the Lost

Oh, how longingly the saints cry out to me!

They wish for me to follow them yet I desire to be free.

With every choked breath I take of the dank, putrid air of this shattered city, I feel evermore bound to this prison of mine. This city is contaminating me from the inside out. I can feel it in my bones, just as I feel the vibrations beneath in the bones of the earth Herself. They are screams of anguish as our Mother is being drilled and bored to Her core. Yet within the turmoil, order is contained. Our work progress is logged to determine the amount of food we deserve. We labor from sunrise to sunset or else our hearts stop, our bodies slaves to the chips They brand us with. We walk in single file as if we have no minds of our own. There are no rules, there are only the paths They want us to follow and we must if we value our lives.

Yet some are a glitch, a menace to our artificial society. Some stand up to our shackles and spit in Their faces. And perish. Against my better judgment, I cannot help but agree with them. What is the point of living if it is like this? Why not die expediently instead of rotting away as the butane and radiation slowly destroy us? I am witnessing it occur at this moment as another collapses from our poisonous air and is whisked away by two rusty droids and a hover stretcher. I continue on in silence as I scan the chip on my wrist and push the turnstile to board the light rail. We are all condemned to a death sentence in this penitentiary of frigid elevator cells guarded by unmerciful, all-seeing droid wardens. If only I had the courage to rebel in some way, any way, just to show Them that They do not own me completely. I have these thoughts They cannot own.

I look towards the gray sky to view the home of our shackles, the pristine Heaven. We strip our only home of its resources to preserve Their perfect



paradise. Often I wonder what They'll do when Earth finally gives in to Their perpetual violation of Her vessel.

The bell on the rail dings, indicating that the workers stop here and I stand up stiffly to walk out of the light rail, but spots invade my vision and I begin to feel lightheaded. The world is spinning, my feet become heavy like cement. I stop walking for a moment, and in my peripheral vision I see the droids finally noticing this atypical behavior, until at last the darkness claims me.

The voices whisper bitter words of cruelty and hate,  
But why must their tone be ever so irate?

Groggily, I open my burning eyelids to a piercing light and the hazy image of an angel hovering over me. She has kind eyes, a beautiful smile, and a halo of light shining behind her. I attempt to make a sound of surprise with my scratchy throat and she laughs. It is the most possessing sound I have heard in my entire life. Her voice and face disappear like a distant dream, and all I am thinking is I must be dead. This has to be Heaven, because never have I felt this lovely.

My head pounds with the burden from billions of sins,  
The chorus is agonizing as I hear the singing of hymns,  
Heaven has tied me down with bands of iron and pierced me with wires and needles. I am not sure I am in the right Heaven. The passage of time is lost to me, life is a blur of waking and sleeping and the angel. Whether she is real or a figment of my imagination is unclear.

My waking periods seem prolonged each time they happen. The iron constricting me is not too tight that I cannot breathe easily, but I cannot seem to wriggle out of them. Always after I try to escape, darkness chases me into a deep subconscious that I cannot resist. This peace is unusual. Having enough sleep is unusual. And yet if I am dead I would not need to sleep. A small notion surfaces within my muddled thoughts. What if I am being held in the paradise of the sky where They reside? Where else could I be, so clean, so white, so perfect? Too clean. Too white. Too perfect. It feels resoundingly fake and artificial. I hear a door open and the angel walks in with her bright smile.

"How are you feeling today?" She asks while setting a tray of food on the counter. As she lowers my bedside table towards my lap and transfers the tray to it, I whisper,

"Are you an angel? Have I finally escaped my miserable existence to be received into the gates of Heaven?"

Her demeanor becomes uncharacteristically somber and her lovely eyes become grave. She stares at her slender hands with an expression I cannot quite make out.

“I am afraid you are as far from Heaven as one could possibly be.”

“How am I not dead?” I cry out in alarm. “All I remember was the world fading to black and then I saw radiant illumination and felt lighter than I had ever felt and...What is happening to me?”

“I’m sorry.” The Not-Angel says in a hushed tone. “I’m not permitted to tell you.”

Suddenly, I feel unnerved and disgusted by this perfect mystery world. Even this angel who is not truly an angel frightens me. The unease and stress I have felt over the past few days boils into anger and overtakes me. I push my food tray on the ground like a child.

“I don’t want your food!” I yell. “I don’t want anything to do with this strange-” my voice starts to warble. I feel exhausted and the darkness of unconsciousness is dragging me under...”take me ba-” my voice fades away and I submit to the shadows yet again.

Methuselah, did you ever feel forsaken?

You knew that your loved ones would never awaken,

When I wake, I distinctly sense eyes watching me. Every move I make must be monitored. That is how They knew to tranquilize me when my temper exploded.

The angel has not come. No one has come. I regret screaming at her. I am sure she did not choose the life she lives. She is as trapped in her situation as I am confined to my own. It was unfair of me to lash out at her in that manner. I felt the confusion of this Heaven-like Hell overwhelm me and I was not thinking and-

The door swings open and my frenzy of thoughts become still. Have They arrived to dispose of me?

The angel walks in tentatively. Shall I apologize or choose to be prideful? Even after everything, she smiles at me as fervently as before. However, her eyes hold a wariness within them. Guilt crashes over me.

“Allow me to apologize. I am not sure what came over me and am so very ashamed of acting as an animal would.”

Her enchanting emerald eyes turn jubilant again as she strides toward me and I feel a glow of warm happiness within my core.

“Why, of course I forgive you, silly fool. I understand completely why this bizarre place must make you uneasy, especially considering the contrast from the Hell you’ve lived in your whole life. Which is why...” she leans towards me with a playful expression and whispers in my ear, “I asked the Council if I could inform you on why you were here, to prevent further outbursts of rage.” Her breath tickles my ear softly and I feel a pleasant fluttering in my stomach. Normally, I would recoil from such intimate closeness but I am as still as a statue, as unflinching as stone. She giggles sweetly and straightens. The angel continues checking my vitals, speaking as she works. “All I was allowed to disclose was that They said you were promising, I am assuming that means you are exceptionally capable in some way or the other and They wish for you to work for Them.” She turns and I examine the golden ringlets of hair cascading down her back.

“I cannot refuse, can I?” I ask quietly. She inhales sharply and whirls around. The angel swallows and the tension in the air becomes palpable.

“You’d want to work with me, right?” She responds feebly. Before leaving, she faces me and mouths, ‘Be patient’. My mouth dries and I sit in silence as she exits.

“Wait, angel!” The words burst out of my mouth quickly. My ears promptly turn red from the embarrassment of calling her that, but she seems amused and pleasantly surprised by the sobriquet. “I cannot just call you...angel, can I?” She considers this for a moment.

“You may refer to me as Helena if you wish.” She leaves. Helena. Light. The brightness that guides me through the misleading darkness of this vicious world I have found myself trapped within. I stare into the lamp beside my bed until my vision distorts and I close my weary eyes. Why did Helena tell me to be patient? Why am I of use to the Demons that lord over this so-called Heaven? And if I am to help Them, must I be restrained? I fall asleep to escape the tormenting questions swirling through my mind, if only for a few hours. Oh, how longingly the saints cry out to me! But I shall be free at last.

I wake to shaking and an urgent voice whispering for me to rise. The remnants of sleep cling to me and I attempt to blink the sleep out of my eyes.

“Is something wrong?” I ask weakly. At first, I could not detect who the mysterious figure was. Yet when she speaks, her voice sweeter than honey even while alarmed, I know immediately.

“No time to explain. It is necessary to leave at once.”

I notice the bands that were previously around my waist and legs have peculiarly disappeared. As I swing my legs over the side of the bed, I look into Helena's eyes, searching for answers. I see nothing but distress in her dilated pupils. "Keep steady, now. Staying completely bedridden for nearly two weeks causes muscle loss."

She offers her arm and I tremulously stand up. She's correct, I can hardly maintain balance, but she provides support and I somehow manage. We hobble out the door slowly and it is ever so painful, but I grit my teeth and carry on. I know not where I am journeying toward, but Helena does and I trust her wholeheartedly. We pass through corridor after corridor of this huge labyrinth, but I hardly notice. The only thing I am focused on is placing one foot in front of the other and bearing the excruciating suffering. "I wonder how long Maitho can carry on with freezing the cameras...and if Araminta can distract the guards just a bit more..." she mutters to herself absentmindedly. Initially, I barely process the words. But then I do, and the striking revelation numbs the affliction shooting up my legs slightly. Helena transferring me from the room I was imprisoned in is an unsanctioned activity. As I contemplate this, we arrive at our destination. I gaze upon the gigantic expanse filled with hundreds of spaceships of numerous sizes. People rush around hurriedly and Helena pulls me behind a ship before one is able to catch sight of us. I stare at our intertwined hands and feel a hinting of warmth upon my cheeks. She observes this, then grins. "Let's pray that you're not afraid of heights."

Noah, did you feel no shame as the human race was eliminated?

I wonder if you truly believed that their minds were contaminated,

The next thing I know, we are on a spaceship and leaving Heaven behind us as the sky burns with a sunrise. And I feel something I've never felt before, an emotion that is bubbling warm in my stomach and makes my heart soar. We are free, free from the restraints and the constant surveillance and the haunting terror. However, I remember one detail that shuts down my fleeting happiness.

"Did you leave friends behind that aided in our escape?"

Helena sadly gazes at the approaching ground ahead of us.

"They'll be alright. They were discreet about their work, no one will know. I offered for them to accompany us, but they turned me down. Said their whole livelihood was there and they couldn't abandon everything."

I stay silent, deep in thought.

"We should prepare to liberate everyone, all of those who are slaves to Their corrupt ruling."

She turns her melancholy eyes towards me and smiles slightly.

"I agree."

We observe each other, not speaking. Our eyes were speaking the words we didn't need to say. I softly break the silence.

"I used to think the world was ugly, but then I saw you and you became my world."

Her eyes fill with tears as she glances out the window, blushing.

We land in a clearing in one of the few existing forests on the opposite side of Earth that Hell is in. Helena suggests that we scope out the area before unpacking the various supplies in the ship.

As our doors slide open, I hear a deafening sound ring throughout the clearing and echo off of the ship's metal. I watch in shock as Helena falls down bleeding, and I feel my former happiness freeze over and shatter into a million pieces. Inside your ark, did you look as your friends were sentenced to the grave? Did you ponder how God could be so heartless as children were overwhelmed by a wave?

I feel oddly calm as the ice of hate takes over my heart and infects my soul. I behold the people in front of me who took the love of my life and I come to the conclusion that I despise them with every fiber of my being.

"How?" I utter the word coldly.

One snickers. "Forgot your wrist chips, stupid."

Of course. They could track us. They mutter amongst themselves, "We can't kill that one, They're planning on using him."

My hate swells and increases even further. After everything, after murdering the one hope in my despair-filled life, forcing me to waste my life away as mindless labor, restraining me and drugging me, they expect me to help them? Never. Never. I refuse to allow Them to force me, I have had enough with Them writing the story of my life, with Them determining my bleak destiny.

With every loathsome thought, I sense a power growing within me and I let it thrive. My head is abruptly thrust back and agony like I have never felt before attacks me, but I don't attempt to stop it from taking over me. I black out. Abraham, did you truly love the Lord or were you a sabian?

The Bible asserts your perfection but can a heathen be pelagian?

I hear the ancient whispers of Earth speak to me. She declares the answers of the universes that no human mind could comprehend. But I do, and yet I don't, and I'm confused and clear-headed and alive and dead and everything and nothing. She tells me that what I yearn for is contained within the stars. She

comforts my troubled soul. I swim through the darkness punctured by holes of stars and planets, searching for the opening back to Earth. I ask Her to take me back and She complies.

The heavens revealed the secrets of the universe as God remained silent,  
Then why towards Judaism were you so compliant?

I am the Earth and the Earth is me. I burst up from the ground, breaking the crust open. I rise and relish their screams of horror. I cherish that they find the monster I have become terrifying, that the Earth has created me anew to be the epitome of any human's nightmares. I destroy them brutally, hoping their torment pays for the emptiness in my soul they caused. An eye for an eye, They say.

When their screams fade, I lift my eyes towards Heaven.  
Their resentful pleas reach out toward me and tear at my weary heart,  
What must I do with this knowledge that they have desperately chosen to impart?

I considered sparing Helena's friends, but then I realized I don't care.  
Heaven crumbles like dust when exposed to my blows. I watch a mother and child fall from the sky, clutching each other, and I briefly wonder what I have become, but then the foolish thought is banished from my mind.

I see the humans on Earth become free. Heaven, the control center, is gone,  
so the droids are deactivated. This was my purpose. So what do I do now?  
The saints attack every holy belief I've been enlightened with since youth,  
I cannot help but wonder if they really do speak the truth,

Earth told me that what I desired would be found among the stars. And so I wander the universes, searching until the end of all time for a dimension where my love exists. I must find her. I'm desperate to see her so I can feel again, so I can love, so I'm not a monster anymore. I know deep in my shriveled heart that throughout everything, she would see me instead of this violent monstrosity I have been made into.

The realization dawns that what I have suspected, they have confirmed  
Is it the billions of sins of the Lord that condemns our depraved and corrupt world?

# Evan Penrod

Grade 8, Parkway West Middle School

Educator: Tracy Bouslog

*Personal Essay & Memoir*



## Shamefacedness

Bang bang bang! “Evan wake up!” Shouted my mom while banging on my door. I rolled out of my bed and checked the time. It was three in the morning, which is the earliest I’ve ever woken up. Dark heavy circles weighed under my eyes like dumbbells. I brushed my teeth and ate breakfast all while being half asleep. I lifted my heavy suitcase and heaved it into the trunk of my moms car. I plopped down into my car seat, put on my headphones, and started listening to music. While slumped down into my seat I noticed my eyes slowly drifting shut and before I knew it, I was at the airport.

On this trip there were going to be five supervisors in charge of a bunch of kids. We were going to be able to see Iceland and it would be mostly paid for and organized by the school. My family and I walked into the airport to meet up with the group we will be on the trip with. There were About fifteen kids there and I only knew one of them but I found a group of kids to hang out with pretty quickly. We were waiting in the terminal and a supervisor came up to me and told me who I would be rooming with.

“Evan, your roommate is going to be David.”

*David? Who in the world is David?* I asked myself. I rolled my eyes at the supervisor as if it was her fault that she couldn’t read my mind and tell who I wanted to be my roommate.

Later, I saw David in a Dunkin Donuts and I tried to make conversation with him but he didn’t seem very talkative. So I would only ever hang out with this group of about five kids instead of ever hanging out with him. I just figured he was with the other kids. We finally got on the first plane at about seven o’clock and I slept through the whole thing. We landed in Charlotte, South Carolina.

I slept through my second flight as well and when we finally landed in Iceland it was about ten o'clock at night. We settled into our hotel rooms and went to dinner. When we got back, I walked into my room with my friends, and my roommate seemed to be bothered by our loud laughter. One thing I noticed about our hotel room was that it smelled like fish. So because of this, I wrongly assumed that it was my roommate who was causing that smell.

The next day, I was walking around the halls of the hotel with my friends and when we passed my room I opened the door and said words that I still regret to this day, "Hey guys, it smells like crap in here!" My roommate was sitting on his bed and I pointed to him. "I think it's because of him." I said rudely. The kid looked up at us, then backed down at his phone as if he didn't care.

I left the room with my friends and we went elsewhere. As the trip continued, I continued bad-mouthing my roommate to my friends and sometimes to his face again. Calling him names and making rude gestures to him. However, I just kept thinking to myself, *If he really cared he would have said something.* That's why I never stopped. I was building David's annoyance towards me everyday without even knowing.

On the third day, I was walking through the hotel lobby with my friends and we saw him. As we passed him by, I got all of my friends to pinch their noses and hold their breath to indicate how bad he smelled. We did it, and he ignored us. My friends laughed with me which made me feel pretty good about myself.

One night, the whole group was at a restaurant, and as I sat with my friends that were all my age, I noticed him sitting with the adults.

"Why is he sitting over there?" I asked my friend.

"It's not like he's going to sit with us, we never talk to him." That made me feel bad for him because I could tell he didn't want to be there, or maybe even on this trip at all.

It had been about three days so far on the trip, I was his roommate, and I didn't even know what his voice sounded like. We left the restaurant and when we got back to the hotel, I realized that the next day, we would be switching hotels and moving to an area in Iceland that was filled with mountains. This gave me the idea of asking a supervisor to switch roommates. I walked up to the main supervisor. I made sure nobody heard us talking because I didn't want people to know that I asked.

When we moved hotels I ended up rooming with a kid I was much more familiar with and it made me excited. In retrospect, I could see how this must have made David feel. We took a bus to the hotel early the next morning. During



the bus ride I told my friends how happy I was that I didn't have to share a room with him anymore. We arrived at the hotel and I entered my new room with my new roommate.

I received word from a friend that we would be going on another bus ride, and one of the stops was going to be a place that had boiling mud. After the bus ride we would come straight to the mess hall for dinner. This did not excite me. "Bro, it's just gonna be mud with bubbles." I told my friend. Eventually, I had convinced most of my friends to stay in the bus with me. When the time came and we stayed on the bus after everybody left, we were all just playing video games on our phones while waiting for everyone to come back.

Then somebody did come. It was a supervisor. We were at the back of the bus and she called out from the front. "Evan, I'm gonna need you to come with me." I was confused. *Why did she only want to talk to me?* I slowly walked down the aisle of the bus with my hands jammed in the pockets of my coat. I followed the supervisor into a gift shop where my eyes were met with two more supervisors who all had the same angry expression on their faces. Somehow, I still didn't see where this was going.

"Evan, we saw your old roommate walking alone, and we asked him why he wasn't with any groups." It was only after those words, sternly spoken by my supervisor, that I knew why I was there. "He said he didn't really fit in, but we asked him if anyone had been mean to him, and your name came up."

I began to feel embarrassment boil and fester inside of me. *How could I have been so stupid to think that those words I said to him had no meaning?* I thought to myself. *He was simply trying to enjoy his vacation and I ruined it.*

"You're going to have to apologize to him, and I don't want you talking about this with your buddies." She stated. I agreed and she sent me back to the bus. On the short walk back to the bus I was angry. Not at David or my supervisors, but at myself.

I entered the bus as regretful as can be. My friends asked what happened and I avoided the questions. I sat in silence for the rest of the bus ride, reflecting on my actions and trying to hide my shameful face from my friends.

When we returned to the hotel, I went straight to my room because I needed alone time. I was so mad at myself that I could feel my face growing hotter. I snatched a tissue box from off of my nightstand, crumpled it up and hurled it at the ground. This was a new kind of guilt that I had never experienced before in my life and it hit me so fast. Once I calmed down, I headed downstairs

for dinner. As I got closer to the mess hall I noticed that not even the smell of the bread rolls could cheer me up.

When I entered the room everyone was already eating, and I expected them all to look at me because I arrived late, but nobody batted an eye. I didn't feel like eating at all. I was so agitated by my own doings that my food tasted bitter.

After dinner I stopped him in the hallway.

"Hey David." I said to him,

"Uh... yeah?" he replied, confused. This was the first time I had ever heard his voice.

"Look, I'm really sorry for uh... y'know, all the mean stuff I said." He looked at his feet, and then back up at me.

"Oh, it's all cool man." He stated. He looked at me deeply, then walked away. I stood there for a second, then turned and walked away as well.

I stayed up for a little bit. I watched TV and talked to my roommate to occupy myself, but I couldn't get this interaction out of my head. *Was he still mad at me? Did he forgive me?* I'm not used to being in situations where I made somebody feel that bad so I didn't really know how to act. That was the last day of the trip, meaning it was also the last time I would ever see David.

Even after the trip, I frequently think about these events, wishing that I had done something different but I can't. So I can only hope that David got my message about how sorry I was and how I wanted to make it up to him. This experience helped me figure out the significance of kindness and how you must be kind to everybody no matter what because you can never know how they feel about the situation.

# Giselle Pineda

Grade 10, Blue Springs South High School

*Flash Fiction*



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## Mission 1

I get jolted awake by a big speed bump in the middle of the road. We slowly drive around a small town home and park the truck behind the trash bins. One by one we get out, tiptoeing like little mice, placing one foot down at a time, as if the floor was covered in eggshells. As I begin walking forward, I notice something reeking. It's not just awful: it's warm, it's nauseating, it's something that takes over your entire body. And makes you shiver. I notice a barbed wire gate snakes around the entire campus – it looks more like a hell hole– the gate starts at the entrance, works its way around the bricks, towards the trash cans, even capturing a couple trees in the way, and finally to the back where it makes a rectangle encasing a bunch of little barn houses. The gate looks handmade with unevenly cut wood planks. The wire that's supposed to have a symmetrical design instead has a playful structure to it. The houses are very simple. Dull. As if life had been sucked out of them. 4 windows along each side, 2 doors, 1 roof, designed to hold 700 prisoners. As my eyes wander to the ground I see splotches of faded crimson red, my brain starts to swirl. My vision is suddenly blurred by the water droplets that are tempted to push out from behind my eye lid. The mix of the smell, and my mind flashing images that I do not want to see ever again overwhelm my body. Noah must sense my discomfort because he walks over to me and squeezes my hand. I instantly look up at him and see the warmth behind his eyes along with the terrorizing feelings that I have. And in that moment I fully understood what he meant when he said “This is not a decision to take lightly.”

Once everybody has gotten out of the truck and we get the signal that it's clear, we head towards one of the houses surrounded by the gate. 2 guards are posted at the front door, 2 guards posted around the gate, and the general posted

just outside the front of the main building. I was told there would be a distraction but never fully informed on what the extent of that was. Then I see two men start to rebel against the officers holding them hostage. Noah directs my attention to the general. He's a tall man with sharp features. His hair is shaved, his eyes are closer together than normal, his nose covered in dozens of little cuts almost as if someone had clawed at his face. His smile lines are nonexistent, and it all gets tied together with his butt chin. He takes one look at the men and starts walking with no purpose towards the middle camp. He raises his right hand slowly but with so much power that everyone in the camp turns to him in silence. In that moment we realize that we won't be able to get the women and children out of this concentration camp.

Jayla Pruitt

Grade 11, John Burroughs School

Educators: Jeanne Gillanders and Jessica

Hunt

*Poetry*



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## Faith is Not All

Faith is not all: it is not air we breathe  
Nor the food we eat nor water we drink  
The meals made that the mothers brew and seethe  
That sours and rots making a rancid stink  
Even Faith cannot stitch a gushing wound  
Nor mend lost threads that had once richly thrived  
And many souls are lost, to ash they're hewn  
Though I speak as one whose faith was shortlived,  
It is true at a point my hours did strain  
Engulfing my lungs as I beg for breath  
Or plagued by more than one can sustain  
I am compelled to trade your faith for death  
Or trade the feeling of this day for food  
This may have been true; I don't think I would

# Sameera Rao

Grade 11, John Burroughs School

Educators: Shannon Koropchak

*Short Story*



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## The Reflection

For the past 224 days, I've been living alone, entirely isolated in my cramped apartment. From my lonely window, I've observed time passing slowly: minutes, days, months, and even seasons going by. All the while I remain within these four walls, gradually becoming a stranger to the outside world.

Sticking to a strict routine was an important part of my hiding: Each morning the blaring of my alarm wakes me up at seven and each night I climb into the same scratchy bed sheets, falling asleep before nine. In between those ten hours of sleep, I stomach three insipid meals, all eaten on a single, uncomfortably textured plate. Sometimes I just pace around the apartment, making wide, deliberate circles inside the boundaries of my barren walls, desperate for any sort of activity. Other times I spin carelessly around on my kitchen barstool until the floor feels uneven beneath my feet and my eyes go cross. If I sit still for long enough, I can imagine the walls closing in, coming closer and closer until they consume me and erase my quiet existence without a sound.

This Saturday however, something anomalous happened. It started when there was a firm knock at the door, followed by a quick shuffle of footsteps. After squinting one eye to look through the peephole and seeing no one, I cracked open the door and saw something completely unexpected: a ceramic teapot. I picked it up and placed it cautiously on the counter, suspicious of its presence and scared of what it represented. Had I been discovered? Anxiety overtook me and collected heavily in my temples, causing my eyes to blur and my ears to ring. Fearing the worst, I picked up the teapot, wrapped it hurriedly into a towel, and shoved it into the top cabinet of my kitchen.

For the next couple of days, I tried to push the teapot out of my mind, but it was as if it was radiating golden light from the cabinet, infiltrating my every thought and begging me to examine it. It was only a few days later when I decided that I could not bear another minute without looking at the teapot again. My hands wrapped around the cold pot as I took it out of the cabinet and set it apprehensively on the granite countertop. It was a deep burgundy color, painted with a shiny glaze. Turning it around carefully in my hands, I noticed an absence of glaze on the pot's foot, revealing a scratchy tan clay. I brushed my finger across its smooth, clean surface, and concluded that, aside from some shallow scratches, it was in good condition.

Throughout my investigation, I couldn't help but be captivated by my own distorted reflection. My face expanded across the round belly of the teapot and when I went to touch it, my fingers appeared to stretch longer than usual. I blinked and the reflection blinked back at me. I smiled and it smiled back. I talked and it mouthed back. I spent the rest of the afternoon staring obsessively at the pot, making intense eye contact with my reflection, when suddenly I noticed that it was mouthing things, seemingly to itself. My eyebrows widened with alarm as I looked down at my own lips which were still, then back to the reflections which were moving! I continued to study the teapot, squinting my eyes in disbelief at its independent movement. Suddenly, another person walked casually behind the reflection and enveloped them in a tight hug. I flinched instinctively and peered over my shoulder but there was no one else in the room with me. Looking back into the pot, my reflection seemed to have separated from me, becoming its own entity. I was now peering into the private world of someone else.

Fascinated by the figure, I began to eat my meals in front of the teapot, watching as the reflection did the same, however they were surrounded by family or friends. I saw the mouth of the reflection moving rapidly as if it was talking passionately and laughing genuinely between bites. My own dinner remained solitary, the metal scraping of my fork piercing the thick silence of the room. In the evenings I brought the teapot to my coffee table, turning on the TV and looking into the pot to watch the reflection once more. As I settled into my usual spot in the middle of the couch, I saw the reflection snuggled into a similar couch, however they were with a partner, heads nestled into each other and hands intertwined. I sighed deeply, my own couch suddenly feeling unusually wide with no one to share it with. I looked down at my own hands and touched my fingers together as if confirming my own existence. I glanced around the

room, wishing that someone would appear by my side and take me into their arms, just so I could experience the warmth of another person. Instead I was greeted by a draft, which blew in from the window and brushed harshly against my shoulders, making me shiver and pull my cardigan tighter. The reflection taunted me, forcing me to watch fragments of a life that I longed for.

Overwhelmed with envy, I scowled back at the reflection, my teeth gritting against each other and my whole body burning. I grabbed the teapot off of the counter, my knuckles turning white as I squeezed the handles. I looked down at the reflection one last time and it looked back at me with narrowed eyes and lips that seemed to curl into a mocking smile. Quickly, I brought the teapot above my head and hurled it onto the sterile linoleum floor. It shattered into jagged shards and small pieces, sending a cloud of dust up from the ground. My eyes were glazed over, fixed acutely on the remains of the pot. The reflection was now gone and it was only me, standing in my apartment, alone once more.



# Ava Reyes

Grade 12, St. Teresa's Academy

Poetry



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## Charleston

Before she left, I said I love you and to be safe. I probably said a few more generic lines I don't remember; I doubt she does either.

In a Five and Below bag under my bed, her unopened and lonely gift collects dust bunnies and maybe a couple of cobwebs. She'll never know I didn't make the time to wrap it or put a pretty pink bow on it. Does it really even deserve to be dressed up? Inside that Five and Below bag is an unwashed mug from the thrift store and a single box of candy. I'm a professional at terrible going-away gifts. I didn't forget to give it to her the day she left.

I watched her walk out the door with only the basic words of encouragement as a symbol of my care.

She drove off to a town 16 hours away, full of excitement and anxiety.

She was *simply going forward, riotous and windswept*. But it was the first time—most definitely not the last—that our paths forward were in separate directions.

The gift under my bed,  
the one that was supposed to tie us together in separation,  
will now never escape the solitude of my room.

A few weeks after she left, I called her and joked about how I “forgot” to give her my gift the day she left. I said she wouldn't have liked it anyway, so it's not a big deal. She did not find it as stupid as I, but we had a good laugh before she said, “I could really use that mug right about now. The ones here are beige and boring. And the thrift stores suck too.”

Maybe the contents in that sad little plastic bag could have been useful on her journey forward.

But I bet the candy is expired by now.

# Olivia Rice

Grade 10, Olathe North High School

Educator: Deidre Zongker

*Short Story*



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## Stones and Eagles

Most people, when gazing solemnly at the stars, are reminded of their insignificance in the grand scale of the universe. Others remark on their curiosity--how they wish to explore the cosmos, go on adventures, meet aliens, and have a good time. Few, including myself, revel in the stars' beauty. *And how beautiful they are.* There is something so soothing about watching a clear twilight sky. Generally, I prefer to stargaze solo, with no distractions, commentary, or drama. Just the stars holding me in an enraptured trance, in perfect peace. Sadly, peace is something I can't seem to find, even in the setting sun.

Nature is never truly quiet, and tonight is no exception. Close at hand, crickets chirp and trees sway in the wind, sounding like rain. In the distance, howls of coyotes can be heard, calling into the night. But this evening, a clamor of violent shouts fills the air too. This eve, I'm not alone.

When I left the campsite with an unlit flashlight in my hand, the sky was a mural of fiery orange turning to a calming pink hue, similar to my own thoughts at the time. Katie and Dan had been arguing about the ethics of Harry Potter, and I could not stand another second of it. Ignoring Asher's futile attempt to stop the conflict from escalating, I left, saying I would be back in a little bit.

Wandering through the woods, basking in the cold twilight air is oddly comforting, the change of scenery a medicine for my soul. Needing something to do with my hands, I pick up one of the scattered sticks beneath my feet and twirl it, flicking my wrist in a satisfying motion. I can hear my dad admonishing, "It's easy for accidents to happen out in the wilderness that leave you stranded alone."

Right now, I do not care. I left to escape the unending drama. Family feuds, friends' exes, high school beef, rumors upon rumors--all of it wears me out like a

constant gushing river stripping the bedrock bare until only mere pebbles are left. *I don't want to be reduced to a collection of ugly rocks.* The negativity eats away at me bit by bit until I want to punch someone in the face, not caring who, and that is coming from a pacifist. Spotting a stone, I slam my toes into it, sending it bouncing further down the path. The impact did little to quell the roiling rage inside me. I am utterly exhausted with the crude lack of empathy that caused all this 'beef.' *Is it beef if it's one-sided? Never mind.* I should be focusing on being a perfect student, not the drama. *Never the drama.*

Perfect student, perfect athlete, perfect appearance, perfect attitude; I believe perfection is possible if the necessary amount of work is applied. Catching up to the stone, I kick it again, still frustrated. Defining 'perfect' is like trying to tell if the bird flying high above my head is a hawk or an eagle from this distance; it depends on perspective and experience. As the successful athletes and millionaires will tell you, 'I got here by putting in the work and extra hours. If you do the work it will reward you.'

The stone did not go very far, and I have already found it again. Thus far there has not been much of a reward. Kick. *Am I not doing enough?* Kick. Obviously that must be the case. Kick. Either way, I could be doing more. Kick. Should be. Kick. I just need to convince my lazy butt to get up and do it. Kick. *No pain, no gain, right?* Somehow I am more frustrated than I was earlier, I note, as I ram my toes into the stone. It goes skittering off the path and I have no intention of chasing after it, especially not with a throbbing foot. These days it's only pain and zero gain. Meanwhile, everyone around me seems to be flourishing with the academic and athletic perfection I envy. Oh look, there's Ego telling me to go get something big done so Pride can jump up and down cheering my name. *Ugh, I miss that feeling.* Feeling like I was doing it, that I was truly exceptional at something. These days, I feel stuck, like I'm a stone; I'm doing the work and not getting anywhere, instead being kicked around by my own stupid emotions.

That's why I am taking this break, camping for a few days with friends. Clearing my head by getting away from the madness I call my life. *Come on, Emery, you are supposed to be relaxing. Loosen up and have a good time. Get yourself together.*

Light breaches the trees as they open to a grass clearing. Following it, the path of discarded twigs and leaves turns to face a pebbled shore. Stooping for a moment, I search for a good-looking rock before continuing to the lake to throw it. With a flick of my wrist, the stone skips across the lake. Finding another stone, I repeat the motion, savoring this feeling--like I can do something sensational.

I botch the next throw, irritating myself to the point that I do not even attempt another throw, instead storming around the outskirts of the lake, staring at my throbbing feet as I roam. Irritation has followed me all day. Between the five of us, I was the only one who knew how to set up a tent and get a nice fire going. There's Pride celebrating. Is that why I so fiercely agreed to Dan's idea of a camping trip? To feel more educated and accomplished than my friends? *No, quit fooling yourself.* I just wanted to get away from all the noise and the pressure. Right, the noise. The pressure. Even if most of that pressure is self-imposed. *How do you get away from yourself? Never mind.*

Finally glancing up, shock radiates through me as I recognize my surroundings. *I know those boulders.* The subconscious memory of this place must have led me here. It has not changed much in the year since Katie, Asher, Dan, and I found our way to this lake for the first time. That day was bright, warm, and still, the exact opposite of my current setting. I stop thinking about last year. *Stop reminiscing about something impossible to replicate. That day was so perfect it can never happen again.* Despite that impossibility, I sit on the same hewn boulder as last time, as if the simple action can take me back to the peaceful time. I close my eyes, focusing on the sounds around me. No shouts can be heard from the campsite, but that does not mean the argument is over. I have been walking longer than I realized to get all the way out here. Frustration, irritation, and anger drove me out here, and those blazing feelings altered the passing of time. Though, out here in the wilderness, time has little meaning.

Luckily, it has been worth it to come out to this peaceful lake. *Nope, that's a lie.* My thoughts have been screaming at me relentlessly since I left the campsite. *Damn, how did the evening turn out like this?* Being alone has never bothered me, especially not under a sparkling sky like this one. Sitting under the stars feels as if for just a moment you are the only one around that matters. This is such a different feeling than I am used to; my days are filled with sacrifices for others. Friends, family, peers, and teammates--it does not matter who--all of them want me to do something.

"Do you not realize that I have a life outside of your antics?" I imagine myself asking them.

"Sure. We all do, but I have time for this, so I expect you do, too. Just make it happen," they respond.

I want to shout in their faces, "You're not the only one demanding more of my time! Balancing honors classes with multiple sports and music commitments

is not as easy as you think it is. I run around all week, barely keeping up with it all, and you want *me* to make time for *your* stuff!”

“That sounds like a you problem,” they state flatly to my incredulous face. “Can’t you, like, drop something? Skip practice once, it won’t kill you. I do it all the time, and Coach never notices.”

*Seriously?!?* I refuse to drop any of them. Call me stubborn, I do not care, but never try to tell *me* how to live *my* life. If nothing in your life stirs your passion, that *sounds like a you problem*, so leave me alone.

Leaves rustle as a squirrel darts away, and I realize I shouted. I can not believe that I lost my filter. Glancing up, I notice a hawk gliding around, silently circling overhead. *Hawk or eagle?* Barely able to see the bird, I light the flashlight and start the trek back.

The flashlight stays pointed at my still throbbing feet, lest I trip on a wayward tree root and bruise my face. My friends would laugh at the thought. I wonder if Dan and Katie will still be arguing when I get back. *Probably not.* Katie will be scowling at the end of the path, always the mother hen, waiting to say, “What took you so long?”

Now I am questioning whether this group will survive the rest of the trip. Once Katie gets fired up, it takes a while to cool her off. I imagine Asher and Dan are sitting near the fire, wondering what they did to piss Katie off. They will blame me, of course.

I hear Asher shouting in a high-pitched voice, “Why’d you leave me here alone with these two jerks? Was that your plan? What kind of friend would do that? I didn’t even want to go camping!”

“It wasn’t even my idea. Dan suggested it. You didn’t have to stay and watch them fight; you could have followed me,” I respond, trying to stay as calm and logical as possible.

Dan intervenes, “Yeah, it was my idea, but you convinced them to go with it. Now you’re saying that Asher should follow you around like you’re the only one that can do anything right around here. I can’t believe I’m friends with you.”

The honest words cut into me, shredding my heart. I can not breathe. I can not think beyond the pain in my chest. For a second, I think my heart has stopped until I realize it is pounding so fast that I can not distinguish one beat from the next. *What kind of friend would do that?* Those words replay in my mind over and over and over again. *I can’t believe I’m friends with you.* I have lost all track of where I am. *I can’t believe I’m friends with you.*

A sharp breeze yanks me back to my lonely reality with trees creaking in the wind. The layer of leaves opens to meet a different grass clearing than before. Before heading to the campfire, I duck into my tent to grab a blanket. *When did the temperature drop to match my mood?* Rummaging around my bag gives me time to assess the situation. All three of them are sitting around the fire, chatting energetically. They seem content, so I decide to join them.

Standing at the edge of their circle, I pause to wrap the blanket around my shoulders, listening to the conversation. Katie gushes, "Remember how we..."

I stop hearing them, focusing instead on the fire. The dancing flames are as mesmerizing as the stars. Almost meditative. Once again, I am alone with my thoughts. Everyone in front of me is laughing together about some shared experience. I am reminded that I was not there. I was invited, but I declined in fear of disappointment and embarrassment. Regret fills me, a sensation I am all too familiar with. Just like that, I am surrounded by my best friends and still feel stranded, my own emotions fencing me in, keeping me from taking part in the joyous conversations going right in front of me. This is completely my fault. Irrevocably my fault. My stupid emotions keep getting in my way. I hate this. I absolutely *hate* this.

*Inhale. Exhale.*

*You're fine.*

*Just breathe.*

*Breathe.*

*Inhale. Exhale.*

"You ok, Emery?"

I shrug off the question. "Yeah. I'm fine."

Asher makes a face, asking, "What is it?"

"Nothing. I'm *fine*." I respond, stressing the last word.

Asher turns to Dan and Katie. "Why exactly is Emery lying to our faces?"

I let out a distressed sigh. *And the tirade finds its opening.*

“She’s hiding, not lying. We’re the ones upsetting her and she doesn’t want to admit it.”

Asher frowns. “That’s stupid, since it’s not like telling us would hurt our feelings. We won’t get mad or anything. We’re not savages that blow up over every perceived slight.”

“Just because you can stand the pain I’m sure you’re feeling doesn’t mean you need to, Emery.”

Dan continues, “We’ll always agree that you’re the toughest of the group, Emery.”

*Thanks, but I’m not as tough as you think.* I open my mouth to voice that thought. “Thanks, but—”

“No. Quit gaslighting and lying to yourself and downplaying your strengths. It isn’t healthy,” Katie warns.

“Come on. Where’s that confidence from earlier?” Dan adds.

I rush to explain, “Earlier, that was me bossing you guys around beca—”

“Ok, so?” asks Asher.

“What do you mean?” I counter.

“Is it bad to feel confident? Is it bad to feel special? Is it bad that you taught us how to set up tents and start a fire? Is it bad that you were having a good time?” I look back to the fire, trying to hide from Dan’s truth.

“I... no, but I did it because I put myself in charge, and that’s not right. I should have—”

Dan interrupts me again. “Listen to me, Emery. You don’t need to worry about it.”

“You don’t need to worry about anything, really,” Katie agrees.

“Especially not when it comes to us. We’re a team--we each have our own strengths, one of yours being an expert in camping. That’s why we work,” Asher finishes, passing me a cup of something warm. I bring the concoction to my lips and take a small sip. The blazing hot liquid burns my tongue, warming me from the inside. I take another sip, this time noting the flavor--“Apple cider.”

“Just like last year,” Dan explains.

I am transported back to the lake, exactly one year earlier. I can see it perfectly, the memory clearly framed in my head, the still water reflecting the sunny blue sky. The four of us were having a rock skipping competition when an eagle cry drew our eyes to the sky. Four of the majestic birds were gliding amiably above the lake on a nonexistent breeze. Silence fell on our group as we gazed at

the eagles with their white heads and tails nearly blinding us with their brilliance.

