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Missouri Youth Write

Missouri Youth Write is sponsored by the Missouri Association of Teachers of English (MATE). Prairie Lands Writing Project at Missouri Western State University joined together with MATE and the Missouri Writing Projects Network in June 2008 to form the Missouri Writing Region, a regional affiliate for the national Scholastic Writing Awards Contest, sponsored by The Alliance for Young Artists & Writers (http://www.artandwriting.org/). The winning students’ writings from the Missouri Writing Region for the 2014 National Scholastic Writing Awards Contest comprise this edition of Missouri Youth Write.

Editor: Rebecca Dierking (rebeccadierking@yahoo.com)
Web Editor:
Assistant Editor:

This edition is available online at http://www.missouriwestern.edu/mowriting/youth13.html.
For more information about the Missouri Region for the National Scholastic Contest, see http://www.missouriwestern.edu/mowriting.
Animated Disney movies are a staple of the complete American childhood. Ask any group of children, and they will know all about Simba, Ariel, Pocahontas, and Aladdin. The fascination extends beyond youngsters to teenagers and adults. Everyone, it seems, loves Disney. The franchise began in 1937 with the release of *Snow White*, Disney’s first animated full-length feature, which did wonderfully at the box office. The movie reinvented the classic tale of Snow White in a benign, kid-friendly way, setting the tone for the rest of the movies. Indeed, it is the princess movies that are the most successful and well-loved among viewers. Young girls, especially, are entranced by the portrayals of beautiful, enchanting women who win the love of a prince and live happily ever after. Disney’s portrayal of women on the big screen has an undeniable influence on society, social norms, fashion, commercialism, etc. In her article, “What’s Wrong with Cinderella?” Peggy Orenstein observes that “even Dora the Explorer... has ascended to the throne...” (1). In short, Orenstein is pointing out how America’s princess obsession has gone beyond the bounds of Disney and influenced other children’s shows. Our fascination with royalty in an anti-monarchy nation is strange, if not a trifle concerning. Americans today tend to believe that Disney films have harmless, even positive, influences on their children. However, these films require close analysis to determine the true effects of the princess mentality on young consumers. In sum, beneath the top layer themes of bravery, love, and family, there is an equally present, if less visible, layer of negative messages including superficiality, selfishness, and stereotypes.

Many Disney princess movies encourage the idea that physical appearance is the easiest way to find happiness, and more importantly, to get that prince. Every female character is strikingly, impossibly perfect. They all have tiny waists, long legs, gorgeous hair, beautiful voices, flawless skin, and intelligence. They are all traditionally feminine. Their ankles are small, and their voices are high and soft. Most of them are of medium height and have long hair. Their noses are perfectly straight, their cheeks are pink, their lips are red and full, and their eyes are unnaturally enormous. According to E. A. Lawrence, “Good characters (e.g. Simba, the Sultan, Ariel, Pocahontas) exhibit juvenile traits such as big eyes and round cheeks and are drawn in curves, smooth, round, soft, bright, and with European features” (as qtd. in Lee Artz). Lawrence goes on to point out how villains such as Scar, Jafar, the Hun, and Ratcliffe possess sharp angles, dark, oversized features, and have a general ugliness about them. Lawrence’s claim is important because it illuminates the superficial nature of Disney in regards to the viewer’s reception of specific characters. When the villains are first introduced, audiences are immediately clued in to their evil nature not because of words or actions, but because of appearances. With constant exposure to films that so strongly support the idea that physical features mimic the heart and mind, children’s perception of reality may be altered for the worse.

Furthermore, the majority of the female leads fall in “love” at first sight—literally—with an almost-as-perfect prince. The princes usually lack basic personality traits which is especially prevalent in *Snow White* and *Cinderella*, whose princes do not even have actual names and go by the generic “Prince Charming.” They are like Jake from *Sixteen Candles*. They are there to look cute and save the day, but rarely is the viewer given any reason to believe that they will be a stable and loving relationship partner. Of course, there are always exceptions. Li Shang and Mulan did not become romantically involved until the last five minutes of the movie. *Aladdin* has a man as the lead character, so he has some depth to his personality. At the end of most of the movies, the princess is beaming, having triumphed over ugly evil, her trophy husband on her arm.
In addition, Disney princesses exhibit, at times, shocking levels of selfishness. Take Ariel, for instance. She has everything at her fingertips: power, wealth, family, friends, and her health, yet she yearns to be a human. She is unhappy with what she has. This underlying selfishness motivates Ariel’s every action, including her abandonment of her father, sisters, and kingdom to chase an unfamiliar life with an unfamiliar human (let’s not forget that Prince Eric is also technically an entirely different species). Although it is true that the Little Mermaid may possess some admirable qualities such as determination and bravery, her less wholesome traits cannot be overlooked (Clausen/Kielbasa, 1-3).

However, Ariel is by no means the only princess with blinders. Pocahontas spends all day out gallivanting in the woods instead of helping her tribe with work. She is so wrapped up in her own love affair with the outdoors that she has put her own desires above her responsibilities. Even Tiana from The Princess and the Frog is a workaholic who is unable to see anything but her dream of a glorious and lavish restaurant. What appears to be good, hard work is actually self-absorption. She is willing to give up all her time with family and friends in order to save up the money. While the concept of saving for a future goal is generally positive, the extremity to which Tiana reaches is downright unhealthy.

Finally, the intensely stereotypical side of Disney films is the very essence of the films themselves. The fact that the lead characters are princesses at all, in fact, is stereotypical of Disney movies, especially those aimed at female audiences. Is it not strange that the media in America, a country which began by rebelling against monarchy, is infatuated with the idea of royalty? From William and Kate’s wedding to Sleeping Beauty to the new Disney Channel show, Princess Sophia, little girls sure do love their princesses. The stereotyping also goes on in other ways, such as in The Lion King. The lions, especially Mufasa, all speak with perfect diction, while the scraggly group of hyenas speak with a ghetto accent. It was reported that in a shopping mall, a young white child was heard to shout, “Look, Mom, hyenas!” when they were nearby a group of urban, black teens conversing with one another (Whittock, as qtd. in Lee Artz). Not surprisingly, the child was referring to the Disney hyenas and connected the voices of the youths with those of Scar’s idiotic, malicious posse.

Moreover, since the dawn of Disney, young, innocent women have been tormented by wicked stepmothers and taken it with a smile. Though Cinderella is practically a slave to her evil stepmother, she does all of her work with a cheerful attitude. She behaves perfectly and does everything she asked to do. Belle is ridiculed by the townspeople and sexually harassed by Gaston, yet she consistently treats these people with kindness and decorum. Snow White is hunted by her stepmother and ends up homeless in the dark, cold forest. As soon as she finds shelter, what does she do? She cleans house (but of course, she doesn’t get all tired and sweaty—she has woodland creatures to help her out). Mulan is abandoned by her band of brothers and almost killed by Shang yet ends up saving them all. Jasmine, only a teenager, is forced by her sultan father to find a prince to marry, and she holds no grudge against him. In fact, she has a fantastic relationship and understands that he has no choice because it is the “law” (one would wonder how she could forget that her father is the master of the law). princesses never yell. Princesses never lose control. Princesses always have a level head. They are good girls who are constantly “the bigger person,” and though they might cry on occasion, they are never allowed to ugly sob like the rest of us.

In conclusion, while Disney princesses are not the best role models, they are perfect for commerce. Disney knows what sells, so the company continues to produce princess after princess. Certainly, the characters have evolved—no longer do we see princesses who are devoid of personality and passively do as they are ordered. Perhaps in the future the princess infatuation will die out, but only if our culture changes and turns away from the idolization of self-gratification and flawless, easy romance. Parents should think carefully about what they allow their children to watch and not assume that just because a film is a Disney movie, it is healthy. After all, Disney is merely answering the demands of the consumer, as all successful businesses do.
I’m standing in front of the ice cream machine at an all-you-can-eat Chinese buffet in hospital slippers. Outside it’s raining.

It wasn’t raining yesterday. Yesterday feels very far removed from today, as though a lot more than a day’s worth of time has passed between yesterday and today. Gradually it dawns on me that this is because it has—what I had been referring to as “yesterday” in my head is actually the span of both yesterday and the day before, and I’d simply meshed the two.

Still, it wasn’t raining yesterday. I try to think about the passage of time in a less abstract way. I think detachedly about rain, about mood.

I feel oddly at once inside and outside both of myself and of the building, although maybe not so much “and” as “or”—I don’t think I feel my simultaneous existence in two places at once so much as a state, almost, of suspended existence, a decision of which way to feel in which I’m making no discernible movement in either direction.

People repeatedly push past me. I am given a series of sideways glances. Clearly, I’m in everybody’s way. I’d like to move. But I’m stuck. Or I’m falling. I feel as though I am moving uncontrollably and unable to move at all. This all feels like some kind of horror house gimmick.

This is pathetic fallacy taken to its most illogical endpoint. Is this what I’d wanted to happen, to feel? This is the first time in three days it occurs to me to cry.

I don’t.

Instead I blink hard and resume movement, walking by hand-over-hand grabbing and leaning on tables like I’m in rough seas. I keep having to convince myself that I’m upright. I find my family and, collapsing into the booth, am engaged with their looks of concern. I smile with only the left side of my mouth. “I’m okay,” I say repeatedly, sitting slumped and dull and dragging food around on my plate. The whole act of ingesting, of taking anything foreign inside my mouth, seems at the moment vaguely repellent. I watch various family members chew. I observe a waiter collect plates from several nearby vacated tables. Every action occurring in the room feels repetitive, enveloped in a sort of vague high-magnitude déjà vu.

I have a vague memory of having eaten a bowl of oatmeal, and I think of some fruit back at the hospital, yesterday. I remember eating something equally vague earlier today off a gray institutional tray. ‘Vague’ seems like a good all-purpose descriptor for the last several days. Yesterday in my memory seems harrowing but the day before that just fuzzy, unsure. All my memories are vivid but fragmentary.

Tuesday night

I’m sitting on a plush battered couch. It’s comfortable. It’s sometime after eight o’clock in the first days of a Midwest June, meaning the sun is still half a pendulant over the trees and the air seeps hot around the edges of a window. I sweat and stick to the couch. I stare out the window at the sun. I try to decide what I’m feeling.

It feels like I need to scrape my heart off the top of my stomach. It feels like I applied a compression wrap to my ribs. It feels like someone stirred the whole world’s feelings together and let all the heavy sediment settle then poured off all the happy and now the sediment’s been poured inside me.

Just kidding. It actually doesn’t feel like anything at all. I’m pretty sure I’ll never feel anything again. I try hard not to cry. Really I don’t try at all. The crying just won’t come to me.
I feel drained. My mental image for the word “drained” is an end-of-summer swimming pool baroque with hoses, all bare damp already beginning to fill with leaves. Only, it’s just the start of summer now. These are the months I am supposed to live for, I think, squinting into a disappearing sun. At this very minute every pool I can think of is probably brimming with people who are not me, splashing and shouting and having a very good time, unlike me.

I scrape lines into the black back of the chair with my fingernail. I can scrape lots of lines very fast. My mom walks by, scowling. “Get up,” she says, “get up.” I scowl back and scratch another line. “Get up,” she says again.

“Okay.” Go away I’m in terrible pain, I think, willing her away.

“Get up!” she says loudly.

The emotion welling inside me feels negative, as though I’ve moved the compression wrap around my whole body. I feel uncomfortably squeezed, or pressed down, like I physically cannot leave this chair.

I feel unreasonably antagonized. The chair is comfortable. Why should I get up?

Wednesday morning

I wait until I hear bow hit violin strings to flip on the light, leaning on the doorframe, resting my ear against my sister’s door and listening carefully before pulling open the door to the hall closet. The drug closet. It crunches and creaks. I cringe. The violin stops. Fuck, I think. Don’t come out here, I will my sister through the door.

My sister’s door opens. I straighten my head and pick up a box of Band-Aids from the shelf and begin hastily to unwrap and apply them to my thumb.

“Is your thumb bleeding?” she asks, peering over my shoulder.


I continue adding bandages until she returns to her room and closes the door.

There’s exasperatingly little in the medicine cabinet. Days of biting the back of my hand just to feel it. Finally, one long spurt of resolve and I’m here. I’ve gone through it in my head, and it looked pretty much like it does, bottles and packets all tripping over one another—only in my head I guess I thought I’d brush back the detritus to find some One Bottle that I’d slug back and succumb to.

I pick through all the bottles, front to back and then start again from the front, trying to imagine how I’d do it with each of them, if I did decide to do it. I imagine tossing back cough syrups, saccharine-sweet on the back of my throat, choking. Nyquil on the rocks, I think wryly, purple Triaminic in a wine glass. Aleve. Advil. I’d be pain-free till the very end. Cherry children’s liquid Motrin, the color of fake blood. Extra-strength Tylenol with its orange label flagging loosely. Too much Tylenol’s a messy situation, involving a charcoal drink and, if it fails, a yellowing slow liver death. Powerful painkillers from some bygone dental procedure—oxycontin, hydrocodone, only a few tabs of each. A colorful mix of sleep meds: Ambien, Unisom, Lunesta, OTC melatonin, generic temazepam in its ambery-orange Rx bottle, an empty lorazepam bottle. Lot of sleep potential.Half-full Zoloft next to the pill cutter.Bottle of Klonopin, slightly offset from the rest.

I take out several bottles to consider. I reject the opiates on the grounds that it may look too much like an accident, recreation gone wrong. This won’t be an accident. I give each bottle a shake. There’s a little Tylenol left, some Ambien, and the Klonopin is almost full. I take the three, leave, shut the door quietly, turn off the light.

I don’t want to die. I’m clear with myself as I go downstairs. I don’t want to kill myself, I don’t. I need a break. Just need a break.

Wednesday night
I’m back in the black chair for the second night in a row. I’ve lost track of how many lines I’ve made. I’m still idly making new ones.

I don’t know whether I feel hot or cold. My face feels flushed, but my body is bristling from the a/c coming up from a vent behind the chair. I sit for hours.

My dad comes in at some point.

“Want to talk?” he asks.

“No.”

He sits anyway.

At another, later point I take a shower, standing unmoving under the water for a long time. My parents are in the hall outside the bathroom conversing at low volume and seem relieved when I finally come out. The night seems normalized.

I uncover the bottles almost giddily, like a present, unscrewing the lid of the Klonopin and pouring the tablets out over my sheets. I count them carefully. 42. I think dimly, in dark humor, the answer to life, the universe, and everything. The pills are the answer. I decide to take all of them.

Right now? I pick up approximately half and weigh them in my palm. I don’t have water.

I put them down and stand to get water. Someone is coming downstairs. Little pink pills are strewn across my bed. I can’t put them back in the bottle because they’ll rattle and give me away. In a panic I shove them all under my pillow as my dad enters the room. He sits down and talks for a long time. I don’t listen and don’t remember what he says.

I scoop the pills back into their bottle and turn off the lights, feeling somehow unhinged and sad. I don’t know what to think. I don’t know what to think about. I try to look at the Internet. I scroll through Facebook without reading it. I look at pictures of faraway beaches and mountains and feel nothing. I feel viciously unhappy, unwell. I text some people, help i don’t want to go to sleep. No one replies. I Google, Klonopin overdose. Tylenol overdose. Fatal overdose. Nonfatal overdose. Suicide. Kill myself. Klonopin. Death.

Thursday morning

I wake up too early. The sun seems unnecessarily violent. I don’t want to be awake, I think, and roll over to go back to sleep.

I hear my mom enter the room from behind. “Get up,” she says, nudging my back with a cold toe.

I mumble something about not sleeping well. “GET UP!” she yells and leaves the room. She comes back. “YOU HAVE TEN MINUTES TO GET UP!” She walks away.

I groan and feel the cold floor against my left leg.

I can’t do this. I just can’t do it this morning. Do what? Do it. The phrase wanders through my head. I remember the pills.

I roll the bottle from under my pillow. I have the water from last night.

I pour out half again, rolling them around in my hand. The thudding of my heart is ridiculous. I can’t hear around it. Are you gonna do this? I ask myself. Seems crazy. I stare down my handful of Klonopin. My body seems not fully engaged with what I tell it to do. Finally I toss back the pills, without conscious decision, choking slightly. I swish water into my mouth and try to swallow. I’m coughing. I spit out most of them and try again. They’re leaving residue all around my mouth, having already begun to dissolve. The taste is sort of bitter, acrid. The texture is what’s awful, grainy and gummy at the same time, coating the whole inside of my mouth. I take the ones I spat out back into my mouth and swallow. I can feel them moving into my empty stomach. I look back into the bottle for the other half. Can I do it? I stare them down for awhile. I decide I really can’t. I’ve lost all my nerve. I lay back. I start to get really scared. My heart seems erratic. I don’t know. I look around for something to write with. I think I might have to craft a note. I find a pen and an issue of Time magazine but no words can fully form. Finally I
scrawl "~20 1mg Klonopin" on the back cover of the magazine. I wonder if I’ve overdosed. I leave the note so they’ll be able to help me in the hospital. I lay for about five minutes trying to feel any changes occurring in my body or headspace. I hear my mom coming back.

I get up and run to the bathroom, shutting the door and locking it. I kneel and wonder if I’m going to cry. I take a yellow toothbrush from the counter and jam the handle down my throat, retch and retch and try very hard to throw up. What comes up is bright yellow and sour and disgusting, and I don’t know if it’s the drug that’s coming up, I retch until I spit streaks of blood. The drug probably can’t come up. I can’t tell if I’ve made a poor decision. I unlock the door, walk out, and lie down again. My mom walks in.

“Stomach hurt?” she asks with some concern.

“No.”

She walks in and pauses. She crouches. She sees the open Klonopin bottle. “You’ve been taking this?”

I nod vaguely.

“Don’t take this! This is mine! This bad medicine,” she says
She starts to walk away with it. “I’m gonna throw it away.”
I panic. “WAIT!”
“What?”
“Don’t throw it away. I have to see how many I took.”

“Just now,” I say. “Well, like ten minutes ago.”

“What? THIS IS CRAZY! YOU’RE CRAZY! THIS IS BAD MEDICINE!” she yells.
“I know.” I’m feeling oddly unconcerned now. The Klono is kicking in.
“We have to go to the hospital.”
“No we don’t.”
“If we don’t go you’re gonna DIE.”
I say, “You’re overreacting,” smirking a little.
“Let’s GO!” she yells.

I think I know all the procedures it takes to leave the house. I look around for shorts, catching one foot inside the shorts. I laugh. My mom is in front of the door frantically rattling her keys. “Hurry!” she shouts. I slowly pick up shoes and socks from the kitchen floor and follow her out the door.

“Are you driving?” I smile. She doesn’t even look at me. I get in the passenger side and throw the shoes and socks on the car floor. The garage floor is already warm. It’s summer. I’ve forgotten.
As we drive, the world seems to grow progressively brighter and brighter.

When did the grass by I-35 get so green, I wonder. It’s as green as my shorts. The shorts are still new. I tear off the tag and continue to wear them.

We pass houses and people and dogs and grocery stores and gas stations. There is a distinct unreality to all of them. The sun’s out, and the sky’s bright blue. Right now is probably the best I’ve felt in years—near elation. I slowly untie the shoes to put them on. That’s as far as I get.
“Hurry up, you blasted fairy! I don’t think this bloody demon can survive much longer!” I scream at my mini ally.

“I’m coming, you insane babbler,” retorts my colleague, “I got these as fast as I could! Close your mouth for a minute, would you, lest you want December to rain down early upon us by the creature waiting below!”

“You took 5 hours to find those simple antibiotic weeds, and you call that fast?” I complain furiously at her.

Hold on a moment, we’re a bit far into this story, and you probably don’t know one thing about this world. Let me go into the semi-rich history of this place. This planet, Earth, has magical energy spread across it and has opened portals to other dimensions. Now the planet is ruled by humans, demons, dragons, and other aliens. Currently the year is 3026 and the burning seasons are upon us.

I am GoyalShadowspark. As an effort to create a superhuman, I have containers surging from my head. Being human earned me a set of clothes, a knife, and enough money to buy a 438xr-54 pistol with grenade feature, a 2609-p50 laser rifle, 296 blend cloak armor, and a 56-ph650 ATV. Anyway let’s start at the beginning, shall we?

“Hey, fairy lady, can you tell me what that sign over that city says? It’s too hard to read at this distance,” I question as the road constantly shakes the ATV. My magical friend flutters quietly to my side and stares up at the gigantic sign.

“I think it says Platte City,” exclaims CharlieneWoodbringer, “is that our destination?”

“I don’t know where else to go, so I guess we could stop here for a while and rest, then continue to a new city,” I explain. “While we’re at it, maybe we can make some money for new weapons, armor, vehicle, etc.” We keep traveling the path we are on and after ten minutes arrived at the city. I expect that we can walk in, but as we approach, our eyes catch a sign that says: only humans without mutations are allowed. Without looking behind me, I remember my lizard tail mutation because of the containers.

“Darn,” whispers my colleague, “neither of us can go into the city.” Her attention turns toward me, “Well, what now? Maybe we should head back to the ATV and search for a new city. There is Recarder, Demolition, Upcountry, and Merculus.”

“I don’t know what to do. Let’s get back in the ATV and discuss it.” We trot to the ATV and enter through an unlocked door without caution. I am about to start the ATV, when I notice a small boy crying at the walls. Being a man of sufficient code, I stroll to the helpless boy as my partner stays hidden in the ATV. For all who don’t know, sufficient code is chosen by anything on Earth. The code states: I must help anyone in need, I cannot break my word of honor, and I cannot perform torture unless there is an adequate reason. There are 3 more types, one all good, heroic; one all evil, demented; and one where you can make up your own code, unprincipled. Anyway, I ventured to the small boy.

“Is something troubling you, boy?” I question. “If there is, I might be able to help you.” The boy stares upward, and I see darker lines on his pale face showing where tears have chosen to flow. Untidy hair covers his forehead and grass colored pupils focus cautiously upon my head and the containers.

“Who are you?” asks the confused boy, “and why have you come to help me?”