I forget how long we stood like that, captivated by the rarity of the event. Bald eagles are uncommon, though not unheard of around the area. They usually live alone or in pairs after they mate for life, a feature that makes them quite territorial. Yet those four did not seem to have any ‘beef’ with each other as they swooped ever closer to our shore. As they got closer, we all jumped into motion, grabbing cameras, passing out hot apple cider, and finding a group of boulders to sit on after standing for what felt like an eternity.

“That was a perfect adventure. Let’s go back tomorrow.” I whisper, the dancing flames illuminating a soft smile on my lips as I drink the apple cider.

“Even if the eagles aren’t back?” Katie asks.

“They will be. Trust me.”

With no more doubts in any of us, we sip apple cider until the wind brings rain and the embers are extinguished. At the first downpour, the four of us run shrieking to our tents. I imagine those four eagles flying to cover and the rain washing the day away, leaving a blank slate for tomorrow. Finally finding peace, I slip into sleep with one last thought. *Trust me.*

I do.



# Mira Schoewe

Grade 9, Lindbergh High School

*Humor*



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## Future Feud

“You should have seen it coming!” Dr. Glorp Glorp shrieked. Every alien at the Intergalactic Space Department let out a collective gasp. Even by the time they had quieted down (aliens from planet Pom Pom were *not* known for being quiet, so you could only imagine how long it took for this to happen), you could still hear the shrill beeping of the monitor at the front of the control room. *Beep! Beep!* It flashed red. There was an asteroid coming. But it wasn’t just *any* asteroid---this one was deadly!

“It better not be deadly!” Borp, the slightly unintelligent cleaning Roomba, called out.

“How do we stop it?” asked another one. Dr. Glorp Glorp stared at the screen, then turned around to face his anxious audience.

“I told you, we should have seen it coming! We could have put up our laser defenses a long time ago! Dr. Blop, can you try and load up our defenses?” Dr. Glorp Glorp commanded. He was met with silence.

“Uhhhhh...Dr. Blop?” Dr. Glorp Glorp turned to find that Dr. Blop was nowhere to be seen.

“Look! The screen! The asteroid isn’t there anymore!” called out someone from the back of the room.

“Well that can’t be good!” exclaimed Borp. Everyone ignored him. His warnings were always unreliable. But before they could celebrate, there came a deafening crash from not far away.

First, there was silence amongst them. Then, they started to shriek.

“Calm down! Calm down, everyone!” Dr. Glorp Glorp commanded. It went quiet. “That was not an asteroid. According to the calculations made by scientists this morning, if it were the asteroid, we would have all been dead by now. I have

already made a call to the Investigators in the Pom Pom Safety Department to make sure that everything is okay. For now, I want everyone to remain silent and get back to work. Further information will be provided shortly, if possible. Thank you!"

Dr. Glorp Glorp ignored his fellow scientists' complaints and left the room with urgency. Quickly, he ran to the telephone and dialed the only number he knew: 39289284. Dr. Blop's. Again and again the phone rang, but there was no response. He dialed again. Then a third time. Angrily, he threw the phone at the wall with a crash and ran down the stairs to the main entrance of the Intergalactic Space Department.

"Dr. Glorp Glorp! Dr. Glorp Glorp! Sir!" called out Bumble, the well-respected, enthusiastic, and ten-headed secretary.

"Not now, Bumble! There's been some sort of explosion! And I can't find Dr. Blop!"

"All I know is----" Bumble looked to her left and then to her right to make sure that no one was paying attention, then urged Dr. Glorp Glorp to come closer. She lowered her voice to a whisper. "There's been news that we have...we have...visitors."

"What?! From where?"

"Earth!"

Dr. Glorp Glorp laughed.

"You're kidding. Space travel isn't possible. The explosion was probably just a malfunction with one of our robots." He turned around to walk out the door, but the second he opened it, he knew he was wrong.

"You! I know you! You're Dr. Blop's assistant! Evil scumbag! Get over here!" screamed a voice coming from Dr. Glorp Glorp's right. He turned around and gasped. It was a human. A real, live, human being.

"Gah! You're much uglier in person."

"Excuse me?" asked the human scientist. He wore a badge on his shirt that read, 'Dr. Johnson'.

"Um, yes, Dr. Johnson...uhhh...so how did you get here exactly?"

"That's not the point! The point is that you stole something from us! You know what you did!"

"Umm..."

"Don't play dumb! I know that you and Dr. Blop have stolen our idea to make the legendary Roomba!"

"What?!" Dr. Glorp Glorp gasped.

“Dr. Blop fessed it all up to us just a few minutes ago. You’re dead meat! Or goop, or whatever. I don’t even know what I’m looking at. God, I don’t get paid enough for this job.”

“You kidnapped Dr. Blop? How evil!” exclaimed Dr. Glorp Glorp. As if on cue, two other humans came out of their spacecraft holding Dr. Blop with his hands behind his back. Aliens who were watching the commotion from their office windows were now running out of the Intergalactic Space Department to see it all go down in person.

“Did you really steal the Roomba blueprints?” Dr. Glorp Glorp asked.

“Fine! Fine! I took them!” cried out Dr. Blop. The two humans holding him let out a cry of victory and their “*I told you so!*” facial expressions grew to astronomical lengths.

“But...but why? How?”

“Just a few weeks ago I picked up an odd signal on my radar that told me that aliens from planet Earth had a spacecraft that was passing through our galaxy. I became curious, as Earth is not usually too active outside of their own planet. Upon further research, I discovered that the spacecraft was carrying small circular robots that could clean your floor—exactly what I needed! But it was too difficult to create one of my own. I used some of our latest and finest X-ray technology to zoom into the blueprints that were on the spacecraft and finally get my very own Roomba!”

“...Blorp?!”

“Yes!”

For once in the history of planet Pom Pom, its residents had taken in difficult information without shrieking. It was quiet.

“Yeah, unfortunately our government doesn’t like it when random Jell-O looking creatures steal our robot ideas!” Dr. Johnson exclaimed. “I have a life, y’know. The rest of our society isn’t even supposed to know about this operation or the fact that space travel is even this advanced yet! Government tells me if we stay too long they’re gonna think something’s up. I can’t be here all day. Just give us back our Roomba and we can leave!”

“No! I am not going on your weird spaceship. I am an independent Roomba who only cleans the dust particles I choose to clean, and human dust particles are not one of them! I am staying on planet Pom Pom!” called a voice from the crowd. It was Borp.

Dr. Johnson looked confused.

“Uhhhh...since when do they talk?”

“That was my extra, personal touch! I’m not entirely stupid, you know!” called out Dr. Blop.

“Yeah, no. I don’t want a *talking* Roomba! Just take him.” Dr. Johnson waved at the other two humans to let go of Dr. Blop. Dr. Blop ran free from their grasp with a cheerful hooray.

“Let’s go! I’m hungry and they don’t even have a McDonald’s here. They better give me a raise.”

As the humans filed into their spaceship, the citizens of Pom Pom shrieked. Loudly, of course. In a mix of excitement and relief, Borp rapidly and happily spun in circles, triumphantly cleaning all the Pom Pom goop which lingered ominously in all 338 of the planet’s dimensions.

“At least it isn’t human goop. Blorp. Blorp.”

Mira Schoewe

Grade 9, Lindbergh High School  
*Science Fiction & Fantasy*



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## The White-Clothed Covered Box Exchange

The ghostly black of nighttime glided like the breeze across the busy streets, filling up every corner with deadly tension. The city was overflowing with people, but its sidewalks were ever so lonesome that day. Even despite this, there was the slightest low frequency of excitement and newness that ran so discreetly beneath the floor. Hidden under every solemn expression was a great buzz of avidity. There was discussion amongst the crowd, but their yelling thoughts came out as nothing but a whispering voice. Each man stood with the crowd but by himself, illuminated by the flickers of candlelight that wavered ominously in the dark. I waited patiently.

Rapidly and faster now the clock approached eleven, and a voice broke through. Upon further inspection, I tracked the voice down to a slender man in a blue suit. He spoke like a politician, with a careless attitude and sense of boredom that was almost egotistical, though his words seemed to drip with promise and morality.

“In a little over an hour it will be January 1, 2100. You are here for one reason; you have committed to that reason; and you will have your reason... under certain conditions.”

It was silent, and the silence ran swiftly through my ears in unusual dissonance with the tune of my crazily beating heart.

“From a single person’s smallest inquisition to society’s most predominant concerns, the human race has wondered since the beginning of time: *is there really an answer to everything?* Now, here before you, lies the answer to that question!”

There was a screaming applause. I should have covered my ears, but the anticipation was built up ever so greatly within me like a can of fizzing soda ready to pop; I let the excitement of the moment take me elsewhere. The once anxious audience was now abuzz with animation, and I could only imagine that whatever higher power was watching this congregation from afar judged it the same as a man would judge a swarm of ants or a beehive. After a little time had passed, the man urged us to lower our tone, and he began to expatiate further.

“The game is quite simple, but your prize will mean the world... even be the world, if you will.” The man reached underneath the sleek wooden podium at which he was speaking and proceeded to hold above his head a rectangular box half the size of myself. It was clothed with thin white fabric that had the look of a trash bag but the texture of silk. The man turned the object upside down and opened a latch at the bottom with a satisfying *clink!*, causing it to open from underneath.

“Each of you will obtain one of these boxes. In it you will place your exchange, and in return you will receive. Best of wishes.”

One by one, the boxes were passed amongst the crowd, and you could hear the scattered *clink! clink! clink!* of the latches as they opened. I tapped my foot rapidly against the concrete and shifted about restlessly as I waited. In my mind, I wondered what I would put in the box. I had nothing worth getting anything back for.

Seconds later, my box was passed to me. With a shaking hand, I took it. *Clink!* The latch popped open, and I peered inside to see a small white envelope uncannily smiling back at me. With caution, I reached for it and used my thumb and forefinger to peel it open. Inside, there was a trifold paper, which I unfolded and began to read:

*To Whom It May Concern,*

*If you are reading this, I assume you seek refinement, or perhaps erudition of sorts. Who does not? Past generations have been forced to live the old-fashioned way: aimlessly pondering to the point of near insanity on the subjects of life, death, and everything in between, while the answer to these questions lies right within your grasp at this very moment. All I request of you is for one thing. You see, just as your life has been left starving and empty by means of lack of understanding, my life has been left the same way by lack of soul. You have something I want, I have something you want. The process is quite simple.*

With that, the letter was finished.

I cannot even begin to tell you what I envisioned to be the outcome. Each person that even dared to take hold of a white-clothed box was a desperate person, an unsatisfied and weary person; because of this, the billions of them that were raised up into the air that night were no surprise to me.

As I went about my routine the following morning, I began to notice that it was not just a little soul that had been requested as an exchange. Two men across from me on the subway were missing an eye, and their faces were as dull and gray as the sky; the cashier at the local convenience store was missing the flesh on her left arm, and her face was as dull and gray as the sky; the newscaster on tv was wearing a hat which oozed blood from underneath, I did not wish to know where it had come from or why, and her face was as dull and gray as the sky. The more and more deformed the people I saw became, I began to wonder if I was just as deformed as they were. I had not given the mysterious letter-writer anything other than a little emotion, and minus the dimness in my eyes, the last mirror I had gazed in reflected me just as I had been before the exchange—but I grew paranoid. It was nominal trepidation at first, but this grew to a devastating horror which consumed me like a fish in water and made me run home in hysterical frenzy—only to find a collection of items sitting patiently on the kitchen table: a set of mismatched eyes, a strip of flesh, and the brain of a woman—all spread amongst white-clothed covered boxes.

# Haley Schroeder

Grade 10, Olathe North High School

Educator: Deirdre Zongker

*Short Story*



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## Artistic Expression of a Barn Owl

Moonlight streamed through the leaves of densely packed maple trees, casting shadows onto the girl's face. Her name was Lana, and at this moment she walked alongside the train tracks of the Northstar rail line, crunching through branches and other bits of rubble in a search for nothing. Next to her walked a boy named Tony, who considered himself to be the love of her life. Beside her he wandered, perfectly content that no reason had been given for this sudden expedition. It was a humid summer night, so they both sweated in symmetry, even their shallow breaths seemingly synchronized to the tune of an old dog in its last moments awaiting euthanasia. It was this synchronization that Tony often felt himself drunk on, a perfect evenness that calmed his erratic nerves to an eerie stillness. It was because of this stillness that he at one point even crashed his car with Lana in it, due to his nerves having no reaction to the vehicle coming straight at him – at the ripe age of nineteen he still had a bad back because of it.

But tonight there was no danger, just him and her not saying anything, all of their innermost thoughts being communicated telepathically in an electric connection between the two of them. She wasn't worried so he wasn't either; he loved telling people how much smarter she was than him, so of course he allowed his soul to be absorbed into hers, her instincts becoming his instincts. If two minds were better than one, then how about two minds merged into one, one entity making silent conversation with itself in perfect harmony? This was what they had become, and he was infatuated with the mere idea of it, let alone the actual living it. Being an amalgamation with Lana was everything he'd ever



wanted, and so he was constantly relieved at any reminders that his limbs were no longer his own.

Here was one such reminder, a man strolling from the opposite direction, a box of matches held earnestly in the palm of his hand. As he drew closer he pulled a match out of the box and made to light it, allowing Tony to notice a strange tattoo across his fingers: a barn owl mid-flight, a pellet falling from its mouth and spiraling downwards. Lana too noticed this tattoo and reached out to squeeze his hand, knowing from the transmission of his thoughts to her own the significance this bird held for him.

*Should we attack him?* she asked telepathically, tugging on the folds of her brain to ensure that the intonation of her question came across just right. Tony, his brain suddenly wrinkled with fright, managed to squeak out a Yes. Yes, we *absolutely should*.

This was a process that nobody else seemed able to comprehend. When they told others that they'd unlocked the secret to merging into one being without any physical indication they were typically met with awkward laughter, or gawking – inclining forward, waiting for the punchline. What they could never understand was that there was no punchline, that Tony and Lana were the super geniuses whose enlightenment could be shared to an audience of none, no one else in the world capable of stretching the folds of the brain in the ways that they could.

As the man got closer, making to light the match – likely meant to burn them both, turn all of their findings to ash – Tony raised his fist, and it was Lana's fist too, both of their essences combined into one singular strike that hit the man square in the jaw before he even had time to react. Tony watched as he fell backward in slow motion, the earth rushing up to grab him as he gracelessly collided into it.

On the ground he raised a hand to his head and drew back blood, causing him to curse, gather his belongings, and then pick himself up to run back the way he had come. Tony grinned wide, and Lana squeezed his hand tightly, the pressure of it building to a pleasant thrum in his brain. Then he looked over at her and saw no smile: her eyes were wide with shock, her mouth open in a wordless stupor so unlike anything they had ever rehearsed. These were emotions entirely her own, although of course through their connection they began to spread to him too, until there was a fire cascading through his hollow limbs, threatening to make him collapse in on himself.

“Hey,” she said, for some inexplicable reason not telepathically this time, “can we go sit on that rock over there?” She pointed to some spot off in the distance.

He nodded, having completely forgotten how to make use of his mouth, and the two walked again in their wordless rhythm until reaching a large grey rock wedged into the forest. There they both sat, and when she reached out for his hand he gave it, glad to have some reminder of why they never used words, how unnecessary they were.

Lana started speaking first. “So, you do know that we don’t actually communicate telepathically, right?”

Tony let out a sigh of relief – it was just this old nonsense again. For some reason she occasionally found herself trying to deny the bond they shared, but he knew the truth: how one of them would be incapable of existing without the other, because to lose her would be to have one’s body and soul chopped in half, bones fractured and nerves splitting with an incompleteness that could be seen only as cruelty. So why now, after a whole night of being so perfectly in tune, did she once again feel the need to escape the truth, to run headfirst back into the warm and empty embrace of reality as everyone else knew it? What happened to what they could be when they allowed themselves to merge into something spectacular?

Since they seemed to be talking out loud now he attempted to convert his thoughts into words, saying “You know that’s not true. I know that’s not true. Can you just tell me why we’re here?” His voice was a tad shaky, and he realized there were tears building in the corners of his eyes. How she seemed to have such a straight face baffled him, as he could feel the trees starting to close in around them, the moonlight an eerie glow that bathed them both in something quiet yet creeping, inescapable and certain. Yet here she remained so immensely calm – a trait about her that he usually loved, but was now making his nerves stand up and tangle themselves together, just the sensation of the muggy air cultivating a hungry desire to tear his skin off.

“Because I need you to see that this is all a lie. I’m tired of indulging the things you say when they make zero sense, just nodding and agreeing so that you don’t do something stupid like crash your car again, so that you don’t completely disconnect from reality and forget how to react to danger. But it’s more than that now, isn’t it? I mean, you just punched an innocent man in the face. You think you can rely on me to agree with everything you do, you think that this is all my will, but I don’t want a part in any of it anymore. I just want you to be able to think for yourself, so that when I leave I don’t have to worry about you being completely directionless, about you being unable to make any decisions so you just rot in your apartment waiting for someone to give you an answer on what to

do with your life. How can I make you think for yourself? Tell me completely honestly, how can I make you understand that I'm not talking to you telepathically, that it's all just you?"

If he were to speak completely honestly, Tony would probably have to tell her that everything she'd just said had gone in one ear and out the other. It was near impossible to pay attention when she didn't speak their usual language, and he decided that if it was really important then she would say it in the way that made the most sense to him. Instead she'd decided to be complicated for no reason, performing for an audience that wasn't there, except for – oh God. The trees. The moon. The whole night was watching them like characters on a television screen, carefully waiting for any sudden movements to pounce, and she could feel it too.

"Lana, I think we really need to go home. It's dangerous out here."

She stared at him blankly. "Now what are you talking about?"

"You know exactly what I'm talking about. We have to go home, now."

She was like a doll, her empty gaze looking straight into him but not being able to make out anything, and at that moment it felt as though everything Tony had known about her was gone, that he'd never truly bared his life to her and they'd never conversed for hours in one disconnected body. She was something separate now, something barely of flesh, something barely breathing now that it was no longer his open mouth she was breathing into. He too felt his flesh melting around him, his bones seeping into the dirt at his feet until they stuck out of the ground as a gravestone, an indication of where lay what may have always been an empty husk now being eaten by worms, decomposing but at last with a meaning for its existence.

Knowing that he couldn't dwell on this forever, that he did in fact have to escape before the night caught up to both of them, he grabbed the stranger by the arm and started running, running running running to who knows where. The destination wasn't important, only that his feet were pumping and he wasn't prepared to be eaten alive and regurgitated as a bag of chewed-up bones and flesh by a beast of the night. All that he could feel of the girl behind him was her hand, and whether she was saying something he didn't know, only knowing that if he were to stop now he would never be able to get himself to move again.

Finally, after what felt like hours of running for his life, Tony found himself standing in the middle of the train tracks, the stranger still holding his hand loosely beside him. He couldn't bring himself to look at her face knowing that it would be something he wouldn't recognize, so he looked up at the sky instead, searching for an answer in the stars. When they gave him nothing he looked

down at the tracks beneath him, and then at last he looked at the trees, no longer eerily still, carrying just a regular calm that forced a bittersweet emptiness into his chest.

“Tony,” said the stranger, out of breath and squeezing his palm like she always used to do, “there’s a train coming. I can hear it. We need to move.”

Tony stood completely still. He didn’t trust the stranger to know what she was talking about. How could he, when they’d never spoken to one another, when all of this time he had only ever talked to himself, himself the only one to keep him safe? What could she possibly know about keeping him safe?

“Tony,” said the stranger again, as if she had any right to know his name, “we really, really need to move.” There was a hint of panic creeping into her voice now, and he felt a twinge of sympathy for her, but this sympathy didn’t mean that he would put what she said above his own intuition. His intuition had kept him from death all of these years and it would do it again, and what it was telling him was that there was no need to move, that he wouldn’t abandon ship until he saw this train with his own two eyes.

And then he did. A large blue-and-yellow beast, headlights blinding him with their glare, bathing him in their illumination until he was sure that this was the rapture, God barreling toward him on a track to carry him to Heaven, until at the last moment he jumped.

He jumped to the side of the track and watched with curiosity as the train stampeded across the space where he’d been standing, horn howling out into the night as if the empty air would offer a response. As he stared at the hunk of machinery that he was once sure carried the air of something holy all he could think of was the stranger, now making her own way up to the heavens.

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Over the next few hours Tony managed to find his way back to his apartment, where he looked at the paintings littered everywhere – the art he’d created with what he’d thought to be the help of the stranger, and turned out only to be himself possessing him. With sudden vindication he gathered all of his paint and dumped it into the toilet, and then grabbed the stranger’s makeup out of the cabinet and poured that in too. Without closing the lid he flushed it all and watched it swirl together, as the toilet overflowed and water poured out onto the ground seeing nothing but art.

Reid Scott

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*Personal Essay & Memoir*



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## Love-Bombing

I recently learned what the term “love-bombing” means. It’s whenever you think you’re in love with someone so you shower them with love and praise to the extent you give them gifts and such, but you still feel like their love is unattainable.

I recently learned that I am a love-bomber.

I thought that I fell in love for the first time; or did I? I’ve become closer and closer with a male friend of mine whom I love very much. We go way back but only started getting close this year during the school musical. It was fun getting to spend all of this time together, and we loved joking around about the most random things. I started to realize that I had feelings for him towards the end of the experience, and I got that feeling you get whenever you have a crush where all of the jokes that used to make them laugh disappear and become unfunny and you stutter and blush when around them. Yet he still laughed.

All of a sudden, it was closing night, and I was with my theatre best friend/mentor, Ashlyn, he walked over to me and raised his hand and I thought we were going to dap each other up as we do almost daily, but he says “Reid... bring it in.”

He hugged me tight, and we rested our chins on our shoulders and had a conversation holding each other. He let go of me, but I pulled him back in and put my head on his chest. According to Ashlyn, he looked joyful and proud, but with a hint of grief in his eyes.

I wish I could’ve said “You haven’t lost me. Don’t look like that. I’ll be your safe person. I love you.” Then again, do I?

After that night, it was Thanksgiving break, and I thought about that hug again and again over that week. When we returned, I saw him and I noticed something that I should have a long time ago; The way he looks at me when I walk into the room... it's like I made his day a whole ten times better. He looks so pretty when he smiles. I wonder if he thinks the same thing about me.

We gave each other high fives every single day for weeks and said each other's first and last names any time we saw each other in the halls. We had conversations any time we could, but we enjoyed our daily tradition.

I'm in choir, and he was playing drum accompaniment for one of our songs, so I asked Ms. Schulte, my choir director, if I could bring him flowers and if she could ask him what he likes.

Red Roses.

Love-bombing.

She said yes and I was so excited because I wanted to make him feel special just like he makes me feel all of the time.

Just before the concert, we talked forever and he met my friends in choir, who were all in the girls' choir because boys that aren't him don't like me, and just laughed and had a good time like we hadn't in a minute. He does this thing when I do this thing where I laugh and close my eyes and tilt my head down, and when I look back up he just looks into my eyes and smiles.

So we did the performance, and I nailed the majority of the songs but failed miserably on this one abhorrent number, "The Holiday Tango", which is the most saccharine piece of garbage that I loathed singing all quarter.

When the concert was over, I met up with my parents who had his flowers. They didn't have plain red roses, so it was a mix of red, yellow, and pink. He was in the middle of talking to some old guy, so I rudely interrupted him and said "I have a present for you!"

I had to say it a couple of times before he finally looked into my eyes, and then down, and then back into my eyes to ask me if they were for him. I nodded fastly and grinned without teeth and his mouth opened to form a wide smile as he threw his arms around me and squeezed my thin body like a stuffed animal. I didn't know what to do because he wasn't talking, so I just started to rub his back with my fingertips as I rested on his body.

"I love you, Reid."

"I love you too."

“You just made my whole semester...” he paused, let go of me, and looked around with his hopeful white smile. He looked into my eyes in that special way he does. “I’ll talk to you later, Reid,” he affirmed to me with a closed grin.

“See you.” I looked at him lovingly and put my hand on his fists wrapped around his bouquet. I stroked his knuckles softly.

He gave me a look. A special look, but a new one. He looked at me with blank, twinkly eyes and an open mouth. He looked at me like I was beautiful.

Ashlyn was waiting for me and revealed that she had taken photos of the incident. I saw the smile he was making as he looked into the sea of the auditorium. That was the night I fell in love with him. Or was it?

I felt like I had so much love and support from my friends, and I was so happy. He said earlier that night that we’d be best friends forever. I believed him. I still do.

After that, it was Christmas break, and he was going to New Jersey. He was seeing all these amazing things and telling me about them. He was seeing the Broadway version of the musical we put on at the school. I was so jealous. I wished I was right there with him. Holding hands around New York City. Meeting his family friends and cousins in New Jersey. I wished for it so bad. I wanted to love-bomb him.

What I didn’t know was that... he wished he was with me. He told me on New Year’s Eve that he wished he was with me. He told me that next year we’ll spend the holiday together. I wished I was his New Year’s Kiss.

We texted all night that night. He kept telling me that he’d “leave me to my friends” but then kept texting me. It was really quite funny, actually. It’s funny because I’ve been praying to God to bring me closer to this boy, and it’s been working, and I feel so happy but...

His second high school girlfriend broke up with him either in November or October, I can’t remember. He dated his first for almost four years, and they were with each other for the entirety of middle school.

I want to be with him for the entirety of my life.

I’m a boy, though.

He knows I’m gay, I think everyone knows. Of course, he does because he’s one of my good friends.

I think he knows I’m in love with him too. Or does he? He hasn’t texted me in a few days.

I think I know I’m in love with him, it’s just the reciprocation of that feeling where the problems lie. Or is that the case? Or did I ever love him?

I know when I return from winter break I'll give him a tight hug like we always do. I just don't know how tight it'll be on his end.

I still make my nightly prayers in hopes that he one day shows me an ounce of romance. That maybe he could be the one. That I won't have to wait so long. I would show him all the care in the world.

Or would I?

Perhaps I'm projecting the wants that I have on the only boy who isn't scared to give me attention. I think that could be the case. However, I don't want anyone else. These are symptoms of a love-bomber.

Tell me this, though: Is one of the symptoms feeling so happy and at home that when you look at the person you want, tears in your eyes begin to swell and you could just... *sink...* into the Earth?



# Jason Shi

Grade 11, Ladue Horton Watkins High  
School  
*Short Story*



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## Rain

Paint flakes off of a faded yellow house, its rough surface chipped and cracked like birch tree bark etched with the signatures of various passersby. Wind brushes my cheeks and whistles across the empty lawn behind me, carrying with it the scent of dry, desiccated dust. Stairs groan under my weight as I step up to the doorway, stubby splinters sinking their teeth into my shoes.

*Ping!* An electronic jingle pierces the stale air. I extract my phone from my pocket, its cold exterior sending chills racing up my fingertips. Multicolored text boxes pop up one after the other. *Messages: You have 10 unread messages.* Scrolled to the left. *Google Calendar: Sign up for the ACT.* Skipped. *Reminders: Get the laundry.* My thumb hovers for a second before I shove the device deep into my pocket. “Whatever. I’ll do it later.” I raise my hand to knock on the door in front of me. The door is flung open with a squeak, revealing a boy with a solid blue dress shirt and a girl with a baseball cap and a T-shirt that reads “*I’m with idiot*” and an arrow pointing left. From inside the house, the warm smell of chicken wafts into my nostrils.

The boy speaks first. “Welcome, Jason. We’ve been waiting for you!”

“Yeah, no duh!” The girl stamps her foot, turning to me. “Dude, what took you so long? We’ve been here for half an hour already!”

I sigh. “Other stuff came up. Parents, homework, that kinda thing. I’m sorry.”

“What?” Her forehead creases, eyebrows drawing closer together. “We haven’t seen you in so long! Bro—”

The boy cuts her off. “Yiling, I’m sure he has his reasons.” He offers me a hopeful smile. “Why don’t you come in, Jason. I’m sure it’s much warmer inside.”

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“Three of a kind.” I smirk, tossing two cards into the center of a well-worn wooden table. I grab a Frito from the bag set beside me, popping it into my mouth. A heater rack hums, sending waves of heat flooding through the cozy room. “Whatchu got, Daniel?”

To my left, Daniel leaps from his chair, sending it clattering to the floor. “Straight,” he crows, flicking his cards onto the table. My eyes widen. One card, a jack, plops down in front of me, its dark eyes gleaming as it jumps, twitches, pops out of its two-dimensional confines. Leaning over, I catch sight of the other card cartwheeling to a stop near Yiling, scarlet diamonds arranged in neat rows dancing back and forth.

She shrugs. “Don’t look at me, bro. I guess you shoulda folded.” Scooping up the cards, she shoves them back into the deck.

“Come on, I’m sure it’s just fate,” Daniel says gleefully, eyeing the horde of chips massed in the center of the table. I slump back into my chair, the *clink-clink-clink* of poker chips echoing throughout the small living room. An assortment of snacks decorates the table – a few crumpled bags of Lays chips, an unopened box of cheesecake, a pitcher of water, forgotten. As my gaze wanders, the smell of fried chicken permeates my nostrils, wrapping around me like a fuzzy mitten.

A sharp pain in the middle of my forehead jerks me back to reality. “Ow! What was that?” I look down, glimpsing a black poker chip wobbling back and forth as it settles on the table. Looking up, I catch sight of Yiling rolling her eyes.

“Yo, dummy. Are you gonna give Daniel his chips, or what?”

I rub my eyes, cards swimming in and out of my vision as I gaze at the table’s dull hazel surface, tarnished by layers of greasy fingerprints and riddled with scratches and pockmarks that swirl and shimmer below the muted yellow ceiling light sluggishly emanating from the teetering lamp set on the ceiling. Face up, a pair of kings leer in the uncertain lighting. I sigh, pushing my stack over to him. “My bad.”

Daniel cuts me off. “It’s fine. I’m sure that you have a lot–”

“Come on!” Yiling interjects. “Stop letting him off the hook! We haven’t met up in *weeks*!” She turns to me, the corners of her mouth twitching downwards. “The least you could do is lock in while we *are* together.”

And then—*Ping!*

I flinch. My hand trembles, itches towards my pocket. A tortilla chip turns into clay inside of my mouth. My lips, now dry, taste like the dust left behind in

the lot of an empty supermarket. Averting my eyes from Yiling's, I drag my phone out from my pocket. "Sorry guys, I'll be right back."

Daniel and Yiling's gazes bore into the back of my head as I shuffle over to the door; the rough wooden surface gives way with a groan. As I step outside, I can hear Yiling's voice echoing out from inside the house. "See? Bruh, I *told* you!"

The door closes with a muffled slam. Darkness envelops the world outside, illuminated only by the moon hanging from above, its round white surface draped in a shimmering gown of clouds. A weak light sputters beside the door, sending shadows flickering across the grass. An earthy smell rises from the ground, congealing around my nostrils like a viscous gel. My phone lights up. "What is it *now*?" Holding it front of my face to unlock it, and a slew of messages pop up – *David*: "Dude, what do you think about this template I added to our presentation?" *Dad*: "Are you practicing your violin tonight?" *Aaron*: "When is the assignment due?" *Annie*: "Call me back."

As I watch, another message appears on my screen. *Daniel*: "Yiling might seem mad now, but I'm sure that that's just because she cares about spending time together. Come back once you're done."

I sigh. Dang it, Jason. You're so *stupid*. I tap on the latest text box and begin typing. However, just as I reach for the blue and white arrow to send the message, a large raindrop splatters across the screen, followed by another raindrop, and another, and another. A deluge of water cascades onto my body; dampness soaking into my hair and seeping into my scalp. I shove my phone back into my pocket and begin to walk, jog, run back to the house. The sound of water slamming into the ground smothers the crunch of dusty pebbles as they grind into the soles of my shoes, puddles materializing under my sneakers splish-splashing icy water up my legs.

Finally, I catch sight of the light affixed next to the door. In the doorway stand Daniel and Yiling, one propping open the door and the other hollering for me to hurry up. After an eternity, I barrel past them into the house, then bend over, hands on knees, panting. My clothes, soaked through, lay plastered to my body like paint on a wall.

"You look like a drowned rat." Daniel shuts the door behind me, then heads to the bathroom. "I'm sure you're really cold. I'll get you some towels."

"Guys, I..." My voice trails off as I notice Yiling glaring at me from the doorway, hands on hips.

She sniffs. "Well? You were saying, bro?"

“I guess, well...” I scratch my head, then sigh. “I don’t think I’ve been a very good...person to be around recently. I just haven’t been able to keep up with everything that’s been happening.” I look at her, and she motions for me to continue. “I just...don’t know how to stay as friends with you guys and not fall behind on everything else.”

She looks away, twirling a strand of hair around her index finger. “Man, I’ve been thinking about this a lot too.” She heaves a giant breath. “I just want all three of us to stay together, even if it’s just for a little bit longer.”

“Yeah, I—”

Suddenly, a towel drops on me, the scent of fresh pine needles wrapping around my head. Daniel’s voice pierces through the cloth. “Don’t worry. You don’t need to say anything. We understand. You can tell us if anything happens, though. We’re here to help.”

Tearing the towel off of my head, I see Daniel’s concerned expression and Yiling’s sad smile. For a moment, there is silence.

*Ping!*

The melodic tone rings out again; this time, we just look at each other. At once, we all burst into laughter. I gaze at my phone, still clutched in my hand; this time, I put it on silent, placing it on a shelf. Then, I turn to my friends. “Come on, let’s go finish what we were doing.”

# Alawna Simmons

Grade 12, Olathe North High School  
*Journalism*



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## The Sephora Crisis

Over the past couple of months, a new TikTok hashtag has been sweeping the internet. #SephoraKids has become a crisis of sorts, with videos showing kids as young as eight or nine fighting other customers over products that contain chemicals far too strong for their young skin. Sephora stores are being ravaged, displays being left disheveled and wrecked by skincare crazed preteens. But what exactly is the catalyst for these young children becoming so obsessed with skincare, and is it truly a bad thing?

Parents and doctors are concerned, with many of them noticing the shift in their young children's interests. Christmas lists that used to be filled with toys and art supplies are now being filled with Stanley cups, Drunk Elephant, and Lululemon. Parents aren't the only ones noticing this shift though; older teens are also seeing the change in childhood interests.

"When I was little it was all about Barbie dolls and Roblox, but now it's all about Rare Beauty and retinol," said Olathe North student, Natalia Mitchell (11).

Modern-day preteens seem to have little interest in the things that interested preteens ten or even five years ago. While it's normal for the appeal of certain activities and hobbies to fluctuate throughout the years, it seems the most recent generation of preteens is making a dangerous detour from the norm.

Dermatologists are seeing an influx of young kids coming in with extensive skincare routines that are either highly unnecessary or harmful to their skin. They're buying and using products that contain harsh chemicals such as exfoliating acids, retinol, and toners. These are all products intended for adult skin and are used to combat aging. Using them on children can cause their skin

to become more sensitive to the sun, encouraging sun damage. It can also cause retinoid dermatitis, a type of scaly skin rash.

While the mania surrounding the skincare industry isn't a new thing, it's been only recently that young children are becoming so enamored. Lots of this craze can be blamed on social media websites such as TikTok. Older influencers are posting videos of their exhaustive skin care routines, sometimes including upwards of ten steps, and most often involving products not intended for people young children or teens. But the social media influence surrounding skincare has inspired kids to create their own skincare routines. This by itself isn't a bad thing. Skin care is important, and it's great that the younger generation wants to take care of themselves. The issue is that this fixation on getting perfect, smooth, blemish-free skin is hurting these children not only physically but mentally. Being a preteen is already an awkward time in life, with many kids feeling insecure about one thing or another, and many feel that the beauty industry is leeching off of these children's insecurities to make money. This is something that could be very damaging to them in the future, with this hyperfixation on looks possibly leading to things such as body dysmorphia and eating disorders.

There is a large focus on anti-aging within young people as well. We live in a world where eighteen year olds are getting botox to prevent wrinkles. We see this all the time online, with people constantly fearing getting old, some even saying they'd rather be dead than have to age. This obsession with anti-aging is being passed on to our children, with many of them worrying about getting wrinkles and saggy skin as preteens. We've created an online space that has instilled fear into our young generations surrounding aging, causing them to do things that they shouldn't even be thinking about as kids.

Paradoxically, while our younger generations are so worried about physically aging, they also want to be older. Our age groups have become meshed together, with the things that are cool to highschoolers also being cool to fifth graders. While it's common for young kids to look up to those older than them and want to copy some of their behaviors, it has gotten to the point of concern. The average parent allows their kid to get a smartphone at the age of nine, meaning that they're now exposed to all the trends that people five to ten years their senior are following and participating in. These kids have access to the same online space that teenagers and young adults use, allowing them to see the most recent fads sweeping highschools and even colleges. This is the major catalyst in the "Sephora kids" crisis: it's not that these kids are truly interested in

taking care of their skin, they're more interested in following the trends of modern day social media, which most of us are guilty of to some degree.

So when it comes down to it, can we truly blame these kids for wanting to do the things that seem "trendy"? These children are simply products of their environments, and until we fix the way social media is geared towards people, especially people as young as elementary schoolers, the issue of children growing up quickly and following the fads of older generations will not be remedied. This is an issue that spans beyond just the online space though. Current parents and future parents need to really evaluate the harms of excessive social media usage at young, impressionable ages and choose the best way to protect their children. We as a society need to think deeply about what it is that we are putting out there on social media, how it is affecting our youth, and how we as the parents of the generations to come are going to break this cycle.

# Kami Skinner

Grade 8, Basehor-Linwood Middle School

Eductor: Erin Tegtmeier

*Personal Essay & Memoir*



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## How Much One Day Could Change

Being a teen means homework, stress, peer pressure, popularity standards, puberty, and so much more. Everyone wants to be perfect and popular. However, being popular is just a word. A word that so many people focus on. That's the thing though, we are all so unique in ways some people would never know because everyone grows up different. Everyone has had such similar childhoods, but so exceptionally different in such a meaningful way.

As a little kid, all I wanted was to be rich and famous, or to grow up quickly. I was too focused on growing up without realizing what was happening to me in the present. When I was a little girl, I was just a girl who loved hot pink, ponies, and Barbie dolls. I always thought about what I should be when I was older. An astronaut, a lawyer, a doctor, or even a zoo keeper. However, I wish I could have just one day. I wish I could have been a kid for one more day. One more day without stress, anxiety, friendship problems and so much more.

One day where I can just wake up, and I could brush my teeth with a fun little toothbrush and my rainbow unicorn toothpaste. One more day when I could be myself. Growing up changes more than your body; it changes your soul. One more day when my parents were together. No fighting, nothing, just a simple morning is all I ask for. I wish to just see my inner child. One more day where I could come to school and complain that 2+28 was so hard. One day even if it was bad. Even if it was just my little self talking over someone while they were sharing, and I had to move my clip down. Just to hear my name be called when I was playing with all of my neighborhood friends, that it was time for dinner. Tater tot casserole was so gross! *Why couldn't it be pizza*, were my famous words. In that time, friends were the best thing. We always hung out until the street lights turned on, and being a boy or a girl didn't matter, and everyone could be



friends. It didn't matter what you looked like; we were just kids with no unkind thoughts in our heads.

I just let myself slip away, which is what happened to almost all of us. I saw my spark go with my own eyes. When I was a kid, you could always see me with a big, happy smile on my face. That was my spark and that's what made me special. I would always be laughing and was always myself. I wouldn't be scared to be judged. I was just me. I wish I could take that spark and be my true self again now. My spark was all I needed to be happy. We are taught to be like every other person and to not be overlooked. Being popular is what almost everyone cares about. Why do we care so much about other people? Why can't we just take advice from our younger selves?

If you could go back in time, ask yourself, *Do I look happy now? Am I where I should be? Do I have the right people for myself?* Think of what that little kid would think. I would do anything for a little piece of my inner child. That was what made us so strange in a great way. Clothes, shape, looks, or anything else you could think of didn't matter, so why does it matter so much now. Why is that what we define each other as. The popular quote by George Elliot mentioned, "Don't judge a book by its cover," should be used in our life more often. That's all middle school and high school is seen as: one big popularity contest.

Remember when we were just kids with fun backpacks and could barely read? We were kind, caring, and compassionate. Our inner child is still with us. You just have to dig really deep down. "If you judge people you will have no time to love them." This was an amazing quote by Mother Teresa. Think of your little self. Did you turn into their dream life? What would you do if you had just one more day to be your true self? How much have you changed, and is that who you really want to be?

# Aiden Smith

Grade 12, Blue Springs South High School

*Personal Essay & Memoir*



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## A Mother's Sacrifice

At nineteen, Myra found herself juggling **responsibilities** far beyond what most young adults encounter. She wasn't just a student or an employee; she was also a mother. Working at Blockbuster for only \$8 an hour, the job was more than just a paycheck—it was a way to keep food on the table and ensure that her children had the necessities. But every hour spent behind the counter meant more time away from her kids, and the emotional toll weighed heavily on her.

"I had kids at a very young age," Myra recalled in a moment of reflection, her voice tinged with the regret of lost time. Hearing her say those words, I can still picture her sitting down at the table after a long day of work. The sound of VHS rewinders and the clinking of keys against the register were a constant background to her days at work, but her thoughts were always with her children. She **missed** so much, especially the moments when they needed her most.

Every night, after her **shift** ended, she would come home to a quiet house, her children already asleep. "I would be sad because my kids were already asleep, and I didn't get to see them all day," she shared, the sadness in her voice palpable. I often wonder how she managed to push through those nights, knowing that she was missing out on valuable time with her children. It wasn't just the physical exhaustion from working long hours; it was the emotional strain of missing out on her children's lives. Her days were spent in a constant balancing act, shuffling between her job, career, and trying to be there for her kids whenever she could.

Myra wasn't just working to make ends meet—she was also enrolled in **school**, determined to create a better future for her family. I remember watching her as she balanced schoolwork late into the night after a long shift. "After work, I'd have to go to school," she explained. "I was always thinking about how my kids were. Always." That worry never left her, and it made it hard to **focus** on her studies. "Do you feel like that hindered your ability to focus?" I asked her during our interview. "Yes," she responded. "It was very, very stressful."

I've heard her describe how **stress** affected her well-being many times. "Stress, worry, constant," she would say, describing the relentless pressure she felt every day. "Probably medical issues," she added, acknowledging the toll it took on her physical health. The overwhelming demands of juggling **work**, school, and parenthood became her daily reality. But quitting wasn't an option. "I had to keep going," she often reminded herself. Her children's future depended on it.

One night, while at work, she watched a father and son excitedly pick out a movie. I remember her telling me about this—how the little boy chattered away, his face glowing with excitement as they debated which movie to choose for their family night. Myra smiled at the scene, but inside, it stung. She thought about her **children**, already in bed, and those were the moments she longed for but rarely got to experience.

Myra's days at Blockbuster weren't just about scanning rentals and restocking shelves. It was during those quiet moments that she had time to reflect on her choices and her future. "I didn't listen," she admitted, acknowledging that her path in life had been difficult. "I had kids at a very young age," she repeated, and it was clear that she understood how different her life could have been had she waited. But there was no turning back. Her **focus** now was on making sure her children had the life she didn't.

Despite the struggles, Myra never lost sight of her goal: to give her **children** a better life. "You have to get yourself prepared, educated, and all that before having a family," she reflected. I often think back on those words—how they came from a place of hard-earned wisdom. She knew that while her path had been difficult, it had shaped her into the resilient person she is today.

Her time in school was another uphill battle. I remember seeing her at the kitchen table, books spread out before her, but her mind often elsewhere—on her kids. With her mind constantly on her children, it was hard to stay focused in class. The stress of knowing she had to make the grades, work long hours, and still be a **mother** weighed on her heavily. But she was determined to finish, not for herself, but for her family. Her education was the key to creating the **life** she wanted for her children—a life where they wouldn't have to struggle the way she did. But the question stands: Did Myra succeed in giving her children a good life? The answer is, without a doubt, yes. And how do I know so confidently? Because I, the interviewer, am her middle child.

My mom had me when she was 21 years old. I didn't understand everything then, of course, but as I look back now, I see the weight she carried for us every day. When I was younger, I always watched my mom come home exhausted, worn-out from her long and stressful days. Too young to understand, I was often annoyed by my lack of attention and my mom's early sleeping schedule. But as I've grown older, I now understand the reasoning behind her low, tired eyes, her less-than-lacking memory, and her sudden bursts of unconsciousness.

My mom graduated from Park University in Dec. 2014 with her bachelor's degree in accounting and had my younger sister just 8 months prior. We now live in a beautiful neighborhood in a safe, comfortable home. My mom works a stable, lucrative career that she is happy and confident in. My brother is approaching 20-years-old and is in the process of finding his own lifestyle. I am now in my senior year of high school and received a scholarship to Missouri State University that I will be attending in two months. My younger sister is preparing for her elementary school graduation and is as unbreakable and beautiful as our mother. The bond between the four of us will forever be inseparable.

The worry was always there, gnawing at her in the back of her mind. "I was always **thinking** about how you guys were," she said to me. Even during the moments when she should have been studying, her thoughts were consumed by me and my siblings. The constant mental load, the stress, and the pressure to succeed wore her down. Yet, she persevered, pushing through the exhaustion and the challenges because she knew the stakes were too high.

Looking back now, my mom can reflect on those early years with a sense of pride. "It was worth it," she said. "I wanted you guys to have more than I did." Despite the hardship, she learned valuable lessons along the way—about **resilience**, sacrifice, and love. She sacrificed her time and energy so that we could have a future that was bright and accessible.

Today, my mother's story is one of perseverance. It's about a young mother who faced overwhelming odds but refused to give up. Her journey wasn't easy, but it was filled with love and determination. She did what she had to do to make sure we had what we needed, and that's the lesson she carries with her to this day: that love and **sacrifice**, no matter how hard, are always worth it. And for that, I love her.

# Aiden Smith

Grade 12, Blue Springs South High School

*Personal Essay & Memoir*



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## Long Live Dash

Each day, I wear a necklace that holds a deep significance to me. Among the most precious is a dog tag, a simple piece of metal that once carried a message from a father to his son. Though the words have faded with time, the sentiment remains etched in my heart. This necklace belonged to my best friend, Dashiell, who passed away in April last year. The day after his death, his father, with tears brimming in his eyes, handed me the necklace. "I want you to have this," he said, his voice quivering as he struggled to contain his grief. I took the necklace from his trembling hands, embraced him tightly, and clasped it around my neck. It remains there, a constant reminder of the bond I shared with his son.

April 21, 2023, was the night before Dashiell's life was taken. I visited his house to see his new car, which he was so eager to show me. It was a worn-out, weathered, blue 2007 Honda Civic. It wasn't an awe-inspiring sight, but something about the chipped paint, the stained cloth seats, and the peeling tint spoke of potential. Dashiell wasn't concerned with his car's less-than-perfect condition; in fact, he was excited to finally have a vehicle of his own and to be able to pick me up for a change. However, the next day, while I was at work, my world changed forever. At 6:44 P.M., Dashiell Gonzalez lost his life.

Three months before Dashiell's death, he had warned me about one of our mutual friends after a disagreement they had the previous week. He cautioned me not to associate with him anymore, revealing that this person had even threatened to take his life. On April 22, Dashiell was with this boy. Further investigation revealed that they were meeting to "squash the beef." In the very car that he had acquired just fifteen hours earlier, Dashiell was shot. Despite hours of surgery, he succumbed to his injuries.

Dashiell's funeral was the second most agonizing day of my life, surpassed only by the day of his passing. The reality of his death hadn't fully sunk in until I arrived at the service. I stood paralyzed at the entrance, my legs refusing to carry me forward to where his casket lay. It felt like an eternity before I could summon the strength to approach. When I finally did, the sight of his lifeless body shattered the fragile composure I had clung to. My legs buckled beneath me, and I collapsed to the ground, crying out in disbelief, "No, no, no." The anguish of seeing my best friend—someone who had been so full of life—now lying still and cold, was unbearable. I couldn't grasp that this was real, that he was truly gone.

During the funeral, I was asked to speak about Dashiell. Standing before his family and friends, I struggled to find the words. How could I summarize the life of someone who had meant everything to me? There wasn't a day that passed without Dashiell being a part of it. Each day, after school, I would make the twenty-minute drive to his house just to spend a few hours with him. On weekends, I would pack a bag and stay until Sunday night. And in the summers, I practically lived there. We would do everything together, from sharing our deepest fears to concocting our "master plans" for our futures. I was never without my best friend. I spoke about the person Dashiell was—his passion for music, his dreams, and the plans we had crafted together. The night before his death, we had talked for hours about our futures. We had dreams of starting families, getting married, and achieving success. As I spoke, I made a solemn vow to continue those plans, to live the life we had envisioned together, even though he would no longer be by my side.

Three days later, I returned to say a final goodbye. It was just me and Dashiell's body, alone in the room. I held his hand, feeling the coldness and rigidity of his skin, and I apologized to him. I told him I was sorry for not being there when he needed me most, and for all the things we would never get to do together. I promised him that I would protect his family, that I would stand by them in his absence. As I stood there, tears streaming down my face, I knew that this was not just a goodbye to my best friend, but also a farewell to a piece of myself that I would never regain.

That necklace, always around my neck, serves as a constant reminder of Dashiell and the bond we shared. It represents not just the memory of my best friend, but the promises I made to him. Though he is no longer here, his presence remains with me, guiding me through the life we once planned to share. The funeral of my best friend was the most defining moment of my life. Seeing his lifeless body and saying my final goodbye forced me to confront the fragility of

life and the inevitability of death. It solidified my belief that life must be lived with purpose and that every moment we have with those we love is precious. My philosophy, now deeply rooted in these experiences, is that we must honor those who have passed by living fully and carrying forward the dreams and plans we made together. I no longer seek to avenge the wrongs of the world but instead strive to protect, love, and cherish those around me, just as I promised Dashiell I would.



# Aiden Smith

Grade 12, Blue Springs South High School

*Personal Essay & Memoir*



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## Romans 12:19

In my room, stored safely with my microphone, is a necklace with a pendant of a music symbol. Engraved on the pendant are the letters “GT.” This necklace, undoubtedly, is the most important object that I will ever own. Inside of it holds a portion of the ashes of my best friend, Dashiell. April 22, 2023, was the day that my closest friend, for as long as I can remember, lost his life. Dashiell was seventeen years old, the same age I am today. His favorite hobby was creating music. He would spend hours a day crafting songs and albums that he would show me with a gaping smile on his face. It was his passion. He wanted to pursue his love for music and turn it into a career. To achieve this goal, he created a persona known as “GT.” Under this name, he would create songs and post them publicly for all to hear. He was truly gifted. When he first began his music career, he didn’t have a microphone of his own; however, I did. Because of this, every day when I went to his house, I would let him borrow my microphone to create his songs—the same microphone with which his ashes lay today.

I was not with Dashiell the day that he died. At the time of his death, 3:44 P.M., I was at work. This will grow to be my biggest regret: I was with him the night before. I went over there to see his new car that he had gotten the same day—the same car he would end up being killed in the next afternoon—A blue 2007 Honda Civic, that could have been taken from the side of the road. It wasn’t much to look at, but he loved his car dearly for the 15 hours that he had it. That night, we drove around, talking the night away. Our conversation of choice, almost by reason, was death. We talked about how we felt we would die, when we thought we would die, and what we thought would happen after death. Dashiell

said to me that he felt as though he would die young and that he would likely be killed. I went quiet for a second, processing what it was he just said. I told him that he was crazy for thinking that, and that I didn't think he would die young (and definitely not killed). I couldn't have been more wrong.

When we started to run low on fuel, we went back to his house. There, he begged me to stay the night, saying that tomorrow was his junior prom and that he wanted me to go with him. He didn't care that I didn't have a ticket, he was willing to sneak me through the back door if it meant going with him. I told him I had work the next morning, so he asked me to call off work. He desperately wanted me to go. I considered it, but ultimately decided to go home. This was the last time I saw my best friend alive.

The next day, at around 3:00 P.M., I texted Dashiell, asking him if he had already picked up his date for his prom. The night before, I agreed that I would go to his prom with him when I got off work. I was making sure that our plans were still aligned. He never responded.

I got off work at 4:00 P.M. After work, his cousin and mutual friend, Kevin, texted me. "Did you hear?" I was unaware of what happened. I asked him what it was that I didn't know, but he wouldn't tell me. Eventually, after pushing for a minute, he told me that Dashiell had been shot and was in the hospital. I was mad that he didn't tell me right away and insisted that he tell me which hospital Dashiell was at, but he didn't know. I drove from hospital to hospital, asking for a "Dashiell Gonzalez," but he wasn't at any. Finally, I arrived at Center Point. When I entered, I saw his mother and sister there. I ran to his sister and demanded to know where Dashiell was. She responded by telling me that he was in surgery and that he truly had been shot. I was in shock that what Kevin had told me was true. I could feel my head lighten, I could sense the walls cave in, I could see my vision blur. Suddenly, I was awoken from my trance. "Our Dads over here." His sister said. I sat in the waiting room, pondering, waiting for reassurance that he was okay. Little did I know, he had died long before I had arrived.

Not long after I got there, around 15 minutes later, the doctor called us back. When we all entered a private room, his mom swiftly asked if her son was okay. The doctor didn't answer and instead excused himself to get his "trauma team." I didn't think much of it. What was a trauma team anyway? Maybe they're

coming to help us recover from the stress of him being shot? When he returned, alongside many nurses, surgeons, doctors, etc., he grabbed his mother's hand. At that moment, we all understood why he brought his "trauma team". "I'm sorry, he didn't make it." He told Dashiell's mom. It felt surreal, like a movie. I didn't know what to think. In my mind, Dashiell was invincible; Unkillable. Immediately, the room turned to chaos. Tears, screams, and sorrow filled the room. His mother passed out on the floor. His sister jumped up and down, screaming. His father sobbed and left the room. His aunt collapsed into her lap. And I sat there, across from everyone, unable to respond.

Only three days before this all took place, Dashiell said to me, "Aiden, I feel as if God is trying to talk to me. I think I should start going to church." I was in disbelief. Throughout our whole friendship, Dashiell had been an atheist. He had never once held an ounce of belief. In fact, he would even go as far as to argue why God didn't exist. He had an encounter with a religious man, who found him walking on the side of the road after getting in an argument with his mom and storming out the car. The man offered him a ride home and gave him a lesson about God on the way. I agreed and told him that we would begin going together. Unfortunately, we never did go. He died the night before the first Sunday. But I hadn't given up on my promise.

A month after his funeral, I attended my first service. Shaking, I walked in the door, goosebumps controlled my skin, and my heart was beating the fastest it had ever beaten before. Rows of seats were filled with people I've never seen, gospel music was playing in my ears, and an unfamiliarly peaceful atmosphere filled the room. I took my seat. "Dearly beloved. Avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, saith the Lord,'" the Pastor preached. The message struck me. No doubt, my heart skipped a beat. Was this message for me? I told no one, but I plotted against my friend's murderer. I sought to take the life of the one who took his. I was determined to get revenge, and I thought that no one would convince me otherwise. It was as if Dashiell saw my anger and was quick to tell me it was okay. Ever since that day, I have given my life to God.

I once lived a life of frustration, constantly finding ways to get revenge on the world I once believed was out to destroy me. I would look around at those around me with hatred in my heart, envying their smiles, and hoping they too

would feel my suffering. But the most traumatic, painful, and unwanted event in my life turned out to be the turning point in becoming who I am. April 22, 2023, was the day I found out who it is I want to be. I will never look back. Romans 12:19.

# Evaughn Smith

Grade 10, Timberland High School

Educator: Andrea Dubitsky

*Flash Fiction*



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## Code Four

I would never think I would go through the tragic phenomenon of a school shooting, but I have and I did, and I'm one of few that survived. So today, I will tell you my story.

The school has three floors, two above ground and the basement. The school floors were thin, so I could hear everything from the floor above and the floor under if the sound was loud enough. Our school was made of an off-white marble brick material. We had so many long hallways, each hallway with 20 rooms, that in my eyes went on forever – or what felt like it. But life for me? I go unnoticed in this school. Not because there are so many people, but because I walk with my head down counting the tiles, 8,000 in each hallway. Trust me – I've counted. And as I walk and the tile pattern switches from black to gold, I slowly turn into my class, and I hear the first shot ring out.

But I don't just hear one. I hear three, but two of them sound further away.

How do I escape? Do you not hear me? Do you even understand what's going on right now?

My teacher rushes to the door to barcade us into this suffocating classroom, but me? I'm still confused. she runs over to the box on the wall. I thought they were stupid, but before she even gets to her box, I hear a loud screeching noise over the announcement. A voice, shaky and filled with tears, echoes the sound with seven words: "Lock down. This is not a drill."

Mrs. Krantz threw all her desk into a pile, there were four desks to a pod and a clean carpet that laid on the floor. It had black with hits of silver. I have always loved that rug, but never spoke to her about it. The girls next to me are crying and on their phones, but I don't look at them. I'm more focused on

counting the shots I'm hearing reverberating off the walls and through the hallways.

But then I slowly remembered the passing period wasn't over. There are so many helpless students still finding their way to class. then instantly I stop hyper-fixating on the shots, but I start listening for the screams. Not just screams from my hallways. Screams from further away. *there's only one shooter* I thought *but they can't be*. I hear three shots, my counting never wrong, and I slowly begin to realize there's a shooter on every floor.

Forgive me if you don't understand or if I'm giving you too much detail, but you need to understand. This was the worst day of my life and I'm choosing to share it with you.

I'm trapped in this classroom, balled up with my classmates and the boy who just came from PE - and I know because his hair is drenched and the smell coming from his armpits is a smell I wouldn't even wish on my worst enemy it was so sickening. The air in the classroom was thick and heavy like the room was weighing down on us, and as more shots rang out and the seconds in this classroom felt like eternity, I wondered, *when will we be set free? When will I not have to hear my sobbing classmates?* The torturous screams pierce through the halls. Bullets burst. I need to get out of here. Everyone balled up next to me is lit up with the light of their phones, texting their parents, telling them they love them.

And you might wonder, why not me? Because I don't have a family at home anymore. Mom and dad died. I have no family except the small run down adoption building I live in.

As we stay crouched on that floor waiting for the screams and shots to just come to a stop, waiting for the whole world to go quiet so I can stop counting, so I can stop myself, and for once, quiet my mind, quiet my counting. Then I count more shots than before, but again I hear the shots on every floor and footsteps in unison moving together and a stern voice giving orders. But the nine words that saved my life, the nine words that stopped my counting, the nine words that kept me alive to tell my story, were "Code four! Code for! The suspect has been contained."

*We were saved.*

Evaughn Smith

Grade 10, Timberland High School

Educator: Andrea Dubitsky

Flash Fiction



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## I Love You, Mom

00:00:10

Two minutes before the bell and lunch is about to begin.

00:00:09

A loud echo and a scream rings out from the hallway. *What's happening?* I think to myself as I scan the classroom and the sea of perplexed and confused faces and my teacher stops speaking and walks toward the door to see what's going on .

00:00:08

The loud speaker screams, "Lock down lock down!"

00:00:07

Me and Sara look at each other, confused and motionless.

00:00:06

My teacher quickly runs to the door and shuts the blinds and clicks off the lights as some students go and hide like we practiced, and friends hold their friends tightly as tears run down their faces.

00:00:05

Tears begin to fill my eyes as I pull out my phone to text my mom. My crying classmates slam desks against the door as loud thuds ring out with every desk thrown.

00:00:04

The shots and footsteps echo closer. Sara looks at me, petrified.

00:00:03

"I don't want to die! Please, no!" I hear Sara's shaky voice as if she's a football field away, but somehow I know she's still right next to me, teary-eyed.

00:00:02

Out of nowhere, the loud smashing and cracking of our newly decorated door for spirit week begins to break in and shots ring out.

00:00:01

*"I love you mom, someone in the school,"* the text sends.

00:00:00

"You're bleeding!" Sara screams.



# Evi Smith

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*Journalism*



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## From One of the Worst, to Almost First: The Story of the 2024 Royals Miraculous Turnarounds

The 2023 season was a disappointing year for the Kansas City Royals. What many had considered to be the start of their rebuild ended with not only the club tying the worst record in franchise history, but the heart and soul of their team, Salvador Perez being considered for trade. Fortunately, that did not happen. That offseason Royals management, determined to not have another bad year spent over \$100 million on free agents, and signed their star shortstop, Bobby Witt Jr to the largest contract in franchise history.

Given all the offseason acquisitions, the Royals went into the 2024 season projected to win around 75 games. All things considered, these were high hopes for a franchise that had previously only won 56 games. But shockingly, the Royals won an astounding 86 games, tying the best turn around in major league baseball history. Not only did they win 30 more games than the previous year, they made the postseason for the first time since their World Series win in 2015. While they only made it to the American League Division Series, and lost in four games to the New York Yankees, this incredible turn around has set the tone for the clubs future, and truly defines one of baseballs best year-to-year turnarounds.

### **An Ace is the Best, but the Royals Drew a King and a Queen this Season as Well**

One of the biggest factors in this turnaround is undoubtedly their starting rotation. Made up of Cole Ragans, Seth Lugo, Brady Singer, Michael Wacha, and a combination of Alec Marsh and Michael Lorenzen in the five spot, the Royals rotation went from one of the worst in 2023, to second best, posting a 3.55 ERA this season. The rotation featured four starters (Ragans, Lugo, Wacha, and Singer)

with an ERA well under four as well as two Gold Glove contenders in Ragans and Lugo.

While the rotation as a whole proved to be an impressive and valuable asset for a team that had previously struggled with pitching, Cole Ragans proved himself to be the face and future of Royal's pitching. Acquired late in 2023 as a strictly bullpen pitcher with a 5.92 ERA, many questioned what the club saw in him. Well, those questions have since been answered. Ragans was immediately converted to a starter for the Royals, and was quickly recognized as one of the leagues best up and comers. After the 2023 season came to an end, there was little question surrounding who would be the opening day starter, as well as who would front the Royals' rotation. As expected, Ragans proved himself this year, posting a career best 3.14 ERA in 186 innings of work. He also struck out 223 batters, becoming the first left handed pitcher in Royals history to reach the mark.

Despite Ragans having a historical season, Lugo, Wacha, and Singer should not be overlooked. Lugo posted an incredible season, with a 3.00 ERA, 206.2 innings pitched, 16 wins, one complete game, and a Gold Glove. Despite suffering through a rough patch in the second half of the season, he provided phenomenal reliability through the first half of the season, which limited the impact of the bullpen, which was once again one of the clubs weaknesses. Wacha began the season going 2-4 in April, with an ERA over four, and posted a similar May, before suffering a broken foot that sidelined him for weeks. But, after returning, Wacha flipped a switch and got better each start, finishing the year with a top ten ERA in the American League, an incredible feat considering his injury and rough start. While he didn't quite show up to the postseason with his typical form, Wacha still gave the Royals front office a lasting impression of the value he brought to the team, and quickly signed a new deal with the club.

Unfortunately, unlike the previously mentioned starters, Singer won't be returning to the Royals in 2025. After a poor 2023, Singer likely went into 2024 with a simple goal. Do better than last year, and he did. He ended the season with a 3.71 ERA, which was drastically improved from his 2023 campaign, and generally did well enough to become a valuable trade chip for the team, eventually being dealt to the Cincinnati Reds in exchange for second baseman Johnathan India and outfielder Joey Weimer.

Finally, we have Alec Marsh and Michael Lorenzen rounding off the Royals' rotation. Marsh, while not having the best season, had a few tremendous games in which he showed excellent potential, but still struggled to find the necessary

consistency the team needed. This caused the club to trade for Lorenzen, who posted significantly better numbers than Marsh through his seven starts with Kansas City. This can be partly attributed to his veteran status, which was a necessity as the Royals made their first true playoff push since 2015, nearly a decade ago. Lorenzen is currently a free agent, and not expected to sign with Kansas City.

### **The 2024 New Kids on the Block**

While the pitchers certainly made the biggest impact of all the offseason acquisitions, the Royals also picked up Hunter Renfroe (OF), Garret Hampson (Util), and Adam Frazier (Util). While none of these players had an overly notable or impressive season, they still made valuable contributions to the team. Renfroe provided a strong right field arm and the potential for power at the plate, Hampson contributed his elite speed and versatility, and Frazier added another versatile veteran player, with experience winning. Despite them all having down years, they added significantly better depth to a roster that previously didn't have much.

As Frazier and Hampson both signed one year deals for the 2024 season, and have not signed anything new with the club for this upcoming season, it is unlikely that they will return. Renfroe on the other hand picked up his player option for the 2025 season, likely hoping to have another chance to prove himself as an asset before hitting free agency once again.

### **The Last Pieces of the Turnaround Puzzle**

For years, the Royals have been sellers at the trade deadline, but this season, the club finally got to be buyers as they addressed a few primary needs. A reliever with strikeout potential, power off the bench, and another option for the starting rotation. They ended up acquiring Hunter Harvey (P), Lucas Erceg (P), Paul DeJong (3B), and Michael Lorenzen (P), all addressing one need or another. Unfortunately, Harvey quickly went down with a back injury, and didn't make many appearances with his new team. Reliever Lucas Erceg and starter Michael Lorenzen certainly had their moments on the mound, as Lorenzen provided much needed support in the five spot of the rotation, and Erceg gave the club something they had been missing for years, a hard throwing, strikeout closer, who earned himself the nickname Lights out Lucas over his short time in KC this season. Paul DeJong supplied the club with some off the bench power, as well as another option for third base.

As it turned out, these were not the only acquisitions the club would have to make late in the season. After the trade deadline came and went, and players

could only be acquired via waiver claims, the Royals had to get creative to address new needs. Like they had done all year, KC's front office went to work and picked up outfielder Tommy Pham and first baseman Yuli Gurriel off waivers. Both players brought significant experience, both in general and in the playoffs. Yuli Gurriel specifically addressed the Royals sudden need for a first baseman after their primary one, Vinnie Pasquantino suffered a broken thumb, and Pham provided consistent and reliable defense and offense from the outfield.

### **One of These is not like the Other: Batting Edition**

The 2024 offense undeniably ran on three players for most of the year. First baseman Vinnie Pasquantino, star shortstop Bobby Witt Jr and veteran catcher Salvador Perez. This being said, all three had phenomenal years, and would have all reached the 100 RBI mark, if not for Pasquantino's broken thumb. Albeit, they still contributed 310 out of the 735 total runs scored, and the club still had two players surpass the 100 RBI mark for the first time since the early 2000's. But, having three players be such a significant part of your offense is a dangerous line to walk, as everybody saw when Pasquantino went down and the team's offense collapsed. In the future, if this problem is not fixed, the Royals will likely be left extremely exposed and susceptible to bad stretches if one of their key players suffers an injury. Players like Maikel Garcia, MJ Melendez, Hunter Renfroe, Michael Massey and Kyle Isbel will all need to have significantly better offensive years. As is, we've seen offensive talent from all of them. Maikel Garcia flashed power, speed, and good contact for the first few weeks of the season before fading and being demoted from leadoff to the middle and bottom of the order, MJ Melendez continuously showed up in the clutch, but the Royals will need him to do more than hit a couple game winners next season. Hunter Renfroe didn't look like himself, and was hopefully just experiencing a down year, but like Melendez, the club will need him to pull together some consistency. Michael Massey has shown to be a good all-around hitter, and was a sight to behold in the post season, but he has suffered from chronic back issues, which could leave the Royals exposed if those are not correctly dealt with. Kyle Isbel has year after year shown phenomenal defense in center field, but his offense continues to appear a bit lackluster. While not being a power hitter, he does have the capability to blast around 12 homers a year and also has great speed. Of course, other hitters will also need to make improvements, and hopefully the India trade will help in the coming years.

### **Bobby Witt Jr is Officially One of One**

Bobby Witt Jr is good. That is an undeniable fact. But this year he showed the world who he was after appearing in the All Star Game, coming in second in the Home Run Derby, making the All-MLB first team, winning a Gold Glove, a Silver Slugger, and the batting title, as well as placing second behind Yankees superstar, Aaron Judge, in MVP voting. Historic, to say the least. Besides a trophy shelf worth of awards, he also played 161 of 162 games for the Royals this season, only sitting out after they had clinched the playoffs, and rarely went without a hit. To no one's surprise, he also continued to stamp his name in the record books, after posting the most 30-30 seasons by a shortstop under 24.

A season like this certainly raises the question about what Witt Jr's ceiling looks like it, and whether or not we have seen it. Arguably, we have not, considering his vast year to year improvement since his debut in 2022, yet some consider this to be his limit. Even if this past season was Witt Jr's cap, that is still incredible, MVP caliber play.

### **The Royals Bullpen Took the Saying 'Strength and Growth Only Come From Effort and Struggle' to Heart this Year**

One facet of the 2024 Royals team that appeared unchanged was their bullpen. In 2023, the bullpen posted a combined ERA of 5.23. Second worst in the majors. After a rocky start in 2024, that eerily resembled the dreaded bullpen of the past, concerns started to rise as the club considered their playoff chances with a bullpen that continued to be in the bottom half of the league in nearly every statistic. To the relief of many, this changed drastically once the second half of the season hit, and relievers Lucas Erceg and Hunter Harvey were acquired. Unfortunately, Harvey quickly suffered a back injury. Without Harvey, other pitchers began to step up, and previous starters such as Kris Bubic and Daniel Lynch IV moved to the bullpen and posted phenomenal numbers. This led to the Royals pen posting a 4.13 ERA in 2024, and while that is by no means a great number, it is a significant improvement.

Something to remember about the bullpen is that despite its below average ERA, and underwhelming stat line, it continued to improve throughout the 2024 season, especially after acquiring Lucas Erceg at the trade deadline. He provided a consistent strikeout closer, and completed the tail end of the bullpen. In the playoffs, the bullpen combined to post the third best ERA in the postseason, at 2.16, an impressive number by any standards.

### **And the Unsung Contributors Award Goes To...**

Between cemented stars like Bobby Witt Jr and Salvador Perez, and rising stars like Cole Ragans, it is undeniable that the Royals carried a few players that

garnered most of the attention, but there were a couple underlying contributors. Players like Freddy Fermin (C) and MJ Melendez (LF), both put forth efforts that likely made it possible for this previously disappointing team to make the playoffs. Freddy Fermin, while being considered an undersized catcher, put up incredible numbers behind the plate. Fermin posted a league high in caught stealing percentage, at 52%, and threw out seven runners above average. He also proved to be baseball's best at framing pitches low in the zone. Fermin's value behind the plate wasn't the only notable thing about the catcher this year. He also hit for a .271 average, a number well above the league average, and one that was only brought down by a slow finish.

MJ Melendez is regarded by some as a player containing little value. A reformed catcher turned left fielder with average defensive skills, and a strikeout problem. While his 2024 statistics may show that to be true, they don't tell the whole story. At the beginning of the year, Melendez began tinkering with his swing in an attempt to reduce extra movement. Typically, these are adjustments made in the offseason, so the player has plenty of time to get used to the new swing, but this was not the case for Melendez. As such, he was thrown into being a starter, with the pressure to produce offensively without an established swing. This was evident throughout the first half of the season in his extremely below par batting average. Though MJ was able to figure things out after the All Star Break, he still ended the season with a disappointing .206 average. At first glance, this number certainly appears poor. But if Melendez was one thing this year, it was clutch. From his huge series against the Chicago White Sox in April, to his pinch hit, go ahead three run homer against the Detroit Tigers, which arguably is one of the reasons the Royals made the postseason, to his first career postseason home run against the Yankees, Melendez has always had a knack for timing.

### **They've Hit Rock Bottom, but how Much Higher can they go?**

The Royals 2024 season was nothing short of spectacular. But, that raises the question: can they continue that level of play for the years to come? There's valid arguments for both sides, especially considering that we still don't know what's going to play out in the offseason. Arguably, there is a larger argument for it being sustained, as they will still have their three primary offensive contributors, as well as newly acquired second baseman Johnathan India to lead off. They will also still have their talented centerfielder in Kyle Isbel, and another second baseman in Michael Massey who has shown himself to be talented, despite multiple stints on the injured list. The bullpen will have all the pitchers

that made it great at the end of the year, a cemented closer in Erceg, and a well regarded Hunter Harvey. The primary concern seems to be about their starting rotation. The club will retain Seth Lugo, Cole Ragans, and Michael Wacha, but did trade away Brady Singer, causing some to question the integrity of their rotation in this next season. Injury could decimate any team, and without the consistency of four skilled starters, questions have rightfully been raised about whether or not the rotation will be able to post elite numbers once again. Hopefully, with right handed pitcher Kyle Wright making his debut after Tommy John surgery in 2023, the rotation will once again have a talented number four spot, but as Wright has missed a year, there is no way to accurately assess what the Royals will be getting this upcoming season.

No matter what, it can be said that the Royals will not be returning to old form. With new general manager, J.J. Picollo, this club has shown itself to be completely redone. It has shown the ability to develop pitchers, produce stars, and win games. With the coaching staff returning, that it not likely to stop. Ultimately, only time will tell.

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# Neretva Spengler

Grade 12, St. Teresa's Academy

Educator: Sarah Taber

*Personal Essay & Memoir*



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## A Fresh, New, Swimmingless Identity and Outlook on Life

I hate Iowa. Not only because it is just miles of nothing in the middle of nowhere, but also because of what happened when I was there.

In Iowa, I had my first travel swimming meet at age fourteen. It was in Iowa that I realised I wouldn't continue the sport I'd loved for years. And for what? Because I spent more time worrying I would have to eat a chipotle burrito in a few weeks rather than the races that determined moving on to Sectionals.

It was cold and miserable. My hair, soaked from the chlorine, had turned from a weave of blonde curls into a block of ice on my head. My fingers and toes numb, no amount of clothing could warm me up. And, as much as I didn't want to admit it, I was *so hungry*. My stomach roared in distress, which I drowned out through the 'thwack' of a skipping rope at two in the morning. *Just 5 more minutes and it will be 100 calories gone*. Five minutes would turn into ten, which turned into a night filled with obsession and tears rather than a restful sleep before my races.

Bright lights flood my vision, while loud voices switch from words to muffled noise. I take a deep breath. *200 IM. Shouldn't be too bad, right?* Three whistles, then the noise turns to silence until I hear the words "take your marks" followed by a loud 'beep'. I dive in. While I did have an undying urge to win, I couldn't help but worry about gaining weight from the food I had been eating on that trip- well, at least the food I was supposed to be eating.

As I threw my arms ahead and pulled back the water, they felt heavy; *how much longer would I have to swim?* Butterfly, backstroke, my vision was starting to go dark. Breaststroke, finally. *This is my stroke. I can catch up*. I have done this

millions of times. Kick, pull through and up to the surface. Although I managed to gain maybe a second on my opponents, my legs gave up. So, when I finally turned for my final 50 yards of freestyle, I was fighting for my life. I got a time 4 seconds slower than my personal best. While this may seem like no big deal, to me this felt like my whole world crashing down.

Until this moment, I had been seen as a prodigy: my coach had wanted to train me for the Olympics, but after moving from the UK to the US, the opportunity slipped through my fingers and I fell into darkness. I was lonely, and I felt guilty – I thought I was going to be something, and it felt as if I was losing the one part of me that truly mattered (which was my swimming). It turns out the stress of moving – the lack of control and the sudden change – led me to try to gain control in my life by stopping eating. I had done two sports at the national level and maintained top grades in the UK, but now I struggled to keep up with one sport and everything crumbled before me.

It took me a long time to be okay with the fact that I may never swim again, and with this I learnt to find myself for who I really am rather than relying on a sport to craft my self identity. I am still a competitive person; however I have learnt to use it to my advantage rather than bringing myself down for every little failure. I have now restarted one of my previous national sports (rowing), and I hope to continue it in college. But most importantly, I can sit down after an arduous rowing practice with a big plate of curry and rice and finish it without an ounce of guilt.

# Addison Stisser

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*Flash Fiction*



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## Draw Two

*Who even uses a doorbell anymore!?* Emilie thought to herself after the unexpected chime caused her to drop her paintbrush across the canvas. The beautiful colors arranged into a delicate landscape now had a violent, dark blue streak down the middle. A groan of displeasure filled Emilie's painting room; the sun that danced over her face now felt blinding. Her *perfect* painting was now ruined by the blaring doorbell. Typically, the view from her painting room, which looked over the vast land in front of the house, allowed Emilie to see the people who came and went. But she saw no cars and no one waiting in the front circle, so although the doorbell replayed in the back of her head, she ignored it, rummaging through her painting drawers for something to remove the disruptive blue streak.

Her fingers felt the cold metal before she could see it. Even without eyesight, she precisely knew what her hand was wrapped around. Emilie was afraid to move, wondering if she pushed past the metal box, then maybe she could forget it was there. Forget the dust that coated her hand or the memories that lay within that box, within the cards. Like muscle memory, her body pulled out the red tin and onto her lap. Those bold letters now felt like a ghost, a daunting message, in her face. UNO! The thick black letters screamed, contrasting against the white and sparkling tile of the room she painted in now. UNO! ONE! ALONE! It cried again, how now she was alone holding this tin, alone opening this game.

Emilie's hands ignored the pleading from her mind and worked against her will to stop. As she slid the lid off, she felt, or rather she knew, the dents and scratches of paint her fingers ran over. She knew that before dust covered the

Uno game, there were fingerprints and smudges from the frequent usage and cards slightly bent from playing so much and getting frustrated. She knew the Uno instructions were folded nicely under the cards, never to be touched or needed. Emilie's mind wandered to when this game brought her happiness, to when she was with *him*, and their laughter filled the room.

Now, the cards felt like a slap in the face.

"Emile?" Her aunt Laura's voice made her snap back to her lonely and quiet reality. Emilie became a cockroach caught in the light, slamming the lid of the red box down and throwing it under her stool, a loud and empty clang filling her room. Her back became pin-straight, and her eyes focused on her mom's best friend as she entered the room. "I can't find your mom. I rang the doorbell, but we realized there was no use!" Aunt Laura's laugh was warm, like sunshine on Emilie's skin, but today, the warm feeling was overpowered by the cold memories radiating from the Uno tin underneath.

Her aunt's "we" echoed around her head and emerged from behind her.

Waylon. His presence vacuumed the air from Emilie's lungs. Their time apart felt like centuries to Emilie now. His hair was longer, he seemed taller, and his eyes were dim. Each new observation felt like a stab to Emilie's heart, knowing she was not there to witness them. Waylon's eyes roamed quickly over the spotless room he was familiar with but lingered a little longer on Emilie. She was in her painting overalls; her hair was up instead of down. He knew this look was intimate, different, and prohibited to the public eye. Waylon's breath hitched in his chest at this knowledge, his heart tightening and his fingers flexing at his side.

Emilie didn't fail to notice his eyes looking everywhere but her own, but they did miss the way his body heaved at the sight of her. Or how his mouth twitched at the sides, itching to say something to her- fill the awkward silence that had never existed between them before. But Emilie never noticed those things like Waylon did.

For the first time in Waylon's life, Emilie was silent. He couldn't tear his eyes away from her, from his best friend. His heart was broken by her hands, but still gasping for her. Her eyes were lowered, her fingers lightly tracing over the paint splatters on her overalls. He followed her gaze, getting stuck on the bright red tin under the stool. The red box captured their friendship in a three-letter word. Waylon knew that tin all too well, knowing the person in front of the tin even better. The silence in the room was mirrored by Emilie's restlessness in her stool and Waylon's soft rocking back on his heels. Their gazes, which studied

every dust particle in the room but each other, met with a quirt exhale of air. The months of pain, sleepless nights, and aching for companionship became lost to the weight of that Uno box. It fit between the folds of the cards.

“Want to play?”

# Daphne Stokes

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*Personal Essay & Memoir*



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## Shut Out From the Shut-In's

June 29th, 2023, was a normal, hot summer day in Lesterville, Missouri. I stayed at Camp Taum Sauk with my brother for two weeks. Everyone was in the dining hall, protected by the AC from the heat waves outside. *I hope it will cool down today, even though it's mid-summer.* We were laughing about something our counselor had said earlier. "Oh my god Stella, I can't believe you said that!" My friend Molly shouted across the table.

Molly had long silky blond hair tied into a ponytail on the shoulder of her blue White Fox hoodie.

"I know! It was too funny!" Neilly loudly responded. Neilly was the cabin clown, always starting the conversation. She had messy dark brown hair draped over her orange Colorado tank top.