“Well, my code demands I help others. Is there any way I can help?”

“Actually, I do need help with something, but we need privacy.” His head goes close to my ear in a slight whisper. “If feel like we’re being watched, so do you have anywhere secluded that we can talk?”
"I have an ATV; will that do?"
"Yes, that will have to do."
"OK then," I state awkwardly, "this way." We trudge toward my vehicle, and both of us climb in.
"Hold on, are you cut?" I ask as blood is visible on his arm wrapped in cloth, red from absorbing blood.
"Hey, CharlieneWoodbringer, can you steal some medical supplies from the city if you can? This boy seems to be wounded." 
"Fine," she complains, "I'll take medicine from Platte City." She flies over the city walls.
"I'm GoyalShadowspark. Now, what is your problem, boy?" I finally ask after silence.
"Well, a few days ago I found a note that claimed my father was taken into the forbidden mountains and to never go back to my house. Can you help me, good sir?"
"I've never heard of the forbidden mountains," I attempt to remember a map of this area of America. "First take me to your house; maybe there we can find clues about your father or his captors."
At that moment, Charliene came flying into the ATV with medical supplies.
"Eat up the herbs to heal you," Charliene explains to the boy.
"I don't trust that fairy of yours," says the kid with accusation. "I need proof this isn't poison or any other drug."
"I'll test it," I state reluctantly. "If Charliene had any bad intentions, they will fall upon me rather than you, boy." I swallow slowly a pinch of the herbs, but nothing happens. "It's good, unless I have changed." The boy takes the rest and the wound closes upon itself and heals back together.
"Let's head off then," the boy commands. "My name is WilliumLokes, by the way." I lock the door we move off to the boy's house on foot. We find a wooden cabin concealed among the trees, just a mile from Platte city. The cabin's wood door is rough, so that if you grazed your hand upon it, you would have a fistful of splinters. I unsheathe my 438xr-54 pistol and enter the small house to find the room sacked and empty of any useful supplies. A portrait lay shattered among the ground, clothes draped over the floor, chairs, and bed. Two mattresses were on top of each other, and chairs flanked the table cluttered with books and papers. Nothing seemed to look odd to the normal eye, except that the place was looted, but there was a suspicious circular glass on the floor. It was cut clean and not from the broken picture but from a looter.
"It looks to me like there won't be any physical evidence that we may find," claims Charliene.
"Actually, there is a circular glass on the floor," I state, "It looks like it could be the face of a watch or a monocle. Maybe some evidence outside this small cabin will tell us more about your father's captors." We venture outside and find nothing, but as I look through the foliage, I see two dragons of moderate size quickly descending. The boy shrieks and darts behind a large rock to avoid being noticed.
"Watch out! We got company!" I scream over the dragon's bloodcurdling screech. It sounded as if sharp fingernails were being pulled down a chalkboard. Regardless, I take aim and blast the dragon out of the air as it overshoots to land behind me. The hideous creature screeches again and makes its first move. It charges at me with godly speed, but the drug containers kick in a large amount of adrenaline, and I move faster as I parry his claw strike. The dragon is surprised at the action and realizes all too late that I blocked and whacked his white face with the butt of my rifle. The feathered dragon, however, recovers quickly, but the same actions take place. The fearsome monster then recovered from my strike and attacks quickly enough that my parry fails and my armor and weapon are damaged, but not completely dysfunctional. As a final attempt, I fire a laser round into the main body of the beast, and it falls to the mossy ground, motionless. To the side lay another feathered dragon, with a small figure standing atop its head.
"Now that was interesting," Charliene sighed. "Hey boy, come out. The dragons are dead. Wait, were they dragons? I don't recall dragons being feathery and bird-like." The boy slowly checks around his rock and, noticing no immediate danger, leaves his shelter.
"They seem to be dragons," I state, "I don't see anything odd, but just to be sure, I'll try to use my eyes to identify them." I immediately lose energy and glance about the dragons, but they had no magic level so no identification. I look to the cabin and see a magical outline of a creature. I start walking toward the cabin and slowly enter the open door.

"What are you doing, Goyal?" asks my confused fairy ally. "You would've spotted anything unusual when you first walked in." Charliene flutters to the door and waits suspiciously for something odd to happen. I stroll cautiously toward the corner as my heart rate increases gradually. Then the corner lashes out at me with a steel mechslay sword coated with green acid. A metallic outline of a person appears. My armor is slashed and corrodes with immeasurable speed. Surprised at the sudden attack, I immediately lurch backward to the only window to avoid any further damage.

"Here goes nothing," shouts Charliene, "Thermus-Electrus!" Lightning came upon the armored man. He gasped for air, and much of his visible skin smoked from being scolded by such intensity. He lunges toward the door at Charliene but is thrown back by me. The human figure gathers itself and cowers in the corner with my rifle aiming straight at his head.

"Listen up, sir, for I will not repeat this," I threaten. "I will ask you a few questions, and you will answer them. If I get enough information, I may release you under conditions. Do you understand?" The man nods quickly, multiple times. "First, where is Willium Lokes' father located?"

"At the forbidden mountains," speaks a base voice from the man.

"Who are you?"
"Yightler Format."
"Why are you here?"
"Assigned to make sure the father and boy don't come back."
"Who assigned you?"
"Konler Mathingson."
"You ready to hear terms of release?"
"Yes."

"All your belongings will be left here. This includes armor, weapons, and what-not you have on you. You will not directly or indirectly bring harm to this boy, and you are to never cross my path again, lest you want to be exterminated. Do you except these terms?"

"My armor! Are you crazy!!! This cost me a fortune!" exclaims the maddened human.

"Keep this question in mind: do you want to live or enter a premature death?" I ask curiously, as if this were an old game show.

"Okay, as long as I can take my pair of clothes, a pocket knife, and you won't kill me as I leave you. I humbly ask for your word of honor," requests the man.

"I give you my word of honor that you can take what you have asked, and I will only kill you after you have completely left this area." I tell him with pity in my mind, knowing someday the man could come across me again and will be murdered. The man takes off his armor and decides to run out with the supplies I permitted. I put on the new armor, and we left the cabin.

"Well now, let's head to the forbidden mountain," we prepare for the worst in the mountain. Charliene cast a spell, and we flew to the mountain upon her magic.

When we arrive at the topmost cave, a dark figure is close to the back of the cave, and titanium chains hook to the figure. Not much can be seen inside the cave, but we approach the figure which has all the features of a demon: skin that gives the impression of lava, long clawed fingers, and two horns on his head like a deer.

"Father!" cries the boy, "are you hurt at all?" The boy runs to the father and cries as he holds his father's locked hand.
"Charliene, get medical supplies from the forest. This boy's father needs something along the lines of a reviving potion," I order as I rush to the boy's side. Charliene leaves, and for five hours the boy cries, hiding at the end of the cave.

Charliene flutters in with her arms full of medical plants.

"Hurry up, you blasted fairy! I don't think this bloody demon can survive much longer!" I scream.

"I'm coming, you insane babbler," retorts my college. "I got these as fast as I could! Close your mouth for a minute, would you, lest you want December to rain down early upon us by the creature waiting below!"

"You took 5 hours to find those simple antibiotic weeds, and you call that fast?" I complain furiously at her.

She ignores my comment and feeds the medicine to the demon who slowly swallows the herbs. We wait with a growing tension to see the result of the mixture. Willium’s father’s eyes slowly open and quickly glance at us until he sees WilliumLokes. At this point, the demon hugs his semi-human son, and they speak amongst themselves. I end up getting bored and march to the entrance when a white, frozenhead dragon from the cave below blocks the exit for our small party.

"Charliene, get ready for your previously mentioned early December. I think it has come to haunt you," I state fearfully to my friend just a few feet behind me. The dragon roars, and the sound is reflected off the walls and back to my small group over and over again. As a means of killing us fast, the dragon blows out an ice sheet meant to freeze us all.

"Well," I say worriedly, "here I go into the frost of a dragon." I charge at the dragon regardless of life with my newly claimed sword out while Charliene flies out of the way to the edge of the cave walls. I jump as the ice storm ends, and the dragon, stunned by my choice of actions, is taken by surprise when I land on his back.

"Thermus-Electrus!" screams the fairy at the edge of the wall.

"Oh, this is very bad," I mutter in regret. "This is going to hurt." I stand on the white beast and attempt to steady my feet on its back and jump but miserably fall to the dragon’s back. Lightning flashes, and we are both roasted. Burned and scorched, but still alive, the dragon turns its head and grips my torso, holding me toward the inside of the cave. I feel air brush past me as he prepares for death. I slice my new sword in the dragon’s neck, ending its agonizing pain forever.

"Are you alright Goyal?" asks Charliene nervously. "That hit you pretty hard. Sorry about that, I should've waited a moment."

"It’s fine. I’m cooked but still alive. What is the status of the boy and his father?" I ask and look to see that they are frozen, as cavemen were when they existed. Blue ice spread across their bodies, but I can't save them. I got my ATV and loaded it with 2000 dragon scales, 4 packages of dragon blood, all 4 paws, the head, dragon heart, and 3402 dragon teeth.

"Let's check the cave below," I explain to Charliene. "The dragon probably has a stockpile."

Sure enough, when we got to the cave below, we found 2 sets of dogboy armor, a new sword, 3 laser rifles, 20 gold coins, a sack, and one magical coin that only creatures of magical essence can touch. Anything else that touches it is thrown back and damaged by it. We travel to Merculus and sell all the dragon body parts, the coins, and Charliene creates a shield out of the magical coin. This only our first adventure, but we’ll have more soon enough.
Author's Statement
Observations are important. They're the impressions each individual makes on the events she perceives. They're always different, even if the event they are based on is the same. This small collection of works is compiled from my observations and reflections. They represent things that I have seen and experienced. Four of the five pieces are poems. Some of these poems are more straightforward, like Marko and Midwest. The others are more metaphoric, blending small, sensory details with my own feelings on the subject. Stitches and Rips stands out as the longest piece in the portfolio. It's most personal piece in the portfolio, written in several short pieces that come together to create one narrative.

Most of the poems were initially written very quickly, in one sitting, and then edited afterwards. It gives them an impressionistic feel, like a sketch of a memory. Midwest gives off that feel particularly; I wrote it while watching rural Illinois landscape fly past through a bus window.

The goal of these works is to force my readers to feel what I felt. I want them to crawl inside my head and see a few events from my perspective. I want them to feel the shock of an unexpected death, know the fear of hiding from a van. At the same time, my work should inspire new thoughts of their own, think about their own experiences and how they can relate and connect to mine. Many sections of Stitches and Rips are intentionally general because, while it was a story of my experiences, I wanted to create the overall understanding that loss is universal. The works should also challenge my readers to think about events that they may not otherwise think about—such as gun violence—and gain a more intimate understanding of them.

Language is the most straightforward form of communication. Writing gives permanence to language. It allows ideas to be analyzed and mulled over. Writing serves as both a practical and artistic form. I use it to communicate to others. I use it to communicate to myself. Often I will just write stream of consciousness and gain insight to myself. Even in more purposeful writing, little nuggets of personal insight bleed through. The metaphor I use at the end of Stitches and Rips is that people are like patches that, through their experiences, become quilts, with various bits and pieces added and taken away. This portfolio gives insight to experiences that make up my quilt.

Midwest

Ours is a landscape of straight lines:
Yellow dash marks on the highway that rarely make curves;
Rows of corn, golden and expansive;
Telephone wires that dip and rise
And do not waver.

Ours is a landscape of repetition:
Identical fields passing in blurs of color through the car window;
White dashed lines across asphalt;
The perseverant prairie grass
That grows in the space
Between coming and going,
As if they had never been interrupted
By such ephemeral structures as highways.

Ours is a landscape of the true Midwest.
It lacks the blatant and reverent awe
Inspired by New England mountains,
Ablaze with autumn crimson,
Or the soft picturesque
Calm of Coastal sea and sand.

But there is something,
Something in our landscape,
In the flatness of it,
In the vastness of the fields,
In the regularity of the corn
And soybean rows,
In the sudden, quiet ferocity
Of the wild grass,
That is striking nonetheless.

The sky unfolds forever,
Miles and miles of it
Soaking into the eyes.
Between the sky and the land
There is space,
Empty and unobscured,
Space that is patient
And expects nothing,
Demands nothing
To fill it.

They are twin oceans,
The sky and the land,
But without the potent power
That lurks within water,
Without the fear
Of a shift in temperament.

Ours is a landscape
That is steadfast,
Of horizontal lines,
And muted greys, greens, and yellows,
Of geometric function
And tiny wildflowers.

And it’s ugly—
Dead and lonely trees
Still reaching their blackened branches upward;  
Forgotten billboards begging “Your Ad Here”;  
Assorted scraps of trash and rubber and metal  
Strewn across the edges of the roads.

It’s beautiful  
In its bigness  
But also in its smallness:  
A tire swing standing out sharp  
Against the soft-palleted trees;  
A lady in a red shirt tending,  
Not a massive commercial field,  
But a little garden plot.

Ours is a landscape that does not boast.  
Like the hands of an old farmer,  
Calloused and dry, tanned and clean,  
It presents itself plainly  
But with a strength  
That is obvious  
From just a handshake.

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Summer Song

Summer sang the praises,  
Sang the sweet hallelujahs  
That lingered in the thick air  
Before dissipating leisurely into the sky.

Asphalt burned rubber soles,  
Turning them soft,  
Wearing them down,  
Until pavement served  
The arches of unfettered feet.

Summer filled noses, throats, and eyes  
With the soldering heat  
Of sweating skin  
Touching sweating skin.

Digging deep into the earth,  
Burrying white bodies breathing,  
Shallow, shallow still.  
Tossing handful, handful  
Of loose dirt,  
Eyes closed,  
Lips stretched tight.
Summer sang at last, at last,
Sang of hearth and warm chairs;
Of hot, searing metal
That left angry, red marks
On lily elbows.

Autumn cried aloud
In new discovered ecstasy
That scented the air like cinnamon
And colored rapidly transforming minds.

Feet planted firmly,
And strings pulled taught;
Structures built topsy-turvy,
Brick by shingle
To keep out the coming chill.

Autumn made too many plans,
Looked too far, too far ahead
To the edge of the horizon
Tinted gold and orange.

Plunging deep into the water
Floating languorously on top,
Happily letting salt
Brim lungs
And spill over.

Autumn cried in joy
Because the world was as beautiful
As the falling leaves.
And the world was a place
Assembled under bed sheets
And fortified by soft breaths.

Winter whispered
The truth,
Bare-boned and stark
That chased unwilling ears.

The trees are bare now.
They are naked, but look!
The trees are unafraid of the cold.
The trees welcome the ice.

Winter gripped the heart,
Cleared the head and the air.
With its bitterness
It seared like poison,
And burned like a cure.

Dropped into the snow
And lost,
Precious trinket.
Searching, hands and knees,
But never to be found
Until the rotations turns
The snow to rivers.

Winter whispered
*Who are you?*
And stared until the
Answer was apparent
And had been all along.
Winter would not withhold the truth.

Spring was silent
But waited its turn to speak.

---

**Marko**

Marko, Marko
I saw you in September last.
Knocked on your front door—
Looking for your brother on behalf of my sister—
Found you instead.

Sixteen, shirtless, barefoot,
Marko,
You grinned at me like an imp,
Eyes glittering black,
Teeth like white piano keys.
Your chest was heavy,
Soaking in sunlight,
Gold dancing upon brown.

Every inch of you was alive,
Every cell jumped and crackled
Alive, alive, alive
But so lazily so.

I spoke to you,
Pleasantries exchanged.
I hadn’t seen you since sophomore year
When you skipped class in gleeful mischief.
Where were you now?
Where were you now?

We spoke in volleying tidbits
Until your brother appeared
Behind you at the door,
And we left you in your bare feet
On the concrete porch.

Marko, tell me:
When you ran through the street,
Through the dark,
Through the echoes of gunshots
Were you scared?

Did your heart know that its final pump was coming?
Did your lungs know their final breath was near?
Or did they cry out in the frenzied hubris
Of the immortal seventeen year old?

You fell.
Three hot bullets sunk into your chest,
Into your strong, wiry boy muscles.
You were still.
The cells that jumped and crackled
Were drowned in red.

When I learned of your death
I could not comprehend it.
All I could imagine was
Your cheeky little grin and
The sun on your chest
Back when your body screamed
Out its vivacity and life.

I knew there had been lights,
Red and blue,
Flashing and flashing
In time to a screaming siren.
Your mother had been there,
And your brother too.
Did they take your hands?
Did they call your name?

And where were you,
Marko?
Hovering, like in the movies,
Outside yourself, watching?
Or were you somewhere beyond?
Or nowhere at all?

You were dead, but in my mind—
And in my dreams—
You were simply hiding,
Behind door frames and under beds,
In rooms where people cried for you.
You flashed a smile at me
And pressed a finger to your lips.
Don’t tell,
Don’t give away this marvelous prank!

I sat very quietly during the funeral.
I was an intruder on this awful grief.
I was not close to you.

Your mother was late.
Funeral flowers had been forgotten
And she went to retrieve them.
She looked bemused,
As if she didn’t know where she was,
Or for what occasion.

Kids who should have been
In malls and at parks
Were here,
In this stuffy, carpet-muffled
Funeral parlor,
Faces masked with tears.

Your grandmother dabbed her eyes.
He looks so good, she said,
So, so good.
In the lobby, an out of place birdcage
Twittered and fluttered with doves.

Your casket was crowded,
But I inched in to see you:
Your body,
In its box,
Your face a waxy brown,
In the camouflage pants
Your brothers insisted suited you
Better than slacks,
Eyes closed,
Not sleeping,
Not
Sleeping.

Your grandmother was wrong.
You didn’t look good.
You looked dead.
I traced your hands with my eyes.
They looked like plastic.

I imagined them alive,
Holding a pencil,
Holding a hand.
I imagined them very small,
Padded with baby fat.
They grew and they touched
And they sweated and now,
Now they were plastic appendages
Resting inside a silk lined box.

It was then that your death
Became real to me.

Marko, you will always be
Seventeen.
The earth makes another rotation
And you are still seventeen,
Stuck, frozen in memory.
I will age, and you will be seventeen.

No matter how much time passes, Marko,
No matter that you were
Shot down,
Plugged up,
Closed up,
Cleaned up,
Laid down,
Buried,
I will still see you as I saw you last:
Sixteen, shirtless and barefoot in the doorway,
Grinning at me like an imp,
Soaking in the September sun.
The boy sat in the shadow of the caped, broad shoulders of the hero. The hero wore red and white and soaked up the fire’s heat, a pipe dangling from his lips, his face lined with stubble. He clenched a mug of musty cider and drank from it occasionally.

“We leave tomorrow,” he rumbled. His limbs might have been built from blocks of stone; his voice was enough to vibrate the inn’s floorboards. “Before dawn.”

“While it is still dark?” asked the white-haired man from his corner. He, too, held a mug, but far smaller than the hero’s. His rat-like face wrinkled with concern. “It may not be wise, sire,” he said. “The Ide Morti preys upon the dark. He is of the Shaed’rith,” he said, rolling the r, “a creature who becomes shadow—a creature who will slay a foe without so much as being seen, if it is still dark.”

“Do not seek to lecture me. I know the Necromancer.”

The old man frowned. “Do you require accompaniment?” He said no more, but the litheness of his movements, the sinewy build of his arms, suggested an archer: an old, old archer. There was no bow in the room. The hero chuckled, square shoulders heaving up and down.

“Do not bother yourself, old mister. You have nothing to fear; the inn is safe.”

“The Ide Morti hunts the lonely.”

“I will not be alone.” The hero finally turned, allowing the light of the fire to spill across the boy’s face. “I have assistance. This boy has followed me from the Blackened Swamps to the Bloodriver to the southern Peaks.” The boy squinted in the fire’s light, and sneezed as the smoke stung his nostrils. The men gathered around the fire all turned to him—there was at least a dozen—and he hunkered down his shoulders, bowing his head.

“Oh?” said the old archer. “And what is your name, lad?”

The boy looked at him. “Jeremy,” he said.

“Jeremy,” repeated the archer. “From where do you hail?”

“Westridge.”

One of the men, who had drooping eyes and a round face, whistled. He was sitting towards the back and had been listening until now. “Do all minstrels travel so far?” he said. “Come, lad, why don’t you sing a song for us? Lighten the mood?”

Jeremy stiffened. “I’m not a minstrel!” he said.

The hero chuckled.

“Not a minstrel?” said the archer, stroking his stump of a beard. “A warrior, then? A spellweaver’s apprentice?” He smiled. “A Bowman?”

The hero stirred. “He seeks to learn my trade.”

Laughter went up around the inn.

“Do not mock him,” said the hero. “His feelings are tender, but his persistence is rugged.”

The droopy-eyed man lowered his head and said in a hushed voice, “Must be quite rugged indeed, to have managed to enter the following of a warrior like that.” Surrounding men snickered. The hero didn’t hear.

“We leave tomorrow,” he repeated, shifting on his stool, which creaked beneath him. A chain vest covered his stonewall chest, and a massive longsword leaned against the wall next to him.

The archer leaned back; it looked like he was reclining on air. “Dangerous,” he said. “May I have your manor once you’re gone?”

A shocked silence fell. The fireplace crackled. The archer let a slow smile overtake his face.
“What,” he said, “you hadn’t heard?”

The men leaned forward.

“The Ide Morti,” said the archer, “cannot be killed without the death of its killer.”

“Do not lecture me!” roared the hero, the force of his voice sapping heat from the air and pushing back the stools—and their occupants—in a shockwave out from him. The fire flapped, dying out, but the archer mumbled beneath his breath, beckoned with a finger, and it came to life again.

“Knightsbreath,” he said, raising an eyebrow. “Impressive, but it’ll not save you from the fate of the Ide Morti.”

“What’s this talk of death?” cried one of the men. “Tell us more!”

The hero growled and rose, his stool clattering to the floor. “Boy,” he said. “We’re leaving.”

But Jeremy’s eyes were wide, fixated upon the archer. He glanced at the hero. The hero sighed. He bent over, righted the stool, and sat down again, glaring into the flames.