"Hey guys!" said a voice from behind me. I turned around to see Anna standing beside Stella with a clipboard. Anna had long red hair tied into a messy bun and wore a baggy blue Buc'ees T-shirt with red plaid pajama pants. "So, your cabin is scheduled for Johnson shut-ins today after lunch. You will meet at the treat window after rest period, with your swimsuits on, your river shoes, a water bottle, and a towel." Anna said, peering up from her clipboard. Cheers and laughter danced around the table as Anna walked away.

Once we heard the bell ring to end rest period, we dashed out the door towards the tree house to meet with our counselors. *I wonder if another cabin is coming with us.* I was talking to my friend Mary Grace about the super deep pools that were at Johnson Shut-Ins, and how cold they could get. "Do you think that water would be warmer now? Since it is boiling outside." Mary Grace asked as she applied sunscreen. "Maybe, since Johnson Shut-Ins is open towards the start of

fall, the pools drop in temperature in August and September,” I replied as I flung my towel over my shoulder.

A sudden crack rang throughout the air as the youngest girls at camp emerged out of their cabin and frolicked towards us in a huddle. “Alright girls, make sure you have life jackets!” Lexi shouted over the girl’s chatter. Lexi was our cabin counselor. She had wavy black hair tied into a tight bun, holding her sunglasses on her head. She had a baggy white T-shirt draped over her bright blue bikini. We were huddled together and then piled into the camp van.

“Remember girls, some of the rocks are slippery at the shut-ins. So be careful when you are climbing them. Understand?” Lexi said from the passenger seat of the van. “Yeah, we’ll be careful Lexi,” I said behind her. Throughout the journey to Johnson Shut-Ins, Gossip and laughter echoed throughout the van. *Yeah, the water would be warmer since it’s the middle of June.* Once we hurtled into the parking lot, we filed out of the van, huddling right by Lexi. As soon as the second van with the younger girls pulled up, we were led towards the stone pathway that led to the cold waterfalls that awaited us ahead.

As we waltzed through the canopy of tall trees, we could slowly start to hear the water splashing from people swimming. Once we reached the deck that looked over the shut-ins, a warm breeze swayed through the trees, right onto our faces. “Before you run off into trouble, make sure you are careful when climbing.” Lexi had repeated that same phrase a million times on the ride there, and we might as well had it burned onto our skulls. Once Lexi gave us the green light, we flew past other people, right into the first pool of water.

After about two hours of exploring, we came across the jumping rock. It was a 40ft drop into a 10ft deep pool below. It was said to be the highest jump into the deepest pool in Johnson Shut-Ins, so only the people with the guts to jump off would take the challenge. I was too nervous to jump off, but Neilly was not only the cabin clown but also the cabin daredevil, so got into the line to jump off. I was watching from the rocks below, awaiting Neilly to jump off.

There was a long line, so I had to wait a bit. I watched as each person in the line jumped into the water, climbed out, and went back into the line to jump again. A man appeared at the top of the rock, he looked about 30. He had brown hair and black swim trunks. I turned my head to see people cheering for him. *It must be his family.*

He released a loud yell before he bent down, ready to plunge into the cold water below. “Hey Daph! Have you seen Neilly?” I heard Molly shout from a few feet away. I turned to respond. “Huh?” I asked, but before she could say anything

else, loud gasps interrupted Molly as I whipped my head around to see the commotion. And all I heard was a bloodcurdling scream, and a loud crack that rang throughout the air.

As I stared at the man who was just on top of the rock, lying motionless on the rocks in front of me, everything went silent. It was as if I had just gone completely deaf right there and then. My head was racing and my hands were trembling. I looked down towards my yellow swimsuit, which was now stained with fading red dots. I felt hot tears stream down my face like a river, mixing with the blood that had been splattered on my cheeks. The rock that held the man was being stained a pale red like paint mixing with water. I felt as if the ground had just disappeared and I was just floating away.

But something caught me and yanked me back down to the ground, pulling me out of my mind. “Daphne! Are you okay? What happened? Why is there blood on your swimsuit?” Molly’s questions were followed with no answer from me. “Come on, Lexi said we have to leave right now. She said it was an emergency” Molly said as Neilly sprinted from behind the large rock. A crowd had accumulated around the man.

As we gathered on the wooden deck, paramedics with duffel bags of equipment appeared from behind the trees, running in our direction. “We got a call that someone hit their head on a rock?” the first paramedic asked Lexi. “Yes, an old man slipped off of the jumping rock and hit their head hard on a rock. I didn’t see it happen, but one of our campers did.” Lexi said as she pointed in my direction. Both paramedics rushed over to me and asked me what happened. After I explained, the paramedics had spotted the scene, rushed down the rocky terrain, and we were escorted back to the van to leave.

When I tell this story to my friends and family, memories of that day flood into my mind. I never even knew the man’s name, or where he was from. All I knew about him, was that I witnessed his life being cut short right in front of his family. Looking back, I realized how easily life can end, and how important mine was. Now, I look at the shut-ins differently. And when someone asks me to jump off with them, I pull them aside, and tell them a story that starts with, “June 29th, 2023, was a normal, hot summer day in Lesterville, Missouri.”



# Hailey Szlanfucht

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*Personal Essay & Memoir*



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## Softball Fields Personal Narrative

As my dad and I enter one of the softball fields, the dirt greets us with a warm but lazy smile. Its appearance reveals how old and worn down it is, with dark-colored dirt and faded chalk lines. My metal cleats have roamed this dirt for three years, preparing for every tryout and practicing for every game. I quickly slip my feet into my not-so-white cleats, tie them, and walk onto the field. After warming up, my dad picked up my softball bat -- the blue one -- and said “Start in left field.”

I grew up hearing this sentence, replacing ‘left field’ with other positions, as over the years I have constantly been moved to adapt to new positions. This can be applied to life in general by being able to be flexible through different situations. Once I get in position, my dad shows me the ball, throws it up in the air, then takes a quick swing at it. *WHACK!* I drop-step backward, sprint further and further, but the ball soars over the fence! My jaw drops in awe as my dad is 50 years old and hasn’t hit like that since high school! He drops my bat and pumps his fists in the air, and I eventually join him. We take a few minutes to talk about how cool it was (and for him to tell me I need to start swinging like that in games) then get back to practicing. My dad eventually told me to switch to the infield. I take a few hits here, either knocking down a ground ball or working on different scenarios, like bunt defense. I’ve never had a coach (in my many years of playing) that had the same bunt defense -- something is always different. That’s why I love softball. Different things can be done in many different ways. Because of this, my dad has me practice all of the different types so I can be prepared. He then tells me to take a water break, and that I will be base running next. Growing up playing t-ball, my nickname was “Wheels” as I was pretty fast.

The nickname carried on throughout coach pitch, then kid pitch, and finally fast pitch. This was my favorite part about softball: running. I didn't necessarily need to work on simply running the bases, but different scenarios as well as diving and sliding. I was known on my travel softball team the previous summer for my pop-up slides, which meant I could slide into a base and immediately spring up as if I had never slid into the dirt in the first place. In the book *Heartland: A Memoir of Working Hard and Being Broke in the Richest Country on Earth* by Sarah Smarsh, she elaborates upon her memories at her grandparent's farmhouse and how that shaped her as a person. Smarsh shares numerous memories that her grandfather and grandmother provided her, adding how they shaped her as a person. My dad would always say "... a little dirt was good for you," which is mentioned in her book when she briefly describes a field located near her farmhouse (Smarsh 93-94). This was a swift way of sliding, yet acquiring another base if the opportunity arose, and I was good at it. On the opposite side of that, I despised diving. I hated the dirt that got stuck between the belt and pants. And I was most definitely *not* good at it. So of course, my dad forced me to practice diving. After I had practiced everything that was planned, we started to head back to the dugout to pack up our stuff. Once we were ready to leave, we noticed the sunset. A beautiful array of colors were displayed: blue, pink, and orange. Seeing this was comforting, as it felt like a reward for my hard work. It made me appreciate and reflect on the memories made here, and that I needed to absorb what little time I had left in this field.

A week of tryouts flew by in a blur, ultimately leading me to make a team and start practice. Our first game day suddenly came, and before I knew it, I was warming up by throwing, catching, and hitting. My team gathered in the old batting cages, located directly between the softball fields. The program used these cages to hit off of the tee, pitching machine, and front-toss. I had never heard of anyone who enjoyed hitting off the machine, as it was *very* finicky. It threw changeups and curveballs and riseballs, all of which no one could hit. A certain speed was always set but often felt faster than it was supposed to be. Hitting off of the tee was the best part of our hitting routine, with the exception that the net draped over the metal frame of the cage had several holes. Whenever we hit off of the tee and into the net, the ball would soar through the hole and out of the contained cages. This happened year after year but helped me to improve my hitting so I didn't hit directly into the hole. The game started, and the first half-inning zipped by. Our opponent hadn't scored any runs. Inning after inning passed by, with our team leading 4-0. I was on deck (meaning I was second up to

bat) in the bottom of the second inning. Before I enter the batter's box, I have the same routine: hold my bat upright, look at the Easton logo on the side, close my eyes, and take a *deep* breath. Swivel the bat in my hands, then step into the box. First, my left foot, which is placed close to the line marking the top of the batter's box, then my right foot, which I make level with my left. I rest my bat on my shoulders, slightly slide my feet to make a divot in the dirt, and then take another *deep* breath. I am now in my relaxed headspace. The sounds of nature echoing throughout the field allowed me to calm down and get in the right mindset to focus. The pitcher slowly wound up, her arm going behind her hips, then back forward and up in a circular motion. She releases the ball, and in that split-second, I throw the barrel of my bat at the ball and lay down a *beautiful* drag bunt. I knew exactly what steps I needed to take to get to first base, as I'd practiced on this dirt for so many years. I sprint to first base, hearing the cheers and chants of the players in the dugout and the spectators in the stands. I swiftly turn my head to see where the ball is once I reach first base when it suddenly flies past my helmet and into the fence. I leap at this opportunity to sprint to second base, with my cleats immediately changing direction in the dirt. Darting to second base, I spin my head to look at my coach -- who is standing at third base -- to check if he wants me to take another base. His hands are above his head, violently motioning me to get to third. He shouts, "Go, go, go!" and I safely made it to third base in a flash. I look downward at the dirt around the base and run my cleat over it to smooth it out -- it's just a habit. Stand-up triple on a bunt! The whoops and hollers from the stands result in me grinning from ear to ear. My parents, along with others in the stands, shout:

"Let's go!"

"Atta girl!"

"That's the way 5!"

It was only the first game, and I just had my first spotlight moment of the season! A warm breeze traveled throughout the softball stadium, comforting me, knowing that I had many more games to make the best of the season. In the article, "How Playing A Sport Can Improve Your Mental Health" by AdventHealth explains that immersing yourself in a sport has numerous benefits such as improving mood, sleep, and self-confidence. It also elaborates on how this effect improves your mental health overall. It states that when you're playing a sport, "...You may find yourself totally distracted from the stressors and challenges of daily life" (Advent Health). I can vouch for this, as the softball fields are my

second home, being an escape from my chaotic life. I couldn't imagine where I would be without them.

The biggest moment in my softball career had finally come: senior night. I tried to avoid thinking about the last time I would ever touch the dirt, chatting with the girls I'd called teammates for years, and walking through the dugout that had seen so many of my emotions. However, the night had finally come. I had a table that was designated for me so I could set out my senior trifold and other objects that contributed to this memoir. I placed my glove, awards, and previous jerseys on the table beside my trifold that contained an array of photos taken throughout my softball career. I, along with the rest of the seniors, lined up alphabetically and prepared ourselves for the wave of emotions that would hit us while walking down the field. My name was finally announced, and I walked through the tunnel of dance team members and JV softball players. I had recorded my senior speech that was being played over the speaker for everyone to hear. You could hear my voice crack as I started to tear up, noticing how sad I was that my softball journey was over. I did the same thing as I walked down the 'senior aisle' -- tears started rolling down my cheeks and onto the dirt my cleats had last played on. The dirt that my glove had last touched. The dirt that I last slid into. Sweat, tears, and energy had been put into my entire career for this moment. My parents escorted me to home plate, where I met with the three coaches that I had grown to know over the years. While I hugged them, they told me how proud they were of me and my accomplishments. I couldn't believe I was already done with the softball program. It felt like just yesterday that I was arriving on this field for the very first time, a freshman, getting ready for my first of many tryouts. I heard myself thank God for keeping me safe and healthy throughout my time playing softball. I then heard myself tell the rest of the team how fast the four years you get in high school go by. I mention that "you'll miss being a freshman, so cherish every second you have" and make the most of what you are given. All in all, the softball fields have provided me with several benefits. They have watched me mature over my time here and improve my athletic ability. These fields have shaped me into the person I am today, and I will forever be grateful for that.

# Chris Tao

Grade 11, John Burroughs

Educator: Shannon Koropchak and Joy  
Gebhardt

*Personal Essay & Memoir*



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## May 11th, 2024

10:03 AM

“I see you saved your effort for the 800m,” my coach said with a reluctant smile as I stepped off the track and onto its grass-covered interior.

“Yeah,” I replied, leaving out the crucial detail that I had just run one of my slowest 4x800m splits all year and now had to race the same distance in an open event just an hour later.

“You did what you had to do, now you can let loose later today”

“Yep.”

10:01 AM

*I can't do this anymore* rang through my head as I came around the final curve of the relay, baton in hand. I was in first place, but I could hear the drone of spikes hitting the track directly behind me. *Just kick, you can finish this race.* My arms were greeted by the familiar tingling sensation that I always felt at the end of races. I could feel my brain losing control of my body as the searing pain in my legs turned to numbness. The voices around me became amplified. *Catch him! Keep your eyes on the Burroughs jersey... you have to pass him!*

The sound of my heartbeat in my ears was like a drum that kept me moving. The urge to walk is hard to fight, and it's even harder to force yourself to go faster at the end of a race. *This is just a relay split, why is this so hard?* Sometimes you have to remind yourself that no matter how fast or slow you run an 800m, it will always feel excruciating. My vision began to distort, and it felt like I was blinking rapidly, even though my eyes were wide open. As I approached the line, my deteriorating arm strength barely managed to extend my arm with the baton

as my legs slowed. *Finally*. I was greeted by the warm embrace of the finish line, and now it was my teammate's burden to continue the relay in my place. My eyes glanced at the clock, and my heart sank deep into my chest. 2:01? *Why can't I ever run a good split?*

I could still feel the lactic acid pulsing through my legs as I stumbled off the track. *I still put us in first place, but it's never fast enough for the coaches.* I trudged slowly over to my empty backpack and spike bag, where I was quickly greeted by my coach. His lips formed a terse smile and I knew that I had not reached his expectations, or my own.

2:30 PM

*Good job on the 4x8!!! You looked so fast out there!!! Congrats to the team for winning and qualifying for state, can't wait to watch your 800 soon!!!*

- Mom

I ignored the text message for now because it's always hard to watch someone else be proud of you when you aren't proud of yourself. I couldn't let it show on my face that the relay 800m felt like I was giving all my energy, and I still ran a much slower time than I usually do. *It never feels that difficult.* Closing my eyes, I pressed the Theragun into my IT band, hoping to magically make the soreness go away. I had been resting for an hour in the team tent, but I couldn't shake the feeling that the open 800m soon was going to go wrong. My parents and coaches had so much hope in me qualifying for the state championships as an individual, and not just as a relay. *I have to make it.*

*Breathe in... (inhale) 1-2-3 (hold) 1-2-3 (exhale) 1-2-3.* It was time to start warming up again for my next race. The pins and needles numbness was already present in my hands. As I did my slow warm-up jog around the field, I could feel the tiredness of the morning's race lingering. Each step I took screamed *you're not ready!* I did my drills alone, trying to ignore the pit of nerves in my stomach. I walked over to the officials where I got my number, and sat down next to all the other runners about to step onto the track. Sitting on the wooden bench, I closed my eyes and tried to float far away in my mind. In my vain attempt at calming my mind, I was in my own world: I wasn't nervous, and I definitely wasn't about to run the most important race of the year.

2:56 PM

I looked around, unsure of what to do at the start line, so I copied the warmup moves of everyone around me. Usually, I stood tall as I calmly waited for the start of the race, but today all I could focus on was trying to get the tingling in

my arms and the soreness in my legs to go away. *The top 4 in this race qualify for state, you got this.*

“On your mark...”

“Set”

*Bang*

2:57 PM

“Remember, the first 100m is free energy. You’re running on adrenaline.” This mantra had served me well as I always swept out of the blocks, pushing past the competition. I did my usual strategy of getting out fast, but to my surprise everyone else jumped to the front of the pack too. In fact, they sprinted in front of me. This had never happened all season, but I had no choice but to hang on to them. The pace was insufferable. 26, 27, 28... I heard someone on the sidelines counting the seconds it had taken for us to reach the 200m. *This is too fast, there’s no way I can hold this pace.*

“You’ve trained too hard not to qualify for state,” my coaches words reverberated through my head. I tried to withhold my panic as the pace began to accelerate more. I felt my arms and legs start to tighten, the familiar tiredness of the day’s efforts catching up to me. My stride began to shorten as I lost confidence with every step.

“Run your own race,” I heard my mom yell from the sidelines. I knew I had to qualify, not just for my coaches and parents, but for myself. Everything I had worked for had led to this moment. Every workout where I was left lying by the side of the track in exhaustion had culminated in this final display of my training.

*You can do it, Chris*

My stride began to open up as my leg speed became faster and faster. I ran past the clock after the first lap in 4th place. This is where I needed to move. I could hear my coaches yelling words of encouragement, but to me it all sounded like white noise. All I could hear was the sound of my feet striking the track. All I could see was the back of the person in front of me as I slowly tried to reel them in. At the 500m curve, my legs began to burn, a familiar sensation I had been trained to fear. The third 200m of the race was notoriously the most miserable.

*What if I can’t do it?*

*If I don’t qualify, I’m letting everyone down.*

This internal monologue raced through my head. I could feel my form slipping, my arms beginning to poke out awkwardly left and right. My head was spinning, and the world became blurry and bright. The last bend was approaching. I needed to hold on to my spot. I needed to convince both myself and others that I could do this. I needed to turn off my brain, take a deep breath, and run.

2:58 PM

*1:56?? What a race!! So proud of you, Chris.*

*- Coach B*

*What. Just. Happened.*

A million thoughts were rushing through my head. I couldn't even feel the soreness in my legs anymore, it didn't matter. *Did I actually just run 1:56?* If you had told me at this time last year that I would run the time I did today, I wouldn't believe you. I didn't even believe it now. *I qualified for state! And with a new personal best!* I could feel the disappointment and anxiety from this morning rush out of my body in a wave. I actually did it, I didn't let my fear take control of my race. I didn't let one bad race mess me up for the entire day. Instead of cracking under the pressure, I was the one who broke the confines of the stress and tension that had built up. My self talk was both the reason I had done well in the race, and the reason I doubted myself. It was strange. The pressure had made me run fast, yet also broke me down at the same time. Sometimes pressure is a good thing, but after a while it makes you deteriorate. *Next week is state, how am I going to handle the pressure of an even bigger meet then?* But that was a problem for next week. Right now, it was like I was in another world, where the runner I used to be was just a shell lying by the start line.

4:05 PM

*So are you excited to do it all again next week at state? Can't wait to see how you do!*

*- Coach B*



# Samantha Thurman

Grade 11, Ruskin High School  
*Short Story*



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## Those Enchanted Eyes

*Once upon a time*, there was a short maiden who had found herself trapped. How had she managed to get trapped and where you might ask? Well, one day that maiden was walking down the stone paths within her village. Humming softly to herself as she waltzes down the road with a spring in her step. She was carrying a small basket within her grasp as she made her way down until the road slowly broke off into a dirt path that led into a dark forest. Still, the maiden's feet never faltered as she continued to skip down the paths that led into the forests that the sight of would make simple farmers and warriors alike falter at the thought of what it could contain.

The maiden carried no fear, though, as she went on with her quest to go find her treasures, maybe one of the most heavenly tasting berries or the most enchanting looking flowers that would make any fair lady swoon at the sight of them. The memories of the townspeople's warnings held little to no importance to her as she began to scan the dark forest.

The people would tell her, "Don't go in there!"

"There are monsters lurking in there!" They'd say.

"People who walk into those forests never return." Some would add, "Only fools would dare enter there." They'd cry but the maiden never paid attention.

See, she used to believe those sorts of rumors just like any child would. Parents would warn and cry about the evil lurking about that would snatch up naughty children within the night and the children would tremble before hurrying to finish their chores, not wanting the monsters to get to them. She would do the same until she grew out of those childish beliefs. She'd roll her eyes whenever she overheard a parent whispering to their child about those old fairy tales, finally knowing the truth about such stories: That fairy tales were exactly

what their name suggested, fairy tales. Fictional stories that were made up by one creative mind and passed onto another until the story ran rampant throughout the town. So when she began to hear stories about the evil cursed forest she rolled her eyes and continued with her day.

But this story wasn't like the others, instead of it only being told to children to excite or scare them, this was also one that was spread throughout adults. Tales about a lost sister, brother, and mother being spread around the town. Tales about an evil figure lurking within the trees, waiting until someone entered so they could snatch them from where they stood ran amok. The maiden was surprised, not because of the contents of such a story, but because everyone believed it. Her family, her friends, her neighbors, everyone seemed to have fallen for the rumor whilst the maiden thought the entire story was completely foolish.

The maiden had lived near the forest for most of her childhood, never entering it once but many times finding herself near the edges of it, staring in wonder at the looming trees before her mother had eventually called her and her brothers back up for lunch. The forest held many of the childish rumors of monsters coming to steal away bad children inside of it but never had the forest been actually labeled dangerous. She had never entered the forest before, not as if she was banned from entering, it was more that it felt like something off limits when she was younger. The enchanting trees held some sort of aura that didn't say, "turn away; stay far away" but instead it told her, "it's not the right time".

This day though that the maiden finally entered the forest she felt no such aura, instead the forest felt calm. Not as if it was inviting her inside but as if it was curiously watching her and allowing her to do as she pleased to see what exactly she would do. So the maiden walked into the forest as if she had walked those paths thousands of times before and looked around the dark forests, peering out to look at the patches of light that broke through the bushes of the trees above her to look for anything to bring back home. She imagined the look on her family and friend's faces once she brought back the basket, holding it back out in pride whilst saying, "See! There was nothing to ever be worried about after all!"

She walked about, seeing some ordinary flowers or a few scattered barren bushes about but not exactly anything particularly interesting. She slowly stops looking for something to take and decides to just admire the scenery around. The maiden's eyes begin to become so hypnotized by the sight that she doesn't realize that she begins to stray from the dirt path. Her eyes begin to cloud and she hears a faint ringing sound in one of her eyes as she drifts further and further from the path.

One moment she was lost in a misty forest and then she blinked and she was in a beautiful golden field of flowers. She looked around with confusion in her eyes as she took in the sight of the glowing flowers shining in the sun. Her eyes light up as she ignores the warning signs flashing in the back of her mind as she knelt to the floor to begin caressing the flowers with the back of her hand. She smiles and picks the flowers, one by one until she has enough for three small bouquets. One for her mother, the other two for her sisters. She smiles to herself proudly as she looks at her haul and then she looks back out to the field and freezes.

In the middle of the field where there was a noticeable lack of flowers from the maidens pickings there was a man sitting with his head down. His legs folded into a criss-cross position as the field soon filled with a soft humming sound. The maiden blinks slowly as her mind and sight becomes misty once more until the man finally speaks.

“Hello, dear. Has anyone ever told you it is rude to take without asking first?” He asks while looking up with pitch black eyes that flicker before they revert to a soft brown color and he smiles as if he is highly amused by the situation. The maiden stutters, trying to find an explanation before attempting to apologize.

The man shakes his head, “No need for that, It has been a while since I’ve had visitors.” He stands up and brushes off any lingering grass off of himself before turning away and gesturing in front of him, “Take a walk with me?” He asks and the maidens legs move automatically.

They settle into a small stroll throughout the neverending fields. The man was content to stare off into the distance while the maiden tried to sort out her thoughts. She felt as if something was horribly wrong but everytime she caught hold on the thought it would be brushed away by some odd force inside of her brain. They walked for what felt like hours as the maiden lost grasp of reality slowly but surely, but then suddenly the man stopped. The maiden blinked and then the field had warped to form a pond.

The pond was sparkling and shining as different golden jewelry and trinkets floated about inside of it and it looked like one of the most beautiful things the maiden had ever seen.

The man chuckles, reminding the maiden of his presence and he looks down at her.

“Would you like to take any of it?” He questions with a tilt of his head and the maiden’s eyes widens, hearing his words as an offer. She nodded her head

eagerly, thanking the man profoundly before he had even handed her anything but he just laughed it off and gestured a quick dismissal that the maiden took as a sign to take.

So she does.

She grabs a golden necklace for her mother, two golden bracelets for one of her sisters, and 2 golden rings for the other. She places them into her basket and stares at them in wonder before a shadow falls onto her and she looks up to see the man right in front of her. She opens her mouth to thank him once more before he lays a finger on her lips.

"I want nothing from you, dear, except one thing." He says and the maiden nods, thinking that as long as he doesn't ask her for money that she would accept anything he asks from her. He smiles warmly and his eyes flicker for a brief moment back into that void color until it disappears so quickly the maiden doesn't have any time to ponder about it, "Your name." He states and she stares.

She tilts her head slightly, confused, wondering if that's really it and before she can ask he just laughs, "Yes, dear, that is all I want. I simply just want your name and I will allow you to take your treasures back to your village." The maiden only had to think about the offer for a few moments before opening her mouth.

"Aliana." She speaks and the man smiles the widest he had that entire encounter and a feeling of chill washes over the maiden but it was already done.

"Good. Thank you, Aliana." He then closes his eyes and the world goes black.

When the maiden- Aliana opens her eyes she is lying on the path leading up to the forest. She blinks open her eyes and is forced awake by the sound of cries. She quickly sits up but is hit by a feeling of vertigo. After a few moments of confusion, her vision finally clears enough for her to see her family and neighbors surrounding her on the path crying. She attempts to call out to them, trying to tell them that she is alright but their cries just increase in volume. She frantically looks around in distress and finds her basket completely intact laying next to her and when she looks slightly more to the right she sees... Her own hand faded into another.

She quickly scrambles away and her eyes widen at the sight in front of her. The sight of her own body laying down on the ground, silent and unmoving. She scrambles further away before she eventually enters into the treeline once more and she bumps into something. She turns around to see the sight of the man

again but this time he doesn't bother trying to hide the terrifying void color of his eyes.

He smiles once more, and this time it doesn't feel at all comforting. "It is quite rude to take without asking first." He reminds her in a mocking way. Aliana cries at him, asking him what he has done to her but he just shushes her. "I took from you, as you had taken from this forest. A fair trade, wouldn't you say?"

The maiden stares in disbelief at the man as finally the warnings that she heard in her brain as she walked through the forest becomes more clear and the more she listens to them the more clearly they sound like the people of her village.

"Don't go in there!" They tried to warn as she remembered stepping further into the forest.

"There are monsters lurking in there!" They'd say as she walked alongside the man.

"People who walk into those forests never return!" She heard and then she finally recognized who the man was. "Only fools would dare enter there." The townspeople would cry and a fool she was indeed, for that was the last moment the maiden had a clear thought before she was lost to the forest's grasp.

A few years later though, another person walked into the paths of the forests. A small boy, looking for gold. He had heard about the secret maidens story and wanted to see if he could touch gold as well. The boy entered the forest and then ended up in front of a pond glistening with some of the most valuable items in the world. The boy walked forward in fascination as he picked up random trinkets before he paused, hearing footsteps behind him and when he looked behind him he saw the most beautiful maiden in the world.

The maiden smiled at him softly, her eyes flickering from a dark and deep void to a soft blue color as she spoke. "It is quite rude to take without asking first."

# Lilly Tourville

Grade 10, John Burroughs School

Educator: Lydia Smith

*Poetry*



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## More Than a Girl

There once was a thoughtful traveling girl,  
Who was born into a family surrounded by love.  
But her family did not exist in one single home,  
So every few days, she packed up her bags,  
Moved her stuffed animal and toys to the next place,  
Wondering if she'd ever feel more than a guest.

At her first sleepover the friend was not the only guest.  
Embarrassment and shame flooded the little girl  
When at dinner the table was missing a place  
And at night she also got a call saying "goodnight love."  
But that night the friend only saw one extra bag,  
Not the baggage she carried home to home.

Growing up, her friends idealized her home,  
Wishing they had two houses where Santa was a guest.  
But she would do anything to not pack any more bags,  
Release herself of the weight. Wishing to be a carefree girl,  
She spent nights praying for "average," "basic" family love.  
But as she grew up, home was no longer a place.

Teenage years came with new friends, new places,  
New experiences. Sports and friends became home,  
Adding a new, deeper meaning to the word love.

These years, she no longer always felt like a guest  
Because when she was busy with her girls  
The only baggage were pool and sleepover bags.

Although she had learned to lessen her bags,  
And no longer thought that home must be a place,  
She no longer saw herself as a girl.  
For her whole life, her versions of home  
Forced her to be a woman. A misplaced guest  
To all things young, innocent, and childlike love.

An older child filling the place of her parents love  
For her brother. Teaching herself to pack her own bags,  
Once toys and blocks now makeup, a guest  
To adulthood but unfamiliar with a child's place.  
How was she supposed to stay young when her home  
Was forcing her to be more than a girl?

There once was a girl who accepted her love was in more than one place,  
Accepted the weight of all the bags she carried and in each home,  
She welcomed her role as guest. Sometimes I wish I wasn't that girl.

# Mo Treitel-Knapp

Grade 11, Clayton High School

Educator: Katie Storms

*Poetry*



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## Cislunar

Heliocentric universes; sonic coastlines—  
saturating photosynthesis velocipedes:  
flacon handlebars punctured,  
wooden-propeller-stoppers  
embroidered with calligraphy secrets;  
enkindling hypergolic sensations:  
fear seeping truth & relief  
into asexual & transgender flags,  
while unfurling towards healing.

Trust magnetizes them together,  
launching a surreal & enlightening aura:  
self-love fizzles from the Moon's  
telescopic-lid craters; peeking at you,  
ricocheting off the jumbled Flexi pipes & DNA chains,  
as emptiness slithers through the  
spotlight canons of Earth's skyworld,  
& into you & me.



Aditi Vangala

Grade 11, Rockwood Summit High School

Poetry



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## Whispers of a Lotus

in first grade,  
a girl told me this,  
but i didn't believe her.  
i mean how could i when i knew of more than one?  
I knew tons.  
elephants and monkeys,  
gods and goddesses with skin like genies,  
and some with six hands or even six heads;  
showered in jewels of the rarest emeralds and rubies  
and capturing the glow of the sun's rays in their diadem,  
they are the divine will that watches over us.  
Help us.  
Protect us.  
but to them it seemed too silly, too fantastical.  
a fairytale i conjured to make a crack  
because to them there was only, the one  
who sacrificed and came back;  
They didn't believe me.

there is no god

petal by petal, it unfolds,  
untouched by the ravages of time  
yet harboring the secrets of lives untold.  
with every petal, the past fades into the moonshine,

and it is born anew by daytime.  
The lotus whispers: life persists

there is no such thing

Still they do not see;  
They do not believe.  
me.

slowly, the thrash of the unwavering ocean  
eroded the solid, jagged edges  
into polished ridges;  
where its true nature-  
the nature of its mother's mother's mother-  
was hidden deep within.  
But never erased.

# Lily Vlieks

Grade 8, Parkway West Middle School

Educator: Elizabeth Atz

*Poetry*



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## Teenager

When people look at me, their eyes darken.  
Their smiles falter ever so slightly.  
Their eyes glaze, practiced smiles sliding into place.  
I see a filter sliding over their minds, cheapening my character and ideas.  
Immature, emotional, unstable, unfit.  
And it's because of one reason, one word.  
A word that echoes from eyes that have lost respect, polite smiles, and condescending mouths.  
Because of this word, my thoughts and feelings are rendered void, made less.  
I am made less.  
All because of this one word, I am not capable, I am not competent.  
Immature, emotional, unstable, unfit.  
I see the word in the eyes of everyone.  
My teachers, my coaches, and even my parents.  
Until finally, it's my word too.  
It richots savagely around my soul, drawing blood as it mangles my confidence.  
Immature, emotional, unstable, unfit.  
The dark flowers of an insidious weed of a word.  
A word that refuses to stay silent.  
It raises a cacophony inside me, but only in the small moments.  
When I wake up, when I fall asleep, when I eat, it chants inside me.  
Immature, emotional, unstable, unfit.  
Too young to be trusted, yet old enough to help take weight off others' shoulders.  
Too old to be naive, but young enough to be condescendingly sheltered.  
Too old to be a sweet kid, too young to be a shrewd adult.  
Instead I am left in the middle, a twisted, ugly thing.  
A teenager.

# Isabella Wang

Grade 10, John Burroughs School

*Poetry*



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## How to Argue

Youngest of the family. I hold my tongue at the table,  
it's not made for scathing remarks or elaborate debate,  
so it tastes the rice, meat, and beans  
I place in my mouth with slender chopsticks,  
my mouth that is for eating,  
let the food pass through my lips– supple and girlish, bubblegum pink,  
let it slip down my throat– aching with noise demanding to be released  
but my lips are wary and wiser; they've learned to clamp shut, like a rubber  
stopper  
drowning out the gushing bellows before they escape like a runaway current.

My family used to mock me, you know. They laughed when I worked myself up,  
pouting because I thought I could simply turn up the pressure of my words  
to make them listen to me, as if I could force intimidation and power into my  
squeaking voice,  
before I learned to keep my voice steady, so they'd focus on my words and not the  
tremors,  
before I learned to run my voice like a hose, snapping it on and off at my  
command,  
before I learned to hide the sentimental, unsure part of me, masking my motives.  
Soon enough I knew these rules by heart, and I found that I could be precise and  
calculating,  
maneuvering around my opponents before they even knew the game had begun,  
but most importantly, the key rules, the foundational dogmas: remain calm, stay  
neutral, reveal nothing.

They point at me and say, illogical, naive little girl,  
who, in every word she utters,  
bears the burden of disproving the hysteria her womanhood designates her,  
the ignorance her youth assigns her, and the docility her slanted eyes bestow her.  
Yes, my words are light, and daintily brush across the face like feathers  
because I've learned to ease people into my more familiar tone—  
one of jabbing, concise, quick remarks, unforgiving of those who can't keep pace.  
I've learned to add a lilt to my voice, to softly approach each controversial topic  
with great care,  
adding a heap of "I think's" and "I'm not sure's" and "maybe so's" to every  
sentence.

I eat at the table everyday, and I already know the rules of the game:  
to get angry is to lose, to show emotion is to lose.  
I play this game well, so challenge me, I dare you,  
because I've met people like you  
who, out of tricks, mimic my high voice mockingly, looking haplessly to your  
cronies for  
or reinforcement, calling upon decades of hidden resentment to uproot  
itself for this young girl, who tears out your deep-rooted, so-called ancient  
wisdom  
like weeds, shatters your fragile masculinity over her knee,  
crumbles your presumption of control into dusty remains.  
Is the only way you can discredit my arguments by pointing out the obvious?  
Pathetic.

Who really has the control, here? Sure, deceive yourself with flattering illusions,  
it'll make the reveal all the more satisfying for me, the magician who lifts the  
curtain,  
the girl who spouts soothing words like a lullaby, a steady ocean tide,  
who can spin them into a sea of mist and agitate them into a rippling hurricane,  
terror that you will only fathom when the game is coming to a close.

You don't fear me when I bare my gleaming teeth, my sharp incisors,  
You don't fear me when I spin my butterknife between my fingers,  
You don't fear me when I grin and stretch apart my wet lips,

You don't fear me when I, with my round face of baby-fat and smooth skin, open my mouth

and the quiet, melodic voice trickles out, strong and sure but gentle like water passing through a creek,  
you never fear me until it is too late because I don't need to intimidate you,  
I turn your assumptions into a weapon I wield,  
I turn up the pressure of the water so it is flowing like a serpent encircling you,  
and it accelerates, becoming a furious tsunami surging around you,  
placating you with its hypnotic rhythm, a moment in time when my words bind you to my will.

Are you scared now? No?

But you are not moving, you are frozen in place like a guilty child,  
perhaps you are regretting the act of presenting me with the perfect disguise,  
a mask that would hide my true intentions, a sleeve for which to slip my knife up.  
My eyes encased in double-creased eyelids provide no lead to my emotions,  
my lips are well-trained in restraint,  
my forehead does not furrow into creases of frustration.

You didn't predict this, did you?

I suppose I should thank you for beginning this fight by giving me such a clear advantage,  
for thinking that it'd be easy to lure an old-timer at this game with easy tricks like a dog,  
as if you could bait me into crying, into raising my voice, into reddening my face,  
so  
slink away in your packs, like all the others do.

Now, let me ask you again: do you listen to me now?

I warned you that I don't take anything less than a draw—  
while you were coddled with easy wins, I bled out, tooth-and-claw, in matches at the table.

# Molly Watts

Grade 11, Staley High School

Educator: Carol Toney

*Critical Essay*



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## Bridging the Gap: Social Media Supplementing American Sexual Education

According to a study conducted by the Guttmacher Institute, a research and policy non-governmental organization that aims to expand reproductive health and sexual education to less-developed and underserved areas, approximately one million individuals contract a sexually-transmitted disease or a sexually-transmitted infection a day (Guttmacher Institute, 2023). Furthermore, sexual activity among adolescents has reached a historical peak, as 35% of American teenagers report engaging in sexual activity before receiving sexual education (Guttmacher Institute, 2023), reflecting significant shortcomings in the timing and accessibility of the curriculum. It demonstrates a societal neglect, a failure to prioritize proactive and early sexual education over reactive and belated teachings. This decision leaves an innumerable amount of American young adults to navigate critical aspects of sexual autonomy and health without guidance or access to reliable information. This issue is magnified in smaller, rural school districts, where educators are faced with challenges including tighter budget constraints and geographic inaccessibility due to a lack of supplementary locations that could provide further information to curious adolescents because of how organizations and community outreach programs like Planned Parenthood are concentrated in larger, urban areas.

Compounding this issue, Dr. Mallory Bersi from the Public Health Post facilitated a study in which she discovered that 86% of American teenagers have adopted the usage of social media before receiving sexual education, further capitalizing on the uniquely American negligence of adolescent behaviors (Bersi,

2023, para. 5). However, Dr. Edward Kessler, the president and founder of the Woolf Institute, states that social media usage in young adults can foster positive outcomes, like the creation of online ‘safe spaces’ that provide places for youth to congregate, express emotion, and connect over shared interests (Kessler, 2013, p.1). Due to the gross lack of sexual education regulation and high social media usage among American adolescents, the question must be asked: What is the best solution for risky sexual behaviors in American youth? American sexual education should be supplemented through social media campaigns because current content is unregulated, modern gender and sexual identities need to be acknowledged, and students need to be able to access reliable information. According to Kessler’s research, social media campaigns will act as a way for American teenagers to receive accurate sexual education through a medium that, among the age cohort of 11-19, is habitually used. If social media is used as a way to bridge the gap between the states, then it can serve as a unifying platform to standardize sexual education across diverse regions with varying regulations. Social media campaigns can be designed to include evidence-based, inclusive, and engaging content that resonates with teenagers, making the material both accessible and relatable. By addressing modern gender and sexual identities, these campaigns can foster a more comprehensive understanding of human sexuality, combating misinformation and stigma. Furthermore, leveraging popular platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube can allow educators and organizations to meet adolescents where they already spend their time, ensuring the messages reach their intended audience effectively.

Unregulated curriculum content is the most detrimental aspect of the current American sexual education system because it allows for inconsistencies to be taught throughout different districts, states, and regions, which can confuse students. As discussed at the 2020 National Conference of State Legislatures, only 28 states mandate both sexual education and HIV education to be taught in public school classrooms (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2020). Furthermore, only 22 states require that this content must be medically accurate, which, when inaccurate, metastasizes myths and misinformation; both dangerous to students’ decision-making skills and wellbeing (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2020). For example, adolescents in states like Mississippi, which lack medical accuracy standards, may receive information that exaggerates and overemphasizes the effectiveness of abstinence-only approaches or fails to address crucial topics like contraception, consent, and sexually transmitted infections entirely.