“The Ide Morti,” said the archer. “The Necromancer.” His voice dropped low, drawing suspense from the air, drawing power from the fire.

The hero huffed. “Bardsbreath,” he grumbled to himself, but nobody heard.

“He is not called such without reason,” continued the archer. “Aye, the Necromancer gives life to those undeserving of it. But—as every spellweaver learns—there is always a cost.”

He lifted his head.

“He must steal life from the living to give to the dead.”

“Impossible!” said the droopy-eyed man.

“Incredible!”

“He spreads lies!”

“Such a thing is unheard of!”

“The Ide Morti himself,” said the archer—he did not raise his voice, but the others quieted instantly—“is unheard of. It wields darkness as a sword. It wears shadow as a cape. And it saps the life out of all things that live to fuel itself and its minions.”

The hero stomped his foot. The inn shuddered. “That is why it must be destroyed.”

“And that is why you must be destroyed as well.” The archer twisted a beard hair around his finger. “Long ranged bows or spells will not work on the Ide Morti; one must kill it from up close. But should you be lucky enough to land such a blow, the contact will allow it to steal the life from you to feed. It can only suckle on things it touches. And the only way to kill it is to touch it.” He looked at the hero. “My poor friend,” he said. “You will take your own life in the instant that you banish it.”

Now Jeremy rose when the hero did. The hero did not look at the archer. “It is a decision I made years ago.” He glanced at Jeremy. “Come, boy,” he said. “We’ll need rest for tomorrow.”

But the archer’s eyes had misted over, and he did not even notice the hero leave. He nodded quietly to himself. “So it is,” he said. “So it is.”

Jeremy hid in a small cave of rock overlooking the field. Fingers of dawn had yet to stroke the sky, but the birds sang of morning, and the stars were dimming. He crept out to the edge of the cave. The hero was down below, armored in white, his sword slung over his back. The horse was picketed somewhere behind him.

“Monster!” roared the hero. “Show yourself!”

A ripple spread out in the tall grasses around him.

“Monster!”

“Monster!”

“Show yourself!”
A screech, an explosion, went out around him. Jeremy ducked back into the cave and emerged a moment later. It was the same Knightsbreath he’d used in the inn, but amplified by a thousand; the fields were utterly flattened. Where there had once been trees was now only dirt. The hero grunted, loud enough for Jeremy to hear. Light peeked out over a distant mountain, but not enough to illuminate the field. Jeremy glanced at it, and then quickly turned his gaze to the hero. He put a hand to his mouth, eyes wide.

There was no warning. An aura of blackness, of pressurized air, crackled into existence. The hero’s longsword flew into his hands. Something like a raven speared through the air, fast as black lightning, and then materialized on the ground: a hooded thing. It melted into shadow and disappeared. Jeremy shuddered and then glanced again at the still-dark horizon.

White and black flashed from the flattened land. The hero disengaged, sword giving off a faint glow, scanning his surroundings. A funnel into nothingness opened up right where he was; he saw it and cursed. Jeremy gasped. The hero spun around, looking for a target, then looked down at his chest and saw . . . nothing. He stumbled backwards. A nameless shriek went up around him; Jeremy covered his ears. The hero fell to a knee. His limbs sagged where before they had held up his sword, his shield, his armor easily. Now they were weakening with every moment, his energy leaking into that blurry whirlpool. It started to suck in his arm, and the hero roared, jerking it back. The shadows deepened around him. A scythe appeared out of the air, whistling towards his neck.

“Monster!” bellowed the hero. Knightsbreath exploded out of him in every direction. The scythe flicked backwards, tongue-like; a wall of blackness rose in its place, shielding the invisible Necromancer. As Jeremy watched, the green of the field’s grass shriveled to a brown, and then crumpled into ash. He leaned out precariously over the cave’s edge, watching. “Master!” he shouted, but his voice was lost in the Knightsbreath.

Things rose from the field all around the hero. A prairie dog. A rabbit. A pile of bones that must have been from a dozen different dead things. The ground boiled, spitting up fossils; bones clacked as they rearranged themselves into things they had once been, hundreds, or thousands, or millions of years before: werecats, hagwomen, small serpents, a four-armed giant. The hero rose to his feet, sword glowing white, igniting in flames. Jeremy sucked in breath. The hero slashed the air and a line of fire extended from his sword, whipping through a dozen half-formed skeletons and exploding where it touched the earth. Flesh coated the skeletons that remained: wrinkled, leathery flesh for some, supple fur or iron-hard scales for others. The Necromancer was nowhere to be seen, but the dead things now alive charged at the hero. He spun around, sword extended, drawing a circle of fire around him. Wherever the Necromancer was, it could not have been there; it would have retreated where there was darkness.

The hero scanned his surroundings. Most of the undead had been destroyed, but a handful of hagwomen scuttled towards him, moving on six insect-like feet. One of them shrieked and cast a powder at him. Another hurled a globbering concoction at his feet, where it sprayed upwards, melting his armor where it touched. He scrambled backwards and eliminated them with an amplified stab. The ground shook behind him and he turned; the four-armed giant leapt at him. He hadn’t time for the sword. He went down on a knee and slammed both fists into the giant’s belly, teeth clenched. He roared and threw the giant upwards, then whipped the longsword after it. There was an explosion, like firecrackers, in the sky. Jeremy cracked a smile and began laughing, but quieted, scanning for the Necromancer.

It appeared, finally, once the hero rose to his feet, swinging his sword from side to side. A web of darkness fell atop him, ensnaring. The hero swore. It was not a physical web, but his movements slowed when he touched the darkness, as if he was moving through water. He tried to back out but only ran into more. Shadows flickered around him. He followed them wildly, scanning the ground, the air, the sky.
A funnel opened up at his neck. He tried to thrash but achieved nothing. Loose chains on his armor rusted in an instant, crumbled to dust, and were sucked into that hole of nothing. His sword arm was moving too slowly to do any damage, and even the flames coating his blade were being sucked away. He gasped, his breath hoarse. Jeremy covered his eyes. He uncovered them a moment later. A ring of light appeared around the mountains, growing brighter with every moment. He looked quickly to the hero.

The hero, too, glanced towards the mountains, but furtively, trying to hide it. He grimaced, moving slowly out from the black shadows, eyes visibly dimming as that whirlpool in the air fed on him. He made it to the ring of the black web. One step, another step. Jeremy whipped his gaze from the mountains to the hero and back again. Another step. He was at the ring.

The scythe appeared again, seeking his blood.

Jeremy cried out. The hero saw it, but did not flinch. It came whistling at him, targeting a chink in his armor. His foot made it out of the slowness and ground into earth, trying to drag the rest of him out. He made a feeble movement to block the scythe, but too slow. It sunk into his chest.

He pulled himself out from the ensnarement. He stumbled across the field, scythe sticking out of him, falling to his knees.

He grabbed the shaft of the scythe.

Jeremy's eyes widened. The sun crested the mountain, bathing the valley in daylight, burning away the shadows. As soon as it fell over the hero the Necromancer materialized, unable to maintain invisibility, its skeletal hand gripping the scythe that dug into the hero's flesh.

Jeremy fell backwards with a sigh. He was trembling. "Master," he whispered. But then he swallowed and looked away. From his vantage he could see the distant woods, and the glistening river, and the horizon that ended in pink far away. He turned his gaze back to the hero, a bead of water falling from him and splattering across dry rock.

The hero pulled the scythe into him further, drawing with it the Necromancer. The metal head poked out of his back, dripping wickedly with poison. He hissed, his eyes bloodshot and open with rage, but still he pulled, faster and faster, until the Necromancer was right before him. He grabbed the thing, muscles bulging, tackled it to the ground.

"Monster," he said. A final Knightsbreath gathered in the space of his throat. Blood glistened all around him. "Monster!"

The field exploded.

Jeremy threw up his hands in protection and scrambled back into the cave as chunks of debris flew at him.

The hero watched as his voice tore the Necromancer into chunks, chunks that bled shadow. The funnel appeared desperately, but the hero's eyes were closing. The scythe's poison did its work with ruthless efficiency. The Necromancer screeched, the Knightsbreath roared, and then there was silence.

Jeremy slid down the rock and picked his way across the rubble. Bones and skulls gaped up at him from the loose soil. All around the earth was bare, empty, and flat. He walked with his head bowed.

The hero's body was still intact, but everything around him was destroyed. Pieces of the Necromancer—shreds of steaming black cloak, glinting shards of the scythe, strange puddles of shadow—lay strewn about him. His sword was next to him, back to its ordinary state, and his armor was somehow intact; Knightsbreath did not harm its own user. Jeremy pushed back the hero's visor and inspected the face. He rose after a moment, his lips tightened, his hair stirring in an unfelt breeze. He went over to the sword, tried to pick it up, grunting, and then dropped it again. It gave a dull clatter against the dirt. Sunlight gleamed off the steel. He knelt down beside a patch of Necromancer cloak, reached out to touch it—and then drew back his hand. He glanced again at the hero, his lips no longer tight, but his eyes crinkled with weariness. He sighed. The hero's armor, his longsword, winked at
Jeremy, and he hesitated. Then he went over and kicked dirt over it, covering half of it. Again, he paused. He reached out a hand again and grasped the handle, swallowing, eyes shining, and for a moment he moved to uncover it, but one more glance at the dead hero’s visor and he let go. He covered the rest of the sword and the armor, and then stood.

Unspeaking, he made his way out of the once-battlefield, at first stepping cautiously over pieces of blackness and then trudging across empty rock towards the distant line of trees. He would go to the river. He headed in that direction right now. He would go to the river, and then cross it, and then move on to the mountains, and he would not stop—not for snow, nor rain, nor darkness; he would go on and on and on, to where the sun rose out of the earth.

But now he stepped over a shattered set of bones. Behind him, the hero’s armor and sword lay buried to be forgotten. He did not look back. He planted a boot into the dirt, leaving a solid footprint, picked the foot up, set it down again: a heavy sound. The dirt melted into grass. He stepped from wasteland into forest. A branch cracked beneath his boot.

Jeremy kept walking.
Infinite

When you write, don’t think of the paper. Don’t think of the ink. Imagine chiseling your words into a great stone. Imagine knitting every letter into the fabric of the world. Imagine every nook and cranny of the galaxy—from twinkling stars to distant quasars—all obeying what you’ve made. It’s all an illusion of course; what you create is but a meaningless collection of atoms in a massive and uncaring universe. But it’s a nice illusion.

But don’t think of that. Breath in—hopes, dreams, life itself. Breath out—doubts, pressures, everything... you are almost ready. Your words are going to be known forever. They will be sung to the heavens from the greatest stage. A multitude of mothers will softly read them to their children as quiet sleep encompasses their small bodies. Your words will be as a rite of passage, each new generation taking solace from what you have put down, etched into the collective consciousness of humanity. But of course your piece will be forgotten—will be relegated to the twilight of dusty drawers and empty libraries. Eventually, you too will forget your own child. But today is not that day.

Keep breathing. Keep treading water.
Put your pen to paper...
...and become infinite.

Ozymandias

Let it be known that today was when man captured light—bound it together on nothing but soft whispers and gentle cushioning.
Slowing it, freezing it, isolating it within the bitter vacuum of absolute zero until,
at last,
it bonded.

Let it be known that today was when man knew the stars,
and the stars knew man.
We knew their names and counted them upon a multitude of fingers.
But there is always another hiding—always another celestial white whale to hunt.

Let it be known that today was when man stepped through the looking glass onto—and into—the rough sands of distant worlds.
In distant hopes of going there—forever—
Martian redemption, for we sinners of the earth.

Let it be known that today, Man has become god.
Prometheus has snuck us fire;
now we
mustn’t
get
burned.

The Cemetery

The weather is waiting weather.
Nature, resigned
to the
inevitability
of
Winter.
But lingering some slight semblance of Summer warmth.
It is waiting weather.
I see the tombstones.
Some, the new, the lucky,
Are intact.
Without the muck and grime of age
You see the grim message they convey.
Most, however,
Are lost.
Broken, filthy beyond mortal recognition, or having the Letters worn off with time.
That is the true fate.
Not death.
Being forgotten.
The names.
So many names.
Some have flowers on them.
You know someone cares for these.
The family man marine lost in action.
The elderly grandfather who recently passed.
The six-year old.
That is but a fraction of a fraction
To the forgotten names.
The ones without flowers.
The dead ones.
They built this town.
Now we build it around them.
I shiver.
Cruel wind cuts through my thin garments.
Winter is Coming.
I leave the cemetery.
It has been nine years since I last saw Simon. I was a bold, rash innocent that never, even in a nightmare, would have imagined that she would lose her brother. He would have been twenty today.

“Mother!” I shrieked, my voice crackling with fury and desperation. “He is but a babe! A mere boy! You cannot expect him to go to war against men thrice his size! He should surely die in such an event!”

My mother glared at me, as the wives of powerful men often do. We had had this argument many times in the past days, neither of us willing to back down, for there was something dear to each of us at stake. For my mother, it was her pride and the house’s honor; for myself, it was the fate of my young brother, Simon.

“SaphiraEkinraYontosh! You shall have no word in the matter, and you most certainly shall not use that sort of language with your mother, or anyone else of high importance! As for Simon, your brother is going to become a foot soldier for Lord Belwicket’s military. That is my final word!”

Surging with rage, I whirled around, ready to make my, hopefully striking, exit. All of my bitterness swiftly melted, however, as I caught glimpse of poor Simon, standing in the doorway of Mother’s chambers, tears cascading down his cheeks like beads of heartbreak. Instinctively, I rushed to him, scooping up his small, shuddering, seven-year old form.

When we reached my chambers, I sat and rocked him, soothing him until his sobs faded to whimpers and his tremors to shivers.

“I don’t want to fight anyone,” Simon sniffled in his timid way. “I want to stay here and draw everyone in the whole castle. Then I’ll never have to fight anyone. Right, ‘Phira?”

He pulled back, searching my pale face with his curious, now pleading, grey-blue eyes, so full of wonder and innocence. Seven years, I had been his protector, his safety. In that moment, I knew that I would not hesitate to do so for seven more, if it kept him out of harm’s way.

“Of, course you won’t. I promise.”

So it was that I fought a fortnight longer with my mother and father, imploring, threatening, and bargaining, but to no avail. After three weeks preparation, my brother, who would not have harmed an ugly, runted piglet, was sent off to Lord Belwicket’s castle to become a soldier.

After a month of fret and sobs, of unheard wishes and nightmares that persisted mercilessly, I received a letter from Simon. All was well as could be expected in such a place for such a boy; he had not been forced to harm anyone and, more importantly, had not yet been harmed. After this first news, he sent another letter every month, for the next four years. I swiftly grew to both look forward to and dread these small glimpses of the life my young brother was now living.

Three days before my eighteenth birthday, my brother’s latest letter arrived. Rendered worriless by the constant joy and celebration around me, I was utterly aghast when he wrote of an upcoming battle. Though the prospect of such a garish event would have thrilled most boys of his age, Simon was unnerved by it. He was not alone in his horror; I began to pace constantly, refusing to eat to the point that I fell ill.

Due to my illness, I was not able to respond to Simon’s letter, and it was not until I had recovered from my physical ailments did my mother tell me the soul-wrenching truth about the outcome of the battle that had worried me so.
There was a general service held for Simon—along with every other fallen soldier from the dire crusade—at Lord Belwicket’s castle. I was surrounded by weeping mothers, tight-lipped fathers, and keening children, yet not a single, solitary tear fell from me, for every drop of emotion I had was lost to the bitter nights of desperate cries and nightmarish dreams. The only thought that passed through my all but numb mind was that the ogrish men that had destroyed the glowing light of Simon’s soul would regret that day with every breath they drew and every drop of their blood that fell from my blade.

~*~

If anyone had been watching the stables at the Featherbed Inn that night, they would have seen a young woman, dressed as a man, her father’s sword and horse by her side, her flowing hair cut to an unrecognizable hash, and a bundle of letters clasped firmly to her chest.

After three days of treacherous paths, rushed shelters, and blundering attempts at hunting, I arrived at Lord Belwicket’s castle once more. This was my brother’s training place, just as it would soon be mine.

“What’s your name, young lad?” asked the initiator.
I knew what I said would affect my entire future. After hesitating a moment, I claimed a name.
"I am Simon Bellator."
Simon's Soldier.
Poetic Justice
Derek Hamilton
Platte City Middle School
Short Story
Kelly Miller

The school day drags on and on
The same melancholy classroom
Over and over again
Like a broken record repeating
The same chords over and over again
I beg to move to a school
Where you aren’t judged on your athletic abilities
I beg to get out of this broken home
Where only sad haunting memories circle in my mind
Over and over again I ask the bullies for mercy
No more punches no more words that sting like
BB pellets breaking skin and cutting deep
Into my innocent flesh
Over and over again I fill my lungs
With nicotine and smoke
Marlboro Southern Cuts being my only friend
Over and over again
I don’t fit in

I look at the poem one last time, tears threatening to sting my eyes and crumple my piece of crap “poem” up into a ball. I shake off the emotion that had swarmed around me like gnats around a porch light on hot August nights. I dread this place. I mean, I truly hate this place. Sometimes I think I wasn’t made for this world.

In my English class, when my teacher began our poetry unit, I came alive. I felt as though I had actually come home. Writing poetry seemed foreign to me at first, but when I began to put my pencil to paper, the words flowed like wind through the branches of trees. They came out of nowhere. I couldn’t stop writing. I became addicted to moving words around a page to form the incomplete sentences of stanzas. I felt as though the stanzas were as incomplete as my life, fragments of a whole piece waiting to get put together. Like a puzzle. That’s it, a puzzle. My life is like a puzzle.

What is going on with me? I am not a writer. I am not an athlete. Sure I went out for wrestling at my high school. It is expected. I am a guy. It is what guys do. You either play basketball or wrestle. Anyone who didn’t suffered through the name-calling and slurs that, in the olden days, meant “happy.” You know what I’m talking about. You brush it all off, but it still stings. A cut without a Band-Aid to heal the pain. It stings enough that you join the wrestling team even if you don’t want to.

It’s getting late. But I’ve got miles to go before I sleep. Another absence in school wouldn’t matter. My 83% attendance could never be brought back up so why try? My thoughts in my head spin around and around. I reach into the pocket of my jacket and pull out my pack of cigarettes. I put a one between my lips and light it. The flame, a metaphor of destruction and disaster for everything that stood in its wrath of inferno. I inhale with my cheeks and take a big breath, shoving the toxins and smoke into my lungs. I flick the ashes into a small Mountain Dew. Oh how my mom would kill me if she caught me smoking in my room. It doesn’t matter. Everyone is asleep, and I might as well be dead for all they know or care.
I put out the cigarette, lay down on my bed and pull the comforter over my head. I flick off the lamp. Almost immediately, sleep threatens to pull me into her dark embrace. Slowly but surely, I am lulled into that place of escape. I see only darkness. It envelopes me as I drift into its welcome release. I don’t dream, and all I see is darkness. For now.

My alarm sounds at 6:00, jolting me from my sleep. I feel around, eyes still closed, to hit the snooze button. *Turn this damn thing off!* I hit the snooze button and turn on my lamp in one swift motion. I jump out of my bed quite literally and go to the bathroom. There are no sounds around the house, and the sound of my own footsteps echo throughout the cavernous house.

I take a quick shower and get dressed, exiting my room after grabbing my keys. The smell of hot coffee assaults my senses. I run downstairs, pour out a cup of coffee, splash in a little mocha creamer and out the door I go to another amazing day in paradise otherwise known as Maple Woods High or as we affectionately call it, Maple Weeds High, home of the tokers, the smokers, and the jokers. At this point in my life, I’m not sure what category I fit in.

Looking at my phone, I see that I have four minutes to get to school before the tardy bell rings. I hop into the “Matador,” start her up and rev up the V-8 supercharged beauty of an engine. Before I put the car in drive, I look up at a bedroom window. There she is, waving, with a world-weary look on her face. She should; I put her through hell every day. I smile and blow her a kiss and press the accelerator.

I pull into the school parking lot thinking that I will just zoom to the front. Reality hits. Of course I’m late again, so I’m forced to pull the car around to the freshman lot where the Taurus and the station wagons reign supreme. After all, if freshmen can drive, they’ve been held back a few years and are probably still driving mom and dad’s wheels. The Matador comes to a screeching halt in a less than desirable space. I pull into my reserved parking spot forcing the Matador to a tire-screeching halt. I grab my bags and break into a sprint towards Maple Weeds High’s front doors. I trip over my untied shoelace and face plant on the concrete. I can already hear the devious laughter of the students spectators. I can feel the stares I’m getting, like a lion stares at a gazelle when his stomach is growling and he’s ready to eat. I get up, my face red as hell from the embarrassment. I wipe the moisture that is starting to pour out of my eyes. Tying my shoe I see the counselor, Mrs. Peeler, escape from the school’s doors.

“Late again, Mr. Anderson?” scolds Mrs. Peeler.
I stare at the ground, my face still stinging as I reply in a quiet, short reply “Mhhhm.” An awkward silence fills the space between us.

“My office. Now!” I could hear the forced ferociousness in her voice. She is usually a sweet lady, but occasionally she has to bring out her “big girl” voice and it is pretty scratchy from not using it consistently. Keeping my head down at the floor, I reluctantly walk into the school and into Mrs. Peeler’s office where it smells of perfume and has a crap ton of bright pink furniture. I sit down on a magenta chair. The room looks like a Hello Kitty interrogation room, which is pretty much exactly what it is. She sits down in her nice official office chair with a big *plop!* She gives me, what the whole student body calls, the Look of Demise.

“So Devin. You know that your attendance is at an 83% correct?” I just stare out of the window behind her and watch as the American flag wavers in the school’s parking lot, again creating a very awkward silence between the two of us. In my peripherals I can see her dark brown eyes staring into my soul, awaiting a response. The bell rings, piercing my eardrums and breaking the silence that filled her office.

“Well Devin, I mustn’t let you miss second hour.”