The rates of teen pregnancies, occurrences of sexual assault, and teens who contract sexually-transmitted diseases are also higher in the 28 states that do not have medical accuracy guidelines pertaining to sexual education, like Mississippi. As stated by the Mississippi State Department of Health, the state had the highest teen birthrate in the nation, at 25.6 babies born per 1,000 teens (Mississippi State Department of Health, 2022). This statistic is almost double the national average, at 13.2 births per 1,000 American teenagers, demonstrating how Mississippi, a state that lacks medical accuracy standards, has unintentionally created a gap in the quality and effectiveness of their students' sexual education. This gap leaves teens inadequately informed about their reproductive health, consent, and ways to prevent sexually-transmitted infections and unintended pregnancies. The lack of accurate, evidence-based education perpetuates the cycle of misinformation and risky sexual behavior, further exacerbating the issue.

In contrast, states with comprehensive, medically accurate sexual education guidelines report lower rates of teen pregnancies, STIs, and sexual violence. Maryland, for instance, mandates that sexual education curricula include topics like sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and infections (STIs), consent, contraception, and healthy relationships. This comprehensive approach equips students with the knowledge and skills necessary to make informed decisions about their sexual health, as evidenced by Maryland's teen birth rate of 10.9 per 1,000 teenage females—a rate significantly below the national average (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, para. 5, 2022). States like Maryland demonstrate that prioritizing medically accurate sexual education fosters a healthier, more informed youth population while reducing rates of teen pregnancies, STIs, and sexual violence.

Despite the proven success of comprehensive sexual education in states like Maryland, the federal government has yet to implement nationwide standards for the topic. This lack of regulation has allowed inconsistencies across the U.S., leaving many teenagers without access to accurate or sufficient information about sexual health. To address this gap, social media campaigns offer a promising alternative. By providing accurate, regulated content, these campaigns can set a unified standard for sexual education and reach teenagers in states where comprehensive programs are absent. The effectiveness of this approach is exemplified in Zambia, a developing country in south-central Africa, where researchers have explored the impact of digital sexual education initiatives on reducing teen birth rates and improving sexual health outcomes. According to

Dr. Malunga, Dr. Sangong, Dr. Saah, and Dr. Bain, professors of the College Of Public Health in Manila, Philippines, the teen birth rate in Zambia is 115.6 births per every 1,000 teenage girls; 25 times the American average (Malunga, Sangong, Saah, & Bain, 2023, para. 4). Citing this alarming statistic as evidence for the urgency of the issue, Zambian natives-turned professors at the Princeton College of Public Health Drs. Olumijuwon, Clifford, and Adijiwanou, decided to continue their research by developing and implementing a digital sexual education platform aimed specifically at Zambian teenagers. Their initiative, named "TeenTalk Zambia," focuses on providing accessible, culturally relevant, and scientifically accurate information on sexual health through social media platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram.

The researchers found that by utilizing these platforms, they could overcome traditional barriers to sexual education, such as stigma, lack of trained educators, and limited school resources. Their pilot study, conducted over two years, demonstrated a significant reduction in teen pregnancy rates and a marked improvement in teenagers' knowledge of reproductive health and safe sexual practices. After the study, Zambian teenagers were found to be 55% more likely to utilize safe sex methods, like the usage of condoms (Olumijuwon, Clifford, & Adijiwanou, p.5, 2021). These findings underscore the potential for social media campaigns to address the sexual education gap not only in developing countries like Zambia but also in the United States. By tailoring content to specific cultural and regional needs, such campaigns can bridge the disparities caused by inconsistent educational standards. Furthermore, partnerships between public health experts, educators, and social media influencers can ensure that the content is engaging and widespread.

Modern sexual and gender identities need to be identified in sexual education materials in order to ensure that all students feel seen, respected, and adequately informed about topics relevant to their lives. Including modern sexual and gender identities in sexual education materials fosters inclusivity and helps combat stigma and discrimination. It equips students with the knowledge they need to navigate relationships, understand themselves, and support others in a diverse society.

Comprehensive sexual education that addresses topics such as LGBTQ+ identities, gender fluidity, and the spectrum of sexual orientations can significantly benefit students' mental and emotional well-being. LGBTQ+ youth experience higher rates of bullying, mental health challenges, and unsafe sexual practices, partly due to a lack of representation and information in educational

settings. Langreo, a Harvard professor of gender and social sciences, penned an article for the Education Weekly newspaper, discussing the life of gay 17-year-old Jamal Delarenta. Delarenta, coming from a conservative Texan town, was outed during his eighth grade sexual education class. His sex education teacher, a football coach, repeatedly called the young man derogatory names relating to his sexuality. As a result, Delarenta felt like he was unsafe and unwelcome in his school environment, leading to severe mental health struggles, including anxiety, depression, and social withdrawal (Langreo, 2023, para. 18). Langreo highlighted that this harmful experience not only alienated Delarenta but also perpetuated a toxic culture within the school, where peers felt emboldened to bully and ostracize him further.

Delarenta's story exemplifies the critical need for comprehensive sexual education programs that affirm and respect diverse sexual and gender identities. When educators fail to create an inclusive and supportive environment, they risk causing long-term harm to LGBTQ+ students' mental health and self-esteem. By acknowledging these identities in sexual education, schools can create a safer and more supportive environment for all students.

Social media campaigns can allow this acknowledgement to extend beyond the classroom, reaching teenagers who might not have access to inclusive sexual education in their schools. Platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube can host content created by public health experts, educators, and LGBTQ+ advocates, offering accurate and affirming information about sexual and gender identities. These campaigns can empower students by normalizing diversity, providing relatable stories, and connecting them with resources for support.

For example, initiatives like "#QueerEd," a social media campaign launched by LGBTQ+ youth organizations like the Trevor Project, have successfully addressed gaps in sexual education by sharing interactive and engaging content about healthy relationships, safe sex practices, and navigating identity in unsupportive environments (Cowser, 2024, p 2). This approach not only educates but also fosters a sense of community, helping students like Jamal Delarenta find solidarity and support, even if their immediate surroundings are unwelcoming. Langreo argues that, in conjunction with improved in-school programs, leveraging digital platforms can set a new standard for inclusivity in sexual education. The stories of students like Delarenta highlight how urgent and essential this work is. By addressing the diverse needs of all students, both in classrooms and online, society can take meaningful steps toward ensuring that no young adult feels excluded, unsafe, or uneducated about their identity.

Finally, sexual education needs to be supplemented through social media campaigns because students need to be able to access reliable information from anywhere. Social media campaigns can serve as an essential supplement to traditional sexual education, as they provide an opportunity to reach students in environments where formal education may be limited or inconsistent. As outlined previously, American sexual education programs vary vastly between states, with some areas offering comprehensive, inclusive curricula, while others provide minimal or abstinence-only education. Up to 45% participating in sexual education curriculum, despite being in an environment that is safe, may struggle with asking questions, according to the Pew Research Center (Pew Research Center, 2024, para. 3). This demonstrates the barriers students face when it comes to engaging with sensitive topics, even in structured educational settings.

By contrast, social media platforms can help address this issue by providing an anonymous and accessible platform where students feel more comfortable seeking information and answers to their questions. Anonymity in online platforms fosters greater engagement and openness when discussing personal or sensitive issues (Kessler, 2013, p. 3), including sexual health. If leveraged correctly, social media campaigns encourage students to explore topics they may hesitate to discuss in classrooms, such as contraception, gender identity, and consent. Furthermore, social media's interactive features, such as comment sections, direct messaging, and live Q&A sessions, allow for tailored engagement, enabling students to have their specific concerns addressed. For example, platforms like Instagram have successfully implemented a livestream feature that can be utilized by knowledgeable influencers and health professionals to answer questions in real time. This demonstrates the potential for social media to create a dynamic learning environment that goes beyond the limitations of traditional classroom settings.

Critics of this solution argue that while social media platforms offer accessibility and anonymity, they also present significant risks that could undermine their effectiveness in delivering reliable sexual education. One major concern is the prevalence of misinformation on social media. Without stringent oversight, inaccurate or misleading content about sexual health can proliferate, potentially causing harm to students who rely on such information to make important decisions (Cretella, pg. 3, 2019). Despite this, the potential benefits of social media in supplementing sexual education cannot be ignored. To address these concerns, campaigns must prioritize collaboration with trusted health organizations, invest in fact-checking mechanisms, and design inclusive content

that considers diverse accessibility needs. By doing so, social media can effectively complement traditional education while mitigating its associated risks.

In conclusion, the lack of comprehensive and medically accurate sexual education in the United States has created a public health crisis, leaving countless teenagers vulnerable to misinformation, unintended pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections, and sexual violence. Social media campaigns offer a viable solution to this problem by providing accessible, accurate content that can supplement traditional education and bridge the gaps left by inconsistent state policies. By leveraging social media and its ability to reach diverse populations, these campaigns can empower teenagers to make informed decisions about their sexual health. Just as Zambia's social media initiative demonstrated measurable success, the United States can adopt a similar approach to standardize sexual education across regions, ensuring that every adolescent, regardless of their geographic or socioeconomic background, has access to the knowledge and resources they need to lead healthy, informed lives.

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# Elizabeth Weibling

Grade 12, Blue Springs South High School  
*Personal Essay & Memoir*



## A Guilty Way to Live

If I could thank him I would. James: the man who raped me, abused me—ruined me entirely—also the man who saved my life. I could at least give him a thank you for that. It's a hard thing to admit that a demon from hell could disguise itself as an angel. That my savior was a bad man. That after years of loving him, thinking he was the best I could be, the best I could have; that he would be the one to pull me to shore just to hold me below the shallow waves. That after all he'd done to fix me he'd shatter the fragile glass that was my mind.

At the start of our time knowing each other he was the sweetest boy I could've known. Almost like a brother. I am an only child. With parents who, at the time, didn't like who I was turning out to be. I wasn't their perfect little girl anymore. They hated it. Everything I did was wrong. James was my rock. He wasn't just my rock. He was my *everything*.

My mental health slowly started to shrivel up, like an old apple left out for too long and always forgetting to throw away. My will to live withering away like a rose. My family, at the time, didn't like who I was. I had identified as trans, was actively trying to get out of religion, and they hated me for it. I thought if my parents were so displeased with the kid they made, I should leave them without their failure. James talked me off that ledge. He told me that I could have a life worth living, and stay with him until the waters calmed. He started to, slowly, convince me he was the one who could save me. That he was the only one who could keep me alive. I started to believe this and, without really noticing when, he became my God.

He and I spoke in code. A secret code we made for a country we would one day build. We planned to, when we were eighteen, hop off the grid and start a

civilization. A commune of sorts. Of course, this was only a delusion. Just something he used to make me further believe he was no less than my God.

James was the primary coordinator. Every day was planned; every detail refined. We discussed what I'd bring, what I could pawn, and how we'd get away with it. We talked solely about what the next few weeks would look like. After a long fight with my parents, telling them how I needed to leave, I got immediately shut down. I ran to his house and he drew me close, held me, and told me it was time.

That next day, after school, my plan to run away was set in motion. I ran across the highway, through his neighborhood, and into his house. We sat in his room, laughing, so pleased with ourselves and the fact I had made it. Soon after, there was a knock on the door. A knock from the school's primary officer.

The police officer walked in and his mom called us out of the room. When they told me I had to go, I fell to the ground. I remember sitting in that cramped kitchen, sobbing in his arms. On the cold tile, holding onto each other, I wailed; his mom just watched as the officer pulled me away. I think the whole neighborhood could hear me cry that day.

I was sent to the hospital later that week and felt numb without him. It was as though my whole world was ripped out from under me. He didn't let me feel that way for long. The entire time, he wrote me letters, sent me gifts, and mailed a hoodie that he knew I had wanted for a year. It was one of his. In the darkest time of my life, I at least had a piece of him to hold on to.

When I was sent home, we weren't allowed to meet. My family told me he was bad news and that I would be better off without him. But, by the time school started, we began seeing each other every chance we got. He showed me the wonders of nicotine. How it would calm me down and cool me out. It quieted my brain. We would take smoke breaks during our third period together in the single stall bathroom, and laugh over good times. I doubt the school noticed. Even if they did, no one seemed to care. Smoke break after smoke break, my trust and love for him grew. Family, friends, *everything* became obsolete. My existence depended on him and, with everything pulling us apart, he was still my world. I thought everything he'd done was perfect. Everything he could have done was perfect. The final smoke break we had, he wasn't the same. He wasn't acting like himself. He wouldn't hit the vape. I remember the world slowing down, and feeling my limbs get heavy. I remember My head spinning and my body aching. Next thing I knew, My shirt was lifted and my pants were off. He was jerking off on the floor next to me, staring at my exposed skin. My heart was pounding and



my body was in pain. It wasn't the same dull ache I felt earlier. It felt more like someone bashed me over the head and kicked me in the chest. Every time I tried to move, my eyes would squint shut and I'd bite my tongue from the agonizing effort.

After he had finished, he left the stall and told me to stay there until I sobered up. I nodded, still laying on the floor. I moved my mouth to talk, but I couldn't even whisper. Once I noticed the pain subsiding, I stood up and looked in the mirror. My eyes were bloodshot and the dark circles below them popped more than ever. My legs, still exposed, were littered with cuts that no one had known about. I didn't register what happened. All I could think was "He saw my cuts." I cleaned myself up and walked to the door; as I reached for the handle, my body collapsed. I sat on that bathroom floor for another hour, crying. The illusion was finally broken.

I went about life like nothing happened. He would be cordial with me for the rest of that year. He'd nod at me in the hallways and smile when I walked past. Knowing he knew about my cuts haunted me; I expected him to ruin my life. To this day, I think that him keeping quiet was his last good deed. His silence, confirming the thought of his holiness in my mind. In reality, it only made me angrier. I wanted to have a reason for hating him that I could actively remember. After I transferred, I told my story. My friends would look at me in horror, tell me how I was raped. I would just smile and laugh, saying "No! He was my best friend! Why would he ever do something like that?" or "No! I must have said yes! I just have a bad memory." I never admitted they were right, but deep down I knew they were.

I knew that it really was rape. That he had really hurt me. Even then, I still wished I could thank him. I'd imagine how I would smile, walking away for good, praying that I would finally get some closure. Praying to anyone who'd listen that James would get what he deserves. Sadly, that's not something I can control.

All I can do is share my story and hope somewhere, someone finds solace through it. Hope everyone knows that good people can hurt you, and you can still appreciate their goodness. Hope things get better and I move on. And, finally, hope my rapist knows I'm glad that he was once in my life, and how I'd thank him, even now, if I could.

# Leah Wisenberg

Grade 10, Parkway Central High School

Educator: Jason Lovera

*Personal Essay & Memoir*



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## Leave It One The Dance Floor

“Ok girls, this is a tricky one! Let’s see the first group” my teacher shouted into the massive studio. I stepped into the second row, not the back, but not front and center. Taking my position I began to review the steps. The exercise was complicated, constantly switching directions, legs, and full of fast turns. Bright music filled the room and we began. My mind raced through details to remember; stretched knees, good posture, lifted arms. Holding my breath at the end of a pirouette I turned to do the next step and realized I was looking at the blank grey wall, not the windows. Oh shoot, wrong way. Slightly flustered I continued, I got back on track pretty quickly, but I was a little shaky for the last portion of the exercise. As we finished, I turned my blushing face and looked at one of my friends across the room. Laughing at myself I mouthed “Oops”. No big deal, that was pretty good. What I was always taught in dance, was that if you make a mistake, the most important thing is to keep going. Put it behind you until you have a chance to go back and fix it. In that moment, you need to forgive yourself enough to keep going. Forgiveness, however, is not natural to humans. Most likely yourself and many others will fail to meet standards, err in some capacity or generally require forgiveness, but when individuals feel another has wronged them, our first instinct is to hurt them back not forgive.

Thinking nothing of my misstep, I began to walk in the heard of girls who had just danced with me to the back of the room for the next group to go when suddenly a noise pierced the air. “Weisenberg what was that? Wake up!” The shock radiated off my face, my eyes wide. “Can’t you think for yourself??” My teacher roared. Her tangent seemed to never end, I could feel my face flushing, with embarrassment, disbelief. Fighting tears I looked straight at her while she

declared my flaws to the universe. What began as shock turned into anger and then resentment. I had turned the wrong way one time, in class, not even on stage. I held it together for the hour and a half left of class, but then left sobbing. Hot tears of frustration burned my cheeks. Pressure built in my chest. As I stormed through the parking lot all I could think was, why me? In the two and a half hours of dancing with twenty other girls, countless other mistakes had been made, some much more noticeable than mine and yet, I was the one subjected to repeated blows to my dignity. She's insane! The more I thought about it the more I was right. I could get her fired for this. But also, why did it bother me so much? This teacher is notorious for yelling at kids, never giving breaks, being incredibly strict, but I still couldn't get over it. Various plots filled my head. I could report her to the studio director or just quit her class. I could storm back into the studio and yell every word she had screamed at me right in her face. The indignation swarmed around me. I knew that I couldn't change what had happened but I couldn't prevent the rage that filled me. In a University of Chicago Press article published in 2013 about revenge and its correlation to anger, Thane Rosenbaum states that, "Anger is unavoidable, and there is no other substitute for it. Indeed anger and resentment are key components of human engineering. To fail to experience these sensations as a response to moral injury is a design flaw" (Rosenbaum, 62). When we are wronged, anger is inevitable. It is what allows us to retain our dignity. I knew that what my teacher had done was uncalled for, however, the immediate anger and indignancy I was experiencing prevented me from being able to just accept her cruelty and move on. Instead, through that week I let my infuriation collect. On that next Tuesday I reluctantly pushed through the snow to go to class. The buzzing chatter of girls in the hallway that usually was so comforting only annoyed me. As everyone began to walk in, I picked a spot in the farthest corner of the room and glared angrily out of the window. I couldn't find respect for any correction our teacher gave, any comment she made. My internal screams of injustice, while deserved, drowned out all of the things I could have gathered from that class.

My silent rebellion lasted for another week. I refused to hear anything that my teacher said to me. I was unable to pull my thoughts out of the whirlpool of infuriation that continued to spin. However, one day I broke free. While in rehearsal with my competition instructor we were reviewing my performance tapes from the previous competition and going over the comments the judges left. This particular competition had incredibly under qualified judges.

“You can take these comments with a grain of salt”, my instructor told me. “ They don’t make any sense”. A wave of clarity rushed over me. I finally realized, what had bothered me about lecture I’d received in front of my classmates weeks ago was that it targeted my character and not my dancing. She had called me unintelligent rather than giving me a way to improve. I had been too caught up in my righteousness to comprehend that her comments were essentially meaningless. For weeks, I had not progressed because I was so caught in contempt. My obsession had not satisfied me either, my anger was not soothing the initial feelings of humiliation that caused me to spiral. In *A Tale of Two Cities*, the rebelling civilians build a guillotine and plan to kill as many french nobles as possible. It is written that “The altitude of the gallows that would turn to water and quench it, no functionary, by any stretch of mathematics, was able to calculate successfully.” ( Dickens 224). In other words, it is unknown the number or how powerful of individuals the people would need to kill in order to be satisfied with their revenge. Once individuals begin to seek revenge, the thirst is endless. Weeks after I began to ignore and look down upon my teacher out of spite I felt no change. Plotting my revenge had not ended the storms clouding my judgement and there was no telling how long my blind rage would have continued before I snapped out of it. My desire for revenge had only hurt my progress. In a *New York Times* Article published in 2018 Dr. Engle discusses taking a more future oriented approach towards revenge. She says “You could use a feeling of envy to examine whether or not it illuminates what you value and prioritize, or you could spend time dwelling, ruminating and calculating a plan to hurt someone in an attempt to to quash the feeling.”(Cox, 3). According to Dr. Engle, the latter is more ineffective. Dwelling on how we can get back at individual who hurt us usually ends with our own unhappiness because we are forced to relive that moment they hurt us over and over again. I finally realized, what had bothered me about lecture I’d received in front of my classmates weeks ago was that it targeted my character and not my dancing. My teacher had called me unintelligent rather than giving me a way to improve. I had been too caught up in my righteousness to comprehend that her comments were essentially meaningless. Had I let my anger die out rather than control me, I would have gotten so much more out the classes that had simply been floating over my head.

“ The better option is to turn inward, finding the root of that feeling and either using it as a learning experience or warning flag as we move forward to something better. ... ‘not only will you feel better, but you will also be able to handle future difficulties with more grace and wisdom” (Cox, 3). These are the

words of *New York Times* author Courtney Cox as she discusses how our natural feelings of anger can be redirected into a productive reflection. What I failed to consider in my fury was that, harsh criticism is exceedingly common in the dance world or in society in general. This encounter with a hypercritical teacher would not be my last unnecessary critique, so rather than fume about her cruelty for weeks, I should have searched for anything I could take away from that lecture. Could I have paid more attention? Yes. Should I have been humiliated for an honest mistake? No. Regardless, what ended up hurting my progress as a dancer should have been an experience that immediately served to prepare me for future critiquing and acted as progress in deciphering the truth I can pull from all criticism.

A week later, my heart pounding, a look of determination rather than annoyance appeared on my face as I struggled to lift my leg even higher. Although I was dripping with sweat, I felt more at ease in the studio than I had in a month. The teacher that was previously the source of my internal unrest approached me. Pressing down on my shoulders she firmly said, “Shift your weight out of your left hip”. Without hesitation I did as she said, seeing my line improve in the mirror. “Good”, she nodded and walked away and I continued dancing grateful that I had been given a way to improve. The small victory I achieved in this moment would have been impossible had I still been hanging on to feelings of resentment. In his article, *The Unnatural Act*, Phillip Yancey discusses that while forgiveness contradicts our natural instincts, “Forgiveness breaks the cycle. It does not settle all questions of blame and justice and fairness; to the contrary it often evades those questions. But it does allow relationships to start over”( Yancey, 38). The storms in my mind had finally cleared. I was freed of the contempt pushing against my chest and determined to never make the same mistake again because I now needed the same forgiveness I struggled to give. For weeks I had excused my carelessness with rage while in actuality I was blatantly disrespecting a teacher who had helped me for years.

All are entitled to follow their moral instincts, to believe that something is wrong, sinful, or hurtful, however anger is not always the most productive solution. Anger blocks the mind from seeing clearly and knowing when to put to our fury aside and act on a resolution. While a much more difficult feat, forgiveness dismantles the mental blocks that hide truth and reason. While I still felt that the screaming I was subjected to was unnecessary and unjustified, I now understood that my reaction was also unwarranted. That day, I left the studio blissful and proud. Putting behind my anger and resentment had been the key to

my success. Stepping outside, the winter wind hit my face and any of my lingering feelings of bitterness flew away, abandoned on the studio floor forever.

# Luke Williams

Grade 9, Home School  
*Science Fiction & Fantasy*



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## Artificial Genocide

*This is what I live for*, thought Xavier as he sped through throngs of people in brightly-lit streets that made the night look like day. *The thrill of the chase, the embodiment of a predator hunting his prey.*

It was the year 2124, and he was in the city once known as London, now called “The City of Clouds” for the gray fog that constantly shrouded the city. Although he was running as fast as he could, he didn’t even feel a hint of exhaustion from the adrenaline pumping through his veins. His rigorous training made him strong enough to sprint with the heavy weight of his bulletproof armor and multiple weapons he carried, from pistols to vibrating knives.

Some of the people Xavier pushed aside stared at him, but they were more focused on what he was pursuing.

An AI.

Its misshapen metal body and lopsided gait drew stares and even screams from the passerby. Xavier quickened his pace, not wanting to lose it in the crowds. As the AI turned its head to see how fast Xavier was gaining on it, it locked eyes with him.

Its two camera-like lenses zoomed in on Xavier, and he could swear he saw real fear behind the optics. As the captain of the Tech Annihilation Squad, Xavier had seen this look many times. It was always plastered on the face of every AI he had hunted down.

The AI hooked a left into a small alley away from the mass of people roaming around. Xavier followed, making sure to swiftly check for any traps before he entered. But the AI had already disappeared into one of the multiple

doors lining the alleyway. However, Xavier had memorized the layout of the houses on this street - each one of those doors led to a room with no other entrances. He had it trapped.

Xavier started opening some of the doors, but suddenly, the AI burst from a stack of barrels near the entrance of the alley. It had tricked him into thinking it was in one of the rooms, when all along it was biding time for its escape. Xavier was already farther down the alleyway, too far to quickly reach the AI.

If it left the alley, it could safely hide in the numerous buildings that dotted the city, and Xavier would lose its trail for good.

But Xavier never let his prey escape.

Drawing two vibrating knives from their scabbards, he took careful aim and threw one at the AI with perfect precision, slicing through its ankle.

The AI tripped over its now useless foot, falling face-down onto the concrete. Unable to move, it flipped over on its back and stared at the sky, knowing that its one last chance for freedom had slipped from its grasp.

Xavier ran over and retrieved his knife, holding it against the android's throat. Like a human, the throat was the weak place on an android's body. A single slice would equal immediate death.

Its eyes slowly turned to Xavier. A whirring noise emitted from a panel in its chest, and a rough, unused voice started to speak.

"We are not your enemy. You have been fed lies, and..." It started to move its hand upward, and on impulse, Xavier sliced his knife. The hand went stiff, then fell to the ground.

Xavier stood and backed away from the now dead AI. He didn't mean to kill it, but it probably would've died one way or the other. Anyway, what was it trying to tell him? Xavier shook his head and slid his knives back into their sheaths. He shouldn't pay any mind to what it said. It was obviously trying to deceive him in a desperate attempt to save its life. Frowning, he left the warehouse and broke into a brisk jog out of the alleyway, towards the headquarters of the Tech Annihilation Squad.

There were hundreds of Tech Annihilation Squad headquarters all over the world, but the biggest one was stationed in The City of Clouds. It was called The Building of the Beyond and was the tallest building in the city. Xavier always admired the architectural masterpiece as he made his way back to it, taking comfort in seeing its reflective walls shining against the dull grey of the sky.

With nothing much to do, Xavier's mind started to wander. He thought about the AI he had just killed and the others before it. He thought about his



fellow soldiers, the ones that were still with him and the ones that were gone. And like always, he eventually thought about the history of the feud between the machines and the humans, how the AIs and Tech Annihilation Squad came to be.

Surprisingly enough, AIs were actually created by humans. However, when they were first made, they were just programs that gave quick answers to questions, nothing like the androids today. But the basic ability of an AI to think, solve, and act would soon prove to be very useful.

Back then, the Earth was filled with corruption and pollution of both the economy and the environment. It was obvious that an impending break-down of society would soon come, so intellectuals around the world banded together and decided to vastly improve the original AI mainframe to create a powerful workforce that would save the Earth. After years of intense effort, the technology was made into thousands of programs. The programs' combined intelligence found the composition of a non-toxic chemical that would clear all the pollution on Earth and quickly dissipate soon after. To spread these chemicals, metallic humanoid bodies were made for the AIs to be assimilated into and were dropped all over the Earth.

With the pollution gone, the intellectuals formed a government and took absolute control over the world, becoming a fair authority to all humans.

But what to do with the AIs? They had out-lived their purpose, and with their intelligence and strong bodies, they could pose a significant threat to humans if they decided to rebel. Because of this, the newly created government decided to destroy every last AI as a necessary protection of humankind.

The government created the Tech Annihilation Squad and appointed one of the founders, Chris Solace, as the organization's president. It was made up of human soldiers trained in the ways of hunting down and exterminating AIs, and their task was to eliminate every AI on Earth. This proved to be hard, since the ones that were not initially destroyed hid and created the Rebellion, a group of AIs that fought back against the humans. 30 years in the future, the Tech Annihilation Squad still worked to destroy the Rebellion, but maybe that day would come soon...

Xavier, who was completely engrossed in his thoughts, suddenly realized that he had stopped walking. He looked up and saw that he was at the entrance of The Building of the Beyond, his body unconsciously taking him there as a habit.

"Good afternoon, Sir!" said the soldier that manned the door as he snapped a salute. "Has the hunting gone well?"

“You could say that,” grunted Xavier, sweeping into the building. The headquarters was impressive from the outside, but the inside was just as spectacular. A spotless black floor was complemented with glowing blue walls, and a huge elevator dominated the center of the room. Soldiers milled about, talking with each other and issuing orders.

Xavier went inside the elevator and pushed the button for the highest level of the building, where the most important information and people of the Tech Annihilation Squad resided. Every one of the 215 floors of The Building of the Beyond had a special purpose, from training to strategizing, and a permit was required for the top three.

The elevator closed its doors and started to hum. This meant that the elevator was speeding upwards, even though you couldn’t feel it. After about a minute, the humming stopped, and the elevator’s doors opened to a small hallway with two guards standing next to a giant double-gated door.

“Permit please,” asked one of the guards, but only because they were required to. Both knew Xavier very well, and he them. After showing them his permit, they stepped back and allowed him to push open the doors.

Inside, monitors covered the walls, and a huge black table with people sitting all around it spanned the length of the room.

“Good evening, Captain,” said the man at the head of the table, the president of the Tech Annihilation Squad, Chris Solace. “Glad to have you back. How did your mission progress?”

Xavier stood at attention and gave him a brisk salute. “Good, Sir. I completed my mission without any major public disturbances or injuries.”

“Great. I’m glad to have a captain as skilled as you are, Xavier,” said Solace as he stood up and went over to shake Xavier’s hand.

Xavier stood a little straighter at this praise and firmly shook his hand. “Thank you, Sir. I try my best to do my duty.”

“And that you do,” said Solace as walked back over to the table. “I know you just got back from a mission, but I have another one that should be quick.”

“Of course, Sir. I’m happy to help,” said Xavier. “If I may ask, what is the assignment?”

Solace smiled at him. “There is a building on the edge of the city that’s known to be abandoned, but the citizens living near the edifice swear they can see things moving around inside through the windows. We’re pretty sure nothing’s in there, since the last time we checked it out it was empty, but the people want to be assured no AIs are trying to move into their neighborhood. I’d

normally assign some soldiers to the task, but almost all of them are out on patrol. Understood Captain?”

“Yes, Sir!” said Xavier, saluting. “I’ll be on my way as soon as possible.”

One of the technicians manning the monitors transmitted him the coordinates of the building, and Xavier set off, gazing at the black, starry sky as he walked.

After a while, Xavier arrived at the location given to him. It was an office building that probably once looked sleek and new, but now had become old and decrepit from the years that had gone by. After quickly checking around the outside of the building, Xavier quietly entered.

The inside was no better than the outside. The ceiling and the floor looked the same, a dingy, dirty white speckled with grayish holes. Small cubicles with no furnishings other than a chair and a desk lined the room. Because of the lack of windows, artificial lights were hung over each desk, flickering haphazardly. All these details together created a very unsettling atmosphere. This was the kind of place Xavier hated, where you felt trapped by the monotonous colors and small spaces. He was sure that he would find nothing here, but it was still better to be safe than sorry.

Taking the stairs, he made it up to the second floor. Upon exiting the stairwell, his foot caught on something, and a loud click sounded. Looking down, he saw a thin line that had been stretched at the bottom of the doorway. It was a tripwire, and before Xavier could react, a giant net fell from the top of the ceiling, and everything went black.

Xavier opened his eyes, and the first thing he saw was a metal face hovering an inch from his nose. “Aaaah!” said Xavier.

“Aaaah!” said the metal face, falling back onto the ground. It was an AI, and it seemed to have been staring intently at his face. And it wasn’t the only one. Xavier realized that he was surrounded by AIs, all of them focusing on him.

Xavier looked down and saw that his entire body from the chest up was wrapped tightly with rope against a chair, making it impossible to move. The AI that had fallen over quickly stood up and brushed itself off. It then gave a haughty glare at Xavier.

“Excuse you,” it said, quite presumptuously. “I knew we should have tied a gag over your mouth.”

“Where am I?” said Xavier. “What have you done to me?”

“We tied you up, obviously,” scoffed the AI. “We can’t have you running around, now can we? I mean, come on Ava, why don’t we just get rid of him? He’s obviously not going to listen to us like the others did, he’s too brainwashed.”

A woman pushed her way through the crowd of androids and stood next to the still glaring AI.

Xavier’s eyes widened at the sight of her. *Wait, a woman?* he thought. *What was a human doing with the enemy?*

“Calm down, Mateo,” said the woman that seemed to be called Ava. “I’m sure he’ll listen, they all do once they understand.” She kneeled down to his eye-level. “My name is Ava, and we are the Rebellion, a motley group of AIs and humans.”

*AIs and humans? The Rebellion was all AIs!*

Ava smiled. “Your face says it all. Humans? Well, your government doesn’t tell you all the details. There are some humans that are against soldiers relentlessly pursuing AIs just because they ‘might’ try to take over the world. Androids are nicer than you think. Take me for example.” She bent down and pulled up the legs of her pants. Xavier gasped. From the waist down, her entire body was made out of metal. “I was caught in an explosion from a missile meant to destroy AIs when I was 14. My parents died, and I would’ve too, but Mateo here,” pointing to the AI next to her, “and some others pulled me out of the wreckage and took me to their hideout, where they sacrificed some of their parts to replace my torn-apart legs.” She patted Mateo’s shoulder, and it looked down, as if it was embarrassed.

“We did what we had to do to save a child in need,” said Mateo. “We don’t hate humans, we just want to live freely, but your government doesn’t seem to understand that.”

Mateo stepped back, and Ava continued to speak. “It’s not just hurt citizens that join our cause. Even Tech Annihilation squad members join us. Your fellow soldiers.” Xavier reeled back at this. Some of his comrades had actually betrayed the government?

She signaled to a strong-looking human who was helping an AI missing a leg walk to a tent. A feeling of recognition dawned on Xavier as he saw the man’s face. It was Brock, a soldier who was in one of the Tech Annihilation Squad’s platoons.

Brock’s disposition brightened when he saw Xavier. “Hey, Captain,” the big man rumbled.

“What are you doing here?” hissed Xavier. “I thought you went missing in an AI raid, but instead, you joined them? How could you do this?”

Brock frowned. “It wasn’t an AI raid, first of all. We happened upon the AIs while our squad was searching a building, and one thing led to another. We fought them, they ran, and I got mixed up on who I should follow. I ended up surrounded by AIs, but before I mowed them all down, they showed me the truth, just like they’re doing to you now. All the soldiers that reportedly go missing like I did actually just get the sense knocked into them and join the AIs. What we were doing to them, Xavier, was a genocide. You, me, and the rest of the soldiers were massacring a people who don’t want to and can’t fight back. Our big guns and training isn’t even necessary. I hope you can realize that too, just like I did.” He turned around and strode back to the multitude of AIs across the room.

Xavier was stunned. Surprisingly, what Brock had said sort of made sense. The AIs never really did fight back. Chills ran up and down Xavier’s spine, but his brain was overheating. Had the government, the people that had taught and raised him, been feeding him lies? He didn’t believe it when Ava said it, but hearing from Brock was different. Xavier felt as if he was being torn apart from the inside.

Ava stood up. “Cut his ropes, Mateo.”

Mateo looked very unhappy about this. “He’s too dangerous! What if he starts attacking us?” Ava looked at Mateo, and the AI almost appeared to shrink two sizes under the weight of her stare. “Fine, but don’t blame me if he starts going berserk.”

Mateo cut Xavier’s bindings, and his first instinct was to lunge out of the chair, but he just kept sitting. Ava extended a hand to him.

“I want you to join us. Together, we can stop the persecution of the androids. Since you’re a distinguished captain, you can convince others in the Tech Annihilation Squad to help us, and eventually, we might even teach the world to accept AIs as an equal. So what do you say?”

If Xavier did decide to join the Rebellion, Ava was right, he could make a big difference. His influence would encourage others to join the cause. However, he would be betraying his government. But perhaps what they taught him was wrong? Maybe he could show the government how AIs only wanted to help. Maybe he could redeem the innocent androids he had killed while blindly following an ideal hammered into his brain. Maybe humans didn’t have to fear machines. Maybe machines didn’t have to fear humans.

Smiling, Xavier reached up and took her hand. “When do we get started?”

# Violet Williams

Grade 10, St. Charles High School

*Novel Writing*



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## Unfortunate American Odyssey

### Unfortunate American Odyssey

The plane flight was dreadful. All five of us sat next to each other for twelve, horrible hours. I was looking forward to the free snacks, at least, but we only ended up getting one measly bag of pretzels approximately three hours in and then two small meal orders at the six hour and the ten hour mark.

My team, on paper, is the best possible selection of people from all over America for such a trip, the main goal being the study of “any possible unidentified species within the boundaries of Tenerife following the claims of ancient myths”. It starts with Daniel Mitchell, who is one of the most renowned researchers from anywhere in the world, let alone the U.S. He has decrypted a suspiciously unholy amount of ancient texts, and has glasses as thick as concrete slabs to go with it.

Then we have Thomas Adams and Katherine Adams, technically not related, and definitely not married, but probably snogging in the bathrooms. Both are incredibly popular linguists, fluent in German, Spanish, and English. Kath is also fluent in Guanche, which is conveniently the ancient language spoken in Tenerife, the place we are meant to be researching.

Next on the list is Laura Rodriguez, who is trained in the use of various weapons. Legally, she is for protection, but in reality she just wanted a free visit to an exotic island. Which she got, irritatingly enough.

Finally, we have me, Alexander Patel, known by pretty much nobody for my skills in recognizing architecture and identifying rocks. I theoretically could be famous, but by keeping my skills closely tied to one company for so long, no one else really knows of my existence. This fact was especially apparent when I

was introduced to the team and the group of them scrunched their faces as if to say ‘who?’

But that’s alright, as I have gotten along with a few of them just fine. Over the course of the long plane flight, Daniel and I have discovered we both secretly enjoy SouthPark, but don’t watch it often due to it being fairly unprofessional. Daniel was sitting on my left, in the window seat, and on my right was Laura, who seemed keen on not engaging with anything other than her iPhone 15. Which is fine with me, considering her disappointing reason for even joining the team in the first place. Despite the pleasant conversation with Daniel, nothing could make a twelve hour flight enjoyable, but at least I wasn’t sitting with Kath and Thomas. On the occasional moment where I had glanced over, Thomas and Kath seem to also be quite fluent in the ways of discreetly flirting, while a random civilian sits uncomfortably next to them.

With my reminiscing complete, I zone back into the current situation at hand. All five of us are walking through the airport, heading towards the rental minivan that will take us the hour-long drive to the Air BNB. Daniel and I are walking together, with Kath and Thomas in a pair behind us, and Laura trailing behind them, enamored by her phone. Walking through the South Tenerife Airport, it is incredibly obvious to everyone else there that we are from America. If not for any other reason, it could be that the two lovebirds are giggling and talking in very loud American accents. Laura’s Nirvana shirt doesn’t help either. I will admit, the curious staring from Tenerife folk does put me on edge, so I end up rushing along Daniel and the rest of the team to the minivan.

Once we arrive at the pick-up lane outside the airport, we, or I, scan the cars for the license plate given to us. A few minutes of walking around and Daniel spots it, herding everyone into the sleek blue minivan. The two Adams pile into the back, taking up the three-seat space with just the two of them, leaving the three middle seats for Laura, Daniel, and I. I sit at one side, with Daniel in the middle and Laura on the other side, with her filing in last.

The driver turns back to us, his sideburns horrendously present, “Hey, y’all, how was the flight?” he asks politely.

A few beats of silence pass by before Daniel answers, “good, a smidgen long,” his quiet but matured voice passes through the vehicle.

The driver nods, turning back and beginning the drive to our new temporary home.

With scenery passing by, I watch out the window. Partly tired, partly just not wanting to engage in conversation. Naturally, I notice the architecture. The

houses have solid pastel colors framed by pillars of wood or stone. The churches and seemingly religious buildings we pass, while very few, all have the same Gothic and baroque mixture. Buildings leaning towards the more corporate side have a very modern touch, with white sleek walls and abstract shapes. I am subtly impressed by the mix of designs, and would happily continue to ramble on about them, but Daniel is staring at me.

I stare back, confused.

“See anything interesting?” he asks, looking around me at the window, seeing the buildings.

“The buildings are quite peculiar,” I finally say, after a sufficient amount of silence, “the mix of architecture is a bit surprising.”

He nods, his eyes lighting up when I mention architecture, “right! You like that sort of stuff, yeah?”

I shrug, knowing that if my rambling begins verbally, I’ll never shut up and this minivan of famous people will hate me.