And then slightly under her breath, “Lord knows, you’ve missed enough school as it is.” “Here’s a pass. Mrs. Loydston’s room, correct?” she says brightly, apparently recovering from her snarky phase.

“Yes Ma’am.” I respond. She scribbles some illegible cursive onto a hot pink Post-it note and hands it to me.

“Just get to school on time in the future, Mr. Anderson.”
“Okay.” I bluntly respond. I bound out of Hello Kitty and into the dregs of high school society. I walk into the senior pod and head to my locker. 15-26-55. I open up my locker and out falls a piece of lined notebook paper, folded into a little square. I open it up and read it.

Dear Doofus,

No one likes you. You’re not cool, and you don’t belong here. You can’t even get a girl.
Screw Off,
Roger

My heart thumps in my chest. I slam my head into the dead cold locker next to mine trying to force the lump in my throat to go away so I don’t cry. I turn around to go back to class when a boulder-like fist drives into my stomach forcing all of the oxygen out of my lungs, making me heave and huff just to catch a breath. Through blurred eyes, I can just make out the face of Satan himself, otherwise known as Roger. This guy had it out for me from the first day I entered this school. I wasn’t on his radar until he caught his girlfriend, Rachel, saying hi to me in the hall one day. He never misses a chance to remind me that he’s her one and only.

“What the hell, man?”

He opens his mouth to respond, but no words came out. I catch a momentary glimpse of guilt in his eyes but then that is veiled by hatred. I look down at the marble tile ready to get hit with another heavy blow. Nothing. I lift my head. No one is there. Finally able to catch my breath, I wipe the tears from my eyes and head back to class. The rest of the day I keep my mouth shut and my head down low.

The final bell of the day rings. It’s one less day I have to spend in this building of torture. A herd of kids stampede out of the school’s doors. As I pass through the Junior hall on my way out to the parking lot, a hand reaches out from a classroom door, grabs my shirt, and jerks me in. Damn. Two meetings with Roger in one day. I prepare my abs for a quick sucker punch. Instead, two hands land on either side of my face and before I know it, lips are on mine. I pull back quickly. It’s Rachel. I look around. This has to be a set up and Roger’s behind it. I push her away and stare at her for a moment.

“I—I’m sorry. That was wrong,” Rachel says softly. I think she actually means it.

“Damn straight. Your boyfriend is looking for trouble with me, and that little act would get me a free ride to the ER. Are you crazy?”

“Look, I broke it off with him weeks ago. He’s a jerk, and I think he always has been. I’ve liked you for a while now, ever since you read your poems in English class.”

“You actually stayed awake to listen to those?” I laugh. I notice her nice hair, and her eyes have a little sparkle—poetry material.

“Well, maybe someday we could go to Starbucks and you could read a few more to me. I know this is forward, but here’s my number if you want to hang out sometime.” I take her number and shove it into my pocket. Yeah, it is a little forward, but I like her. Roger is going to put my butt in a sling for sure.

“Yeah, maybe. Gotta go.”

I’m still thinking about her as I make my way to the freshman lot to retrieve the Matador. Opening the candy red doors and slipping into the leather interior, I light a cigarette before slamming my gearshift into drive and racing out of the parking lot.

When I arrive at home, I notice that all the lights are out. Pretty typical. When I’m at school my mom usually naps during the day. I figure it’s depression, and I’m pretty much the cause of it all.

I open the front door and immediately go to the kitchen to grab lunch. I don’t eat from 7:20 to 3:15 during the school day. Any food cooked at school cafeteria is distrusted by most of the students and definitely by the faculty. Once a freshman found a varmint tail in the salad, and that’s been pretty
much the death of the cafeteria. The news traveled all over the school, and by the time it hit the senior pod, it had turned into a full blown story about vermin residing under the metal food bins and warming themselves under the infrared lights. That was enough to close down the Mexican Fiesta section for most of the year. Delicioso.

After wolfing down a PB&J, I hear mom rattling around upstairs. “Devin, is that you?” she calls.
“Yeah, it’s me ma, what’s up?” I answer.
“I have to talk to you about something important.”
“Come on down and quit yelling.”
I can hear her coming down the steps and brace myself for what she might want to tell me. You just never know with her. New boyfriend. Lost job. Missing money in the bank account.
“I think I have some good news,” she says when she arrives in the kitchen.
“Yeah? What’s that?”
“Well, we’re moving.”
It takes a while to sink in. “What?”
“Chris wants us to move in with him.”
“Who’s that?”
“Devin, I’ve been seeing him for a while now.”
“Oh, sorry, didn’t know that.” Or actually, didn’t want to know that. I like to keep my nose out of my mom’s affairs. Believe me, it’s better that I don’t know what’s actually going on.
“We’re moving out in a few days.”
It finally starts to hit me. A few days? Moving out? I smile. “Are we moving out of this district?”
“Yes, I know you’re not going to be happy about going to a new hi—“ Mom stops talking when I run to her and give her a big bear hug and spin her around. “Devin! I thought you liked this school.”
I don’t answer her. I just put her down and run upstairs to start getting my things into boxes.

I dump my cigarettes in the trash, pull out my thick journal of poetry, and sit down on my bed. I thumb through a few pages and lean back on the bed thinking about nothing...and everything. Words swirl in my head, stanzas begging to be written, line after beautiful line coming together, making all the pieces fit.

After a few minutes, I reach into my pocket and pull out a small piece of white paper. I punch in the number before I lose my nerve and wait for a few rings.
“Hello?”
“Hey, about that offer to meet at Starbucks...”
A Little Dead Squirrel
Hanna Kime
Humor
John Burroughs School
Jill Donovan

Four days ago, I was taking my dog for a walk around the neighborhood. Strollin’ through the trees, you know. Smellin’ the grass. No one else was outside. Probably cuz it smelled weird out, kinda coppery. And like, I didn’t mind, but then, we turned the corner, just for a second, and it started smelling worse. Like, I don’t know. The smell of mold. Like a three-week-old cup of coffee kinda blended with fish. Cappicuna, or cappicin-tuna. Latte-una. Latuna. I don’t know. And Oscar stopped walking, and I tried to pull him away but he wasn’t buyin’ it. So I went back and grabbed his collar, to, you know, drag him forward, when I saw it.

A squished up little squirrel, bleedin’ out his last few minutes on this earth.

And I don’t know; in that second I started thinking. And I kept thinking after we walked home. And like, I just haven’t stopped. I got onto this like, spiritual pathway, about why we exist, and what our purpose is, real deep stuff. Like, what am I doing with my life, if shit like this can just happen? If squirrels can just die out of nowhere?

And like, I think that little dead dude was trying to tell me something. Because animals know. You know? They know us. I think they know us more than we know us. Or, I hope so. That’d be awesome. I mean, who knows what they’re up to. Who knows what we’re up to? Those were the kind of questions I was asking. The questions I am asking. Because if I don’t ask them who will, you know?

And then I started thinking like, poverty, you know man? How does society let that happen? And we’re all happy, you know, driving our cars and shoppin’ at our Walgreens... Walgreenes... Walgreens. But we don’t think about the little guy. Or, the little squirrel. Did he pray to his little squirrel god? Or was he like, a New Age Secular kind of squirrel, the kind that’d pray to a little squirrel Bob Marley, with a little squirrel Rasta cap and like, a life affirming series of Reggae squirrel EPs? I mean, to each his own. Bet he had some little squirrel family to go home to. With a squirrel wife, munchin’ on their acorns and like, foraging for food and shit. Squirrel stuff. Bet they had a little squirrel cave, off in some tree, where they cuddled up for the winter, all squirrelly and warm, their tails tangling up together. Maybe thinkin’ about setting up a nest of little squirrel babies. Building their squirrel 401K’s. Who knows.

It’s sad, man.

And like, why did it have to be like, some little dead dude sending me off on this philosophical journey? Like, do we only change because of dead things? Dead squirrels. And he was disgusting, I mean, his little squirrel bones sticking out all over. Poking through his weak little squirrel skin. Blood and guts just everywhere. Squirrel soup. The kind of food those starving kids in Honduras dream about. And we just walk on by, grossed out for like a second before stuffing our faces with Chipotle.

But that’s life, I guess. You know, eat a burrito. Eat a Twinkie. Eat a mashed potato, no one cares anymore. All we care about is Kim Kardashian and the new iPad. And like, I still don’t understand the point of iPads, I mean like, just tape four phones together, it’s the same thing. Like, that’s just science, you know? But we’re all like, no time for food or like, kids and family. Just gonna keep driving. Smashing squirrels. Don’t look Jimmy, Dad’s just killing another little critter’s dreams. Another innocent little dude scurryin’ home from a hard day’s work. It hurts.

But anyway, that little dead squirrel got me thinking. And like, once I start thinking I just can’t stop. Cause like, I’m like, all psychological, you know? And that image just burned itself into my brain. And for four days my mind just wasn’t working. Because how can you work when, like, our lives might have no meaning? Like, I’m just finding out that my whole life has been a lie, and you expect me
to get up at eleven in the morning to tell some dude and his wife about today’s soup specials? I just can’t man. And I couldn’t cook or walk or anything, so for that whole time I just, like, sat at my sofa eating Dominos. Thinking.

But then, my boss called me, all angry’n shit. And like, I tried to explain that like, he was shakin’ up my metaphysical zen, but he wouldn’t listen. And I need my job, so I got up. Put on the little waiter uniform, back to supporting the system. And I was in my car, just driving along. And suddenly, out of nowhere, some dumb little squirrel just comes running at me. I swear it was like the little shit was on a suicide mission. I slam on my breaks, tires start screechin’, but, like, I don’t know if it’s gonna be fast enough. So I press ‘em harder, but the little dude keeps running at me, and I don’t know what to do, so I just keep pushing down. And I rolled to a stop, closin’ my eyes, prayin’ for the little shit’s life.

But I didn’t hit him.

And I swear, that little dude stared me down, right in the eyes. And I think he knew, about all the thinking I’d been doing, and I think I saw him kind of nod, like, hey you tall-ass pink dude in your big-ass metal box, I get it. And after, I don’t know, ten seconds of eye contact, he just walks away.

So I sat there, alone in my car, thinking. And after a few minutes a guy pulled up behind me, and honked. But I knew. I knew what it all meant, what my whole life must’ve been leading up to. Like everything kinda just shifted right into place. This is gonna sound stupid, but I don’t know. It felt like I’d make some sort of choice, set a new path. And he kept honking, but I didn’t move. Cause I’d just started to realize, right in that second, that, like, I can change the world. And I thought about the little dead dude from four days earlier, and the other little dude from just seconds earlier, and man, I just smiled.
To Steal A Scarf
Hanna Kime
Short Story
John Burroughs School
Jill Donovan

The store once called their skinny jeans “Jennifer Slims.” For two and a half years the Jennifers lived in three moderately sized stacks nestled between the Bonnie Bootlegs and the Felicity Flares. After some months the Felicities died. Then the Bonnies died faster, and in a not-so-short time the Jennifers had monopolized the teen-jean marketplace.

The night prior, Tina Nightingale’s mother had given her two hundred dollars and the command to “not waste it on another goddamn sweatshirt.” As she stood alone, staring at the wall of different colored, different patterned denims, clutching the wad of cash in her pocket, she sighed.

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On a murky summer morning, crouched behind a rotting playhouse, five-year-old Tina Nightingale stared at a dandelion until she stopped thinking. Within the span of twenty seconds the universe subverted itself, and Tina lost track of her own existence.

Within three years’ time she’d forget that cold, empty feeling that passed through her chest. Eight year olds don’t need to think about their place in the world. No, she would rather think about her parents, sitting in the third row and smiling in a way she’d never seen before. For unlike every other seven-to-eight year old child enrolled at Oak Brook Elementary School, she could spell the word, “annihilate.”

She gazed at her peers, scattered throughout the crowd, their faces obscured by way of mediocrity. Every flicker of brightness bounced around the auditorium, back and forth and back and forth, until it found its way to her face. She stood illuminated, the singular hope amongst a sea of unexceptional. In that moment she mattered.

Until her first day of sophomore year, as she sat alone at the desk four rows back and furthest left, that memory lingered. The room fit twenty desks, staggered, in rows of five. The remaining seventeen students trickled in, congregating around those they cared about. By the time class started, the two seats next to Tina remained unoccupied. The teacher glanced at Tina, and for a just a few seconds assumed a slight set of dimples and watering eyes that vanished just as Tina made eye contact. Tina looked at the seats next to her, then back at the teacher, who was chattering about polynomials with a grand toothy grin. Tina blinked twice, frowned, and looked back to her notes.

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She abandoned the Jennifers and moved on to a store one might describe as “corporately earthy.” Each jacket, skirt, and glorified poncho was shaped and colored just oddly enough to make any middle class suburban white kid feel edgy. In turn every piece of fabric sported symbols and sayings from such an eclectic selection of religions and ethnicities that any significance the icons might have once held had been stripped away for the sake of sales, sales tax, and inflated young egos.

Two weeks after the trip to the mall, Tina filled her backpack with rope, duct tape, and two new cans of black spray paint. That night, just after her parents had fallen asleep, she climbed out her bedroom window and scaled down the branches of the dogwood tree, each step unleashing a downpour of dead and dying petals. She biked through her neighborhood and past her school, to the land of the big houses and the cleaning ladies and the family trips to Beijing that more than half of her peers took for granted. She stopped at a pedestrian crosswalk. And after some jumping and clutching and fiddling with the rope, she managed to spray black the thumb, index, ring and pinkie fingers of the flashing
orange palm. She hopped down, admired her work, and crossed to the opposite side of the intersection.

It grew into her weekend tradition. Every Friday and Saturday night she ventured deep into the homeland of those she most hated to mark their every sidewalk with a big, blinking orange “Fuck You.”

One night, just a week after her seventeenth birthday, Tina rolled over a nail on her ride home. With her bike rendered inoperable, she trekked to the nearest subway station. A small one line track that no one ever spent too much time on. They never had security, so she never bought tickets. She sat on the blue, metal bench, with no company outside the flickering fluorescent overhead and a vending machine that buzzed and cracked without provocation. She glanced at the schedule mounted just above the tunnel’s mouth. The next train would arrive in three minutes, though it was headed in the opposite direction. With a soft laugh she stood up, walked to the ledge and jumped onto the tracks. She stepped forward, stopping a few feet into the tunnel, and stared down the long, empty cavern illuminated by one lonely orange bulb. The sign flashed “two minutes.” She walked back to the stop, one foot in front of the other along the track, arms outstretched to balance. One minute. A chuckle, she skipped over the wires and tracks to the opposite side, in the path of the oncoming train. Thirty seconds. An announcement blasted over the speakers. The wind slapped against her face. She saw the headlights. Ten. The tracks shook. Her heart stopped beating. Her eyes watered. Seven. She jumped across to the other side and watched as the train sped past her. She reached the wall and pulled herself out, careful to avoid the third rail. No one left the train that had arrived. No one had noticed her at all. She sat on the blue, metal bench and waited.

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As she searched through the sea of quirkily patterned knee socks, Tina noticed something out of place: a long, thin, purple silk scarf. The ends had been systematically frayed to convey a controlled sense of rebellion. Splotched to seem artistic, yet expensive. It was not a sweatshirt. It was not a Jennifer. Tina picked it up and smiled.

And the universe subverted. Her heart beat too fast. Her eyes couldn’t blink. She stopped breathing and stopped thinking, and she had to run, run, run to where no one could see her. So she ran into the dressing room, clutching the scarf and gulping in air and willing herself to calm down.

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Several months after the trip to the mall, Tina’s English class went to see a local production of *Hamlet*. They took a bus. She chose a seat twelve rows back, right in the middle, and a small perky redhead wound up stuck by her side for the drive there. For the first half they both said nothing. After awhile the girl started to feel uncomfortable, so she asked something harmless like, “What do you like to do” or “What’s your favorite TV show.” Tina couldn’t remember exactly what. She remembered her choked, stuttering response. She remembered yelling things like, “I don’t like that you think you matter, because you don’t. You never will. You’ll die and leave no trace. You’ll die and hundreds of years later you might as well have never existed. You don’t matter. You will never matter.” But the rest had faded.

The next day her parents told her that she needed to take some time off to rest. That they found her a therapist. That she’d be feeling better in no time.

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She sat in the dressing room for twenty minutes. She told herself to calm down. She told herself that she was being stupid. She told herself that she was okay and that she was smart and that she was happy. She told herself to act normal. But then she glanced at the scarf in her hands and decided she deserved more. She looked at the scarf. She looked at the door. None of it had any point. Nothing had a point unless she gave it one. She wanted something different, something better.

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She never met the therapist. The night before she was meant to, she scaled down her dogwood tree with nothing but a half full bottle of vodka. She started walking.
The autumn wind kidnapped the dying trees and the dying bushes and the dying roses and the dying grass and tied them all into one giant knot. With every thought came a new sort of bubbling in a new chunk of brain. Each step she took sent her plummeting to the core of the Earth and back again. Her body ticked like a clock, and if she tried to stop breathing her time would stop. She kept walking.

Taunting. The lights taunted her. She kept walking. Step. Step. Step. She could be a musician. She would be a musician. Then people would listen. No one ever listened to her. No matter how loud she screamed and pleaded and cried, the world remained complacent. Complacency. Indifference. She hated indifference. She liked clashes and bangs and revolution. She kept walking.

She kept walking until her legs gave out. She walked until she reached the wrought-iron fence to the town’s local zoo. One of the bars was dented just enough so she could slip through.

She awoke to the roar of a lion.

Although her vision blurred from sleep, she recognized her state of undress. Every slice of exposed flesh seemed to have at one point been coated in a thin, dry film of dirt, but after a series of violent night sweats, the filth congealed, adhering to itself to form a dark brown set of external veins. As she forced herself upright, every disjointed vertebra snapped itself back into physiological accord. The world she had no recollection of entering de-blurred itself, and the squawks, caws, and growls of her locked up neighbors grew impossible to ignore. She passed each of them on her way to the hole in the fence behind the butterfly house. They kept howling and roaring, but she kept walking.

She pulled off the tag.

She walked until she reached the school. Being a Saturday, the halls were empty, and every classroom had been locked but for one near the end. An English room, she discerned from the pile of essays on the teacher’s desk. She flipped through the first, “Love Conquers All,” by some sophomore named Jake, who’d argued with his mother. He wouldn’t listen. She wouldn’t understand, until he apologized. Admitted to his immaturity and mended the residual tension. The two parties moved on with their lives, better and closer and changed. The next, “Off the Leash,” The dog came back to the owner, and she learned the meaning of responsibility. She worked harder. The dog stopped peeing. Everyone was happy.

Tina coughed and shook and fell to the floor. She couldn’t think or breathe. When her head started clearing, her thoughts were fragmented. Nothing made sense. She felt as if nothing ever would make sense again. She did not deserve that at all. And so she lit a match.

Her peers’ regrets, their epiphanies, their dreams and their lessons charred their way into something indiscernible. Every flicker and spark swirled through the classroom, back and forth and back and forth until they found their way to her face. She stood illuminated, the impossible guide for such pathless destruction.

She left the store.

They all asked why.

Were she to say it out loud she might have noticed. Were she to hear herself, she might, for the briefest moment forget that she was speaking and merely judge. But she never answered. She only thought. She thought about her future. She thought about her past. She kept thinking and reworking and analyzing and tearing it all apart and everything made sense. She was smart. She was important. She was strong. Important. Indisputably so. Everyone talked about her. Everyone
knew. Knew. Knew she mattered. She’d made an impact. She left a mark. Important. Unconventional. Terrifying. She terrified everyone. She forced herself above. She fought. She won. She mattered. She knew she mattered. She was smart and strong and important. They walked past and didn’t look at her, but they all knew. They all listened. They all saw. Important. Rebellious. Winner. She won. She won. Important. She was important. She was strong and smart and important. Indisputably so. And that was all that really mattered.

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The life of any individual can be condensed into a series of pivotal moments. For the typical sort, such moments might be weddings, births, funerals, or promotions. For the bigger thinkers, such moments are more abstract, derived from happenstance and inflated into something that they can call significant.

In the span of approximately three and a half minutes, Tina Nightingale redefined her life. She cast away the commonplace and threw herself into the world of tasteful rebellion. The days of hiding in the background were over. She was going to be different. She was going to be important. She was going to matter because she deserved to.

She pulled the fine silk from her pocket and looped it around her neck. She smiled. She laughed. She stepped out into the universe a new person, freed from the black-outs and the laughter and the judgment, ready to show everyone just what she could truly be.
Stop and Hear the Music
Hanna Kime
Persuasive Writing
John Burroughs School
Jill Donovan

Perhaps due to its abrasive musical numbers and seemingly substandard acting, many assume that the 2007 made-for-television hit *High School Musical 2* lacks true depth. That the story told is just a rehashing of overused teen tropes. But one cannot simply take the lyrics at face value. By digging deeper into the plot, it becomes clear that *High School Musical 2* is not merely a glorified Hallmark card but rather a nuanced examination of our current economic and political systems. Throughout the entirety of its one hundred four minutes of running time, the film presents dozens of blatant critiques on our treatment of the working class. And by obscuring the film’s true themes, director and producer Kenny Ortega has managed to quietly win over the hearts and minds of America’s youth to his controversial cause. This film is not a simple fable of friendship and togetherness but a call to arms. A plea for proletariat revolution against the ruling class that deserves to be heard.

The film opens with a group of American students, impatiently watching as an oversized clock ticks out their last few seconds of the school year. The students are impatient, restless, bursting with energy. They chant, “Summer. Summer.” Their voices grow in volume. The bell rings. One hopeful youth shouts out, “What time is it?” His peers and comrades respond, “It’s summer time!” To the students, summer represents freedom. Because America’s educational system has left them unfulfilled, the students long for a chance to truly follow their dreams. From the first few minutes of the film, summer is elevated to an ideal. The perfect time. A utopia, of sorts. Although the students chant and dance about summer’s arrival, it becomes clear that summer has not truly come. Their perfect universe does not truly exist.

The protagonist, Troy Bolton, quickly realizes that, while he would much rather be shooting hoops with his friends and his dad in his backyard or spending time with his girlfriend Gabriella, he needs to work in order to afford a college education. With hopes to win Troy’s affections, Sharpay Evans, Troy’s wealthy rival from the preceding film, convinces her parents to give Troy a position at their family’s country club, Lava Springs. Troy brings his friends along with him, and the group begins to work, serving the whims of their upper class patrons. They immediately question the value of their work. Their boss treats them poorly, they must follow strict guidelines, and their labor brings little reward. Yet, they maintain hope for their perfect world. The group sings, “If we work, work, there’ll be no doubt. We can still save the summer if we work this out.”

In an attempt to win Troy over, Sharpay promotes him and introduces him to several college basketball coaches. Overwhelmed with his newfound status, Troy ignores his friends and girlfriend, focusing instead on his future. His friends feel hurt. Discarded by their friend and stuck in a meaningless job, the group appears ready to quit. But then Ryan Evans, Sharpay’s brother, plays baseball with them. While the group is happy to have found a new friend, Ryan’s relationship with the workers exists only to fuel his own ego. He wants to show his sister that he is more accepting than she is and that she should follow his lead. Inadvertently, Ryan’s involvement dampens the workers’ rage, and consequently the workers never act. Instead, with Ryan’s assistance, they distract themselves with a talent show. The talent show, in turn, represents the workers resignation and acceptance of their fate. Ryan Evans serves as an example for how our charity and acts of kindness can often prevent real systemic change from taking place. Because the workers feel less hurt in the moment, they do not fight for a better future.

Throughout the film, Sharpay struggles to convince Troy to join the talent show with her. For a moment, Troy agrees to sing with her. But after Gabriella leaves him, Troy begins to realize how much
he’s given up for the sake of money and influence. In a dramatic number, Troy decries the randomness of prosperity. He realizes that the only way to succeed is to “Bet on it,” to take a gamble, because nothing can be certain. He sees his reflection in the lake and exclaims that, “It’s no good at all to see yourself and not recognize your face.” Yet, he continues to play the game. He tries to convince himself that he can find the hope he’s lost, that he is wrong to blame the world, and that he should blame himself.

He returns to his friends, who hatch a scheme to bring Gabriella and him back together. Troy enters the talent show, alone, but as he is singing, Gabriella appears from the crowd. Then, the whole group arrives, and they all sing together, they’re “lovin’ where [they’re] at.” And they feel happy, but they have lost. In a symbolic moment, Sharpay awards the trophy to her brother, showing that the subversive, subtle sort of inequality impacts us more than the few we antagonize. Class conflict is not a product of a few greedy CEOs, but rather, a truth that pervades all facets of life.

The film ends with a vision. A dream of the summer paradise that the group will never obtain. A world where the rich and the poor can dance in the sun together. All on an equal level. Where everyone is one for all, and “All for One.” They imagine a world where everyone deserves to join the party. They imagine a world where they’ve finally got the summer that they wanted. But as the film shows, that world does not exist. Before long, children will start singing. We will realize that we want a summer as well. And maybe, in the real world, we will not give in.
There is a brief moment, a mere blink of the eye, of an absence of sound. A total, noiseless instant of smothering—

Silence.

Mummy says to cherish the moment, so I do.

I always do.

Just before the quiet, the breathing rasps as blood and mucus erupt from the mouth. The chest—it rises and falls at an inconceivable pace, like a humming bird whipping its miniscule wings. The patient gurgles as he begins to choke on his own fluids. Glassy eyes roll back into the head, and then—

Silence.

No flailing limbs, no seizing body, just... still.

That’s when I look up at Mummy, up to the leathery beak she wears, the same beak I wear, too. It’s impossible for me to see her muddy eyes behind the foggy glass coverings, but I look anyway. I look to tell her, “I see, I hear, I feel.” Because that’s what I always do—what Mummy wants.

I look away quickly, though, back to the body on the bed, because the silence never lasts, no matter how much I want it to. The dead do not stay dead, not anymore.

Appendages start moving again—kicking and clawing at the air. Jaws unhinge and low, guttural sounds leak from the throat, moaning for the thing it wants most—the thing only the living can provide.

I draw in a sharp breath, the scent of myrrh filling my nose. It blocks out the miasmatic air—the smell of dying and decaying flesh veiled by my mask. I look at the black lesions on the body, a milky substance oozing from them, and shiver. The Black Death is appropriately named.

The abomination in front of me moans, thirst overwhelming. It reaches its speckled arms towards me, joints moving grotesquely, but pain does not phase the being anymore. Its fingers stiffly stretch and wiggle at me, beckoning me closer.

Just a taste, it seems to cry, just a taste.

Silly demon, I cannot satisfy the hunger.

“Arrogance is blindness,” Mummy’s stern voice rings in my mind, and I shiver. The beasts are powerful, and demand respect. There have been too many causalities to not. She tilts her head down and shakes it slightly; I swear I can see her ancient eyes piercing through me.

My hands tremble under her scrutiny, fumbling with my heavy gloves, trying to pull them off. Pale golden skin emerges from the canvas, shaking. The once-living being lets loose a new flurry of yelps at the bare flesh.

I flex my fingers, allowing the life-force—the ichor—to flow through my body. It is a good feeling, a renewed feeling. Mummy motions for me to continue, to complete the ritual, so I do.

Like always.

I raise my arm, meeting the creature’s decomposing hand with my own. It hisses as its flesh begins to smoke at my touch. I feel the gentle tug as I make the connection with the reanimated corpse, and explore within its subconscious. Of course, the human’s soul has left. But—

Darkness.

Primeval, chaotic—

The demon lunges at me, struggling to break the connection. Its claws grab at me as its empty black eyes stare in pure malice, feeding on fear others too willingly given. I won’t allow it the pleasure, though.
Instinct and millenniums of training take over. Ichor flowing through my body, I will a blast of holy light forward and revel in the warmth it creates on my skin. I understand what the abomination feels—the intense need, more than anything in the world. The light is from the heavens above, and I wish every day to feel His glow once more, I—

"Resist it!" Mummy snaps, reaching a hand towards the bolt. "Finish the ritual."

I look hastily at the light and plunge it through the demon’s chest. Wisps of fire branch out from the wound, eating away the demon, the malevolent being slowly crumbling. A high pitched, agonizing shriek unleashes, and then—

Silence.

I’m standing beside the bed, clutching the hand of the recently deceased patient, who is still. **Deathly still.** I feel no pulse in my unclothed palm, no darkness within.

I exhale.

"The patient is cleansed," I tell Mummy, trembling, my hands shaking.

She nods once, then briskly turns and starts to walk out of the room, her robes swishing against her body. As she opens the door, her back still to me, she says softly, "The light is forever our temptation, our weakness. Fight it, my love." It’s so faint, I wonder if she is talking to herself, but she turns and looks at me, her beak mask creating a unique shadow against the flickering candle. "Be strong. In time, we will be with Him again." I catch her voice breaking just before she shuts the door.

I realize I’m still holding the limp hand of the patient. The hand is small, about my size, with grimy fingernails and soft skin. My eyes slowly fall on the patient’s face, which is rounded and olive skinned from what I can see that’s not covered in blood. Crystalline eyes are open wide, startlingly so, and pink lips are open in a scream.

I gingerly place the small girl’s hand on her stomach, close her eyes, and place a sheet over her. She was about my age—at least, the age I am in this life cycle.

I look away from the girl and busy myself with putting up the equipment. I know I will have to tell her family soon of her death, but I delay. It is hard telling the humans when a loved one is gone. They are so fragile, which is why I protect them.

I’m drawn again to the girl, to the way she lays on the bed, curled in fear. One moment she was alive, but then she wasn’t. She died long before she was brought to Mummy and me—the demon had stolen her body—but it still saddens me to see her so utterly empty in this room.

I leave quickly, shutting the door behind me. I feel a tear run down my cheek, but I can’t wipe it away—I must wear this mask. I want to rip it off and keep it off. I want to breathe fresh air, and not the sickly sweet scents of myrrh. I want to feel the bitter sting of the wind and the gentle kiss of the sun, but my skin must stay covered. I want to—

"You know you mustn’t, yet you still yearn," Mummy says, materializing beside me.

"I know, I simply wish..." I say, unable to continue. I wish to what? Reveal our nature to the humans?

"Duma," Mummy says, and I look up at her. It has been a long time since I’ve heard my name. My true name.

"Ariel?" I respond with her true name. She is Protector.

"We are not unlike the beasts we seek to destroy," she says slowly, turning away. "Really, we are the same."

I know we are the same. We need bodies as they do, though we acquire them by different means. Does that make it better? We are robbing the humans of a chance at life, no matter how short.

"However, the needs of many outweigh the needs of the few," Mummy says, fetching her gloves from the window sill. Her bare hands linger in the sunlight for a moment, before hastily putting on the gloves.

"Do our needs not matter?" I ask, then wish I hadn’t.
Mummy’s head snaps toward me. “*Our only needs are to protect.*”

I cannot disagree that her needs are to protect. But I am not wholly like her. I was not a Protector before… the Fall.

I was once Duma, Archangel of Silence, an absolute antithesis of sound and predestination and all that is spontaneity, free will, and unpredictability.

Before the Fall, it was my job to listen to His Word, to trace chords back to the start, follow notes to their end, find resonance in His Word, and watch for discord. I did not seek to purify His Word; I merely watched and cared. The past, future, and present were my duty. My only rules: do not interfere and never tell.

I did **not** protect. I did **not** help. I listened.

But as I said, I was once Duma, long ago. My needs have changed in the absence of His Word. My needs reflect my desires—to bask once again in His Glow and listen to the calming silence of His Word—and to do that, I must redeem myself in His eyes. I must help His people. I must protect the weak.

“*Yes, my dear,*” Mummy says, “*Yes.*”

Another tear escapes my eye. I must return.

“*Now finish your job,*” Mummy says. “*Go.*”

I flex my bare fingers once more, allowing myself pleasure in the sense of renew the life force sends through this body. I replace my gloves and step outside. Just before I walk away, I glance back to the window of our home—I swear I see Mummy lift up her mask and touch her face, to wipe away the tears.

I am not the only one suffering.

I must remember that.

Few humans walk these streets anymore. I try to relish in this silence, but I cannot. My mind is a knot that will not untie.

I look at my shadow on the cobblestone. It is no surprise why the humans fear us. Our masks mimic the prophet of death. *We* bring news of death because this sickness leaves no survivors.

I focus up ahead, to the house at the end. I quickly reach the door and wait. Wait for the humans to come. I know they feel my presence.

Slowly, the door opens, and I step into the dark.

“My daughter,” a ragged voice starts, “is she...”

I cannot communicate with the humans, and they know this. They have learned. They know my attendance can only mean one thing.

The man begins weeping, and a little boy rushes in and grabs his leg. They both have the same crystalline eyes, I realize.

I start to leave.

“*W-wait, Doctor,*” the man stammers.

I stop, frozen, because the humans never talk to me.

“Did you kill it?” he asks, his voice deepening.

I stand, unable to move. *It?* This human... something is different.

I turn and step closer.

The man has black lesions on his arms. He smiles.

I step backward as the demon lunges toward me. The little boy is sent flying through the air as the abomination attacks, knocking us to the ground. It pins my arms so I can’t remove my gloves.

“*Give up,*” it says, communicating like Mummy and I do.

This has never happened before.

Demons are crazy, driven mad by their own condition. This is not a demon.

“*Give up,*” it repeats.
“What are you?” I ask, struggling to free my wrists.
“I am like you,” it affirms, laughing. “Actually, I am better than you.”
“How can that be?” I wriggle my hands in my gloves, trying to release them. “It’s not possible.”
“I am exactly as you are, Duma,” it hisses. “Shackled to this earthly prison. Doomed to act out lives as pitiful humans for all eternity.”
How could it know my name? Is it… one of us?
“I am Abaddon,” it declares, “Archangel of—”
“Destruction, Bringer of Death,” I finish.
“Very good, Duma,” he says, his clear eyes sparkling.
“I don’t forget,” I say softly. “Why are you here?”
“Master requests that you join us,” he says.
“He is not my master,” I spit. “I am a child and servant of the Light.”
“We no longer answer to the Light,” he jeers. “We answer to the Morning Star.”
“Some of us do,” I whisper, wrenching my hand free of his hand and my glove. I grab his arm and make the connection—
Shooting pain arks from the link and floods my entire body. Only between two angels can this pain be caused—demons crave the light and comply with the connection.
He really is an angel.
I release his arm, and he rolls to my side, breathing hard. It takes a lot of power to connect with another angel, and I can barely move. Abaddon’s body is cracking. He will need to find a new host. His eyes land on a small heap in the corner—
The boy he threw.
But surely he did not survive. He couldn’t—
Abaddon begins shining, the holy light oozing in tendrils from the cracks on the body.
I have to move, I have to protect the boy.
But the needs of many outweigh the needs of the few.
More of the light has escaped the body and is starting to move toward the boy.
But this boy could be something special in the future.
Abaddon’s light spirals through the air.
I jump up using my dwindling strength and rush to the boy. He’s still breathing.
I turn, and the light is right in front of me. If it touches me, it will destroy the both of us. That would save the boy and prevent Abaddon from—
“Duma, be strong!” a voice shouts as a figure pushes me out of the way, and the light connects with it. A blinding flash lights the room, and I feel a release of power into the air. I feel myself start to fade...
“Doctor?” a tiny voice squeaks.
I blink back the darkness, resisting it.
“Doctor, are you okay?” it asks.
I blink again, and the world starts to form around me again.
“Are you dead?”
I focus my vision, and see a small boy standing over me. A boy with crystalline eyes.
How did he survive? And that voice—the one who saved me—it was Mummy.
I struggle to sit up and scoot away from the boy. He edges closer.
“Stop! Don’t touch me!” I shout, but I know he can’t hear me.
He cocks his head sideways. “Why?”
He… he heard that? “Can you understand me?” I ask.
“I can talk like you, too!” he exclaims.
“H-how? How can that be?”
He scrunches his face, as if he’s trying to remember something. “Um, I think it’s because part of Ariel and Abaddon are inside me,” he says.

None of this makes any sense. I look around and see the body Abaddon occupied lying empty and dead. Mummy’s body is the same way, I realize with a start.

But how could they both be inside the little boy? How were they not destroyed by each other? I ask the boy those questions.

“I think a tiny part of each of them was left behind, and they combined and flew into my body,” he explains.

“Are they still consciously there?” I ask and he looks confused. “Er, can you hear both of them speaking?”

He shakes his head. “No, they’re gone. It’s just me. I’m new!”

“What does that mean?” I ask, my hopes of Mummy still being alive crushed. When angels are killed, they go Below, and there is no mercy there.

“I’m new!” he says again. “He said I’m new—that no one has seen something like me before!”

“Who? Who said this?”

The boy points up. “That guy up there. I don’t know his name. Just…Him.”

“Y-you can talk to Him?!”

“Yeah! He says you and I are gonna lead everyone home soon!” the boy cries. “And He says my name is Remiel.”

The Angel of Hope.

So many thoughts cross my mind at once. I look at the boy—Remiel—and can’t help but smile. There is hope.

“What should we do first, Remiel?”

***

My kind, we are special. We’re born into this world with our eyes open wide, full of knowledge, wise beyond belief. We are here to protect this fragile thing called life. What are we? The Bible refers to us as irin we-qadishin—Watchers and Holy Ones. We are fallen angels cast upon this world to watch and to aid whenever necessary.

We once walked in the heavens above, and I can still remember the warmth that spread throughout my entire body, the eternal Light. One day we will return.

Mummy and I, we were beak doctors in this life. The Black Plague is but an attempt to unleash Hell on Earth, and we’re stopping it, one demon at a time. We protect these humans, ensuring their survival for centuries to come. They’re special, some of them—still good, the light still burning within. They keep me going.

Remiel has brought hope where there was none. We will return, and we will be with Him. But until then—

We’re always watching, always waiting.

We will continue watching until the Earth returns to a previous state, before mankind, back to—Silence.
Astrolobotomy
Kyler Martin
Central High School
Poetry
Kyla Ward

Astrolobotomy
God is a progressing astronaut.
Trying to make due with all the space between us.
He says, "If only I could hold together the sky a little longer my dreamers never would have ripped me apart."
"If only I could have turned my palms to the past for the sake of glass shards then maybe glass scars wouldn't be such a familiar thing."
Two things and a Gun bang left us like this.
Tattered, yet ready.
Shattered, he bled steady lead into the lines of the Universe with the intentions of making his art last longer.
Only until his fingers got tired.
At least that's my excuse for the poor getting fired.
But to say I care about that all the time would simply carry me a liar.
You see, I am God; conduced to a 17 year old boy trying to be what he aspires.
An artist.
A surgeon.
A lip-syncing virgin to the sounds of great sex.
The contradicting inhale to a very last breath.
A young man in a dream, where everything is right in front of me.
Everything I was and everything I want to be.
And I need words.
Less verbs.
To move an ocean like pages of a prayer and disintegrate every single droplet or commandment that was ever even there.
Inflate fish lungs just so we can call the gills fair.
Wrap my body up in Gold for all the clothes I couldn't wear.
Drop acid off a mountaintop and watch the forests sock and hop I'm not even a beat poet I just like to write and talk a lot.
You can't buy the lessons you'll learn; now I say that proudly with all the stripes that I've earned.
I've got ash in my brain for all the bridges that I burned.
I'm just a splash with a name and a tidal wave is yearning.
Gurgling for morals, foaming at the mouth with self-doubt, this is all God's plan, you can't begin to understand.
Understood?
So quit asking me if I would save you if I could.
I don't want to want us too.
And if I can't taste you I don't want you.
I'm Hannibal lector for loose ends at the same spot the truth ends; I'm just trying to keep my true friends, so would you send?
Any human you can lend to mend me?
Any words you can spin to end this trend of whoever apologizes first is the loser and last admits defeat.
We're destined for failure shooting at the stars we used to keep.
Whenever God is an astronaut dodging bullets in her sleep.
Trying to hold the space between us just a little while longer so we can take the life we're handed for
granted and end up back at the same spot we landed.
I didn't write you an apology letter, a man did.
And I planned it.
Like all the days in which God planned planets, God damn I can't stand it.
Sitting.
Waiting.
Pacing.
Racing.
Aching for the days you were gracing me with your presence your essence is a blessing.
God.
If you can tear the sky and whisper why we have to live until we die, I'd confess every little lie.
From this point on because, God, I'm gonna try.
And this time because I want to.
Not because you want me to want to; don’t get me wrong I still want you.
But we’ll never understand.
Long after everyone else knew better, I was still coloring the sky purple. At first, many preschoolers will scribble neon-orange suns above fields of burnt-sienna grass. They are either unable to focus their underdeveloped prefrontal cortexes on clawing through the crayon bin long enough to find the correct waxen hue, or they’ve never imagined the sun as anything more specific than “that warm, bright ball in the sky.” Or, perhaps, they just don’t care. Sooner or later, though, most kids learn that the sun is traditionally colored yellow, the sky is not purple, and the grass is green, because teachers begin insisting that students draw the world as it “really is,” whether or not they care about the accuracy of their refrigerator doodles. Any rebel who continues using unrealistic colors after the age of six is clearly doing it “wrong.” But even when all of my peers had learned to assign colors correctly, I remained “wrong,” confidently scribbling purple skies. It’s not as though I didn’t take great pride in my work; I called on the muses of macaroni artwork to guide my hand so that I could accurately reproduce the world as I experienced it. However, what I now understand to be color blindness, my teachers gradually mistook for belligerence. Despite my efforts, I could not convince anyone (save my parents) that my sky “really is” purple. I wished everyone could jump into my brain, just for a minute, so they could see how I saw. In retrospect, my teachers’ incredulity is forgivable, as I failed to represent a model, well-mannered student. Although I never missed a chance to demonstrate my fervent passion for learning, more often than not, my behavior drew the teacher’s furrowed brow. I rarely failed to do what was asked of me—quite the contrary. Often, the teacher would only finish half of her instructions before my racing mind had calculated where she was headed, completed the activity, and set to yakking with the pretty girl across the classroom.

I remember one incident particularly well. It was a sunny Monday morning, and school had just begun.

“Good morning, class.”
“Good morning, Miss Laura!” we all chimed in unison.
“Can anyone tell me what their favorite shape is?” inquired Miss Laura as she skirted around the classroom, lightly depositing a pair of safety scissors and three pieces of colored construction paper on each of our miniature desks.

Hands shot into the air around me, each straining to reach higher than its neighbor, and I thought to myself, “What does my favorite shape have to do with scissors and construction paper?” I lived for the chance to show Miss Laura how smart I was. If I could manage to arouse that glowing grin of approval, nothing would ruin my day.

Quickly stuffing my stubby fingers into the scissor-holes, I proceeded to cut a diamond—my favorite shape—out of blue construction paper. When I had finished, I waved my cutout proudly in the air and shouted, “My favorite’s a diamond!”

“Please don’t talk out of turn, Aidan,” Miss Laura responded firmly. “Now, Sarah, what did you say your favorite shape was?”
I slumped back into my seat and stuck out my lower lip. Why was she ignoring me? I had done what she wanted; I was sure of it. But I didn’t pout for long. “Fine then,” I thought, “I’ll just show my diamond to Ellis.” I walked over to his table and—

“Sit down!” shouted Miss Laura.

“But I did my shape,” I whined.

“Oh? What were my instructions?…I see a purple diamond. You were supposed to use blue.”

“Huh?” I was sure she was trying to trick me. “But it is blue!” I shouted back.

“I see it sitting right there. Are you saying I’m a liar?”

“I didn’t do anything wrong! Why’re you mad?”

“Please, sit down, Aidan!”

“Why d’you hate me?!” I screamed.

Miss Laura trembled, and her face flushed a deep red. “You are un-teachable!”

It was like a punch to the gut. The words hung in the surrounding air as a thick, suffocating fog while we looked into each other’s eyes. Slowly, I shrunk back to my seat and put my head down on the desk, hiding from everyone the silent tears streaking my face.