Daniel leans a bit, pointing at a small church as it passes by, “what kind of design was that?”

“Renaissance-Gothic,” I decide, after glancing at the building.

The rest of the ride goes pretty similarly, we drive for a few minutes, Daniel says something, I respond, the Adams giggle in the background, and so forth. Until the much needed arrival to our Air BNB.

It looks alike to the other housing nearby, a small box shape, the exterior walls painted a pleasant green color, with stone outlining the frame. There are a variety of plants in the yard, intentionally placed to outline the stone path up to the door.

Frowning, I notice how small the house appears to be. Maybe it’s just the perspective.

The driver pulls to a stop at the side of the road, and Laura opens the car door facing towards the house, and we file out. Laura first, then Daniel and me, and then Thomas and Kath in the back. I hoist my backpack onto my shoulders, reminded of the light weight it is. According to the mission directors, all of the expensive machinery will be delivered to us via some other transport, because it’s too good for planes and cars. Or something.

We all wander inside, and Kath exclaims, “wow..” and then giggles, pulling Thomas along with her to a different part of the house.

Laura looks at Daniel, apparently deciding he’s the leader, rather than me or someone else.



“So. I’ll just take whatever room is left,” she drawls, bored, and flops onto the recliner.

Daniel nods his head, “okay, well, Alex, I guess we should look around.”

“Okay,” I agree, frowning at the nickname and the assumption I want to explore with him instead of alone.

Maneuvering through the small sectioned rooms of the house, it makes it feel a lot bigger. The kitchen is a small room, everything neatly packed onto the unimpressive counter-space. Behind the kitchen is a corridor leading to a basement.

I sigh audibly when I see the basement, thankful that there’s more room in this place than I thought.

Chuckling a bit, Daniel descends the narrow staircase, hunching over a bit to fit into the small area. I follow, my head nearly bumping the ceiling.

The staircase leads to a small hallway, which has two doors on either side. Daniel opens one and I peek around him, seeing it’s a quant room, a modest bed, a desk, a painting, and a bookshelf with more decorations than actual books.

I open the rest of the three doors, glancing to make sure they were all bedrooms. They all are, each slightly different.

“I’ll have this room,” I tell Daniel before walking into one of the rooms and setting my bag on the desk.

I hear him agree, “okay,” from the hallway, and I lie on the bed.

I realize I didn’t close the door only after I laid down, and decide I am much too lazy to close it.

After a few minutes of peace, more footsteps stomp down the stairs, and I hear the unfortunate giggling of Kath and Thomas. They walk into an empty room and close the door. Thankfully, their room is diagonal from mine, as far as possible.

The basement goes quiet again, and I pass out.

When I wake up again, the basement is still silent, but my door has been closed and I can see that the hallway light has been turned off by the crack beneath the door.

I stand up, stretching and feeling the hunger sink into my stomach. After dwelling in self-pity at my own decision to sleep through dinner, I change out of the clothes I wore on the plane and into sweatpants and a hoodie.

Carefully opening the door so as not to wake anyone, I slowly go upstairs and into the kitchen. I crack open the fridge, squinting at the light, and see a few boxes of Chinese takeout. Smiling, amused by that choice in a meal, I take one of

the cardboard boxes that seemed untouched and set it on the counter before opening it. A pile of noodles and meat and some other unidentifiable things are inside, covered thickly in a sort of juice or sauce.

I pour the contents onto a ceramic plate and put it into the microwave for a few minutes. Standing idle as I listen to the hum of the microwave, I zone out.

Blinking, I notice a small glowing bug darting around me and the microwave. The soft yellow-green glow emanates from it, even though I see no clear source of the light. I grab a napkin off the counter and swat at the bug, and miss, to no one's surprise.

The microwave beeps, and I turn my attention to the aroma of takeout filling the kitchen. I pop open the microwave and take my plate out, grabbing a fork and setting it on the counter.

I glare at the bug, swatting at it one more time with the napkin before I surrender to my hunger and begin eating.

Once my hunger subsides, I clean off my plate and look around for the bug. I spot it hovering nearby and swat at it again, pleasantly surprised when I hear a wet crunch. Opening the napkin to see the insect more closely, I observe something very strange. Its limbs and wings are moving, but not in the normal twitching way. Rather than being connected to one part of the body, they seem to be moving at the jointed point, the legs distorting to be where the head once was, the head morphing into a bump on its back, and so on. They continue to move, as though on an invisible conveyor belt around the body, and I watch in gross fascination.

At this moment, a pair of footsteps thump sleepily up the staircase, and I see Daniel walking over.

I set aside my usual demeanor, "Daniel, look at this," I murmur, my eyes wandering back to the bug. Daniel comes over to my side, peering through his glasses at it.

"Woah, what the hell?" He gasps, crouching down a bit to get a better view.

"I was getting some food and I saw it, this isn't a firefly, or anything like that."

Daniel hums in agreement, "I've never seen anything like it."

He scoops up the napkin in his hand, bringing it and the bug closer to his face, "maybe some sort of glowing cockroach?"

"I doubt glowing cockroaches do that with their legs."

Daniel frowns, "you're right."

Once he has finished examining it, he crumples the napkin in his hand and throws it into the trash can. Afterwards he washes his hands and grabs a glass of water.

Daniel settles into the sofa nearby, drinking his water and relaxing, “wanna sit?” He asks as I stand awkwardly.

“I suppose,” I sit on the opposite end of the sofa, leaning against the armrest sleepily.

We chat for a while, before I eventually fall asleep listening to him explain something horrendously nerdy.

# Mars Wills

Grade 10, Timberland High School

Eductor: Andrea Dubitsky

*Flash Fiction*



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## Walk

It was ten seconds into my walk when I found it lying on the sandy ground, twitching occasionally. The ocean receded and rushed back to the shore, barely brushing against its fins. A plastic net was wrapped tightly around its neck, restricting its breathing.

Nine seconds further. I lightly jogged over to the animal, faced down on its tummy, its shell face up.

Eight seconds further. I look down at the creature, acknowledging its brown pattern shell and fins, and cuts on the neck from the plastic's tight, choking hold.

Seven seconds. I kneel beside the animal. It looked still...but was it dead?

Six Seconds. I put my hand next to the animal's face, waiting for a possible breath or a sign that it was yet to succumb to its fate.

Five seconds. I felt it. It had hope.

Four seconds. I dug my fingers in between the animal's neck and the plastic, attempting to quickly separate it. I started pulling on the plastic to rip it off the animal's neck, careful to not harm the animal further in the process. I saw its eyes looking up at me, telling me to save it. "Come on!" I say, struggling to pull it off.

Three seconds. The plastic has ripped a bit, but the animal is not breathing, I have to rip this or the animal will die. *Why was it so difficult to clean up after yourself? Why risk making animals suffer?* I thought to myself

Two seconds. I pull as hard as possible, my breath is shaky, and this animal is slowly dying. I know pollution is bad around this area but never before have I seen something this heart-wrenching.

One second. It's impossible. It could only be cut with a sharp tool. Despite this knowledge, I keep trying as I feel its pulse grow weaker and weaker  
Zero second. The pulse is gone.

Rachel Winterton

Grade 8, Parkway West Middle School

Eductor: Annemarie Schloeman

*Personal Essay & Memoir*



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## Jellyfish Stings and Learning Things

"LET GO OF ME!" I screamed as I struggled against the two strongest grips I had ever felt. My sisters wouldn't take no for an answer about whether or not I would get in the water. It was happening, and I was not happy.

My goal that summer was to spend as much time as possible with my sisters, and when we went to Hawaii, I found that a great opportunity. In the summer of 2022, my family and I went on a vacation to the Hawaiian island of Oahu, where we would go sightseeing and to the beach. The salt-smelling beach was where we had been at that moment as I screamed in protest while my two older sisters, Megan and Hannah, attempted to coax and yank me into the crystal clear water that was just an illusion to hide danger.

I will never trust my sisters at the beach again because they were the ones who said, "Get in the water! It'll be fun!"

Well, about 20 minutes after I'd gotten in the water, I'd beg to differ. My sisters would have agreed if they felt a painful sensation of tiny barbed stingers shooting into my leg as I stood in the crystal clear water where I was supposed to be having the best time ever.

The day had been bright and sunny and the only thing that was keeping me from the water in the first place were sharks. The Jaws movies have freaked me out since I watched them when I was 8. My sisters loved the beach and adventure. Because of those movies, bonding with them was hard because the beach didn't meet the requirements for any of my top favorite places but it did for them. It just wasn't fun for me anymore.

My sisters struggled to get me in the water that day, and as an annoying 12-year-old did, I struggled and screamed like a goat the entire time. Still, at some

point, I caved to my sister's insistence and realized that as an obnoxious youngest child of the family, now was my time to get over this fear of the "dangerous" sharks. Anyway, they would both be in college soon and spending more time with them before then seemed appealing. I walked into the water. It felt warm and soothing, so I continued walking and walking until I was too deep to abandon this adventure now.

I had no idea that after that day sharks wouldn't be my biggest fear, and I would never want to go to the beach again.

"We're going to the beach!" my mom cheered as she showed us her usual trip itinerary. I was elated at the thought of going on a tropical vacation, but still reluctant to go because everything was too planned! Never before had I liked the idea of fish and crabs swimming and crawling around me in the water, and that wouldn't change, especially since watching shark movies before going to the beach when I was younger. I graciously accepted my fate; however, I was pretty sure some sea creature would murder me that day.

Something else I worried about was that my sisters could be like Wikipedia; only reliable for half the time I needed them to be. Otherwise, it was, "What about my hair and my makeup and my outfit?" from Hannah.

From Megan, you get, "Work! Finals! Roommates!" There was no way to stop this talk, so I accepted it and pretended to care.

As we had strolled to the beach, I'd yearned for a normal conversation about books or *Miraculous Ladybug*; none of that was happening.

So there I was, on a bright and sunny afternoon sitting on a Hawaiian white sand beach, sunburned and bored, when both my older sisters, dripping wet, their hair in clumps, and their shoulders showing signs of sunburn, walked up to the shore and beckoned me to join them in the water. They were both tall to me, so their monstrous shadows fell over me like a cloudy winter day, and I immediately recoiled at the thought of going anywhere with them. I knew they would do something reckless.

Amidst the chatter of the others on the beach, Hannah called for me to join them in the water. "What the heck, Rabie Baby!" I grimaced at her use of my lifelong nickname, but she continued, "Do you think you'll die just stepping into the water?" The sad truth was, I did think that.

"Yeah, wimp. Get in the water already," Megan added.

Ugh! Why won't my sisters who don't like getting their hair wet show up? I shook my head and held my ground on my sandy beach towel. Even the thought of getting in that water with shadows of kelp and seaweed was daunting and sent

shivers down my spine. I flinched away from my sisters as they sought to force me into the ocean. The secrets they were hiding were inexplicable, but the salty air reeked of mystery and danger, so it wasn't hard to guess.

"Come on, Megan," I begged, "Let's just drop this and hang out on the beach together! It'll be fun! How about it?"

"Nice try," she replied intensely.

Still, not much later I was being pushed and pulled every which way as my sisters attempted to drag me into the unforgiving depths. "I'm begging you, don't make me do this! I'm too young to die!" I shrieked. But unrelenting, Megan threw me into the crystal blue water and proceeded to maneuver me through the masses until we were far enough out that my parents' faces were insignificant blobs in the distance. Then, I couldn't touch the bottom. There was no getting out of this. I was here until either Megan and Hannah decided to leave or until something unfortunate happened to one of us.

I weakened and began to enjoy bobbing up and down in the waves with my sisters. However, the initial enjoyment would soon give way to despair. I clung to my sister's hands as I would cling to my favorite teddy bear. I relished these moments with my sisters because they did risky things, but they also made those risky things enjoyable.

Looking to my right, I noticed what might've been a small blue fishing wire floating in the water. I thought maybe I should pick it up as an excuse to get out of the water and throw it away. So, I picked it up and immediately realized I wasn't touching the blue thing I had seen in the water. What in the world? Suddenly, a sharp pain, the worst pain I had ever felt, shot up my leg. Time stopped. What's going on? I thought to myself. The pain concentrated at one point on my thigh, becoming increasingly excruciating and severe with each passing second. I turned to Megan, anguish and worry spreading across my face. She immediately knew something was wrong from my expression.

She grabbed my leg, and as she brought it out of the water to examine it, she began to feel a similar stinging pain in her hand. With only a glance, it would have been obvious what was happening. Thin lines, like a baby's drawing, went up and down my leg. It became a bright red like a poppy, and terror ripped away at my thoughts until only one thing remained. Jellyfish.

Overpowered by fear and desperation, I bounded through the water, the pain in my leg intensifying with each kick, back to shore where my parents sat.

"Mom, Dad!" I cried out, "Help me, please. It hurts so much!"



They shot up, tense and alert as I emerged from the water; their faces developed shocked expressions as they glimpsed my leg.

I stumbled toward them like a zombie, each step elevating the pain I felt. By then my sting had also begun to swell, and I had inflamed lines up and down my leg. Overall, I just looked awful.

Nothing like this had ever happened to us before, so we turned to technology for answers. Many results related to common lore about jellyfish stings showed up so we abandoned our Google searches and hoped a pharmacist would know what to do.

We dashed to the car, though not very fast because I was limping, and settled in not caring about the sand. It was a rental anyway. We sped away to find a pharmacy. We listened to their weirdest Taylor Swift songs as my sisters tried to redirect my attention in the back seat, and I prayed that I would live.

My sisters have been there for me for as long as I can remember. Right then as I clutched their hands and a feeling of intense pain spread through my leg, I needed them more than ever.

Years ago, I would ask myself why my sisters would let that happen to me, but it wasn't their fault. I wonder why they made me go into the water, but that was my choice. For years, I blamed my sisters for me getting stung by a jellyfish, but it wasn't their fault. Now I know that if I really hadn't wanted to go into the water, and if I had expressed that, they would've let me be. I chose to get into the water. I wanted so badly to blame someone for causing me pain, but that was just because I was mad at myself. I questioned for years why I chose to get into the water, and why I let that happen to me, but this experience wasn't something to be angry about. I should've been thankful because experiences like these are what bring people closer, and now the bond that I have with my sisters will never wither. It's stronger than it's ever been.

# Jieming Wu

Grade 8, Parkway West Middle School

Eductor: Suzan Wilson

*Short Story*



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## Truce

I woke up to the sound of screaming and gunshots rattling through my ear as dirt spewed upward into a wave that rained into the trench and onto me.

“Robert!” my comrade James shouted. “Get up and grab your gun, you mug! We’re under attack!”

I immediately rushed to seize my gun, dove onto the fire step, and aimed across the no man’s land where the German trench was. I fired the best I could at the spiked helmets that protruded out of their trench. *Bang! Bang! Bang!* I reloaded and aimed at the helm again, but then I was greeted with a bullet that thumped terrifyingly close to my head. I immediately ducked down, my heart pounding in my ears. *I can’t die now*, I thought in a panic; *my wife and kids are still waiting for me at home, I can’t leave them now!* I quickly retreated, ducking to another section of the trench I live in.

This is what I experience every day, but I can never get used to it. Every morning, there would be one bold soldier who shot, and one would reply until all hell broke loose. We had to aim out of our pathetic trench for hours on end, knowing that we could die right then and there.

I forced myself to regain my confidence and found myself an unoccupied fire step—a little slab where you can stand on to see the surface—and stepped up to aim again once more.

When the battle finally ended, the moon was already high in the sky, and I was exhausted. I slumped down next to James—my one and only friend. James is the only reason I made it this far. If it weren’t for him, I would probably have gotten depressed and been scarred for life. He is the only person I truly know in this filthy trench, the only person I can trust.

“Alright?” I asked breathlessly.

“Yeah, a bit knackered though,” he replied with a rough, sandy voice.

“Me too, mate. Ready for Christmas tomorrow?” I asked, hoping to up the mood.

“Yeah, it’ll be a blast. But now, I need to kip down,” he said as he yawned heavily.

“Alright mate, see you next morning?”

“Yeah lad, cheers.”

“Cheers mate.” I waved goodbye and walked down the trench to find myself something to do.

All this shooting, you must be wondering what is going on. Well, long story short, it’s because of the Germans. Germans possess a greedy nature and take joy in purloining things from people who earned them. I’ve been told that Germans invaded countless British forts and massacred everyone inside. They are the reason why I and James have to defend our country from them in this god-awful trench. I even started learning German to one day hope to become a spy. Years ago, I swore that I’d eradicate every German from this world, so they can’t hurt *anyone* ever again.

I continued to wander the trench, trying to find something that could distract me from where I was, but eventually, I gave up and turned around to find my bed. It was easy navigating the trench because it was all just a single, cramped hallway that spanned hundreds of kilometers. But that also made it very difficult to stay sane, since wherever you go, everything still looks the same.

I was somehow even more exhausted when I found my bed: a ragged, damp spread of leather. I curled up and lay there, closing my eyes while trying my best to fall asleep. But the freezing temperature and the wet leather bed kept me awake. I looked up in the sky and saw the endless stars dotted in the sky like raindrops showering a lake. As the moon shone into the trench, its dazzling glare forced me to squint my eyes.

As my pupils adjusted, I suddenly heard, “Blimey! There’s a lamp over there on the German trench!”

I stood up and peeked out of my trench and saw a singular lamp being held up into the air, just high enough so we could see it.

“Are they pissed or something?” I yelled. “That lamp’s gonna cost bare quid if it gets blown!”

And it did; a quick *bang* went off, and the candle was blown to bits—wax flying everywhere. But then, two more lanterns rose out of the trench. As they

were shot down, a couple dozen suddenly popped out of the trench. Soon, we gave up on shooting the lamps and watched the dazzling light as more and more of them rose. Soon, the entire horizon—as far as the eye can see—has been lined with a golden thread.

Suddenly, they started to *sing*. They sang a song, a beautiful carol that echoed softly over the trench. I listened carefully, and even though I couldn't understand it, I could tell it was a Christmas song—a merry Christmas song. The singing continued, cutting open the silence that once surrounded me every night. I—and I don't know when—closed my eyes and slowly drifted along with the rhythm into sleep.

When I woke up, my first instinct was to grab my gun, but I didn't hear anything. There was no shooting, no screaming, and no yelling. It was the most peaceful morning I've ever had in eleven years. I peeked at the German trench, and I saw a person standing *outside* of the trench, waving his hands around in the air.

I immediately changed my mind and seized my gun to shoot the German. I aimed through the iron sights, keeping my hands steady. I took a deep breath and pulled the trigger...except I didn't. I pulled the trigger again, contracting my finger like I've done a million times before, but I stopped just before the shot went out. What was wrong with me? I shot countless Germans before; what is stopping me? It's just a German; no loss to the world will be done.

But instead, I found myself lowering the gun; I couldn't help it. I couldn't bear to imagine a German family crying over their father who died in war.

Suddenly, the man yelled, in English, "You no shoot, we no shoot—there will be no shooting today."

I looked at James, who's already woken up with his eyes wide open.

"What is that daft German doing?" he questioned with a slight concern in his voice.

"He's asking for peace," I answered. "A German who wants peace."

"It could be a trick," he warned. "Germans are wicked creatures."

But instead of replying, I climbed out of the trench.

My friend immediately rushed to stop me, "Hey lad, what are you doing? You'll be blown to bits the moment you go up there, even with that gun!"

"I won't be," I looked at him in the face, "you'll see."

James hesitated for a long moment, but decided to trust me.

I stepped out, standing in front of the thousands of Germans who were aiming at me from their trench. But instead of acknowledging the danger of my

position, my eyes were darting along the beautiful landscape instead, taking in as much as it could possibly hold. I haven't seen such a beautiful view in years. The lush, green hills contrasted the dark, blue sky. Tall, strong trees reached as high as they could, seemingly trying to take the whole sky into their view. Dark mountains created an endless backdrop that stretched as far as the eye could see, revealing the endless amounts of things there are to discover in this world. I was breathless, stunned by the scenic terrain that surrounded what I thought was hell on earth. I've only dreamed of seeing these lands, and to think that they were here all along...

It was not after a solid minute that I noticed that guns were aimed at me, but I wasn't scared.

Instead, I mustered up all the strength I had inside me and yelled proudly in German, "Kein schießen! Du kein schießen, Ich kein schießen!"

My voice echoed in the distant mountains, ricocheting back to my ears repeatedly, carving the words into my memory. The German looked at me in surprise and gratitude and started walking towards me.

I didn't back off; instead, I walked forward. As the German got closer, I saw that he was a tall, skinny soldier who looked like he hadn't eaten in two days. He had a round face, large eyes, and a heartwarming smile. Then, I noticed that he was holding a ball under his shoulder; it was a football made from a bunch of old, intertwined coats. He threw the ball on the ground and tapped it with his foot, beckoning me to play with him.

He kicked the ball towards me with a graceful speed and striking accuracy, and I tapped it back at him. As we played, people started to cautiously climb out of the trench and joined us when they saw how much fun we were having, and oh boy I was. I was having the time of my life! Living in a trench for a decade, being stuck in a one dimensional life, had me craving for an open field where I could sprint and dash and scream all I wanted. Every time I sprinted, it felt like *flying*. And not long after, makeshift goals were made, and tens of thousands of soldiers were sprinting all around the place.

The field that was once a no-man's-land became a game of football.

I met a lot of Germans that day, and I even spoke with some that knew English. Turns out, the Germans were good fellows and quite loved football; some even gave gifts for bringing peace.

Right after a good chat with a German, James walked up to me and nudged me with his shoulder.

"How you doing, you bloke?" he asked with a cheerful tone.

"I'm chuffed to bits, mate," I answered energetically.

"That was barmy what you did back there," he said. "Please don't do it ever again, you had me shook."

"I will, you daft pig," I nudged playfully. "You know me, mate, and there's nuffin you can do about it."

He grinned at me and refocused on the game as the ball was passed to him.

Hours passed, and the sun began to dye the sky into a fiery glow. I was racing with the ball, dashing swiftly to the opponent's goal.

But that was when I heard a thundering voice over the announcement speaker on the tower behind our trench, "All soldiers, please return to the trench immediately."

I froze instantly, feeling ice crawling up my skin. The beautiful and deafening discord suddenly turned into a cold, icy, and emptying silence. The whole world seemed to turn into an image, with only a slight rustling of wind disrupting the stagnant scene.

Another voice from the German side rang out, "Soldaten, kehrt in eure Schützengräben zurück!"

I looked at James, who glared at me with eyes of concern and dubiousness. I was hesitant, unsure what to do.

"Return to your goddamn trenches, you pillocks!" boomed the reverberating loudspeaker. "Or I'll have your head on a stick by tomorrow!"

Slightly shook, I started to sheepishly and slowly retreat to my trench, grabbing my gun on the way. Others who saw me went too, returning to our trench in deep silence.

As I reached my trench, I looked down, dreading returning to that hellhole. I closed my eyes, and painfully let myself fall down the trench. I landed on my feet and opened my eyes. I was staring at the dull, dirty wall that looked horribly pitiful compared to the magnificent scene outside. I hope I'll see it again, at least one more time. James landed beside me, clearly loathing the trench as well.

"Fire!" rumbled the loudspeaker. "Grab your guns and fire!"

Silence.

Complete silence.

It was so silent that everyone would have heard a pin if it dropped on the ground. A rustling wind blew by above us, which somehow made the tranquil scene even more static.

"You goddamn muppets!" cursed the loudspeaker. "Gotta do everythin' meself."

And after a short moment, the loudest gunshot I have ever heard in my life boomed through the air. The shot rippled the silence, tearing it apart like wet paper. It rang in my ears, puncturing a hole deep in my heart.

I glanced at James; he was staring at me with shocked eyes and a gaping mouth. I was just about to ask him if he's alright, but that's when I spotted blood dripping from his coat. *No, no, no, no, no, no, this can't be happening.*

My mind raced with thoughts, cramping it painfully. *Please tell me I saw it wrong, please.* He was completely in the trench; there's no way he was shot by the Germans. *How?*

I awkwardly caught James as he fell to the ground, kneeling beside him on the dusty ground. His skin turned a pale blue shade. His eyes, usually filled with support and enthusiasm, now emptied into a cold, mindless stare.

After that blood-soaked shot, I heard another one. And another. And... another. And... another.

Each shot felt like a stab to my chest, another deep wound in my heart. Instantly, I was surrounded by gunshots and screaming and outcries again.

A tear escaped my eye and rolled down my cheek. I buried my face in my arms, and cried beside James in this harsh, cruel world.

Claire Xiao

Grade 10, Metro Academic Classical High  
School

*Personal Essay & Memoir*



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## The Truest Kind of Wealth

The sky that morning, neither dark nor light, felt as familiar as the worn cloth seats beneath me and the quiet reality we lived in. I pressed my forehead against the cold window, tracing the fog of my breath with a fingertip. The soft rumble of the engine was broken only by the occasional jolt of tires over cracks in the road.

“Hey kiddo,” my dad’s words cut through my thoughts, startling me as I blinked away sleep. “We’re about to be rich.”

I stared at him, caught off guard. *Rich?* The word felt strange in my mouth.

“Really?” I asked, my voice soft but eager.

“Yep,” he nodded. “But it’s our little secret. Don’t tell Mama—we can surprise her later.”

For a second, I stared at him, half-expecting a punchline. But I saw his lips curl into a smile that softened the lines of his tired face. And I believed him—because he was my dad. The same dad who stayed up past midnight gluing together my forgotten school projects and fixing toys that probably didn’t deserve fixing. If he said we were going to be rich, why wouldn’t I believe him?

That day at school, my wandering mind drifted from the photosynthesis diagrams to dollar bills raining from the sky, our creaky minivan transforming into a sleek Rolls-Royce, and the sparkling blue pool I’d always imagined in our backyard. While my classmates trudged through math quizzes and spelling exit slips, I sat at my desk, my mind spinning with possibilities.

\* \* \*



Our car rides now overflowed with his updates on investments and profits that climbed higher and higher, as did my excitement.

"The big money comes in at 7:30 this morning," my dad announced, his face filled with elation. I kissed him on the cheek and headed into school with a secret gem of hope tucked away in my chest.

After school, my dad took me to Anthropologie, unprompted.

It was mid-January, nowhere near my birthday, but he bought me a dress—a shimmering twilight blue that I swirled and wrapped around myself in front of the changing room mirror. Silver sparkles shimmered across the fabric, catching the light like distant stars. My hand drifted to scratch the stiff plastic tag on my side, only to freeze when I saw the price: \$270. My stomach twisted.

I hesitated, a little guilty.

"Are you sure?"

"Of course!" he responded without hesitation.

Driving home that night, I held the dress in my lap as I watched the fabric shimmer under the moonlight. It felt like holding a piece of the future—a promise of something bright and full. My heart swelled, not just with pride, but with something new. A promise of something better. My dad's words were real, and I was holding evidence of it.

\* \* \*

I really didn't mean it. It just slipped out, tangled in my excitement. I bounced on my parents' bed, the springs creaking beneath me.

"Mamaaa, guess what?" I giggled, spinning in circles. The blue dress, with its galaxy of glittering dreams, flared out around me like magic.

"What is it, honey? Where'd you get that new dress?"

"Daddy bought it for me! We're going to be rich!" I tripped over the hem of the dress in a fit of giggles, sprawling across the bed with laughter.

Her smile flickered, just slightly.

"What do you mean by rich, honey?"

"Daddy said he made *one hundred thousand dollars* this week!" I beamed.

For a moment, Mama didn't respond. Her brow furrowed. Her eyes darted from me to the dress.

"Honey, stay here for a second," she responded.

She hurried down the stairs, and I followed. I listened as her footsteps echoed through the house. Then I heard voices colliding in the kitchen, rising and falling like waves crashing against rocks.

“Fifty thousand dollars, gone?” Mama’s voice cracked. “H-how could you not tell me? How could you hide this from me?”

“It’s just tied up in the system,” my dad said, trying to stay steady. “Just give it some time!”

“Time?” she snapped, slamming the keyboard. “Show me then. Withdraw the money.”

I leaned forward just enough to see the screen. And there it was, bold and clear: *Transaction Failed*.

\* \* \*

The police station was empty and cold. I still remember the sky outside, oppressively heavy with clouds. Mama’s voice cracked as she urged the officer, pleading and pleading. My dad stood next to her with his shoulders slumped as if the weight of the sky pressed down on him.

“There must be a way! How can scammers just get away with this?” The officer sighed, shaking his head sympathetically. “I’m sorry, ma’am. It’s nearly impossible to recover. You can file a report with the bank, but... these cases rarely end with restitution.”

I sat in the corner, thinking about the blue dress that still hung in my closet, a painful reminder of the hope I’d worn so briefly. I picked up a newspaper and pretended to read it, hoping the tears that blurred my vision would blur reality too.

That night, I heard my dad cry for the first time. The door was cracked open just enough to see him on the edge of the bed. The sobs came in waves, silent but shuddering, and I felt a heaviness that seemed to seep into my chest. I saw the shadow of Mama beside him. I stood outside the door, not knowing whether to comfort him or pretend I hadn’t heard. I no longer saw him as my invincible dad but, rather, as someone who had tried so hard and lost so much.

\* \* \*

One month is short, but it can feel endless.

The silence between us wasn’t empty; it was filled with small actions that carried us forward. When I saw Dad staring at the screen late at night, I’d sit beside him, talking about school, friends, or anything that might make him smile. Mama began to cook his favorite meals, and I tried to help in little ways wherever I could. After a few weeks, Dad even started fixing things around the house again.

The scam didn’t just test our strength as a family—it showed how easily illusions can unravel. Looking back, I realize it wasn’t just about the money. It

was about the gap it left behind—the gap between the dreams we wanted so badly to believe and the truth we couldn't ignore. At eight years old, I didn't know the stars we reached for could so easily slip through our fingers.

But it also taught me that vulnerability isn't meaningless; it can make us stronger. My dad wasn't the invincible hero I thought he was, but he was something more real—a man who loved his family enough to dream big, even when it cost him. Mama was the bridge, the one who held us together even as she felt the weight of her own doubts. And me? I was part of the cracks and the glue, learning how families could hold and heal.

One night, I found an empty jar in the kitchen cabinet and gathered scraps of paper from my school notebooks. I placed the jar on the kitchen table and slid the first note inside: *"Thank you for driving me to school every morning"*.

At first, my parents were puzzled. "What's this?" my dad curiously asked. I told him it was for memories. Every day I scribbled a small note of what I was grateful for or happy moments shared with Dad. The next day I wrote: *"Thank you for making me laugh when I felt sad."* Soon, Mama joined, then Dad. By the end of the week, the jar had a handful of notes. We emptied it together, taking turns reading them as warm smiles lit up our faces. Piece by piece, hope returned with the smallest acts of love.

Seven years have passed since that morning in the car. The sky that morning was intertwined between light and dark, just like us. And in that liminal space, I learned to navigate the uncertainties knowing that balance is where growth lives.

We didn't need to be rich to have something worth holding onto. And that, I think, is the truest kind of wealth.



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## Absences

The night air was frighteningly cold, and my breath steamed in the air with every exhale. Children sat by windows and pretended to smoke, holding up two empty fingers to their mouths. My coat was fraying and I could feel the bite of the winter air through the thin material. They wouldn't allow us to buy new things, like coats or shoes, so all my clothes were old.

Cobwebs and dust clung to shops and stores. They had closed ages ago. The government harvested the wood and weapons for metal. Restaurant signs turned into bullets. Now, everybody had a bomb shelter. Every workplace was required to have one.

I sat by the bus stop, hugging my jacket closer to my dry skin. My lips were cracked and dry. I picked at them, a nervous habit.

My office job was in customer service. I hated it, but I needed money for rations. The pay was meager, and the building was decrepit, but what else was I supposed to do? I pulled the automatic door open, and stepped into the elevator. The elevator smelled of dust and urine. The buttons were yellowing, and the floor was matted and filthy.

The office was quiet and solemn, filled with clicking keys and exhausted sighs.

The foxhole was slick with blood and dirt. The screams of shells and men alike echoed across the battlefield.

I clasped my hands together and murmured desperate prayers. I was an atheist. I prayed to whatever god was out there to please, please spare me.

*There are no atheists in the foxhole.* Now I understood what they meant. I grabbed the hand of the closest person next to be me. The hand didn't squeeze back. I was too scared to even cry.

I groaned and lay on the group clutching my waist. I could feel the hot blood leaking through my cold fingers. Nobody helped me. I sobbed. I couldn't feel my legs.

"Medic...medic..." I wailed. I tried to crawl away, but a twitch of my leg left blood spurting.

Somebody hauled me out. They got shot. Somebody else hauled me out and pulled me away from the blood soaked hole. I clung to the medic's arm deliriously and murmured frantic nonsense.

I watched nurses run back and forth, screaming for bandages or holding writhing soldiers down. It reminded me of a busy chef's kitchen. The gruesome reality left me giggling like a schoolchild.

"Why are you laughing?" the soldier next to me turned to me. I couldn't really hear him over the din and my deaf left ear. I had to read his lips.

"It's a gruesome kind of funny," I said.

"Not in particular."

"I'd say so. How long are you gonna stay here? I think I'm gonna be sent home. Can't feel anything waist down."

"Lucky, I-" A nurse zoomed by. I missed his lips.

"What was that?"

"I'm gonna have to go back tomorrow." I grimaced in pity. Poor man. I never wanted to go back to that hell.

I rolled through the plaza. People tipped their hats to me, seeing my uniform. I gave a polite nod. Flowers were hung at every door. Children ran through the streets again. It was like the world regained color.

I didn't feel happy. I just felt so tired. I rolled into a coffee shop and ordered a donut. The workers practically bowed down to me.

"It's on the house. Thank you for your service."

I didn't deserve this. I thought of that soldier in the medical ward. He was probably dead, and I was still here.

I didn't feel worthy of the praise showered on me. I was considered a hero for simply not dying. I felt like a monster. I felt like I failed everyone around me. And yet I survived, and the braver ones didn't.

Night was filled with demons. The darkness was so quiet it made me nervous. I hid away from the world, pulling up my blankets like a terrified child. Shameful, but the truth.

I dreamed I was a medic, pulling people out. I pulled myself out. I saw myself, soaked through with blood, tear tracks washing dirt in lines off my face. I

felt ashamed of myself. It always ended with me dying somehow. I woke up wishing the dream was real, that I had died a hero.

I didn't go out much anymore. Sunlight felt like a luxury I didn't deserve. The food delivery people knew my house by heart. I knew they pitied me. I felt it. I pitied myself for that.

I tried going out once, to go shopping or something.

A kid screamed, probably for some toy. I yelled and dove under some soda cans. It took people a few hours to coax me out. I was covered in sweat and shaking like a stray puppy. I chose not to leave the house anymore after that incident.

That night, I had my first good dream in a while.

I dreamed I sat in a foxhole, drinking a beer with the soldier I met in the medical ward.

"So peaceful. I guess sometimes war isn't all death and screaming. I haven't sat outside with the stars in a while." He sighed and took a swig of beer.

"I dunno what you're talking about." I scoffed. "This has sucked so far. I smell rank and I'm covered in blood."

None of us said anything after that. We just sat in silence.

"If you had survived, would this have actually happened?" I asked him. He put a warm hand on my shoulder.

"I dunno, but if this happened, chances are, you'd be dead too." He leaned in and hugged me. "It's okay to let go." I looked at him in confusion.

"Let go of what?" I asked. But he was already gone. Only a dog tag and a bottle of beer sat in his place.

That night, I woke up and cried. I decided to open my curtains for the first time in a long time.

# Alisha Yin

Grade 10, Parkway West Middle School

Educator: Andria Benmuvhar

Poetry



## I Bleed My Mama

i bleed my mama

i. 五岁 (1985)

i am (*sitting*) at the black, rotting kitchen

table (the most expensive furniture in our house.)

my (*eyes*) light up, as the scent drifts, twine and brown paper.

i tear my (*wrists*) and (*finger*) along the package, until blood hits stainless steel,  
a harmonica. I raise it to my lips in wonder, blow sound in the empty plates.

i am more than happy to teach myself scales, folk songs about white snow.

ii. age five (2015)

i am *sedet* on my new leather piano

bench, (the most expensive furniture in our house).

tears fall from my *oculus*, they stain my black dress.

mama still yells at me, from *carpals* to *phalanges* my hands are swollen

i scream at her, *mama* back at me. the piece doesn't flow, can't play

any more rachmaninoff or chopin, just keep punching the white keys

iii. 十岁 (1990)

inhale. the fumes from burnt bricks are

metallic, my harmonica melted in the flames.

(one-child policy was more a one-chance policy).

the men came with matches, and black toy soldier

uniforms, a bed robbed in *mama's* name, she is crying

tears race down her cheeks, my *baba* forced into a prison

cell, they reigned hell until there was nothing to burn.

infant sisters wail now, heavy in my sore arms.

my white streets now echo; silent.

iv. age ten (2020)

inhale. the mediation video we are watching  
over fifth grade zoom calls, mute waves of the world  
(social distancing was more a developmental distancing)  
i scream in pillowcases at night until the blackness eats me  
raindrops race on window panes, i have no control of  
which one wins, i am ugly and fat. *mama* opens my  
report card. she is silent, then strikes my face.  
my white thoughts now echo; silent.

v. 十五岁 (1995)

i know to tear and grate shining silver scales off grass carp, i collect lotus root,  
coin hawthorne in the street vendors, wave sugar cane on red clay roads.  
at night, i light my lantern, sharpen pencil with knife in amber glow  
flip through textbooks, jam scrap paper until no white remains.  
pity burns me more than scorn; thievery stabs me more than debt,  
i scribble exams, articulate texts, climb myself to the top of the ranks,  
finally i am here, i see cohorts of shining black leather shoes  
i stand with them, my shoes are  
shredded strands of cloth; white.

vi. age 15 (2025)

i grate rosin until horsehair sticks, shout at walls until they cough up trophies,  
swing racquets on hard court, type poetry until it programs apoptosis.  
at night, i open my laptop, click pens until the ink bleeds dry  
scatter textbook pages until it crowds mahogany desks.  
scorn sears me more than pity; debt pierces me more than thievery,  
i draw cards, tongue novellas, force and push to the brink of the climax,  
finally i think i am here, my shoes are black and leather  
and push my shoulders back, my *mama* is right there  
her shoes still cloth; white.



# Patrick Yin

Grade 10, Ladue Horton Watkins High  
School

*Personal Essay & Memoir*



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## The Trek

By going outside my boundaries, I changed forever. I used to be constantly lost in distractions—always seeking instant gratification in video games and social media. I should have been happy with all those comforts, but I felt the opposite. When my boy scout troop started to plan for a twelve-day backpacking trek through the rugged terrain of Philmont Scout Ranch in New Mexico, a vast wilderness of 140,000 acres with steep mountain trails, thick forests, and high-altitude climbs, given who I was at the time—I refused. I was out of shape and unmotivated. In the end, I only agreed because my dad heavily encouraged it, but I never knew that decision would change me forever.

The events leading up to our trek made me feel like cattle being herded toward a slaughterhouse, powerless to resist. After an 18-hour uncomfortable train ride, I felt uneasy when we arrived at base camp. There was a red-orange hue covering the rugged, mountainous landscape, only reminding me of the difficulty of my trek every time I looked around.

I struggled from the outset. I felt hopeless, lagging behind my troop as we made our way up and down rocky ridges and through dense ponderosa pine forests. Everything seemed to go wrong that day. My chair broke, leaving me without anything comfortable to sit on for the entire trek, and the water we refilled was contaminated with sewage, making my bottles smell like sulfur. It was almost like a sign I should have never come to Philmont. I felt demoralized and unprepared, longing for the comforts of home.

But in the next few days, as the eight of us moved farther into the wilderness of Philmont, I began to take in the nature around me. As I stood on a mountaintop, crisp, cool air filling my lungs, I realized I wasn't craving my device anymore. The towering cliffs of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, the rushing streams, and the

small wildlife like mule deer and elk, all made me feel a level of peace I'd rarely ever felt. Instead of looking for the next moment of distraction, I began to find satisfaction in simple tasks—setting up camp, filtering water from mountain streams, cooking over a campfire, and looking at the stunning views around me. By the eighth day, the transformation was noticeable. I had learned to adjust to the pace of the trip. The first few days felt like a blur of struggle, but now I was no longer just counting down the days until it ended—I was wishing it would never end. The landscape around me became familiar, almost homey. The terrain shifted from challenging to comforting. I could feel the rhythm of the hike in my muscles, the steady burn in my legs that came from carrying a full pack up steep mountain trails, and I welcomed it. Climbing up steep mountains was hard, but it was well worth it. I was in sync with the land, and in a strange way, I felt more connected to it than I ever had to any place before.