I wanted Miss Laura to like me so badly that it nauseated me to cause her so much frustration. I knew that something about me hurt her feelings, but I couldn’t understand what, and that thought tore at my insides. I didn’t feel like a “bad kid,” but I wondered if there was something wrong with me. Un-teachable? Really? I’d not yet been alive for a decade, and someone was already deciding for me what I was and was not capable of.

I slid off of the bus that afternoon and shuffled home with droopy eyes, forcing myself not to cry, but Mama and Papa were waiting to greet me with so many hugs and kisses that I was sobbing within seconds.

“Miss Laura called,” my mother said softly after I calmed down.

The base of my skull got hot and tingly. I remembered Miss Laura dialing her phone as the class scrambled out to recess. While everyone else played four-square, I cowered underneath the slide and worried about getting yelled at.

I buried my face deeper into my mom’s sweater and let out a muffled whimper.

“She can’t teach the class if you’re always distracting everyone,” continued my mother.

“I’m sorry.”

“I know you are, sweetheart.”

I ran up to my room and planted myself face down on the bed. I could hear my parents’ dampened voices through the floor. They spoke in those hushed tones which I knew meant they were discussing something I wasn’t supposed to hear.

*****

“In what particular way did we say that Macbeth’s hubris manifests itself?” probed Mr. Lovera, still facing the chalkboard. My hand shot up as he turned to face us. “Mr. McCarter?”

“Was it…vaulting ambition?”

“That’s right,” he affirmed with a grin, winking at me. I glowed. I lived for that grin.

When the bell finally rang to go to 2nd block, Mr. Lovera shouted, “Everyone, make sure to check the Moodle for homework!” as we stuffed our backpacks. “Can you stay back a minute, Aidan?” he asked me as I walked out the door. I retook my seat, and when the room was quiet once again, he continued, “I really appreciate how driven you are to participate in class.” I glowed ever brighter. “I only wish the rest of the class were as motivated.”

“Yeah, me too,” I agreed. “Sometimes I feel like I’m the only one talking…but it’s cool.”

“Well, you gotta remember, Aidan, not everyone thinks the way you do. Others may have trouble verbalizing their thoughts, and your immediate responses could be a bit intimidating.”

I hadn’t thought of that.
Mr. Lovera then requested that I not speak during class discussions for the next two weeks. I was not to raise my hand or share my thoughts unless called on, specifically. We knew it would be difficult for both of us.

I explained Mr. Lovera’s proposal to my mother before dinner that evening. “It’ll be so awkward,” I said glumly.

Her face was unapologetic. “You’ll be fine,” she replied and resumed washing lettuce. “Lovera knows what he’s doing.”

I frowned. That wasn’t a satisfying answer. Suddenly, I remembered something. “Hey, Mom?”

“Yes, Aidan.”

“You know how, when I was younger, my teachers always used to call home ‘cause I was so disruptive?”

“Yes, Aidan.”

“Well I remember, you and Dad would always start talkin’ all quiet whenever I’d leave the room. What were you talkin’ about?”

She turned off the faucet. After a short pause, she said flatly, “Whether or not to put you on medication.”


“They advised us to have you tested for ADD. They thought you’d benefit from medication.”

“My teachers?”

She nodded. “Yeah, most of them.”

“Wow… I had no idea.”

“Of course you didn’t,” she replied matter-of-factly. “You didn’t need to know. Besides, I always told you, ‘There’s no obstacle you can’t overcome through hard work and determination.’”

“I remember. I was certainly very determined after that incident with Miss Laura.”

“And it was very hard,” she murmured.

The following class, when Mr. Lovera asked the first question about our assigned reading, no one raised his or her hand. I could feel my peers’ stares like hot daggers boring holes into the back of my head. I feigned extreme interest in my shoelaces.

“C’mom, guys,” coaxed Lovera, “I know it’s early.” The silence was so oppressive, it was suffocating. I ached to answer his question, and the unspoken words burned at the base of my skull, tickled the inside of my mouth. My impatience with my classmates grew hotter by the second. What was wrong with them? The answer was so obvious! What could anyone possibly—

“Yes! Emily!” chirped Lovera thoughtfully, “That’s good.” Emily snickered to herself and beamed so intensely I couldn’t help but smile as well. Suddenly, I was overcome with a greater desire to participate than I had ever experienced before. I began tapping my foot. My thoughts began to race. The presence of a new mind, a distinct person full of ideas I’d never fathomed, exhilarated me and fueled my passion for learning.

And then it hit me like a punch to the gut. I began piecing together the fragmented experiences of the last ten years of my life. Mr. Lovera’s words echoed in my head: “not everyone thinks the way you do.” I finally understood Miss Laura’s frustration. The fact that my behavior was disrespectful to her only represented half of the problem; it interfered with other students’ learning. Countless teachers had said those very words to me, but I had no concrete experience with which to ground an understanding. And how could I have? I had to spend years in elementary and middle school developing patience and
tolerance before I could allow myself to witness how diversity creates a much richer learning environment.

Then, as suddenly as the first, a second epiphany struck me: if there is value in multiple perspectives, then there must be value in mine. My way is not “wrong;” it is simply different. An overwhelming sense of gratitude to my parents enveloped me like a tidal wave when I realized that their decision to raise me the “hard way” was the best thing they could have ever done for me. To medicate me would have been to say that who I am is wrong. It would have confirmed my insecurities and devastated my self-image. I would have been conditioned to alter my reality through the lenses of foreign eyes, and I would possess a textbook knowledge of good and evil. Essentially, I would have been robbed of the opportunity to become myself. Instead of having my emotions stifled, I was given twelve years to ruminate on that sharp pang of confused empathy I felt when I disappointed Miss Laura. That yearning to understand and to be understood developed into an acute sense of how others perceive my behavior and how my behavior affects my relationships.

I understand that it is just as wrong to impede the development of other minds as it is to be forced out of one’s own. Though I know there is never one correct answer to any question, the right to individuality is not an excuse for people to do whatever they want, regardless of repercussions. It does, however, motivate me to challenge ideas, to be inquisitive, and to never accept something as truth simply because I am told it is so. The moment we cast off our individuality is the moment we lose our humanity. It is frightening how easily the human mind can deceive itself into believing something that directly contradicts its perception of reality. Who has the right to define the sky incontrovertibly blue? Perhaps I am the only one who can see the sky’s true color, or perhaps it is actually green. One thing is certain: I will not make Orwell a prophet. I know my sky is purple as well as you know that 2+2 does not equal 5.
A Letter to John Green
Mikala Petillo
Personal Essay/Memoir
Park Hill South High School
Idean Bindel

Dear Mr. Green,

I’m not much of a reader.
As much as I would love to pick up a book and indulge myself in whatever exotic wonderlands lie within, it’s hard for me to:
1. Get motivated
2. Get interested.

But this last summer I did indeed find myself reading and finishing a whole book. It just so happened to be yours. (Don’t get too big-headed or anything…)

I don’t really know how interested you will be in my story. Hell, I don’t even know if you will ever read this. But, I feel I should write it to someone who might understand. I hope you don’t mind if I send you a few of my journal entries; they will explain everything.

May 4\textsuperscript{th}, 2013—12:00 PM:

So tonight I have a gig with my band Russian Thick! We’re playing at this place called Streams End, and I’m super excited because it has such an amazing venue! Mathew, who works at this groovy guitar place, is running our sound tonight.

Oh—and I guess there is this boy, and he’s looking for a drummer for his band. Mathew told me he is coming to the gig tonight to watch me, so I guess that’s pretty cool.

May 4\textsuperscript{th}, 2013—11:31 PM:

The gig tonight was spectacular! I dressed up as Princess Leia (cause ya know, it’s May the 4\textsuperscript{th}). We totally jammed out, man! After the 2\textsuperscript{nd} set, I took my hair down; I couldn’t really play with it up in buns.

Also, that boy, Jimi, and his dad Thomas came out and watched me play. He seems pretty cool. He looks kind of grungy, long brown hair, jeans and converse. I dunno, I mean we’re just going to have to see how good he can play the guitar. But we exchanged numbers and all that, so I guess we’re going to get together pretty soon and play. I’m not really sure how I could be in two bands at once though, really.

May 24\textsuperscript{th}, 2013—6:05 PM:

I’m going over to Jimi’s house in like 20 mins. I feel bad because I have asked him about 20 times what his address is. I’m horrible at remembering things.
It’s our first practice, so I’m pretty stoked.

**May 24th, 2013—9:13 PM:**

OH MY GOD can this kid play the guitar. I mean—he is **really** stellar! And then there was also another boy, Kris, who played the bass. THEY WERE SO AWESOME!! The first song we played was “Everlong” by Foo Fighters, and we jammed through it all once *without even stopping*. It was really incredible.

When we were done playing, Jimi’s dad came downstairs and said, “So are they good enough?”

“THEY’RE PERFECT!”

What a wonderful night.

Okay, well, I’m getting tired. Drums wear me out. I’m going to bed.

**June 1st, 2013—11:36 AM:**

So my band with Jimi has a gig today. It’s our very first, and I’m actually not that nervous. (But, I can totally tell Jimi and Kris are.)

Ya know, Jimi is a pretty cool dude.

Sometimes, it’s kind of hard being in a band with other guys. It’s like, you join a band with these cool people who just happen to be the opposite sex, and all of a sudden you’re attracted to them. And—it’s not necessarily always voluntary. You will just find yourself thinking about them in this giddy way, and you tell yourself to stop it, but then you can’t, and you have band practice, and you see them and...your mind just goes crazy over them.

My dad always used to say to me, “The number-one rule to being in a band is: never date anyone you are in the band with. It will ruin everything!”

It’s not that I want to date him—I was just saying...he’s pretty cool.

**July 16, 2013—7:21 PM:**

So my friend suggested I read this book. It’s called *The Fault in our Stars*. I don’t really read, but this book is something else.

It’s like—I need to know what happens next.
It’s really awesome so far. I’m already on page 30.
In other news, Russian Thick has a gig coming up next week. Alabama Moon does, too, but it’s not for about a month or so. It’s a pretty exciting time. Oh, by the way, that’s our band name. Jimi and I’s. We finally decided. That is literally the hardest thing you could ever possibly do in a band. Finding a name.

“ALABAMA MOON AND THE KILLING SUN”

It’s okay—for now.

I feel like I don’t really get to write as much, being so busy all the time.

Okay, well I guess I’m going to go read now...

July 29th, 2013—4:16 PM:

So lately I have been writing with Jimi. I wrote this song called “The Fault Among our Stars” about that book The Fault in our Stars. I showed it to Jimi today, and he really liked it, so we’re going to show Kris. Our first original!! We’ve been working on some other stuff, too.

Jimi has a lot of guitar riffs, and I have a lot of words, so I think it’s a perfect match.

We’re going on a photoshoot as a band in a couple of days, and on the 23rd of August we have a gig! I’m really excited—I feel like, when I play with them, it’s just so perfect. Speaking of which...my band manager for Russian Thick doesn’t like the fact that I’m playing with Jimi. It’s almost getting to the point where I’m going to have to choose between which band I want to play in. I have this strong urge to stay with Jimi, but I guess we will have to wait and see.

On another note, Jimi and I are going to see RUSH on the 4th of August!!

YES, JIMI AND I ARE SEEING THE GREATEST PROGRESSIVE ROCK BAND EVER IN 4 DAYS.

August 18th, 2013—8:54 PM:

Alabama Moon had rehearsal earlier. Mine and Jimi’s relationship is starting to become...more than bandmates.

But, I mean I don’t want it to.
...I don’t think I do.
It’s......well it’s...
complicated.
Because, you see if we do start, you know dating and stuff—well, that puts the band at stake. And that’s totally not fair to Kris. Or Jimi.

I...I have to tell Jimi. Yeah that’s what I’m going to do.

Right now.

**August 18th, 2013—10:25 PM:**

I just got off the phone with Jimi. Everything’s good. We talked about us, and I explained to him how it would probably be best if we stayed friends—for the band. He agreed, reluctantly it seemed. But, it truly is for the best...

**August 23th, 2013—11:46 PM:**

Alabama Moon had another gig tonight. We played at this barbecue contest, which was cool because we got to have some free barbecue.

It’s hard to not just want to be around Jimi. It seems like the more I’m around him, the more I feel connected to him. If that makes sense...

I don’t know—I mean, tonight it just seemed like every moment away from him was a waste. It just seems like, “Okay, he’s here, he’s cool, let’s be with each other.”

I really like Jimi.

But, I don’t want to ruin anything. I hope I’m doing the right thing.

I have a gig with Russian Thick tomorrow, and it’s pretty far away, and we have to get up early...so I’m going to crash.

**August 31th, 2013—3:04 PM:**

So about all those things I said about Jimi and me....well, that’s all changed. A lot.

We aren’t official or anything, we aren’t going to put a “label” on it.

We’re just going to take things slow.

I spent yesterday with him, and ended up sleeping over at his house. His parents set me up downstairs on the couch, which was actually surprisingly comfortable.
We sat down there on the couch for a while, listening to records. I started messing with his hair, twirling it and stuff. After a while, I fell asleep right in his arms. All of a sudden, I just remember waking up in the exact spot I had left before I fell asleep. There was no sound. I sat up a little ways and asked him how long I was out.

“Not that long, but the music ended a while ago,” he replied with his quirky smile.

I told him how I really felt and how we could manage being together and still have the band. He completely agreed, which was totally radical.

It was a really lovely night.

September 5th, 2013—5:17 PM:

It feels like Jimi and I have been in constant contact lately. Which is awesome, it really is. He makes me feel this certain way...like there is an abundant amount of happiness. I feel like, with him I could conquer the world. I mean, we could conquer the world. I really feel like we could.

Our band has a gig this Saturday, also. It’s a private event, but, hey, there’s free food for us again. I guess it’s in the-middle-of-nowhere Kansas, out on some field. Still, I’m sure it’s going to be awesome.

September 13th, 2013—3:02 PM:

I’m about to go over and hang out with Jimi. We had practice yesterday, and it was a school night, so we really didn’t have much time to see each other. We always look forward to when we will see each other next...

He asked me to Homecoming on the 6th!! I’M SO EXCITED!!!! I can’t wait to see him look all manly dressed up and whatnot.

Oh!! And last week we had that gig and it was really awesome! The food was really great and we played fantastically. By the time we started our second set, the sun had been setting, so by the end there was all these dragonflies everywhere. One flew into Kris’ face! It was pretty funny. We ended the last set with “Voodoo Child” by the Jimi Hendrix Experience. I’m amazed by Jimi’s abilities every time we play that song. I swear, he is one of the most talented guitar-players I’ve ever seen.

I think I’m falling in love with him.

September 15th, 2013—9:43 PM:

Roses are red
Violets are purple    blue
I really wish we could
Be together forever (just like this) forever and ever the end.

Jimi and I went shopping for homecoming today. Our outfits are so cool—I got this really awesome flapper dress, and he got this totally retro corduroy suit.

I JUST CAN’T WAIT TO SHOW PEOPLE HOW BEAUTIFUL JIMI IS!!!

Homecoming is on the 28th, and I’m totally psyched.

This coming Saturday Russian Thick has yet another gig at Streams End. Just thought I would jot that down really quick.

I’ve had a long day, I’m going to bed.

September 22nd, 2013—10:49 PM:

TODAY IS JIMI’S BIRTHDAY!!

We celebrated at this bar called Knuckleheads. They have this open blues jam on Saturday’s and Sunday’s, so we decided to go and jam. I don’t think there was anywhere else better to celebrate. It’s so much fun there, especially playing with older people who have had so much experience already. It really makes you feel humble, yet appreciative that you’ve been able to have this opportunity. It’s almost a complete bliss on the stage.

Jimi was called up first, and he jammed the blues through about 3 songs. After a few sets, I was finally called up and got to play. There’s no better feeling than to feel the music, man.

So anyway, that all happened, and it was spectacular as usual.

Jimi told me the other night that he was in love with me. I kind of freaked out, but it was like a really nice freak-out. Kind of a...“Oh-my-god-he-loves-me-should-I-say-it-back-or-should-I-wait-I-should-wait-until-I’m-absolutely-sure-okay.” So I just kind-of sat there smiling at him.

I wanted to say it.

I just want it to be perfect when I tell him.

September 28th, 2013—3:42 PM:

Tonight’s Homecoming!! I’m about to start getting ready. I’M SO EXCITED!!

I can’t wait to see Jimi.

Tonight’s about us.
September 29th, 2013—5:33 PM:

I just got home. I spent the night at Jimi’s last night after the dance.

What a night, man.

So, this is basically how the night went:

• We met to take pictures.
• We both were stunned by each others’ beauty.
• We took pictures.
• We left to go eat at Steak N’ Shake.
• We left Steak N’ Shake to go to the dance.
• Jimi can’t dance.
• We didn’t dance. Instead, we walked around looking absolutely fabulous and pondered at all the other people who could not pull-off our amazing style.

And then, we left the dance and went outside. We sat on the stairs leading up to the school. My high school has this really amazingly beautiful view of downtown, and we just sat there looking at it in the distance. After about a minute of sitting, Jimi put his arm over my shoulders, and I rested my head on his left shoulder. I remember my exact thoughts at the moment were:

“It can’t get any better than this.”

October 3rd, 2013—6:00 PM:

I just got home from musical rehearsal. I’m pretty worn out, but I have practice in like 20 mins with Jimi and Kris. The talent show auditions are coming up this Tuesday, so we gotta practice and stuff.

I think I’m going to tell Jimi tonight...that I love him.

I guess I’ll write later.

October 4th, 2013—Maybe 2 AM?

Jimi has

He is

October 6, 2013—11:35 PM:
I am currently lying in Jimi’s bed. It’s cold in here. It’s a good thing his clothes are warm. He always wore long sleeves...

It’s been nearly a whole day since I left his cold body at the hospital. I held his hand till the very end, somehow they were still warm.

He was officially pronounced at 1:32 AM, Oct 5—Saturday morning. I stayed there till this Sunday morning at 6:00 AM.

He saved 9 people’s lives: I’m so incredibly proud of him while at the same time mad and confused and cold and sad.

It all seems unreal.

I’ve barely eaten at all this whole weekend. It has been the most insane, horrifying three days of my life.

Watching my soul-mate vanish right in front of my eyes—I’m going to hold him so very dear to my heart and soul.

I love you, Jimi Harrison.

And even now, I write this with the scar he left so recent and new. I’m not asking for you to sympathize or feel bad. I’m sending you this because of the amazing book you wrote. The only book I could ever relate these feeling to. The only book I read over a summer and finished.

I tried recently to pick it up again. I haven’t made it past the 3rd page.
I can’t.
I want to—I want to feel that I’m not the only one. But I simply can’t. In the near future, I hope I will be able to because it is an amazing book.

In the meantime, I want to thank you, Mr. Green. Thank you a thousand times over.
I may not be a cancer patient whose inevitable fate is death.
But then again, “life is a side effect of death.”

Sincerely,
E.R.
Outlook
Sophia Porter
Poetry
Hyman Brand Hebrew Academy
Claire Reagan

This poem is a dialogue between an optimist and a realist.

When life seems to be tough,
When times grow to be hard,
I recoil from society and
Seek refuge in the stars.

What?

The trees, they are my essence
My love helps keep me going,

How do you—

And I know that even though it may feel that way, I never am alone.

That makes no sense. You—

The river runs steadily on,

The river?

Washing my fears away,
And I can’t possibly stay angry when
The fresh rain hits my face.

Face the facts. You
Find refuge in trees?
How can the stars possibly
Set you free?
Just because it sounds pretty and poetic
Doesn’t mean it’s true.
Don’t you--

See? Don’t you see
That the winds do set me free,
And when the butterflies all flutter by,
My soul fills up with glee.
My one true love
Sent from above
Keeps me company
And we
Have all we need, just he and me,
Just me and he. We’ll be-

You’ll be irresponsible
With your word dispensation.
Your ‘lyrically lovely’ infatuation
Is nothing more than language.

Please--

I don’t want to hear about your trees!
Your heavily romanticized, idealized love,
Your divine clarity sent from above
Isn’t necessarily as serene and surreal
As you make it out to be.
You don’t have to feel
Flabbergasted, wonderstruck, absolutely blessed-with-luck
In order to manipulate your words to portray it
And that’s why it’s not true just because you say it.

I’m not saying it just to say it,
I feel differently than you
And though your love may be rough and raw,
My love is sweet and true.
Just like the movies, and just like the books,
I fell head over heels at first look
The electricity swirls and pulses and tingles,
And the spark I feel—of course you’re single!

That’s the problem!
You dreamer, you schemer,
You pick your words carefully, but you fall down hard.
You’d have more of a sense of gravity, reality,
If you picked up a textbook and dropped all your stars.

Stars in my eyes and the
Stars in the skies
Are the things that keep me pressing on.
Ambition and hope are all that I have,
So my life’s goal is to follow my heart’s song.
Your constraining, confining, creativity-killing rules,
Your pass-or-fail evaluating tools
Don’t leave me any room to express myself
Oh—and what’s worse, my mental health
Is dwindling, declining, with each new addition
To your standardized, calculated, categorized system.
*pause*
Let me be me
Or let me be
But you’ve got to let me free.

“Free” is a relative term—
Free from work, free from learning?
Free to do just as you please?
Free from your responsibilities?
How could the world keep turning,
How could our daily lives keep churning
If you didn’t put in your fair share?
You see, creators like you aren’t rare.
You use words to cover the holes in society
It’s tough, but you keep on fighting
Pretend that even dirt shines like gold,
You say “antique” instead of “old”!
The outdoors? “Charming.”
Violence? “Disarming,” yes,
But all you really need
Is to turn off your TV
And pretend you didn’t see it
Good as new
Does that satisfy you?
Does the fact that your eyelids are shut change reality?
Could you fathom for an instant that maybe, maybe
Problems exist and we must confront them
In order to fix the wrongs we’ve done, then?
I find a strange poetry in that.
Survey, evaluate, repair, repeat.
There’s value
In not using parental block, euphemisms, what have you
But in fixing the problem instead of ignoring it.
That’s how society could truly progress.

Progression is important, I agree,
But there is one small detail, one small key
That some people have the depth to see,
But your reality-oriented eyes don’t.
Society could not budge an inch
Without a pinch
Of hope.
John never truly understood why men who had been away at sea would kiss the land once they returned to it. He would watch ships full of cargo, from France, Italy, even America, dock in Donegal, and he would watch the men saunter onto the rocky shoreline and fall to their knees, inexplicably overjoyed to see land.

All John had ever wanted was the sea. Or, perhaps it wasn't the sea that called him, but the prospect of adventures and faraway places. He knew that if he were ever to board a ship and end up back where he started at the end of its voyage, he would not kiss the ground. He wanted to be away from Donegal. He wanted to be far, far away.

There was nothing for him in Ireland. He was penniless and unemployed and not fed as an eighteen-year-old man should be. His family was Catholic and full-blooded Irish; they were brutally repressed by the Anglo-Irish Protestants in the country, and their future looked bleak.

John, however, was not the type to let his circumstances take control of his life. Unlike his father, he would not sit back and mutter about things turning around eventually. John was going to make things turn around.

He just hadn't quite figured out how he was going to change his life. Often he went down to the docks to watch the sea and the ships that glided more smoothly on it than seemed possible. He knew he would give anything to be sailing away on a boat like that, but he knew he couldn't just pick up without knowing what life he would find on the other side.

One day, John ventured down to walk the wooden docks and listen to the banter of the seamen milling about. He saw a young boy nailing an advertisement to a wooden post and, out of curiosity, read the flyer.

"John Stamp leaving for America: 10th April! Jobs working on railroad available. Passage 4 pounds." Below the listing there was a name and address where one could register and pay for the voyage.

John stared at the flyer. He stared and argued with himself, tried to talk himself out of this idea that was forming in his mind. But he knew there was nothing that could stop him now.

John soon understood why sailors kissed the ground upon returning home.

Stepping onto the American earth in Pennsylvania was a moment that he would not easily forget. He and a few fellow Irishmen nearly sprinted from the vessel to the dock and from there to the nearest patch of grass that they could find.

John didn't end up kissing the ground, though he did vomit on it once or twice. As it turned out, he was rather prone to seasickness.

As John finished retching and began to get to his feet, he felt a hand grip his shoulder. He turned to find a neatly dressed man with a bushy mustache and fond, crinkled eyes helping him to his feet.

“All right, lad?” the man said, surprisingly in Gaelic. John nodded, wiping his mouth, grateful that he didn't have to put the few words of English he knew to work. “You off the John Stamp, there?” he continued.

“That's right,” replied John. “Me and these others.” He gestured to his shipmates, most of whom were still sprawled in the grass.

The man smiled in response, introducing himself as Philip Duffy and sticking out a hand, which John shook. Before John had a chance to introduce himself, however, Duffy was turning away, heading
for the rest of the passengers of the John Stamp. John was slightly puzzled by the man, unsure what he wanted from the rough-looking Irish men, but the thought left his mind as a thousand others poured in. America.

He was here. He’d made it. He had his whole life ahead of him, and he’d be spending it in America. This land was his chance. It was his shot to make something of himself, to prove wrong his family who called the venture foolish, and to begin a new life.

But where to start?

As John looked around the bustling Pennsylvania port, he became a little overwhelmed. Where would he sleep tonight? Where was the best place to eat a good meal? Where would he find work?

A plethora of questions swirling in his mind, John clutched his box of possessions – the only things he had brought from Ireland – to his chest, looking to his shipmates for some guidance. He was the youngest of the group at only 18; surely they would look out for him at least a little.

He was interrupted, however, by a strong, booming voice.

“Sons of Ireland! Gather ‘round!” John looked towards the voice. It was none other than Philip Duffy, standing on a wooden crate and gesturing wildly, summoning John and his shipmates in their native tongue. “Gather ‘round, mates! I’ve a proposition!”

John followed the other men dubiously, standing below Duffy as he continued. “Come work for me on the railroads, boys!” the man shouted. “You’ll have meals and a place to sleep and a quarter a day! The work is hard, but you Irishmen are strong!” At this the men let out a cheer. “What do you say, men?”

There were a few immediate, and a few delayed, shouts of “Aye!” The general feeling among the men seemed to be that they might as well take the offer, as they didn’t have any others. All fifty-seven Irishmen from the John Stamp took jobs with Duffy.

The work was hard.

The men were tasked with leveling a hill – making a cut, as Duffy called it – where mile 59 of the Philadelphia Railroad was to be laid. The soil was full of rocks and clay, and it took a toll on even the strongest sons of Ireland. The shacks that the men slept in were unsanitary and uncomfortable, and there was a persistent, ever-so-slight hunger gnawing at their bellies.

John’s arms screamed each time he dug his shovel into the ground. His back groaned when he had to heave a huge rock out of his way. But his mind was always louder than his body, reminding him that the work wouldn’t last forever and that he would have a good life to live once he was done with Duffy’s cut. He would continue to toil, continue until his red hair was black with the earth of his new home. John was so determined. He was going to make a great life for himself. He just had to clear mile 59 first.

He was so sure that he could make it.

That is, he was sure. He lost some of his optimism when the camp at Duffy’s Cut was struck with cholera.

It was discouraging for John to see some of the camp’s biggest, strongest men brought to their knees by the pandemic. They shook from cold as they sweated from fever, suffering from awful digestive problems and dying pale and empty.

The camp was miserable once the cholera hit. The men no longer whistled Irish tunes as they worked, not even the soothing old folksongs like “Bridget O’Malley.” The birds didn’t even sing. Skies seemed grayer and futures bleaker.

John was terrified. He could not die here. He had not been on American soil for even two months; his life couldn’t end so prematurely! He had plans, so many plans. He wanted to marry a fine girl and have an abundance of red-haired children who’d run around with smiles on their faces because their father would be wealthy, having made a name for himself in the railroad business.
He avoided the sick at all costs. The nuns who came to the camp to care for the ill men claimed that the disease was airborne, so John was careful not to get to close to anyone who might look a little green. He prayed nearly constantly, under his breath as he worked and on his knees before he slept. He just wanted to make it out of Duffy’s Cut alive.

A week after the cholera broke out in the camp, John was disturbed from his sleep by a scream. He emerged into the night air to find Duffy’s Cut in absolute chaos. Men were streaming into the camp armed with rifles, gunshots ringing in air. John was frozen. He had no idea what the men were doing there and even less of an idea what he should do about the fact that they were shooting down his fellow Irishmen.

Someone began yelling nearby.

“What are you doing here?” one of John’s fellow workers screamed. “What do you want from us?”

“We want you dead!” an attacker yelled back. “We’ll not have you infecting our people!”

John watched the exchange in horror. He recognized the attacker – he lived in a nearby town. All of the hostile people must have been from there, as well. They were scared of the cholera spreading. John couldn’t die here.

It was the only thought in his mind as he fled the lean-to he’d called home for the past six weeks. He pictured his pretty wife and children and ran with no idea where he was going. He had to get away from the fighting. He had to prove to his family that coming to America was worth it.

He couldn’t die here.

He forsook all his countrymen, blocking out their screams as best he could as he fled the camp. John was no hero. He just wanted to save his own life. He was only 18; he had so much more of it to live.

He could not die here!

John could see the edge of the woods that marked the edge of the camp. He was so close. He knew his only chance to escape death was by hiding in the trees. But as he neared the tree line he felt a huge, rough hand on his shoulder, and he was thrown to the ground.

John landed on his back, looking up at his assailant, who was hard to see in the darkness but was certainly very tall and broad – frighteningly so.

“Please!” John cried. “Please don’t!” John didn’t even know what he was begging the man not to do, but he saw the gleam of an axe in the man’s grip and assumed he had dark intentions.

“I’ve a wife and children!” the man growled. “They’ll not be getting sick because of you!”

The man stepped towards John and out of the shadow of the trees. In the moonlight, John saw that the man’s face was contorted in anger, bushy eyebrows knitted together and beard pushed into a frown. John searched the man’s eyes for any sign of compassion or mercy but found nothing.

He was going to die.

He was going to die here.

Tears began falling down John’s face as the man swung his axe. John turned his head, and the last thing he saw was the piles of dirt that he and his men had been digging for the last several weeks. All for nothing.

He apologized to the family he left behind and to the family he’d never have, before falling into darkness deeper than the shadows cast by the pines.

The newspapers did not count John Ruddy among the dead. They listed the death toll at only eight. In truth, all fifty-seven Irishmen of the John Stamp were killed that night in June.

No one would know until nearly two centuries later. The dead of Duffy’s Cut would toss and turn in their unmarked graves under mile 59 of the Philadelphia Railroad, begging for their story to be told. They would not rest until the days they never saw and the friends they never made and the families they never had were acknowledged.
Many people who wandered near Duffy’s Cut saw things that they could not explain. Shadows and lights seemed to sulk, creep, parade, even dance in the darkness.

Those who live near the site still say that if you listen closely at Duffy’s Cut, you can hear the tune of “Bridget O’Malley” on the wind.
Rollie came home two days after the first snow of winter, when it was beginning to melt into
slush in the streets, brown with mud and yellow with piss around the lampposts and against the curbs,
and the snowmen slumped into piles of mush with carrots poking out their tops and coal like shit at their
feet. I was in the kitchen. I held a cup of tea, and through the window I saw him at his house across the
street, climbing out of his father’s gray Chevy sedan. His father’s thick mustache twitched like the tail of
a squirrel as he pulled Rollie’s duffel from the trunk. Rollie did not wait for him but walked to the door,
swung it open, stepped inside.

I craned my neck to watch the procession. Rollie did not close the door behind him, nor did he
remove his boots before he continued further into the home, out of my sight. I knew the slush would
stain his mother’s nice rugs. His father struggled with the duffel and nearly fell on a patch of ice but
recovered, his hand gripping the rail with a fury I could see even across the road, his entire body
straining against that single hand pulling him upward. And then he too was inside, the door closed
behind him, and the house again looked dead.

“Rollie is home,” I told my mother. She was sitting under the living room window with a pile of
sweaters in front of her, staring at them hatefully, and white light knifed through the glass over her and
fell sharply onto her hair and face. She looked up after a moment.

“Rollie,” she said, as if tasting the word. “Rollie Stevens? You mean Roland?” I nodded. “Rollie,
back from war,” she said and picked up a sweater and folded it in her lap. “No fanfare for Rollie.”

It was true. Rollie and another boy, Joseph, had both left within months of each other, and while
Joseph had left among cheers and weeping, Rollie went alone, chin down, his hair so dull and dusty
brown it seemed almost gray against the sky. His return was overshadowed by Joseph’s as well; Joseph
came back in a coffin shrouded with an American flag. Four men carried it at the corners. One slipped on
ice and the entire coffin crashed on top of him, pinning him to the ground. It made the papers.

Mother seemed dazed after finding out about Rollie, as if a ghost had joined us in the living
room, and quit folding the sweaters, instead pulling the sleeves of one over her arms so its torso hung
limp over her chest. “It’s freezing,” she said.

“Wintertime,” I said. It was a raw winter day, when no gloom or deep drift of clouds caused the
cold. The cold was hard and undressed, the wind ripping through the naked branches and singing its
pillaging song in my ears, rattling through the glass, and the sunlight was unstained and empty, bright
but heatless.

Mother did not respond, but instead simply stared down at the sweaters. I went back to the
kitchen to stare once more at Rollie’s house. The curtains remained drawn against the cold. No lights
blinking wearily on. The American flag still hung near the front door and filled occasionally with gusts of
wind, but even that gave the house a miserable affect, like a flag on a sinking ship. I waited to see if
Rollie’s mother might wash a window or if Rollie’s father might return to his car to go have a drink, as he
often had when Rollie was at war. Instead it was Rollie who emerged after a few moments. He had not
changed, or shaved, or put on a heavy coat; he gripped the car keys and took two furtive glances back
toward the house.

I found myself moving toward him before I knew what I was doing, coatless as well, hair
unbrushed, wearing my snowboots, which were slumped in the entryway. The front door shut behind
me with a definitive bang, and I hurried across my front lawn toward him. Rollie unlocked his door and
looked up. The light reflecting off the hood of the car blinded him momentarily. He blinked and saw me and said “Ida.”

“Rollie,” I said. I wanted to say welcome home, but the words lodged in my throat. Rollie was four years older than me; before he left he was brutish and thick-haired, and I would sometimes catch him watching me undress from his bedroom window, but instead of being disgusted, I had been flattered.

He did not say anything or move at all. He simply stared. He was taller and broader than before, his hair darker and shorter.

Finally he said, “I’m going to Finn’s place.”

This was an invitation, I realized. He sat behind the wheel and looked at me with his tired eyes, and I crawled into the passenger seat. My childhood fascination with him was rekindled upon his return; and a boy had never asked me anywhere before. And the boy who used to crawl on his stomach through his mother’s garden was grown now and tougher, and my curiosity dragged me onward.

We rolled out of the driveway and away from my house, past the other homes, all grimy with the colors of winter, the driveways thick with melting slush laced with last fall’s dead, soggy leaves. “You’re back just in time for winter,” I said.

He worked his jaw a bit and said, “Cool.” Then, “Some candy-asses threw tomatoes at me outside the airport.”

“Really?”

He pulled up to a stop sign, turned and looked at me. “No respect,” he said. “Meanwhile I was getting my hide shot at, protecting them. Absolute and complete fucks.”

He lurched away from a stop sign. I wanted to say something—I had to—but what was there to say? I had been at home, safe, not really thinking of him or of any boys who might be bleeding life from bullet holes at that very moment—not even giving them the respect of a fleeting thought. The war was never fought in my mind, and I had no interest to bring the grimness, the tragedy of it there. Still, I wanted to say something, I had to, and the silence was palpable.

“At school we made holiday cards,” I said lamely.


I blushed and stared into my lap.

“We’re going to Finn Mattie’s house,” he said. He cranked his window closed and drummed a beat on the wheel. “When I was a kid he’d let me shoot out here on cans and targets. You know my parents are no good, right?” He turned to me suddenly, and a strange grin played on his lips. “You know they used to beat me with a paddle? I’m too big now. I could take my mother out in a single punch if I had to.”

We drove past pastures and barns and fields with horses in the icy cold, eating wet, frozen grass, their tails flicking. I tried desperately not to imagine Rollie punching his mother in their kitchen.

The road turned to gravel and the wheels crunched, and then the road was mud and snow, and the car labored up a driveway to a strange, dust-colored house with a sagging front porch. Next to the door hung a framed portrait of Mary cradling Jesus, and beside that, a white poster with blue block letters that read “Support Our Boys In Vietnam.” Rollie stopped the car and turned off the engine.

“Finn isn’t home right now. The flag’s down.” He pointed to a flagpole, and the flag, rattling against its chain, was nearly touching the ground. “Just as well. I know where he keeps the guns.”

With that he got out and slammed the door behind him. He walked around the back of the house without waiting for me, and not wanting to be left behind, I followed. The cold was swift and burned my cheeks.

Rollie strode up to a dilapidated shed, stopping once to pick up a rake laying in the yard. He shook the knob and swung the door open, then threw the rake onto the floor. It clattered but nothing
stirred. “To scare off the snakes,” he said simply. He had known I would follow and didn’t need to check
that I was there. From under a bucket Rollie pulled a key. He troumped up the porch steps to the back
deroor and stuck the key in the lock, jimmied it, and let himself inside. “Wait here,” he said.

I looked around. The trees were bare and thin, the sky sharp, and the grass a dead, sick yellow,
in some places clumped in dirty snow. Near the barn I saw bales of hay with targets tied onto them,
large metal drums, and benches with cans of varying sizes lined up on top. The wind whispered its high,
whistling, pillaging song in my ear, and I wrapped my sweater tightly around me, feeling as if the cold air
was cutting straight to my bones.

He emerged after a few minutes swinging a long rifle at his side. “Didn’t get you a gun, Ida. Girls
shouldn’t have guns,” he said. He walked a few paces and put the extra bullets into his pocket. He
hefted the gun with the speed and confidence of someone who killed things for a living and pulled the
trigger. The gun bucked and made a piercing bang that rattled me as it fired, and I stepped backwards,
tripped, and fell to the ground. The bullet ripped into the third ring of the target. Rollie cursed and spit,
then noticed me struggling to my feet. He swung the gun toward me, laughing a thin, sinister laugh, and
said, “Ida, it’s just a gun! A harmless little old thing.”

He swung the gun back around, paused a moment to take aim, his eyes focused and trained in
on his chosen targets, and shot the cans, one after the other. The pitiful sound of the cans rattling
momentarily and tumbling from their perch made my heart catch in my throat. I had never been so
close to a gun before, and it was so heavy and cold as winter, dark. I started to sweat despite the frigid
air.

“You want to know what war was like?” he asked casually. He shot at the target once more and
hit the red zone. “War,” he said, “was like a game for grown men. I shoot you, or you shoot me. One or
the other. You knew when you saw a guy that he would have to die for you to live, and Ida, it got to the
fuckin’ point where I didn’t even give a shit anymore who I killed, or how many, so long as I wasn’t the
next one layin’ there dead.”

He shot into the sky.

“I threw grenades, too, Ida. I threw three in my time there. The pop was like a party sound. Like
champagne opening or confetti exploding. I wanted to survive and get homem but now that I’m here I
see it’s a cold fuckin’ place; it’s barren and icy and cruel as war here. Should’ve just died there. You think
you’re safe, but you’re never fuckin’ safe.”

He shot into the sky again. My heart beat faster, and for the first time I realized I was in trouble.
I was stranded here with Rollie and his gun.

“Ida, are you scared of me?” he asked. His voice was thick with sugar. “I defended your sorry
little candyass. I watched men die for your sorry little candyass, and you’re fuckin scared of me.” He
shook his head.

I felt my throat closing. I was dizzy. I began to back away, but my vision spun. I started to cry,
hugging my chest and sweater.

“Ida is fuckin scared of me,” he said. A flock of crows had taken flight overhead, and he began to
shoot at them, taking them down in arcs of flapping wings and terrified shrieks, and they landed among
us like feathered black bombs. Seven total. He kicked at one, rolling it over until he found the bullet
hole. “I knew I hadn’t lost my touch,” he said quietly, to himself. “Just had to get warmed up.”

I wept, standing there, staring at Rollie, at his thick arms and shaved head and dark sad eyes, at
the gun in his grip.

“Ida, what are you so fuckin scared of?” he said. And then an idea struck him like a bolt of
lightning, and he walked slowly toward me, holding his gun in his hands, and said, “Precious little Ida is
scared of big old Rollie and his penis.”

He gripped the gun in one hand by its neck and then released it. I started to run, but his hand
had my arm in an iron lock, as if the two were made for each other. He threw me onto the ground and
laughed and said, “Thank you for the fuckin’ holiday cards.” He kicked me in the face with his heavy boot, and I saw stars before my eyes like pinpricks. He said, “I’m going to kill you, Ida, before you can fuckin’ kill me,” and fell on top of me.

I screamed like I’d never screamed before, through my tears, as if I were trying to scream blood out of my lungs, as if my mouth were full of the dirt from my grave, a curdled scream that had fought through centuries to find itself there, that day, exploding from my mouth. I twisted and jerked beneath him while his cold hand went under my pants and found the space between my legs, and I kicked with the strength of a people at war, and all at once he stopped, went limp on top of me, his earlier confidence draining, and began to cry.


“Rollie,” I whispered. His hand was still between my legs but it had gone limp. I stared up at the sky above us.

“They tried to kill me,” he said.

“Please get off of me.” My voice felt distant.

He pulled out his hand, rolled away, hit the ground like a sack of rocks, and stared up at the cold blue sky laced with birds as if he were looking into the eyes of God. Instinctively his hand found the gun.

“Why didn’t I fuckin die there,” he said. “I should have shot myself.”

I climbed to my feet, stood on wobbling legs, and trembled in the cold whipping against me. Rollie lay on the ground like a wounded child. I stared at him and at the gun he cradled. I knelt and pulled it slowly from his arms and laid it a few feet away.

“I lied to you,” he said, his voice void of emotion. “I did keep track.”

I licked my lips. They were cracked and dry. I knew my back was muddy and wet with melted snow.

“I shot thirty-seven men,” he said.

I somehow knew he had kept track not out of guilt but out of pride. And I knew the number now stuck in his mind like a bullet, bleeding him out slowly.

And he wept like a child, his lips curled back and wet with saliva and tears and snot, his eyes closed, his body curled into a ball, with me and the carcasses of seven birds and the souls of thirty seven men surrounding him. For a while we remained like that, until the sun began to set, early in the day, for it was winter, and the wind ruffled the feathers of the dead birds and my hair. And as suddenly as it had begun, Rollie quit crying. He rolled onto his feet and stood and gripped his car keys and walked to the car, and I followed a few feet behind. You think you’re safe, but you’re never fuckin safe.

In the car Rollie said nothing. He stared at the road stretching like a gash before us. He did not move except to turn the steering wheel. I rubbed my face absently, feeling the heat and raw tenderness of a large bruise forming. The adrenaline-filled terror and confusion of before had been replaced by something else, an ebbing fear and uneasiness, waxing within me. He had gone to war and come back changed while I sat at home, and that thought disturbed and poisoned me; the earth was spinning recklessly beneath my feet, and I could do nothing to stop it. History roared ever forward. When he pulled into his driveway, I got out and shut the door quietly behind me. It was completely dark outside, dark as blood. My porch lamp was on. I ran to the light.
I was once mistaken for a substitute teacher

He is significantly drunker than he thinks he is and it's inhibiting his big brain. All those languages he's learned are for naught. His first words to me tonight were "I hate the stars" and "they make me feel small" and "your mouth is very red" and my mouth is not for kissing and he is so tall and his hair is so nice and his hands are so damn cold and I think his girlfriend is looking for him.

My shirt is cleaner than his because I wear my heart in my chest cavity and he wears his whiskey around his collar. Everyone in this apartment wears their whiskey and their beer and their champagne around their collars. They gave me a glass bottle of something clear and it burned less going down than his eyes do going up. The boys here are men and they think I'm older than I am, and for some reason, I'm not correcting them.