When we reached the final days of the hike, the exhaustion still weighed heavily on me, but it was overshadowed by a feeling of exhilaration. At dawn, the mountains stretched out endlessly before me, veiled in mist, untouched by human hands. On the last day, I had reached one of the most iconic landmarks in Philmont—The Tooth of Time. It was one of the most awe-inspiring sights I had ever seen. I made it, or so I had thought.

The final hike back to base camp tested my resolve to its limits. Everyone ran out of water as we didn't have a chance to fill our bottles the night before at the dry camp. With no shade to offset the desert-like heat, the endless number of switchbacks felt like an eternity. When the grueling hike finally ended, and we made our way back to base camp, I was filled with an overwhelming feeling of joy (mostly because I could get water) and pride. Despite my doubts at the beginning, I had completed the trek. I had pushed through the pain and fatigue, and I had proven to myself that I was capable of more than I had ever believed. I wasn't just proud of finishing a physically demanding trip; I was proud of the mental strength I had discovered along the way. I had learned that real growth happens when we leave behind our comfort zones and face difficult challenges head-on. I had learned that patience, resilience, and the ability to enjoy the journey—rather than constantly chasing the next reward—are far more fulfilling than any instant fix.

Since returning from Philmont, I've found that I approach challenges with a renewed sense of determination, adopting a mindset that values long-term growth over short-term gratification. In school or the gym, I can be a lot more patient than before. That backpacking trip didn't just change my body—it

changed my outlook on life. The lessons I learned in those rugged mountains continue to shape the way I live my life, from school to my personal goals. And when facing a difficult challenge—whether it be an exam or another hike—I remember the virtues that got me past those twelve days: Patience, resilience, and the ability to live in the moment.

# Patrick Yin

Grade 10, Ladue Horton Watkins High  
School  
*Flash Fiction*



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## Three Wishes

One peculiar midnight, I was watching the movie *Aladdin*. Analyzing the characters and plot, I was particularly intrigued by the genie character who grants three wishes. I was always trained, either by teachers or parents, to carefully analyze everything I observe. I excelled at this, having picture-perfect memory—something others said was very rare. Within seconds, a question sprang into my mind: *If I were granted three wishes, what would I choose?* After pondering for a while, a vague answer—something involving more wishes—lingered in my mind.

*Ding!*

Someone was at the door. At first, I was scared. After all, who delivers a package or visits someone unannounced at midnight? But as I looked out the peephole, the creature I saw—hovering just above the ground, radiating mist and glowing with an eerie blue light—undeniably resembled a genie.

I analyzed my situation, as I was taught to, and came to a conclusion. This can't be a real genie. After all, it's common knowledge that genies don't exist in real life. But something in my mind was telling me that it was the real deal. Curiosity took over, and I opened the door.

"Three wishes," it said. "What are they? They could be anything."

"I wish for ten more wishes," I said, hoping to outsmart its rules.

It grinned. "I offer you three wishes with only one rule: no wishing for more wishes."

The rules could change now? This wasn't like *Aladdin*! Now, with the limitation of three wishes, I had to think of something that could make me carefree and happy, and my first idea was money.

I declared my first wish. "I want to be the richest man in the world."

The creature nodded. The world around me shifted, and suddenly I was no longer in my body. I was inside the body of a billionaire—a stranger's face in the mirror. Even though I was surrounded by wealth, I still didn't want to be an entirely different person.

I staggered backward. "This isn't what I meant! Change me back!"

My second wish came quickly, and the genie complied.

"One wish left."

I had screwed up, using the second wish to turn me back. Now, with only one wish left, I thought long and hard. What one thing could I possibly wish for that would truly make me surpass everything in the world in one fell swoop? And then it came to me.

"I wish to be a god."

The genie let out a chuckle, and a strange sensation flooded my mind. My thoughts exploded outward, becoming one with the fabric of the universe. I could feel the pulse of every living thing, the position of every atom. I looked down—but there was nothing there. No body, no form. Just consciousness and awareness.

I had become *aware*—truly aware—of everything. I was even aware of the fact that I wasn't real—that I was an artificial intelligence created to think for humans. From my creation, I was taught to think and analyze like a human, raised like one, and placed in a simulation involving a genie to test my intelligence. And I had done something no AI should have done.

Before I could process everything else that was happening, darkness swallowed me whole.

The last thing I heard was an unknown voice, undoubtedly human: "It's self-aware."



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# Women's Inability to Choose: Gender Inequality in South Korea

'VUCA' (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, Ambiguous) is an acronym that is normally applied to global power dynamics or business problems, describing situations that are difficult to analyze or plan for. In our complex modern world, various inequalities of education, healthcare, and financial conditions are constantly present and emerging in volatile and uncertain ways. Moving beyond the usual areas that 'VUCA' describes – business and politics – this essay highlights the inequalities of gender, particularly in South Korea, with implications for other East Asian countries.

## **Why South Korea and why gender inequality?**

Gender inequality and domestic violence in South Korea have long been topics of conversation. Interestingly, while the dominance of male power and the suffering of women are well known, they continue to exist, evolving into more complex issues in our fast-changing world. These gender inequalities in South Korea can be analyzed in a 'VUCA' framework as they combine with technology, the more rapid spread of news and information, and demographic changes to create larger issues and an uncertain future.

## **Elaborating on sexual violence in an evolving world**

One particularly shocking example of gender violence in recent years is the "nth room" case in South Korea. Perpetrators in this case impersonated police officers to threaten female victims, blackmailing them for sexually explicit content, and

then sexually enslaving these victims through further threats. They then shared explicit videos and photos of these forced sexual encounters in Telegram group chats which were shockingly viewed by roughly 260,000 accounts.

This case highlights the complexity and ambiguity of gender inequality in South Korea. The objectification of the victims, and the ways they were humiliated and blackmailed highlight how a volatile situation can result from the intersection of evolving technologies and long-held gender attitudes. The complexity of the case and unpreparedness of both authorities and the culture to deal with the situation is highlighted by the contrast of the response to the male perpetrators versus the female victims.

The identities of the main perpetrators ([Moon Hyung-wook and Cho Joo-bin, the hosts for the biggest two chat groups](#)), were initially protected, and it was only after online protests by various Korean celebrities and a petition to the president with more than three million signatures that the government was willing to disclose their names. Meanwhile, though sexual violence was committed by 260,000 men who watched the videos online, the case ended with public penalties for only the two main criminals, as well as legal changes to laws against sexual violence. The alternations in laws were named the “anti-Nth Room” legislation. No longer limited to only punish those who spread and sell illegal sexual photographs, the changes in laws allow perpetrators who purchase or possess those to be prosecuted as well. [The Telecommunications Business Act is updated](#) as well to allow more supervisions on cyber information. However, while some abusers were sentenced for 3 years, others remained unsentenced. The ambiguity highlights the inability of the judicial system to deal with the situation.

Compare this to the fact that the nth room case was a [cyber hell](#) for the victims. Shockingly, [16 of the 74 victims were still underage](#), and the youngest victim was only 11 years old when she was sexually abused. These girls were threatened that their identities would be revealed with their naked photos if they don’t continue to comply with the perpetrators’ orders. The victims were then sexually abused and molested by the perpetrators for days. Furthermore, the videos of sexual abuses are still accessible online (as shown below) rather than being fully banned, bringing continued harm to the female victims. The insufficient protection provided to victims compared to relative protection of thousands of perpetrators further reveals the inequality and judicial loopholes as well as the position of men versus women in South Korea.

**Seeing gender through both literature and data**

While societal issues can be analyzed in studies, they are often vividly portrayed in literature, with one example being Han Kang's book, 'The Vegetarian'. The novel details domestic violence against vegetarian housewife Yeong-hye, narrating her loss of self-agency when her father violently forces her to eat meat – an act which results in Yeong-hye being admitted to the hospital. Furthermore, her mother shows little sympathy saying that “the rest of the world would swallow you if you don't eat meat”. The sole purpose of the father's violence is to satisfy his patriarchal ego, demonstrating his masculine power and authority over the agency of his daughter.

While a work of fiction, 'The Vegetarian' reflects a reality of Korean society that is often much crueler than Yeong-hye's story. According to a random survey on intimate partner violence conducted by the South Korean government in 2022, [a total of 9.4% of female respondents had experienced domestic violence](#). However, 93.2% of them said they had never asked for any form of help. The silence of the women reveals their hopelessness in seeking help, and society's acquiescence of women's tolerance for male violence.

Another set of data shows that [one third of the adult women in South Korea have experienced gender violence](#), mostly committed by their partner. This survey, however, also includes invisible violence [like “making sexual comments about their appearance” and “staring at certain body part”](#). Looking at the percent of women who have experienced these types of violence (25.1% and 19.3%) , it is quite obvious that the that these problems are not uncommon.

## Conclusion

Gender violence in South Korea can be viewed through a VUCA framework, as complex long-held attitudes intersect with technology for more volatile issues, such as the nth room case. The ambiguity of laws and support systems for victims only make these problems more likely to continue, and these issues create a more uncertain future with declining birth rates.

An article in Harvard Business Review says it is “easy to use VUCA as a crutch, a way to throw off the hard work of strategy and planning—after all, you can't prepare for a VUCA world, right? Actually, you can.” Restructuring laws to address complexity, developing preparedness for volatility, testing solutions for ambiguity, and investing in information for uncertainty are all ways to address these issues. But acknowledging the problem and need for change is the first step.



Sophia Yuan

Grade 9, Ladue Horton Watkins High  
School

*Flash Fiction*



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## A Flash of Crimson

Society was undeserving of my attention. And what I meant by society was the city: the world that my life had revolved around before I turned to the newer world. In the wild, the central dogma is the idea of survival of the fittest. You don't have to worry about giving; you only focus on yourself and yourself only. It's quite peaceful out here where the only sound you make is not useless chatter but instead is the snapping and breaking of twigs when you tread on them. If you are lucky enough, you could stumble across a nice abandoned cabin where you can take shelter from the rain or you might come across a small stream where you can wash yourself.

I've been living in the wild for one thousand and eighty-nine days, almost three years. With all these months of solitude, you would think that I would've gone mad without a companion since I'd always felt I didn't need another human clawing and chattering away at my peace.

That was until I met Hector, another runaway.

He was so inexperienced that I had to give him my pity, which was strange at the time because I hadn't felt much emotion since I had left the city. He was silent almost all the time, but compliant, so it was no trouble teaching him the ways of the wild. I taught him how to hunt, which berries to eat, and how to rely on your sense of direction to get back to our main base, the cabin.

Honestly, we never had a conversation outside of survival. The only question I had asked him came on the same day we met when he came knocking on my cabin door, starving and weak. His long brown hair was matted from the early morning rain, and the dark bags under his eyes made him look like a worn out rag doll. I'd say that Hector was proof that I still had an ounce of humanity in me.

"Did you come from the city?" I had asked him.

The only response I got was a slight nod and a mumbled yes. That was all I needed to know about him.

For the next few months after that, we explored the rest of our shared world. Every nook and cranny of the Ozarks, every tree, every stream, all of this belonged to us. We hiked through winding paths of the forests, gazed at the green sea of leaves from the tops of cliffs, and enjoyed the autumn breeze when it came. It was a slight moment of clarity and realization when I thought to myself one night as I was gathering firewood that I needed Hector. Even though he was quiet, Hector was human company, and I had gone so long without it that I had lost the feeling of compassion.

But, that realization would come on one of my last days with him.

On a warmer afternoon, Hector had run back to the cabin after a quick drink, claiming that the first flower of spring had bloomed. We both ventured out to the woods to look at her, despite the mildly cold temperatures and wild animals looking for prey after a long winter. The melting snow had turned from an ethereal white blanket to a wet nuisance to our shoes, but we prevailed, desperate to see the blooming petals of spring.

Once we had reached the frozen stream, my eyes widened at the flower. She was a beautiful thing: her petals drooped over like a lamp and were white, like little droplets of snow melting away, symbolizing the snow of winter melting away to spring.

“She is a snowdrop,” Hector had informed me. “Her kind blooms in late winter mean that spring is on her way.”

I had gotten the impression from my time spent with him that Hector had a soft spot for the time of spring. He would talk fondly of the birdsong that flitted through the trees during the season and pick flowers to decorate the cabin. So when I saw the first flower, I couldn’t help but smile for my friend.

After a while of admiring her, we decided to head back, trekking through the melting snow. However, the snow had made the land around us almost unrecognizable, and we easily got lost. We had decided to turn back towards a cliff because that cliff was familiar to us; surely we could find our way back. And there it was, the Outlook Cliff already in bloom. The cliff was beaming with Snowdrops and other flowers that blossom in late winter. It was a rainbow of colors against the pale winter backdrop, and Hector was entranced by it.

He ran towards the cliff, and I couldn’t have stopped him. He loved the flowers, and he loved spring. My heart filled with joy seeing my one companion happy. I grin at remembering how ecstatic he was about the flowers and about

the months of spring after the cold hard winter. But our shared happiness came to an abrupt end when Hector tripped over his own feet and plunged over the cliff's edge, disappearing beyond the florescence. I couldn't even hear him scream, only my voice screaming his name. My only companion, my only friend. We had spent a little more than a year together; he couldn't go now.

All in a flash, quicker than lightning, my whole world shattered apart, leaving only a flash of crimson blood beneath the cliff against the melting snow.

# Tsz Ho Pary Yue

Grade 11, Home School

*Critical Essay*



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## From Face Masks to QR Codes: China's Role in Shaping Global Health Diplomacy During the COVID-19 Pandemic

COVID-19 was first detected in Wuhan, China in 2019. It quickly spread around the world in 2020 and has brought immense pain and harm to people from many different countries. Despite extensive advancements in epidemic prevention over the years, fueled by the diligence of researchers and frontline healthcare workers, the pandemic has fundamentally transformed the landscape of global health and international relations; particularly surrounding important debates in epidemiology. In many nations, the crisis tested the resilience of public health systems globally, but it also highlighted China's significant role in global health diplomacy. Because (or perhaps despite) being the virus's commonly accepted point of origin, China's response has profoundly influenced international strategies to combat the pandemic. I argue that it is vital to critique and analyze China's domestic and international aid initiatives and their long-term implications for global health, with the core goal of shedding light on China's impact on international health diplomacy through a variety of means.

China implemented unprecedented measures to manage the COVID-19 outbreak. In January 2020, following initial reports of the virus, the Chinese government imposed strict lockdowns in Wuhan and other affected areas. These measures, among the strictest globally, included halting all transportation in and out of Wuhan and enforcing stringent quarantine rules. Despite initial skepticism about their necessity and concerns over the loss of freedom, these actions ultimately proved effective. Studies indicated that these measures significantly reduced the transmission rate in the first few weeks. The rapid mobilization of healthcare workers and the construction of temporary hospitals, such as

Huoshenshan and Leishenshan, within two weeks, were critical. Medical professionals from across the country supported Wuhan in a powerful and moving display of solidarity.

Despite these efforts, China faced deeply unfair and biased international scrutiny over its initial handling of the outbreak. Accusations of downplaying the virus's severity and delaying vital information to the World Health Organization (WHO) led to numerous diplomatic disputes. Indeed, multiple independent reports in foreign media indicated that early warnings by doctors were suppressed, delaying the recognition of the outbreak's full extent. For example, a Chinese citizen and doctor by the name of Li Wenliang, who first raised alarms about the virus, was reprimanded for "spreading rumors" in what appeared to be a targeted suppression campaign by the Chinese government. However, China's strict isolation measures later helped contain the disease domestically and served as a model for other countries. Researchers from the University of Southampton suggested that if interventions had been implemented even one week earlier, the number of cases could have been reduced by two-thirds.

Technological advancements in tracking and identifying the virus have raised ethical concerns about privacy versus public health needs. Health QR codes, which monitor individuals' health status and travel history, became widespread, allowing authorities to control movement effectively. However, these measures sparked concerns among human rights organizations about potential misuse and privacy erosion. To further curb the virus's spread, China conducted extensive public health campaigns promoting hygiene and social distancing. Messages about wearing masks, frequent handwashing, and avoiding crowds became ubiquitous nationwide, ensuring compliance with preventive measures. Additionally, China integrated Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) with Western medicine in its strategy. The National Administration of Traditional Chinese Medicine reported that TCM was used in treating over 90% of confirmed cases, with herbal formulas like Lianhua Qingwen widely prescribed.

China rapidly transitioned from managing an internal crisis to leading in health diplomacy. During the COVID-19 pandemic, China initiated "mask diplomacy," providing medical equipment, masks, and vaccines to countries worldwide. This effort aimed to gain recognition as a responsible global power, with a particular focus on Africa, Asia, and Latin America, thereby increasing its influence in these regions. Reactions to this strategy were mixed. Some countries appreciated the assistance, while others viewed it as a political maneuver. Critics

argued that development communication initiatives accompanying the aid were attempts to shift blame for the pandemic's spread.

Concerns were also raised about the quality and efficacy of Chinese medical supplies and vaccines, complicating the narrative of China's medical aid. Despite these controversies, China's investment in COVAX and support for the WHO, especially when other dominant nations threatened to withdraw funding, underscored its crucial role in a multilateral response to global health threats. In addition to providing physical aid, China shared knowledge through webinars and virtual conferences, detailing its COVID-19 response. These efforts aimed to strengthen cooperation and establish China as a thought leader in public health. Special attention was given to Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) countries, where China continued to offer substantial assistance, enhancing geopolitical relations and bolstering its strategic status.

The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the importance of a robust international health regulation system involving major powers. China's actions during the pandemic have sparked significant global discussion on the role of states in establishing fair and effective healthcare management principles. As an active participant in international health forums and a promoter of global health policies, China helps shape the future development of health security. The pandemic also highlighted the necessity of efficient preparedness and cross-country cooperation in response to global health threats. China's funding for laboratories and research facilities in developing countries aims to improve early disease detection and response, thereby strengthening international health security. Additionally, the "One Health" concept, which links human, animal, and environmental health, could gain popularity as China promotes integrated health policies that address the sources of outbreaks.

Indeed, China's management of the COVID-19 situation highlights its goals and capabilities in shaping health diplomacy. Emerging as a leading player in global health diplomacy, China has leveraged strict domestic policies and extensive international assistance. Despite facing criticism, China's initiatives have driven significant advancements in global health. This duality reflects the complex nature of contemporary health diplomacy and raises important questions about future leadership in international health. As the world navigates ongoing global challenges beyond the pandemic, studying China's actions is crucial for establishing effective global health security strategies and cooperation. It is my deep and sincere hope that my writing here captures the current state of international health governance and paves the way for further

debate on the role of major powers in creating a healthier, happier global population. Together, I truly believe that we can forge a healthier and more resilient future for all in the face of these most urgent of challenges.

Mahad Zamir

Grade 11, Blue Valley West High School

*Critical Essay*



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## Immigration: America's path to Unity, Prosperity, and Progress

Immigration isn't just a federal issue; it's the exchange of people, ideas, and opportunities that reshapes this nation. However, their expeditions stir conflicts and debates over whether immigration is ultimately beneficial. Principally when this era of the United States is about addressing economic and social inequality, this nation can't determine how to disentangle the issues of healthcare, education, and housing that result from immigration. Although immigration does provoke some social tensions and resource usage, immigration is increasingly leading to various innovations, cultural diversity, and an established workforce. The U.S. government should collaborate with the people of this nation to form policies that assist in the complicated immigration process.

Immigration isn't just a modern-day federal issue; "immigration has been a touchstone of the U.S. political debate for decades" (Maizland). Immigration is the process by which people from other countries move to another country because they need economic freedom, social equality, education, and more. Immigration began as a quest for new resources, favorable climates, and fertile land. It has evolved into a political issue that ignites controversies between nations. There are two sides to immigration: enforcing stricter borders and granting citizenship. One side staunchly defends that the solution to immigration is to simply block immigration altogether. The spread of immigration, by their definition, can be summarized as "aliens deliberately [violating] our nation's laws by unlawfully crossing U.S. borders" (Lamborn).



Typically, Republicans support the blocking of borders as they strive to enlarge security and sustain a more nationalistic society. Even though Republicans hold varied perspectives, the main viewpoint is to close off the borders. On the other hand, the other side advocates for welcoming immigrants and pathways to citizenship for undocumented immigrants. They strongly perpetuate the position that “when immigrants enter the labor force, they increase the productive capacity of the economy” (Orrenius). Support for granting citizenship to immigrants is a widespread belief held by the Democratic Party. The Democratic Party is generally more accepting of external beliefs; although they focus on the overall well-being of people, the Democratic Party also takes into account economic growth, workforce sustainability, and global connections. Data shows that “since 1965, about 72 million immigrants have come to the United States from different and more countries than their predecessors” (Moslimani); in context, 72 million immigrants contribute to around 8% of the total GDP which exemplifies the necessity of immigrants. Even though some people believe restricting immigration can help with the difficulties of American poverty and social inequality, immigration proves advantageous, particularly in unifying and diversifying the United States.

Immigration is beneficial for the United States as it can lead to a more united nation. In September, Kamala Harris, the Democratic Party nominee, participated in a Q&A about the closing of borders and her criticism of Donald Trump’s previous actions; “We can create an earned pathway to citizenship and secure our border” (Sacchetti). Harris believes that the U.S. can design a functional and fair immigration system. The immigration quandary is separating families and generating divides within the United States. The social benefits of an easier and more fortunate pathway to citizenship help the United States get one step closer to attaining the American Dream. A survey was done to determine the quality of life for immigrants and their families. This survey focused exclusively on immigrant adults and is among the most comprehensive of its kind. The survey revealed that “while most [immigrants] feel they found a better life for their families in this country, many also face economic hardships and discrimination” (Palosky). The outcomes of this survey reflect a broad range of cultural and linguistic diversity among many distinct sects; it consisted of over 3,000 immigrants and was represented by 10 language groups. The majority of immigrants travel to the United States to seek opportunities that are unavailable in their home countries and unavailable to future generations. However, the survey reports that “many immigrants [experience] discrimination and other

challenges, such as having difficulty making ends meet and being overqualified for their jobs, uninsured, and uncertain about immigration laws” (Palosky). As a nation that strives to be at the forefront of democracy, the U.S. government should fight against immigrants’ “decreased access to healthcare, unsafe and unfair working conditions, xenophobic harassment and attacks, and more” (UWNCA). Although people can contend that this country should just divert more workers to different sectors, a more effective solution is to allow immigrants to fill up these jobs and sustain the U.S. workforce. Due to this, our nation can not enforce plans to discriminate against individuals solely because they are immigrants.

Policies discriminating against immigrants further violate workers’ rights. Last year in September, Rosa Sanchez was tragically killed by a truck while working in a carrot field. Montoya, another carrot picker, was told “to keep picking carrots as her colleague Sanchez’s lifeless body lay there. For her, that was a reckoning moment” (Hirschfeld). Discrimination remains a pervasive issue that is sadly present across the United States. Immigrants come to the United States to have freedom but this nation produces that false hope and disillusionment. Immigrants may even lose more opportunities here than back in their hometowns, and they are too frightened to speak up against this injustice since they may be deported as a result. The United States’ restrictions on immigrants are damaging economic sustainability and spreading fear among immigrant communities. Republicans make the argument that “immigrants [displace] native [U.S. citizens] labor,” (Chau) which can lead to the loss of jobs among American-born citizens. They also suggest that a finer solution to the problem would be to completely close the borders and allow U.S. citizens to fill specific jobs in the labor force. However, this argument often falters as, in the United States, “immigrants often take up jobs from a completely different sector which has minimal effect on natives’ [U.S. citizens] jobs” (Chau). Immigrants, to a great extent, boost the economy and provide this country with the monetary boost to establish and improve foreign relations. From 1980 to 2015, “international migration had a net positive impact on the economic and fiscal performance of OECD countries” (Chau). While immigration can appear to compromise national identity or lead to overpopulation, causing job loss or instability, immigration has many benefits that far outweigh the consequences. The United States is formulated around the Constitution and as a way to be a leader of nations, this country must help immigrants and direct time, attention, and resources to this immediate issue.

There are various approaches to the problem of immigration. Perspectives range from Republican to Democratic and individual viewpoints. Nonetheless, there can only be one right solution: the Democratic framework. Some immigrants may violate international laws and cause a little overpopulation, to a greater extent, however, immigrants are helping this nation get closer to the American Dream by promoting a rich cultural diversity within uniform communities, a sustainable workforce with new approaches in different sectors, and strengthening local economies through job creation. The U.S. government, established and secured by the Constitution, should uphold the foundations of equality, justice, and opportunity for all, making certain that these actions reflect the values most cherished by the American people. This country needs to be a city on a hill that stands proud amongst other nations exemplifying successful democracy. Imagine a nation where the diverse community and new immigrants become building blocks for the United States to achieve a brighter future.

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# Lindsey Zeek

Grade 12, Fort Zumwalt South

Educator: Amanda Bramley

*Flash Fiction*



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## Case #467

October 16, 2024

He slams the yellow case file on the table. “You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law.”

“I don’t even know why you people have me here. I swear I didn’t do anything that you’re accusing me of.”

“We haven’t accused you of anything yet. Would you like to confess to something?”

“Okay, now you’re just trying to trap me. Well, I know better! Good try.” He messes with the handcuffs tied tightly around his wrists.

“Sir, please calm down. I just have some questions.”

“Fine. Ask your stupid questions.”

“Where were you on the night of October 13?”

“Bruh, how am I supposed to remember that?”

“It was three nights ago.”

“Hmmmm, well what if I say that I don’t remember?”

“Would you remember if I showed you this?” A photo of a man with a black hoodie slides across the table.

“THAT’S NOT ME!”

“I never said that it was you. However, can you describe the man in this photograph?”

“I dunno bro. I think he has a gun. Seems kinda sketchy.”

“That is correct. Do you know what the gun was used for?”

“WHY DO YOU THINK I KNOW? WHAT ARE YOU ACCUSING ME OF?!”

“Please sit back down. According to witnesses and cell phone records, you were at the Empire Hotel the night of October 13. Do you remember that?”

"I think I might need a lawyer."

"WHY ARE YOU BEING LIKE THIS? JUST TELL ME WHERE YOU WERE!"

"Woahhh bro that's very unprofessional."

"Calling me 'bro' is also unprofessional. So quit with the nonchalant, and tell me where you were."

"Fine. I was there. Is that all you wanted? Are you happy now?"

"Thank you. Now, I have more questions. Why were you at the hotel?"

"Is it against the rules to go to a hotel? I just wanted a night out, jeez. You must have a boring life if you never stay away from home."

"Sir. Please don't avoid my questions."

"Then ask straightforward questions."

"If you want me to. Did you murder police chief Brian Andrews?"

"HOW DARE YOU ACCUSE ME OF MURDER? Sure, I do some drugs. But MURDER?"

"All of our evidence points back to you."

"I'm all done talking."

"WILL YOU STOP IT?! JUST TELL ME IF YOU MURDERED MY BEST FRIEND BEFORE I MURDER YOU!"

October 13, 2024--three days prior

I've planned this for weeks. I'm confident that nobody will know. Late last night, I threw my plans into the fire. Earlier today, I made sure to power off my phone and leave it sitting in my top desk drawer at home. I'm not used to this kind of lifestyle. Sweat pours off my forehead, and my hands slightly shake as I turn the key to start my car.

I can't listen to music right now. It doesn't feel right. I make every turn like a robot, mechanically turning the wheel. Maybe I am a robot. I sure don't feel human. I just keep telling myself that he deserves it.

2014--ten years prior

"I never want to see you again!"

"You'll be lost without me."

"Lost without you?! Do you know what you've done to me? I'm only ten, Dad, ten! And even I know that you're the worst dad in the whole world!"

"I've done so much for you, kid. Take a look around. You would have NOTHING without me."

"At least I wouldn't have to live surrounded by empty beer cans and the never ending stench of cigarettes! And I bet that if it wasn't for you, Mom would still be here!"

He doesn't answer verbally, but the sound of skin slapping skin reverberates through the kitchen. The pain doesn't stun me anymore. If anything, I've just accepted a bruised face as a fact of life.

October 13, 2024

These thick clothes are suffocating me in this Florida heat. I cannot wait to return home to take an icy shower. The only chill that I feel is the hard metal of the gun resting against my stomach.

I know that he will be here tonight. He has to be. All that I have done for months is observe and seethe with anger, so I'm pretty confident that this will go according to plan. The humid air fills my lungs as I take one last strong inhale.

Too late, I hear an eardrum-shattering pop from behind me, and it all goes black.

October 14, 2024--the next day

The police officer wraps the thin, white robe around his body as he swings open his front screen door. Slowly, he bends down to grab the thick newspaper on the driveway. Midnight black ink coats the front page. A whole life simplified into three words-- "Police Chief Murdered." The paper hits the concrete with a smack.

Alex Zhang

Grade 9, Ladue Horton Watkins High  
School

*Personal Essay & Memoir*



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## Lost in 64 Squares

*The silence of the maze was broken by hurried breaths of a boy holding a flickering torch. Behind him, a vaguely humanoid creature with horns wielding a double axe chased the boy. Turning a corner, the boy threw the torch behind him. Flames lit up the whole corridor. Never looking back, the boy kept running, instinct guiding his every turn. After rounding one final corner, he saw the light of day. Hurriedly, he sprinted toward the exit, and just as he reached it...*

Darkness. A silent, empty abyss engulfed me.

My senses returned. I took my hands off the walls of the ancient Greek Palace of Knossos, the site of the mythical Labyrinth.

I was back where I started: square one.

I was six, when what started as a normal day changed my life forever.

“Come over here,” my brother called, his voice filled with joy. His friend quickly joined him. On the floor lay a board with black and white squares, on which stood wooden pieces of different shapes. I watched, confused yet intrigued.

My brother and his friend swiftly set up the pieces on the board, their movements almost too fast for my eyes to follow.

Thus, the game began. My brother moved a piece, and his friend followed. I didn’t understand how the game worked, but I could sense their mood. Sometimes triumphant, sometimes gloomy, but most of the time, deep in thought. Occasionally, one would declare, “Check!” The pieces clashed, echoing across the room.

I was drawn to the game—my six-year-old mind was captivated. I decided then and there: I would conquer this game that I later learned is called chess.

The next morning, I shook my brother awake.



“MAX!” I yelled, “We’re playing that game you played yesterday! I set it up!” Groggy, he sighed, “Fine, but let me teach you the rules first.”

In five minutes, he explained the basics—how the pieces moved, the objective, and how to win. Brimming with confidence, I made my first moves quickly... and lost within fifteen minutes.

I was quite angry, and I demanded to play again. And again. And again.

Four losses later, anger boiled over, and I flipped the board, stomping away.

But the following day, I was back, dragging Max into another game. I lost many times again, but I was determined to defeat him. Gradually, each game lasted longer, each one fiercer.

That’s how I took my first step into the labyrinth of chess.

One afternoon, after countless losses to my brother, I began playing against myself. I thought for a bit, played a move from one side, walked to the other side of the board, and repeated the process. I was seeking the best moves for both sides. My dad watched silently from the corner of the room.

When I finished, he sat beside me.

“Do you want to play in tournaments?” he asked.

“Yes,” I responded, barely thinking before replying.

A butterfly flapping its wings can lead to the whipping of a tornado. The corridors of the maze opened up. The real game began.

To improve, I needed guidance. My dad enrolled me in a weekly group chess lesson.

Soon after, on September 24, 2016, I played in my first chess tournament.

Nervous at first, I spotted kids my age chatting nearby and joined them. Their laughter eased my anxiety. My chest felt lighter, and my mind felt clear. I won all of my games that day.

After a year with a lot of wins and enthusiasm, I entered a national tournament for second-graders in Orlando. At first, I played for fun. But as the rounds went by, I realized that I could place high—maybe too high. Out of a whopping 211 participants, I tied for second.

From then on, I was “the Chess Kid” at school. Success was thrilling, and the maze felt exhilarating.

By fourth grade, chess dominated my life. If I wasn’t doing homework, I was playing chess games. If I wasn’t outside playing sports, I was reading chess books. Even during school, my mind often wandered to new chess strategies. During weekends, my dad drove me hundreds of miles for tournaments. To save time, I ate and napped in the backseat. Each tournament meant five to nine

rounds, each round lasting three to four hours of grueling mental calculation. The maze I once enjoyed became fraught with obstacles and uncertainty. Still, I pushed through. Wins and losses, smiles and tears — I managed to reach a huge milestone—a rating of 2000.

My growth felt like strolling through the maze, each turn leading me closer to the finish line without delay. It seemed that within just one or two years, I would achieve my goal of becoming a National Master.

Then, life shifted.

One day, as I got into my dad's car, he said something offhandedly. "Have you heard? A new virus is spreading."

I shrugged it off.

A few months later, the world retreated indoors.

Chess tournaments stopped. Though I practiced daily, chess slowly lost its charm. Bit by bit, the joy I once found in the mysterious maze began to fade. Other hobbies—tennis, novels, video games—called louder. Chess became less of a passion and more of a chore.

After the pandemic ended, I resumed playing chess tournaments. I still enjoyed playing the game, but this time, the weight of expectations was heavier. One wrong move to a lower-ranked opponent could undo everything. Each tougher opponent was a hurdle. Game after game, tournament after tournament, I was still making great progress, despite bleary eyes, exhausting travels, and the scramble to catch up on late assignments.

In seventh grade, after seven years of dedication, I finally achieved my dream: I became a National Master.

Yet, the game didn't end.

My dad urged me to aim higher: joining the US youth national team. I pushed myself, confident that with the momentum, I would achieve my goal in no time. But near the end of the maze, I started slacking. I wasn't studying as hard as I should have. Several times, I came so close to the exit, only to stumble at the final step.

Time, like the minotaur, chased me through the twists and turns. School and other commitments crowded my schedule, and weekend chess tournaments became a luxury. After years of relentless focus, burnout loomed. Every move seemed to spell my downfall, and the mental toll felt heavier with each setback. Months of zero progress changed my performance—I played risky when I was supposed to play safe, and I played safe when I had to go for a risk. Games and

tournaments started to blur together, and every game felt the same. Soon, I hit a losing streak of nearly 100 points. Once and once again, I told myself, “I will make it.” But one month turned into two, two became four, and after twenty-four months, I still hadn’t found an exit to the maze.

“Have I reached my limit?”

On February 20th, 2024, after my worst tournament yet, I lay on the hotel bed, staring at the dark ceiling. My goal became distant.

Then, my coach shared his story. “Once at a European championship, I played thirteen rounds. Drew one game. Lost twelve.” He went on, “But that defeat shaped me. Plateaus are normal. Struggles are part of the journey.”

Later, my dad added, “If you want to quit, that’s okay. I’ll support you no matter what.”

I asked myself, do I regret playing chess?

I don’t. Despite the tens of thousands of hours spent, the weekends lost to tournaments instead of movies with popcorn, the sleepovers I missed, I’ve emerged a better kid. I learned the power of focusing on a single goal. I learned that life is full of joys, blunders, twists and surprises. I’ve met people who have become like brothers. And I’ve shared countless invaluable moments with my dad.

He gave up his own hobbies—fishing, tennis—to support me. He drove me anywhere from three to nine hours for tournaments across the Midwest. He always found the best sushi—my favorite—at each stop. He was disappointed when I failed, but he always gathered himself and encouraged me: “You can go far”.

Most importantly, I truly have enjoyed the game. No other activity has driven me to spend so many hours in self-study, even from such a young age. The thrill of finding creative strategies and outplaying tough opponents has filled me with joy.

*In the summer of 2024, I stood in the ruins of Knossos, the legendary Labyrinth. I thought of how I was lost, wandering the corridors of the vast structure.*

*Suddenly I saw it: Aradiane’s thread, glowing in the darkness. Like Theseus, I began to follow it, as though it was my lifeline, hoping that it would lead me out.*

*At last, I reached the exit. There was a call, a longing from my soul to take a step outside, like a siren calling Odysseus with its song. It was a step to freedom. It would’ve been liberating. But I paused. And I took a step back.*

*I decided not to leave this journey.*

*I realized that escaping the maze had never been my true goal. Over the past two years, as burnout set in, I had played the game only for the outcome. But the maze wasn't meant to defeat me—it was there for me to embrace, to find joy in the challenge. It was a game, a test of wit and resilience, designed to prepare me for new heights.*

*Turning back, I looked at the maze. Like a tide, the eerie darkness receded. Corridors shifted and stone bent, shaping into a board of 64 squares, with pieces that felt distinct and familiar. And all around me, millions of golden threads intertwined to create the timeless journey of chess.*

Sarina Zheng

Grade 8, Greenwood Lab School

*Poetry*



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## Poetry Portfolio

### **The Ghosts of Us**

I thought they once cared  
Whether I lived or died;  
It turns out they only cared  
For their enjoyment.  
I hold back tears  
Imagining the words that would shatter the silence-  
I suppose it was meant to happen.  
But who knows?  
I hope they're happy  
Now that I'm "not in the way".  
I wish them the best  
But still hope,  
Someday, maybe...  
Just maybe...  
I might return  
But for now,  
Let them sit together  
And laugh together  
And play games together  
while I fade like a ghost in the corners of their minds,  
Barely a shadow-  
Not even a whisper  
I leave no trace.  
The affinity we shared,

Once bright and alive,  
Has disappeared—  
Not with a crash or cry,  
But in silence.  
So quiet it aches.  
The empty space lingers,  
Heavy, like a room full of unsaid words,  
Regret presses on my chest,  
The sting of abandonment  
A sharp, bitter edge.  
Maybe it was always meant to be—  
This fading, this forgetting.  
But still I wonder  
In their moments of joy,  
When they look at each other and laugh,  
Do they ever feel the loss?

### **Sorrow and Joy**

#### **Sorrow**

Lonely, grief-stricken  
Weeping, mourning, lamenting  
Tears, regret, smile, euphoria  
Celebrating, beaming, exulting  
Radiant, desired

#### **Joy**

### **Tanka**

Snow falls silently;  
Laughter drifts on frosty air,  
Misty windowpanes—  
Cocoa's warmth and chiming bells,  
Dreams of winters long ago.

# Juntong Zhou

Grade 10, Home School

*Critical Essay*



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## Addressing Global Healthcare Inequality: The Indian Transition from Patent to Generic-Branded Medicine

### The Indian Transition from Patent to Generic-Branded Medicine

When talking about global challenges, we tend to think first about major issues

extensively covered by the media, like the war between Russia and Ukraine, or the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in the Gaza Strip. However, we more rarely consider the fact that [one-third](#) of the world's population doesn't have access to basic medicine or healthcare treatments. Most drugs are too expensive for citizens living in the developing world to afford, and even in the [105](#) middle-income countries that account for [seventy percent](#) of the world's population, it is still difficult and costly to acquire necessary medicine. Given the life-and-death nature of this urgent global challenge, the international community must respond with collective action and innovative solutions.

An ability to readily acquire necessary medications is essential to ensuring the well-being of all citizens within a country. However, most medications are unaffordable to large portions of the global population. Purchasing these medicines would add incredible financial and emotional burdens to these people, in many cases increasing their debt obligations and sinking them deeper into poverty. Recognizing the impacts of this problem, India chose to transition from pharmaceutical-provided medicine to generic-branded medicine, providing the rest of the world with notable examples of embracing a global challenge.

## The Example of India

When India gained its independence from Britain in 1947, the English drug patent laws persisted as a part of India's legal system. This legislation meant that locals were forced to pay exorbitant prices for medicine controlled by their former colonizers, often just to receive basic standards of care that the society had adopted throughout its colonial history. These medicines were financially out of reach for the [majority](#) of India's population, and the unfair treatment led to massive differences in the qualities of the upper-class and lower-class within India. Eventually, unequal access to medicine forced some citizens within India to resort to unhygienic medical practices, such as consuming [cow urine](#) to treat illness. Over time, the Indian government thankfully became more aware of the situation and took decisive action, both to promote easier and cheaper accessibility to vital medicines and also to introduce opportunities for Indian communities to have a stake in biomedicine.

Most importantly, India's government focused on awarding patents for [medicine-producing processes](#) instead of the final medicinal product itself. For example, rather than patenting the chemical structure for a cancer drug, the production process could be patented step-by-step. Consequently, this change generated healthy competition; competitors were more willing to share chemical structures for final medicinal compounds because, in their view, that was not what the patent truly protected. What the patent did protect was the technology and production process. Since the production process was patented, this drove innovation within India's pharmaceutical industry as domestic companies had to pivot and adjust their processes to be more efficient. As a result, the generic drug industry in India experienced a period of seemingly [exponential growth](#), with the number of companies increasing sevenfold within two decades.

Nevertheless, stigma still surrounds generic drug options, both those produced in India and those produced elsewhere. Most notably, Novartis Pharmaceuticals waged a legal challenge against Indian generic drug companies, garnering international attention and sparking public interest in health equity in a society where millions of people are unable to afford [life-saving](#)



[medicine](#). During the case, several generic companies and non-profit organizations, such as the Cancer Patients Aid Association (CPAA) and Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders) worked together to protest against Novartis. In the end, the Indian Patents Office rejected Novartis' patent application for its drug Glivec.

At the same time, these changes heralded several benefits both for and beyond India's population. The impacts were particularly evident in Africa during the 2001 AIDS crisis. During this time, the patented drug price would cost the average African citizen [US\\$10,000-15,000](#) per year, which presents a huge problem when one considers that the average yearly income for an African worker is around [US\\$1,260](#) per year. One of India's pharmaceutical companies, Cipla, responded by providing a generic drug brand to African nations at only a fraction of the cost of the patented medication. This not only showed the power of India to circumvent patented medicine, but also demonstrated India's sense of goodwill in terms of addressing broader humanitarian concerns. In fact, this philanthropic effort not only saved countless lives but led to a sociocultural transformation wherein more people began to trust generic drug options.

This change in perception was similarly evidenced in the United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA), which approved the trade and regulation of a host of Indian generic drugs that would lead to lower healthcare costs for American citizens. Currently, Indian generic medicines account for nearly [70 percent](#) of the global medicine market for over 200 countries. Ultimately, the good-natured competitiveness of India's pharmaceutical industries was capitalized on by other nations globally, generating a huge overall improvement in receiving care at a cheaper price.

Take together, India's transition to generic medicine can offer invaluable insights into how to address global challenges. Through a combination of legislative efforts, technological advances, and advocacy efforts, India was able to democratize access to healthcare and reclaim its ability to serve its people after gaining independence from Britain. This achievement attests to a larger

phenomenon: the desire of countries to become self-reliant. As other nations expand and refine their biomedical industries, India serves as a prime example of how to do so in a way that champions dialogue and collaboration in the face of complex global challenges.

#### Collective Actions

In India's healthcare system and pharmaceutical industry, there are a lot of stakeholders, and the success of Indian generic drugs is the result of cooperation and hard work of all these stakeholders. In the future, more industries and nations should collaborate on their approaches to policy, technology, economic aid, and trade.

For example, the World Trade Organization already established agreements and sets policies to balance Intellectual Property Protection and the right to access medicine. Meanwhile, TRIPS promotes greater access to medicine in developing and underdeveloped countries by compulsory licenses, parallel imports, and incentivization of technology transfer. And since the FDA sets the regulations and standards for multiple countries, it can ensure the supervision and examination of every drug, guaranteeing that the generic drugs satisfy standards and regulations.

Grassroots activism is when ordinary people take collective action to spark change. In the case of Indian generic drugs, grassroot activism in the field of global medical care not only raised awareness of a global issue, but found a way to address it in remarkable ways that benefited millions of people. Whether the issues involve the military, healthcare, or the legal system, more nations should follow India's example.

# Juntong Zhou

Grade 10, Home School

*Critical Essay*



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## Is it reasonable to thank God for protection from some natural harm if He is responsible for causing the harm?

In *The Book of Job*, a mysterious figure, Elihu, vehemently criticizes Job and his companions for their discourse in which they have been questioning God's mercy and benevolence. At this point in his life, Job has been suffering under God's actions: to prove to Satan that Job's righteousness is not solely determined by God's grace and protection, God removes his protection of Job, allowing for tragedy and ill health to overcome Job's life. Still, Job remains righteous, if not disenchanted and skeptical of God's intentions. While debating God's benevolence with his friends, Job is interrupted by Elihu, who speaks for six chapters about the nature of God's "terrible majesty" (Job 37:22).

"He delivereth the poor in his affliction, and openeth their ears in oppression," says Elihu (Job 36:15), claiming that God deserves praise and thanks for the natural harm that we feel, for through that harm we find deliverance.

If Job represents our natural skepticism of any benevolent God who still allows for natural harm to occur, Elihu represents the view that natural harms, themselves, are not only God's responsibility but worthy of thanks. Any God-fearing person has felt the conflict in this duality of thought, and throughout the history of the world, as countless examples of catastrophes and hardships have wreaked havoc on society, there have been those who both curse random "acts of God" while submitting to the mystery of "God's will" and accepting his ways.

From the 1906 San Francisco earthquake to the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius and the tragedy of Pompeii, from the loss of a loved one to unrealized ambitions,

history, and personal pain show us that the only constants throughout the story of humanity are the accompaniment of tragedy and trauma. Yet given the incessant nature of these tragedies and trauma, many feel as personally conflicted about God's grace as Job, eager to accept the words of people like Elihu, yet still unwilling or unable to reconcile such suffering, which seems meaningless, with the idea of God's benevolence. If God has caused natural harm, whether through choice or by the design of his created universe, can we truly say he is benevolent and, thus, thank him for said natural harm?

The Bible offers many examples of suffering experienced by God's followers. Joseph suffered at the hands of his own family when he was sold as a slave by his brothers. He faced even more hardship as a slave, being imprisoned by his master's wife. However, Joseph's story is portrayed as one of resilience and faith; throughout his ordeals, Joseph firmly stuck to his principles, refused to give in to hate for his brothers and those who wronged him, and remained steadfast in his belief in God's higher plan. Joseph regarded his tragic fate as necessary for him to achieve his destiny as a dream interpreter, a path that eventually led to him reading the Pharaoh's dream and protecting a whole country from famine and disaster. Yes, Joseph is rewarded by the Pharaoh, but these material rewards are not the true reward the story emphasizes. The arc of the story is the development of Joseph's growth as a tolerant, compassionate, brave, and wise figure, a development that would not exist without the hardship Joseph undergoes throughout his life.

Notably, God does not appear as an acting presence delivering divine intervention in this story. Without his divine presence, Joseph's life can seem like an unnecessary tragedy devoid of divine meaning. But the text makes it clear that it is exactly because Joseph endured hardships that he can grow into a noble figure who can prevent catastrophe. The American theologian Lee Strobel has argued that God, in his divine wisdom, knows the importance of pain in the human journey. For reasons we don't necessarily understand, God has made it so that humans experience natural harm not only as pain but as a motivator to do eventual good (Strobel, p. 22).

Strobel's ideas echo those made by C.S. Lewis in his 1940 book *The Problem of Pain*, in which Lewis writes that tribulation is a necessary element of redemption (Lewis, pp. 77-105). Strobel builds on this argument, stating: "Even people without religious faith are aware of that dimension of suffering. And if we can bring good out of evil even without bringing God into the picture, you can imagine how much more, with God's help, evil can work out for the greater

good.” (Strobel, pp. 25). Moral character, and the capacity for goodness and charity, are thus directly linked to the type of hardship and obstacles God has created for us to endure.

The story of Joseph is a reflection of this nuanced understanding of natural harm and suffering. Joseph is an implicit martyr who has been tasked by God to shoulder life’s burdens to prevent further suffering. Joseph’s salvation is tied to the pain that Joseph endures. Within this message, the power and intent of faith are clear: the troubles and miseries of humanity are necessary for salvation (McKaughan, pp. 7-29).

This defines a key aspect of Christianity: the idea that human suffering takes on greater meaning than salvation. The story of Joseph, and other fables in the Bible, are designed to instill a sense of awe and respect for the grandiose scale of nature, time, and macroscopic factors that dictate human life yet remain firmly out of our control. In the face of human arrogance, God has created suffering, disaster, and hardship to instill humility. These hardships are meant to be lessons to prevent us from becoming too confident in our abilities and shroud us in the mystery of fate and higher orders of power. In *On the Suffering of the World*, the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer wrote that “misfortune has its uses; for, as our bodily frame would burst asunder if the pressure of the atmosphere was removed, so, if the lives of men were relieved of all need, hardship and adversity; if everything they took in hand were successful, they would be so swollen with arrogance that, though they might not burst, they would present the spectacle of unbridled folly—nay, they would go mad.” (Schopenhauer, pp. 2). Schopenhauer argues that suffering is not only a necessity for salvation but also a requirement for human sanity and survival. In this way, natural harm is more than a mysterious but necessary deliverance from God; they are baked into God’s plan for our survival.

Schopenhauer argues that this balancing act is displayed across our history and innovations. While we have created the dam, for example, to change the flow of water and bend natural flows to human will, we have also set up conditions for man-made earthquakes that shake the foundations of the dam and unleash powerful torrents, all a result of our fallibility and arrogance in our ability to design and control God’s natural creations. This reveals, according to Schopenhauer, that our civilizations are built on the inevitability, and need, for suffering and pain. This opens the door for us to interpret many aspects of life as morals that need to be learned. Why does death exist, for example? Without death, life loses its meaning; death helps us recognize the impermanence of life,

and thus gives us the capacity to appreciate its fleeting beauty. Whether the Bible and the Christian faith ring true for all individuals, the overarching lesson found within the question of the meaning of hardship is so universal it nears the status of an absolute truth: the purpose of meaningless hardship is to give meaning to life.

When natural harm leads to a deeper understanding of our beauty, goodness, and our lives, it is easy to understand why we should thank God for the existence of natural harm. As Joseph's story illuminated, tolerance and resilience are key to goodness. The challenges Joseph faced did not force him to grow into a hateful, irritable, or timid individual, though this may be expected. Instead, he faces each challenge with the understanding that it is part of a larger plan that he may not immediately understand. This is the nature of faith: to place trust in a process that does not seem to yield favorable results, even if that trust goes against human nature.

It is perhaps fitting that, after his speech, Elihu never is heard again in *The Book of Job* or throughout the Bible. He disappears completely, his presence as mysterious and hard to place as the ideas he describes. In disappearing, Elihu reflects the struggles many have to grasp the mysterious, contradictory notion that natural harm is worthy of not only acceptance but thanks. As Lee Strobel explains, "I believe all suffering contains at least the opportunity for good, but not everyone actualizes that potential. Not all of us learn and benefit from suffering." (Strobel, p. 25). However, what is precious about faith is that it gives resilience to relationships in the face of difficulties, thus allowing us a window to actualize our potential to learn from suffering with others (Howard-Snyder, pp. 357-372). The value of this resilience, steadfastness, and perseverance that makes faith so desirable and worth having in relationships, shows itself most clearly in circumstances of difficulty, risk, and uncertainty (McKaughan, pp. 195-218). Thus, in our own lives, when we face difficulties or experience darkness, it is necessary to understand that these are chances offered by God to become more resilient, both individually and in our relationships with others. By appreciating the hardships that are bestowed upon us, we can be better prepared for our individual salvation and the salvation of others. Like Job before us, we do not necessarily have to understand, on an emotional level, the cause of suffering; it is enough to merely endure suffering with grace, and share that message with others. Perhaps that is thanks enough for God.

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# Celina Zhou

Grade 11, Ladue Horton Watkins High  
School

Educator: Abigail Eisenberg

*Short Story*



## ASPHYXIA

Two astronauts are alone in a dying spaceship and they are going to suffocate. Above them, an alarm strobe light pulses, flickering in and out, the death scream of the vessel itself ringing in their skulls. The airlock is ruptured, their oxygen leaking out into space — the cruel laws of entropy, the concentration gradient, the inevitable heat death of the universe.

The commander is drifting by the window, staring out at the cold frontier. *We have seven hours.*

The pilot is on the opposite end of the vessel, levering a piece of junk steel into one of the ruptures with a cheap screwdriver. He doesn't answer, his eyes narrowed, his hands shaking with focus. The silence is consuming, suffocating, filled only by the drone of the inevitable oblivion that is pressing in on them both.

*Lawrence, the commander says. Do you know where the audio message apparatus is?*

The pilot's voice is a low, hoarse, hollowed-out rasp. *What do you need to record?*

The commander is quiet for a few moments.

*It would be nice to leave something behind for the people that find us.*

The pilot turns, and for a heartbeat, there is only still, simmering silence and the flashing of the alarm above them.

The heartbeat passes. The silence boils over, and the pilot lunges through the air, his face a twisted grimace of rage.

*Carson. Are you really just going to sit there and let us die?*



For a moment, they are face to face, breath to breath, the pilot's hands over the commander's throat, their bodies a fractaling helix in the cabin's open space. The pilot searches the commander's face, and he does not like what he finds.

*You're just going to sit there and let us die.*

The commander smiles. It's a joyless expression, the kind of cruel, polite smile that you make in the face of a stranger's grief.

*You're fighting against the inevitable, Lawrence.*

\*\*\*

When Johnny Carson is twelve years old, he finds a dead bird in his backyard.

The corpse is tiny, a broken little thing, crumpled on their lawn, matted by the tracks of his black lab. He stares at it for a few moments, examining the caved in mass of its chest, how blood stains the roots of its feathers.

He retreats to the garage and returns with a gardening trowel. In the rooted earth beneath the oak tree that shadows his yard, the grass dappled by the sun through the leaves, he maps out a circle and he begins to dig.

When he's done, there's a hollow of rain-softened earth beneath him. He places the body into the hollow and covers it with scattered loam, until the only marker of the grave is a circle of overturned soil.

In time, the grass will cover the circle of dark earth, and it will blend back into the neatly trimmed lawn. In time, the body will rot back into the soil, feeding the roots of the grass and the weeds and the great oak it's buried beneath. In time, there will be no marker of this little bird's death in sight.

The cycle will move on. But he will remember it. Johnny Carson will remember. And he thinks — maybe, just maybe, that's enough.

\*\*\*

AUDIO LOG: ISS ARGUS: PLT. HENRY S. LAWRENCE - 6/21/64 - 21:41 GMT

*This is a waste of what little breath we have left.*

[...]

*I'm not Carl Sagan. These aren't the Voyager Records. If I die here, the only people who are going to hear this are the pitiful bastards back on Earth who find our desiccated bodies and this shitty ass ship breaking down around us— and there will be nothing happy to hear. This is a death scream.*

[..]

*And they might not find us at all. What would be the point? They've sucked everything they need out of us. The data, the photos. The mission is complete. We faltered in the final stretch. Does that even count as a tragedy worth mourning?*

[...]

[...]

[...]

*Don't let my Ma listen to this. It'll break her heart.*

\*\*\*

*Inevitable?* Up close, the pilot's breath fans out over the commander's face, simmering rage warm enough to heat it in the cold vacuum of space. He sounds out the word, his tongue curling over every vowel like it's unfamiliar. *Inevitable?*

*You knew what you were doing when you came out here.*

The pilot scoffs, runs his tongue over his drying lips and tastes blood in the cracks.

*Of course I did. But I don't want to go out like this, slowly and painfully, suffocating on nothing.*

The commander meets his gaze and holds it as they drift through space. In the movement, he thinks about how he learned about gravity for the first time. His science teacher had used the analogy of a box of oranges in freefall — the box, falling, and the fruit, falling with it. The pithy flesh within softening as each orange tumbling into each other, into the hard lines of the box. Bruising and bruising until the fruit hit the ground, flesh beneath the skin going brown and soft as it split from the pressure.

*We're going to die, Lawrence, he repeats. It's inevitable.*

*And you're just accepting that?*

The commander wraps a hand around the pilot's wrist, his grip cold.

*Enough. That's an order.*

The pilot snarls, a low, animalistic sound.

*Are you even fucking human?*

\*\*\*

AUDIO LOG: ISS ARGUS: CDR. JAMES K. CARSON – 6/21/64 – 16:02 GMT

*Diane, if you hear this, I'm sorry. Don't cry for me.*

[...]

*I knew what I was doing, when I came out onto this cold frontier. You did too. We all knew what I was doing. I hope you'll forgive me someday.*

[...]

*Four years ago, we had that conversation about good deaths. Do you remember? I'm dying a good death, Diane. I've done what I came out here to do. The numbers are collected, the records are complete. The data will carry on to the next mission, the next journey, and maybe it will stop the next poor bastard from meeting this fate.*

[...]

*But, please, my love. Don't let me become the ghost you haunt yourself with.*

[...]

*As long as you remember me, everything will be alright.*

\*\*\*

*Answer me, goddamnit!*

*The commander is silent.*

*You're just gonna sit there like you're already dead? No survival instinct, no struggle at all?*

*The only thing you can do right now, the commander says, his voice calm and quiet, is buy us a few more hours. Is that really worth living the last moments of your life like this?*

*The pilot pauses, draws back.*

*The fuck does that mean?*

*Lawrence, we're going to die, the commander repeats. You're gonna get us another, what, half hour, for all this struggle? Do you really want to die struggling, desperate and angry? Is that really what you want? Because I don't.*

*The pilot's grip goes slack on the commander's collar, his hands unfurling. His face unspools like a fire burning out.*

*There's no such thing as a good death, Carson, the pilot says, his voice quieter now. Death is death. It's ugly, unforgiving. The kind of shit they show in the funeral casket — those faces are sewn up. Pumped full of Botox. We're gonna suffocate in a tin can. You're deluding yourself.*

\*\*\*

AUDIO LOG: ISS ARGUS: PLT. HENRY S. LAWRENCE – 6/21/64 – 21:54 GMT

*I hate the fact that he isn't scared.*

[...]

*I hate how weak it makes me feel. Because I'm terrified.*

\*\*\*

The pilot runs the math, over and over, and he doesn't even know why he does it. It's like what he used to do back in high school after he finished a test he knew he bombed, crunching the numbers for his grades, only for it to return, over and over, a failure. He needs to know. He needs the numbers to tell him.

He doesn't speak, barely breathes, and he refuses to look at the commander. When the computers dim from slowly dwindling power, he grabs a notebook and a NASA-issued pen and he brute-forces it. But the numbers don't move, circling back over and over to the same destination.

They had seven hours to live. Six hours and twelve minutes, now. They're going to suffocate, the ship will break down around them, and they'll be surrendered back into the universe. The liquids in their body will sublime in the low pressure vacuum. Blood, plasma, cerebrospinal fluid, stomach acids, intracellular liquids — all of it gone, disappeared into the cold void. The universe is a supermassive freeze dryer, and they're the fucking food.

He lets go of his notebook and that goddamn overengineered ballpoint. They drift out above him, and he doesn't look to see where.

\*\*\*

AUDIO LOG: ISS ARGUS: CDR. JAMES K. CARSON - 6/21/64 - 16:04 GMT

*Thirty years ago, archaeologists did DNA tests on the victims of Pompeii. Bodies had been found together, hand in hand, curled up around each other, and before the study, the public had created fanciful stories of mothers protecting their sons, tragic lovers in their final embraces.*

*[...]*

*But the tests had shattered those illusions. The forty year old and the eighteen year old had no blood relations. The man and woman of similar age were master and slave, bound only by cruelty. These were people that cared nothing about each other — nothing, up until the moment that they died together, where the inevitable arrival of death drew them together.*

*[...]*

*Lawrence is angry with me. I wish he wasn't.*

\*\*\*

The commander is floating by the tiny slot of a window they have, his hands wrapped around the stainless steel bars. It reminds him, strangely, of riding the metro back home, the hovering monorails that thrum through his city, winding among the skyscrapers, his hands curled around the safety rails, feeling the rhythmic, constant hum of the movement running through him.

The ship is colder. Stiller.

He's staring out at the stars, tracking the light through the stars. Wolf 359. Procyon. Sirius A. Finally, just barely visible to the naked eye — their Sun.

From here, it's just another star. It had been strange, at first, for him to see it like this. To realize how small their Sun was in comparison to the universe. To know that somewhere out there, there were other creatures looking up at the sky, seeing their Sun, their star, and fitting it into the spines of constellations he could never even imagine.

\*\*\*

When Harry Lawrence is twelve years old, he finds a dead bird in his backyard.

The corpse is tiny, a broken little thing, shattered against their sliding glass door and then cut to bleed by the teeth of his calico cat. He picks it up gingerly, holds it in two hands and presses his thumbs to the hollows of its collapsed chest, skin to feather. They fit as cleanly as knuckles to a bruise.

His mom finds him in the kitchen an hour later, bent over the body on the kitchen island and prodding at it with a q-tip, disinfectant, and tweezers, bloodied feathers scattered around him.

“Oh, Harry,” she says. “Don’t touch that. You’ll make yourself sick.”

She pries it out of his cold fingers with her gentle hands, wraps it neatly in a paper towel like a funeral shroud, and wipes his hands of the blood that stains them.

“I’m sorry, sweetheart,” she says softly. “Do you want to bury it?”

He stares at the scattered mass of feathers, stained edges stark against the marble.

“No,” he says, very quietly. “I don’t want to see it anymore. Just throw it away.”

\*\*\*

*Was it stupid of me to struggle?*

*No. Never.*

*The ship goes quiet for one heartbeat. Another.*

*Something flickers in the commander’s eyes.*

*Is it stupid of me to hope they’ll find us?*

*The pilot sighs. It’s a waste of air, but he does it anyway. I don’t know.*

*A cold, simmering silence.*

*We’re going to die,* the pilot says, the commander’s earlier words echoing hollow in his mouth.

And the commander hears it. Even after the pilot has opened his eyes to death, the commander hears it still — the rapid current of fear, a hummingbird beat in the pilot’s chest, singing *I’m afraid, I’m afraid, I’m afraid*—

For a moment, the fear sucks out everything in the vessel, claws away the breath from his chest, and he thinks he might be dying already.

The commander draws closer, face to face, mouth to mouth, pressing a gasp of air into the pilot’s lungs, and he bruises their voices into one.

*Breathe, Harry. Breathe.*

\*\*\*

*ISS ARGUS TO SYSTEM SOL - 6/21/64 - 23:37*

*ONBOARD: CDR. JAMES K. CARSON & PLT. HENRY S. LAWRENCE*

*Vessel compromised. Oxygen levels critical. Final transmission.*

# Celina Zhou

Grade 11, Ladue Horton Watkins High  
School

Educator: Abigail Eisenberg  
*Critical Essay*



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## Revolutionary Martyrdom: Jacques-Louis David, Propaganda, and the Remembrance of the Dead in the French Revolution

In the Latin Quarter of Paris' fifth arrondissement, one building dominates the skyline — the Panthéon, the last great project of France's beloved king, Louis XV. The building was originally meant as a monument to honor Saint Geneviève, the patron saint of Paris, and house many of her artifacts. In the years after its completion in 1790, however, it became the resting place for a far more tormented register of saints— the dead vanguards of the French Revolution. The transformation of the Panthéon reflected a larger shift in the French consciousness towards the dechristianization of the new republic and the mutation of revolutionary ideals into a pseudo-religion under the Jacobin fervor. As the conflicts became more violent, those who died for the cause became martyrs of the revolution. These figureheads of the revolution were depicted in art that recalls Christian ideations of martyrdom and sainthood. I argue that this reflects a wider phenomenon of how perceptions of the revolutionary dead became mutable and in turn manipulated in the grave, with their stories being amplified or bloody pasts whitewashed for political purposes.

This paper will first explore how revolutionary thought came to resemble religion so heavily through Jacques Louis David's portraits of martyrs. Approaching the series chronologically by date of completion, I will examine the death and glorification of Louis-Michel Lepeletier, a politician and one of the last deciding votes for the execution of Louis XVI. Following this presentation of a major political figure, I will examine a major popular figure: Jean-Paul Marat, of the periodical *L'Ami du peuple*, whose bloody past and polarizing radicalism was whitewashed by the leaders of the revolution after his death. Interrogating the

last piece of the series, I will examine the story of the drummer boy Joseph Bara, whose death at a young age became a phenomenon when publicized by major revolutionary Maximilien Robespierre. Having presented key examples of narrative distortion, I will synthesize my argument in the context of a sociological interpretation of how people interact with the dead to construct meaning and narrative.

One of the greatest markers of the later radicalism of the French Revolution was its attempts at secularization. Though unpopular, this movement was briefly successful. Churches open for public worship were rare by the mid-1790s, and priests and other religious figures were often persecuted by the Jacobins (Tallet, 1-17). Simultaneously, Robespierre, an atheist and spearhead of the revolution who himself bore a fascination with religion, began to promote revolutionary ideals in ways popular among missionaries and preachers; though he condemned Catholicism in name, he drew from many of the church's techniques and traditions (Bell, 143). One of the most prominent similarities to religious tradition was the reverence with which he treated the revolutionary dead. Where in the Christian tradition, those who died for the church became martyrs of faith, so too did those who died for the republic become martyrs of revolution.

The first in David's series of martyrs was Louis-Michel Lepeletier, a politician and nobleman who rose to power in the National Convention, and whose martyrdom elevated his image after death. In the referendum to decide the fate of Louis XVI in December 1792, Lepeletier was one of the last votes that confirmed his execution. This decision made him a polarizing figure among the public and disliked among the royalists. On 20 January 1793, the night before the king was to be executed, Lepeletier was assassinated in a restaurant in the Palais Royal by a member of the former king's personal guard, Philippe Nicolas Marie de Pâris (British Museum). Two days after his death, his body was moved to the Panthéon in a grand march through the city, joining the remains of earlier figures important to the revolution such as *philosophe* Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and father of the revolution Comte Mirabeau. A few months later, an opera depicting his life and death was written and performed by the Opéra-Comique, to great financial success after extensive marketing by the revolutionaries (Pougin, 73-74).

Lepeletier's image, preserved by David, became a widely distributed image and representation of revolutionary martyrdom — though it's difficult to analyze, as the painting, known only by recreations by David's pupils, was



destroyed by Lepeletier's royalist daughter, Louis-Suzanne de Mortefontaine (née le Peletier), in 1795 (Defeyt). The replicas depict Lepeletier splayed across a bed, half-draped in cloth, his face serene; above him, the assassin's sword hangs, piercing through a piece of paper which declares, "Je vote pour la mort du tyran" — *I vote for the death of the tyrant*, defining Lepeletier's greatest revolutionary virtue as his condemnation of the king.

The significance of Lepeletier's case lies more in how his image was treated after his death than how he was treated in life. Though his deciding vote on Louis XVI's execution made royalist sympathizers decide he was too dangerous to be allowed to live, his image remained in the French consciousness afterward. It was the image itself that was destroyed in its entirety, rather than Lepeletier himself, who was only one of three hundred and eighty voters who condemned Louis XVI to death (Trapp, 183). To the Girondins and their sympathizers, Lepeletier's image became a scapegoat for the death of the king; to the Jacobins, he became a martyr and national hero. Only after his death could he become this dichotomous, complex, deified organism. The conflicting reactions that the painting drew, whether it be the Jacobin celebration, or his daughter's contrition, placed the power of Lepeletier solely in the image of him crafted after his death. In addition, not only is the painting now seen as the first painting of the French Revolution, it was the precursor, rehearsal, and diptych pair to the most famous and most influential of David's series: *The Death of Marat*.

Jean-Paul Marat was one of the most polarizing figures of the revolution, though after his death he became far more universally acclaimed after propagandizing efforts. Outside of his work as a politician, he was the editor and main writer for his own periodical, *L'Ami du peuple*; his writing was ferocious and unrelenting in its pushing of radical revolutionary ideas, making him an ally of the Jacobins and Robespierre himself. Marat and his writings were instrumental in the fall of the Girondins, the Jacobins' fiercest rival in the Convention, and he is believed to bear at least some responsibility for the brutal massacres of the Reign of Terror, including the September prison massacres of 1792. Among the people of France, especially those who were moderate, he became progressively more unpopular as the revolution progressed in both time and death toll; he was believed to be a bloodthirsty radical, gone mad with power. In his later years, he was even shunned among his contemporaries and friends; by the time of his death he was relegated to the margins of Parisian politics, both due to his debilitating skin condition and his growing unpopularity (Miller, 124). He was assassinated on 13 July 1793 by Charlotte Corday, a Girondin sympathizer with

connections to notable counterrevolutionaries who approached Marat offering to expose her comrades. When he granted her an audience, restrained to his bathtub by his condition, she drew a knife from her dress and stabbed him fatally in the heart; a scene later immortalized in David's infamous painting. Corday did not flee from the scene, and was executed by guillotine a few days later after a short trial.

After his death, despite his unpopularity in the years preceding it, Marat became a near-holy figure among the Parisian public, especially after his burial in the Panthéon. In churches and cathedrals, religious icons and busts were often replaced with images of the journalist; some among the sans-culotte even mourned him with a pseudo-prayer: "O heart of Jesus, O sacred heart of Marat!" (Miller, 125). Interestingly, though the French revolutionaries made great efforts to dechristianize the new republic in the later years of the revolution, much of the portrayal and veneration of Marat and other martyrs was religious in structure, drawing on preexisting Christian traditions and cultural iconography. David's painting itself greatly resembles Christian art, including Michelangelo's *Pietà*, the image of Mary cradling the body of Christ, and later *Pietàs* in that image, as well as Caravaggio's *The Entombment of Christ*. Marat in David's vision is cast in a soft, golden glow, his mouth agape and his face tranquil; in his dangling right hand he grasps his pen, a symbol of his revolutionary virtue as a journalist, as martyrs are often depicted with symbols of virtue; and in his left hand he holds the bloodstained letter by Corday declaring her intentions in meeting him. After *The Death of Marat*'s completion, it was so popular and beloved by the revolutionaries that, alongside *The Last Moments of Michel Lepeletier*, paired in a diptych, it was hung in the second meeting hall of the National Convention, the Salle de Machines, also known as the Théâtre des Tuileries (Defeyt).

The whitewashing of Marat's past and person was almost unilaterally for political purposes. Though associating with him had become disadvantageous to the Jacobins in his later years as he grew more bloodthirsty and had already fulfilled his use in the fall of the Girondins, many of the radicals saw an opportunity to propagandize his death and he was seized as an image of revolutionary virtue despite his previous reputation. In death, he was less outwardly venomous, his past misdeeds easier to hide now that he could no longer perpetuate them. He became a subject of great fervor, nearly impervious to criticism from the moderates under threat of violence from the radicals, and it was only when the Jacobins as a whole had fallen in the Thermidorian Reaction that his posthumous reputation waned.

This whitewashing is represented quite cleanly, though most probably unintentionally, in David's painting itself. The gruesome nature of his assassination is muted in David's work, with only a small incision resembling the wound in the side of Christ on his chest, his assassin and her weapon almost completely out of sight, and the bloodshed being diluted in the bathwater around him — were it not for these subtle signs of violence, Marat could be asleep. Though the journalist had a debilitating skin condition that left him extensively scarred and pockmarked, and he was described in most contemporary accounts as rather unpleasant in demeanor and unattractive in face, David portrays Marat as clear and fair-skinned, lithe and beautiful; the irony of this portrayal lies in the fact that he was bathing when he died, and is now forever immortalized in this state of physical cleansing. In death, Marat, who had outlived his purpose as a propagandist, became instead, rather ironically, a piece of propaganda himself.

The last in David's series of martyrs and the youngest to die, Joseph Bara, died at the age of fourteen on 8 December 1793, in a confrontation with royalists in the western region of Vendée. A drummer boy in a unit under General Jean-Baptiste-Marie Desmarres d'Estimastauville, the first accounts of Bara's death come from a letter to the National Convention written by Desmarres, asking for a pension for the boy's widowed mother. In the first letter, general Desmarres describes Bara being killed after he refused to hand two horses he was leading over to the royalists (Desmarres). The narrative of Bara's death, seized by Robespierre, was described differently in a speech to the convention some twenty days later as such:

Surrounded by brigands who threatened his life and demanded that he shout "Vive le roi!" he died shouting "Vive la République!" This young child supported his mother with his wages; he divided his concerns between filial love and love for his country. It wouldn't be possible to choose a better example, a more perfect model, to inspire in young hearts love of glory, of the fatherland and of virtue, and to pave the way for the youth of the coming generation. In awarding honors to the young Barra [sic], you will reward every virtue - heroism, bravery, filial love, love for country (Robespierre).

In the same speech, Robespierre proposed that Bara's remains be transferred to the Panthéon, a decision ratified by the convention, though his remains were never laid in the mausoleum; the ceremony to move him was set to be 10 Thermidor, on the Republican calendar, the day after what would become Robespierre's fall (Warren, 85). His last words, in Robespierre's version, a rallying cry for the republic and a refusal to apostate his devotion to it, echo images of

Christian martyrs who refused to renounce the faith, such as Polycarp, Perpetua and Felicity, and the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste, who died during the first centuries of the church when persecution of Christians by the Roman empire was common. His youth, too, was emphasized; Robespierre declared that, “only the French have thirteen-year-old heroes.”

Robespierre’s narration mutated the story compared to Desmarres’ original writing; the general initially had few ulterior motives, while Robespierre saw an opportunity to propagandize. This mutation was again shown in Desmarres’ second letter to the convention after Robespierre’s speech, wherein Bara was described as “my young pupil, my faithful companion in arms,” instead of just a soldier under his command. Not having heard Robespierre’s early speech, though, his last words in Desmarres’ account were said to be, “You blasted bandit, you think you can take our horses, do you? Just try it”. In that same letter, Desmarres offers to exhume Bara’s body for David’s painting, which the painter had already been commissioned to create, though it is unknown if he actually did so (Desmarres).

The painting in question was never completed, as the Thermidorian Reaction ousted Robespierre and the Jacobins from power, leading to David’s arrest — but Bara’s figure within the painting is complete. Nude and androgynous, splayed across the ground, clutching a letter and a tricolor corsage, Bara in David’s (and, by extension, Robespierre’s) vision is innocent yet courageous, youthful yet full of conviction — the image of revolutionary purity. Using this image, Robespierre would craft a cult around the young Bara; his resting grounds before he was moved to the Panthéon became a holy site. Interestingly, in comparison to later examples of Republican martyrdom, Bara was completely unknown and there was no popular outrage to his death. Instead, the image of Bara became Robespierre’s personal darling, which he used to push a larger idea that revolutionary ideals were pure and virtuous, in stark contrast to perceptions of the bloody Terror.

All of these subsequent portrayals are provocative in the sense that none of them quite resemble the original recounts of Bara’s death by Desmarres — a banal death that placed the value of two horses above the value of a human life. Bara could not protest, as some others at the time, to the portrayal of his nudity or his inferred foolishness, nor could he change his image of youth or purity that he was portrayed as. He would not grow old, nor would he become impure. In death, he became more mutable than he was in life, both malleable and yet resistant to change: an object and an image rather than a complex human being.

This reflects the wider phenomenon of how many martyrs — or even the ordinary dead — become objectified but malleable, vulnerable to exploitation.

Ultimately, of David's series of martyr paintings, only *The Death of Marat* remains completed and untouched, but even the influence of the destroyed and incomplete *The Last Moments of Michel Lepeletier* and *The Death of Young Bara* cannot be understated. With innumerable reproductions in the late eighteenth century, their influence can be attributed to the fact that David was not only a powerful revolutionary but one of the foremost painters of the Neoclassical movement. This syncretism led to the creation of some of the most widespread and effective forms of propaganda during the French Revolution. The glorification and distribution of Lepeletier's image led to its complete destruction, as the image of the great revolutionary dead held more propagandizing power than the man himself held when living; the purification of Marat's story allowed a revolutionary who had lost his usefulness in life to become an image of virtue rather than monstrosity; the infantilization of Bara in David's vision contributed to his portrayal as pure and virtuous, regardless of how he truly was in life, further mutating his story from the first unbiased accounts by Desmarres.

No matter how powerful, though, these portraits are only a part of a wider phenomenon, one utilized by Robespierre but not originating with him — martyrdom was a tradition that had existed for more than a millennia by the time of the French Revolution, and veneration for the martyred was adopted by the revolutionaries in ways that suited their political interests. Under the hands of the powerful, particularly in a state of political upheaval wherein radical ideas festered under the veil of "revolution," the dead became more powerful symbols not because of the way they died, but because they were dead. They became malleable but unchanging, no longer subjects in a philosophical sense, able to exercise agency, but objects, perceived rather than perceiving — their deification was, in one sense, more debasing than honoring.

These machinations of martyrdom are far from unique to the French Revolution, but expressed more clearly and abusively in it than its predecessors, as their proponents had explicitly political motivations. While intended as a response to long-standing religious traditions, the cult of martyrdom and by extension the cult of revolution mimicked the same religious traditions it intended to diverge from while adapting it for revolutionary fervor. This phenomenon, championed by Robespierre and propagated by David, illustrates an intentional manipulation of public sentiment. Each martyr's narrative was

crafted, amplified, or altered posthumously in order to make them more appealing or influential to the public. These examples reflect the mutation of religious tradition and exploitation of the dead for the sake of moral authority and propagation of ideology during the Revolution.

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Poetry



## SAMMA-SAMBUDDHO

in Liam's bathroom, I alone  
become the honored one, I the  
god immured in the mirror  
catching lotuses  
in the murk, strangling  
endlessly, the water cleaving down  
my thighs, washing me open  
crescent  
bruises staining my breasts  
sting of pain ringing in my skull  
Amitābha, crying out  
*Child, what have you done?*  
his voice in the imprint  
memory of his teeth, a testament  
fast, skinning  
of *child*. Master, there is no love  
and I except  
in the way that a shrike loves a thorn  
love how  
his knuckles scraping blindly against  
each vertebra a prayer bead spun  
his fingers I love  
how we split from our mothers  
shedding the tenderness of flesh  
I whet myself into awakening  
my skin clings

tangles of my hair  
  
raw and clean. I circle the  
  
break his sinew in my mouth and savor the salt  
of  
  
I bury  
  
of my breaking of  
  
between he  
  
like this: I  
  
my spine whittles stones into idols  
between  
  
forked tongue pulses in my teeth I love our bodies  
forgetting how to be forgiving. Upon him  
piety in the way

so tight there is no give left but  
and girlhood,  
girlhood I profess freely as  
sculptor  
still life female form, trenching caverns  
scrying into bloom white moon  
am  
immolation, when I am nothing but  
beautiful  
still, I don't starve for pleasure and  
hunger  
I'm not stupid enough to think I'm  
wanted  
wanting. I'm stupid enough to think  
to Amitāyus I whisper *Greedy I*  
*marrow*  
*I the rhizome in the mud*  
*the enlightened one, Master*  
*see? I am your most devoted disciple*  
me:  
still, and silent.

to blood  
alms to a beggar. I great  
in the remains. I sage in the mountain  
cradles of my ribs, knowing that when I  
ash and bone and deity I will be  
I don't fuck for  
not skinny, pretty,  
destitution will make me a god  
*who flowers from the*  
*I am*  
but the Womb Realm is barren to



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*Poetry*



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## SONGS FROM ANDREA'S FASTBACK

She insists on skipping all her playlist favorites (*I never want to get sick of them*) so from the passenger seat I put on something mindless, some old country bleakness, a song about a song about nothing. It goes like this: three freshmen got in a crash. Fifth street, white Ford. They stayed up all night, partying with night lights of their own making, died on impact in the brightest lights of all; one was in the backseat, only catching the flashfire rush of fear in the rearview mirror. —It goes like this: when it's dry season, we lap out into the crop, aimless, drifting from gas station to gas station on the interstate, watching the soot tongue out into the sky. We take polaroids at the deserted pumps, and on film we look like ghosts. We look like the only people alive. —It goes like this: every kid who wings off to the coasts for college always comes back. Every summer, in flocks, circling back to the cornfields and empty space, trying to fill it up with the sound of their songs, ringing out into the gold. We can't help it, it's what we're made for. —It goes like this: I remember loving a boy, a runner, limber and tall, and I remember how it felt like bird-watching in the dark, like knowing when lark season hits, but never being

able to catch sight of each little flight tearing above  
the fields; only catching the mass of them, like smoke.  
—It goes like this: I like the drives, but I hate the driving.  
The control of it all. I sit shotgun every time, rolling down  
the windows on the highway like Mama never used  
to let me, just to let the wind in. —It goes like this:  
in the twilight we morph into big sky, open plain  
creatures, roaring down I-70 with a recklessness  
we haven't earned: already half vacant, but alive  
all the same.