I'm too short to box with God

I'm considering inking tattoos across both sets of knuckles and surgically correcting and stiffening the placement of my fingers so that the 'fuck' trickles down my middle finger and into your retinas and the 'you' points out at your groin.

I feel my existence is tainted in some subtle, but essential way.
Tongue-tied

You can fall in love with words, y'know.
I've seen it happen. The
relationship between words and
their meanings is a remarkable one, and I
do adore studying the
subtleties and nuances of other languages in my
own time.

Nietzsche said that
the idea that words cannot always say
everything has been written about
extensively, and he's right – to an
extent. The only gap I see is
that one which besieges
leftover words without
translations. No English words can really
define these
wonderful, elusive
brutes.

The Germans have a word,
waldeinsamkeit, which,
expounded loosely, means the
solitude one finds in
wilderness. We all
know the feeling, but there isn't
one word that explains it in
English. The Italians say
culaccino to describe the
mark left on a table by cold
glass. Who knew
condensation could be so
poetic?

The Japanese have a
gorgeous language. They've got words like
komorebi, when sunlight filters through the
trees, and tsundoku, the act of leaving a book
unread after buying it.

The Indonesians have a phrase that
defines me everytime I
speak: jayus, or someone who
tells a joke so badly you can't help but
laugh out loud. One of my favorites is *mamihlapinatapai*, the Yaghan word for a look shared by two people, each wishing the other will offer something they both desire but are unwilling to suggest or offer themselves.

I love the Russian word, *toska*, too, roughly translated to sadness, melancholia, lugubriousness. Melancholia itself is a lovely word, English as it is.

So I know all of these charming words, but whenever I open my mouth, all that comes out is a stream of umms and uhhs and errs and I'm much better on paper. I have so much to say to so many people, but I can't. I suppose I'll have to fold myself up in an envelope. It's much easier that way.

I figured when I was a grown-up, I'd have grown-up thoughts

Ten years ago, if you'd told me I'd be (a) addicted to coffee, (b) unable to get out of bed most mornings, and (c) heartbroken, I'd have thought you were crazy.

I'm going to ask you, now (since you know everything), how do I fix this?

I ask a lot of questions to which no one has answers. Is it wrong that I find comfort in the fact that I'm not the only one wondering?
The space-time continuum. It can be perceived as many different things. In fact, most don’t even know what it is. I am one of the few people able to understand this vast amount of information. I admit that even I get confused at times, but hey, we’re only human. My ability to perceive this might appear as a blessing to some, but to me, it is a curse.

If you are smart enough to get here, chances are that you understand that brains can take away prominent social status. Cut to the chase: Intelligence does not mean popularity. This is never more evident than in gym every day. It’s not just me being excluded. It’s all the “nerds” and people who didn’t start out super athletic and popular.

However, this is not the least of my problems. Let me take you on a journey through memories, through the past, and deliver to you insight of the future, my future. This shall be the story of a youngling named Alex. This is his hand writing right now. This is my pen hovering over the pages. This is the story of my life.

The beginning was usual. I shall skip over this part to spare you some time that could be spent more wisely. Not that I don’t appreciate you listening to me; just that, chances are, you know how a person’s life begins and continues on a straight path for about $X$ amount of years. The action starts in late sixth grade, and continues on through the present. Let us commence.

“We need to override the jocks.” It’s Sam speaking.

What a shame that he’s moving away next year, I think.

“Agreed,” I say, and Julian follows. We sit on the bleachers next to the goal. It’s third hour. P.E. The bane of nerds everywhere. To make matters worse, it’s basketball.

“Just how do we do so?” I ask.

“I don’t know. Maybe I could score on my own team,” Julian says.

“No,” Sam says. “That would just make them mad. We don’t need to sacrifice wins for our cause. It’s just to make them treat us fairly, that is a revolution in itself.”

The talk continues like this for the rest of the class period. We decide who needs to be stood up for the most and determine to take action tomorrow.

“Come on Bradley! Pass it to Jordan!” we yell at the leader of the jocks. We have decided that even though not all of us really ‘like’ Jordan, we’ll still stand up for him because he is generally the most excluded.

Bradley finally listens to us, but only once. And not to anyone’s surprise, Jordan drops the ball and it goes to the opposing team, who scores almost immediately.

“Why do we even do this?” I mutter.

“It’s an act of liberation,” Sam says.

“You know they’ll just hate us more,” I reply.

“Our goal is to inspire the people to revolt.”

“I thought it was to make them treat us fairly without starting a complete revolution.”

“That was yesterday.”

It continues on like this for the rest of the year. Make plans, try to enact upon them, and repeat. Make plans, enact, repeat. Plans, enact, repeat. Ugh.

Before we know it, it’s time for Sam to go. Tears are limited, however, because we aren’t children anymore. We have survived a year of middle school. Next year is going to be an even greater
challenge. As if it wasn’t hard enough with your best friend moving away, I’m taking two advanced classes next year, and I hardly know any of the 8th graders who will be in my classes. Poop.

“Tanner, are you there?” I say into my phone.
“Yep,” Tanner says. He can be destructive at times, but overall, he’s a good friend. “I’m going to start a new colony.”
“Why? We have a perfectly good pre-built one here at Robbie’s.”
“It shall sell fish.” He apparently didn’t listen to me. Typical. We’re playing Minecraft; Tanner just got started on the server, while I’ve been on for a while.
“I think I’ve been on too long,” I mumble. My eye has been hurting for a while now, as so my arm.
“What time is it?” I ask.
“Umm, eight thirty.”
“Really? Already?”
“Yeah. Time really does fly.”
“Oh gee, I’ve got to go take a shower or my mom will kill me.”
“Ok. Bye”
“Adios.”
Within five minutes, I’m bathing in a storm of hot water, droplets trickling down my back. Ok, what have I done today? Was it really just twelve hours ago that I woke up? That’s a lot. It only felt like a couple. I guess that’s because I was playing games all day. Wow, my eye hurts. And so does my arm. Side effects. Well, that’s one more wasted day. I really need to do more with my life. Do I even have a life worth living? It seems all I do is play Minecraft and do homework. OH SNAP I HAVE HOMEWORK!
I finish my shower quickly.
The next day I’m really tired. What can I say, I couldn’t get any sleep. I guess that’s what I get for getting my time schedule mixed up by playing video games all day. I realize it’s been three days since I last had school. Thanksgiving. Boy, I sure haven’t done much this weekend.
Later, after many more hours of computing, I consider life once more in the shower (You know, why do your deepest thoughts always happen in the bathroom? I should become a scientist and figure that out).
What makes popular people so popular? Is it that they’re extroverts? Most people here star in football. They have a lot of friends. Do I have a lot of friends? Yes… Best friends? There’s Ethan, Tanner, Hunter…. Are they worthy of friendship? Am I worthy of their friendship? Would they make a sacrifice for me? Would I sacrifice for them? “No,” is the first thing that pops into my head. Is that true? Do I have any true friends? Stop thinking, Alex. But it’s my nature. You think too much. You depress yourself. You have no friends. Oh, and look who’s talking. Shut up. No. OK CAN WE PLEASE JUST STOP ACTING LIKE GOLLUM! No.
Two days later and it’s Monday again. First hour, Mrs. Miller. An eighth grade class. Few friends. Luckily few enemies but still enemy territory. It seems we always have homework in Mrs. Miller’s class.
I have made an internal promise to not play as many video games this week but still can’t wait for the day to be over.
I walk into the room that was filled with strangers a couple months ago. I take my seat next to Turner, who was in my second grade Delta class. I’m sure you will figure this out, you’re intelligent, but Delta is the class for nerds, the high achievers, definitely not the stupid ones. We’re bored most of the time and are only treated like the intelligentsia for an hour a day. Anyway, Turner’s the closest thing I have to a friend in this place, so I take my seat next to him and wait for the teacher to enter.
“Okay, class. Today we’ll be working on your Article of the Week. I’m sure you’ll be extremely bored and hateful by the time we’re finished.”

The whole class sighs, but we follow Mrs. Miller’s directions and get to work. For me, simply passing time until that miraculous tone of freedom echoes through the halls once more, signaling our next class to begin.

Thoughts echo through my head the rest of the day, mostly of sleep and homework. Then, a philosophy pops into my head. *Life isn’t fair. Deal with it.*

I know that, in the end, if I can wait that long, that this thing called karma will kick in and kick some of my classmates in the butt. For me though, I hope it plays out something like this. I roll up to the ten year class reunion in my dark black Mustang, hop out of the car and scoot around to the passenger side where I help my former NFL cheerleader wife, Abby, out of the car. We stroll up to the registration desk where I bump into a short, balding man wearing a frayed polyester jacket and sporting one heck of a comb over.

“Hey Bradley, how you doin’?” I ask, a smirk slowly breaking out across my face.
Tears streamed down from my swollen eyelids as I darted past casual shoppers pushing their carts of groceries. Frustration beyond my handling capacity struck me down, leaving me feeling like an objectified pile of worthlessness.

“Attention shoppers, we will close in fifteen minutes,” announced a voice over the loudspeaker. “Thank you for shopping with us!”

“Scales.”

Obediently, I propped my violin onto my shoulder and touched my bow to the string. With a deep breath, I swiftly pulled the bow over the string. The full-bellied vibrations of the B-flat resonated through my instrument and into my body. The hearty sound penetrated through the cold, dry air of the ballroom and bounced off the polished tile floors and plastered walls. Satisfied with the first note, I proceeded with comfortable fingers. The scale progressed to the piercing top note, slightly out of tune, but I recovered quickly on the way back down. I stared at the feet behind the screen for further instruction.

“Excerpt.”

Once I flipped to the graphite-infested pages of the excerpt, I started bobbing my head to my intended tempo. Within seconds, I replayed hours of careful practice in my mind to remind myself of the most important point: do not rush. I brought my violin to my chin, and quickly fingered a hard passage before I started.

I can do this.

A cough erupted from behind the blank screen. My mind wavered, but my bow struck the string. I bounced through the passage without full mental commitment. Like a train rolling off the tracks, I started to lose control of my speed as my fingers started to tangle. Frustrated and exhausted, I completed the excerpt with a sour feeling in my stomach.

With that, my five minutes in the audition room were over. It felt like an eternity.

Toothpaste... shampoo... cosmetics...

Hair whipping my face, I rushed past organized aisles of personal care products. My nasal canal started to burn as tears started welling up again.

Why did I work so hard? All that diligent practice amounted to NOTHING. I’m such a worthless human being.

“Attention shoppers, we will close in fifteen minutes. Thank you for shopping with us!” Smothered in confusion, I kept running.

“Here we are: Manitou Springs!” my dad declared.

I peered out the car window into the lively town. Groups of tourists were strolling past whimsical cafés, bright window displays, and painted benches. A street performer was singing a rendition of Bob Dylan’s “Blowin’ in the Wind” with an open guitar case, in which kids dropped spare change. A gentle breeze rustled the trees and wafted the aroma of barbecue through the town, behind which a lush mountain range stretched under a cloudless blue sky.
After squeezing our car into a parking space along the street, we started our exploration of Manitou Springs. I immediately noticed a window display of various Native American arrowheads. Pulling my family behind me, I entered the store.

Intricate Native American blankets covered each of the four interior walls from floor to ceiling. Aisles of tourist merchandise—mostly postcards and key chains—filled massive barrels lined up at the entrance. The shop owner paid us no attention; he sat on a rickety, wooden bench in the back corner. In silence, he manipulated metal rods into smooth curves using pliers and inserted smooth glass into designated coils. Catching the light streaming in from the front door, these sculptures embodied a sense of elegance. It made all the tourist merchandise look like junk.

He moved his masterpiece aside to join his other sculptures, which all presented unique designs. With gentle hand, he taped a price tag onto his works. He had written “$10” onto the paper with crude black marker.

Ten dollars is awfully cheap for something that nice.

Silent fluorescents lights up above illuminated an aisle of organized chaos in front of me. Piles of commercial misfits lined the shelves and fill tubs on the floor. Gooey nail polish was scattered in boxes next to stacks of educational DVDs, cell phone accessories, and piñata fillers. Wax candles that seemed to contain goblin organs sat on top of plastic toilet seats near trays of canned dog food. Everything was marked down.

My rush of frustration subsided as I started to browse the eclectic selection of products. A ten-dollar assortment of curtain rods, brushed with a metallic luster, caught my eye. The image of the Manitou Springs craftsman rushed back to me. In my wild imagination, I naturally restructured the clearance metal rods into coils and smooth curves to reflect the graceful ornamental pieces that had impressed me before.

These rods had such potential for art, and yet employees had carelessly placed them on the shelves and slapped on red stickers to mark them as failures.

Admiring the detail, I carefully ran my fingers over the rods’ corrugated metal. Some had more dents and scratches, but none were too severe. Even so, they could easily be twisted into elaborate sculptures with the help of a little heat. To create artwork from such “junk” would grant these neglected items new lives, new opportunities to prove to the world the potential of even the most seemingly worthless things.

Everything has value. Everything has potential. Junk is not junk.

“Attention shoppers, we will close in five minutes. Thank you for shopping with us!”

“Scales.”

I took a deep breath. A flashback of my experiences overfilled me: my failed audition, the artist in Manitou Springs, my escape to the clearance aisle. Junk is not junk. I am NOT junk.

I was the craftsman who spends late nights perfecting deformed sculptures. I transformed junk into art. I saw the value within myself.

Empowered and determined, I pulled by bow over the string. The resonant tone of my soul rang through the hall. Confidence surged within me.

I can do this.

With that, a new chapter of my life began.

I am not junk.
Marie scoots back in the blue tulle dress and the too-big leather seat her parents have patted her down in and looks around at the imposing space. Glistening redwood panels line the room from edge to edge, curiously gleaming and glaring and undeniably judging like all four people in the benches.

To her left, Daddy smirks confidently, the stubble from his morning shave sticking out as always. He mouths “Vote for Daddy” and pushes out his lips and drags down his eyelids until Marie can’t hold in her giggles and the judge flashes him a stern look.

On the right, Mommy leaks premature tears of victory into a pristine white tissue. She shapes her palms into long C’s and joins them together to create an uneven hand-heart for beaming Marie to receive and return.

The last lawyer pushes through the heavy double doors and strolls into the courtroom. She walks straight up to the judge, mutters an apology for her lateness, and lazily approaches the tall stand Marie peeks over. She throws a halfhearted smile at the shy little girl and runs her just-manicured fingernails through a matted mass of blonde hair.

“Hi, Marie,” the attorney scours the limited lines of her index card. “I’d like to ask...” she begins, on the verge of yawning mid-question, “who would you like to live with—your mother or your father?”

Marie is immediately hit with the force of two eagerly competing pairs of eyes, eyes she used to watch wink at each other early Christmas morning when Marie ripped open her much-wanted dollhouse and asked how one fat-bellied, white-haired man from an icy cold North could be so wonderful. Eyes that reluctantly waved goodbye to each other when Daddy would leave for one of his prolonged business trips to Canada. Eyes that slowly grew, Marie hardly knew how, to avidly battle with one another, to stab and counter each other daily. Eyes that glared at each other all the way to the airport that time they were leaving to visit Aunt Lisa in Colorado. Eyes that never once looked at each other the entire morning they’d eaten breakfast at IHOP, except to pass the greasy salt shaker to sprinkle over half-burnt scrambled eggs. Eyes that are now prodding her on both sides, each jab more hurtful than the last, each poke more unbearable than before.

The first thing Marie remembers is looking down at Mommy’s freckled hands yesterday and promising them that her own chubby ones would always be close enough to squeeze. She pivots in her chair and peeks over the podium to the right-side benches. Instantly Mommy’s glossy pink lips split in a grin wider than her jawline. Seeing her mousy brown hair all tied up in that elaborate bun reminds Marie of when they lick away mint ice cream together at Coldstone after Mommy gets her haircut at the salon. She suddenly feels the cozy warmth of the checkered duvet in Mommy’s giant bed that they both snuggle up in when Marie has nightmares about Mommy going away.

Someone sighs resignedly on the other side of the room, and Marie swivels her chair over to see Daddy slumping in the sharp curve of the bench. He immediately sits back up at her open gaze and a hopeful smile tugs up the sepias corners of his mouth. He leans in over the bench like he does when he’s showing her how to swing the mini pink baseball bat he got her for her fifth birthday at the batting cages. His brawny arms lie across the narrow edge of the bench, and Marie is reminded of all those times those same strong arms threw her in the air and caught her in their embrace just before the tiled kitchen floor could catch up to her head. She suddenly realizes she can’t possibly leave Daddy’s hairy brown arms forever.

But didn’t you like when Mommy let you try on shoes at the mall? Her wriggly toes ask from the dark bottom of the podium. Well, what about when Daddy and you caught that scaly fish at the lake?
Her hands counter. What about when Mommy taught you the first steps of ballet? What about when Daddy and you went kayaking together? What about that?

Marie’s throat tightens. Tears begin to seep down into the unwelcoming wells of Marie’s big green eyes. She reminds herself that she is seven years old and hardly a baby anymore. That she cannot possibly cry on this stand today. Desperately she gulps down saliva to cool down her throat and blinks her eyelids to keep the wet in her eyes at bay.

She remembers a better time, when Mommy and Daddy and she were having a picnic on the holey tablecloth on the old house’s sprawling front lawn. They’d just finished stuffing themselves with wet grapes and apple juice and chicken salad sandwiches, and when their bellies were full they lay down across the tablecloth and tangled up their arms with everybody else’s. She and Daddy had competed to see who the best burper was, and Mommy had giggled uncontrollably beside them. The weather had been chilly enough for goose-bumps, and Marie had complained halfway through, but now she wishes she hadn’t.

Something strong cracks a painful dent to her fist-sized heart, but only microscopic teardrops escape from her lower eyelid, running down her cheeks into the front fold of her pretty blue dress. Not a single gaze strays from her exhausted body as she clears her throat and begins to speak.

Her voice betrays the juvenile hope that has transformed into forlorn acceptance.

“I want us all to be together.”
Teeth

Teeth stay hidden in my pink gum,
like cold animals in a sharp frost.
When they sprout,
my pacifier persuades
them away from that perfect pattern.

Teeth pocketed by pounds of sugar,
trying to twin a satellite’s surface.
Another is loose,
from that schoolyard scuffle
over a hopscotch ruling.

Teeth stained less than pearly white,
by lips clogged with cigarettes.
Strings of metal attempt to
pull them back
into a ridged symmetry.

Teeth dyed with coffee, tea,
and lost energy.
Hot chewing gum is my usual partner,
as clocks tick away time
for purposeful oral hygiene.

Teeth sit openly in clear liquid
to match the opaque container
of slight colorful capsules,
the nurse rations out
to my fellow neighbors.

Light of Me

“Do what is expected,”
as the light of me is contorted
by tiny mirrors society builds in my voice.
The real hope is hidden,
like inspiration inside of a stale folded cookie.
“Do what is gratifying,”
as the light of me examines my insides
 to uncover the trustworthy and desirable.
The real joy is hidden
 between memories I adopted from sepia washed movies.

“Do what is lovable,“
as the light of me urges my principled center,
to entirely love what is not lovely.
The real gentleness is hidden
 in the cavities of my imagination dug by zealous aspirations.

“Do what is compassionate,”
as the light of me illuminates frames of pained people,
 ignored by the comfortable and content.
The real hate is hidden
 in the transparency of life to the isolated,
 and the darkness of life to the forgotten.

A Planned Predisposition

Don’t Script Yourself.

It hinders your opportunities.
Your options-
Your personality-
Your loves-
Your joys-
Yourself.
If you expect yourself to speak
In scheduled syllables.

It halts pure communication.
With your family-
With your peers-
With your companions-
With your unknown strangers-
With honesty in yourself.
If you only can speak
A strangling vocabulary.

It kills who you will be.
In society-
In all resolutions-
In others’ lives-
In your aspirations-
In your imaginations.
If you only want your words
To be wiped off that sterile notebook.

Be impulsive.
Jut out from the impeccable wall.
Strip the peeling paint from your inside eyelids.
Don’t Script Yourself.
CHARACTERS

GRANDMA LOUISE, 67, a lively old woman whose sanity is questioned
MICHAEL RAVUS, 26, a serious and nervous man, Louise’s grandson
DOCTOR, 32, a kind man who takes care of Louise
PHIL, early 30’s, Louise’s ex-husband, filled with foolish but good intentions
YOUNG LOUISE, early 30s, a free spirited, eccentric, and pregnant woman
POLICEMAN 1 and 2, 30s, concerned about Louise’s well-being

PLACE
A nursing home, in a quiet and scenic town of the South.

TIME
The present, on a calm, fall evening, 1950’s.

We see a business man, a stern man, walking silently along a path towards a building that has obviously been taken care of. The well-groomed path shows the touch of care and love. MICHAEL RAVUS is seen through a bed of tulips to be walking stiffly into this nursing home. As he enters, he looks around, not knowing where to go. He starts walking further into the building, searching for someone. An elderly and sickly woman is being guided by a younger woman. The elderly woman is a patient, and struggles immensely with the nurse who is guiding her. MICHAEL heads toward them, unsure. A young, and professional looking man in a doctor’s coat suddenly steps in front of MICHAEL, blocking his view from the old woman of whom he was so intrigued.

DOCTOR
(Brightly, he smiles politely as he talks.)
Hello, sir. May I help you with something?

MICHAEL
(Looking around DOCTOR’S shoulder, distracted by the woman still struggling behind him.)
Um... Yes, you can. (Snaps out of his staring.) I’m sorry, excuse me. I’m Michael Ravus. I called in earlier.

DOCTOR
(Shaking hands.)
Oh, yes. It’s a pleasure to meet you. You’re here to see Louise, is that correct?

MICHAEL
(Glances nervously yet again behind the DOCTOR.)
Yes, that’s correct.

DOCTOR
(Noticing MICHAEL’S glances and nervous behavior. He chuckles lightly.)
She is ready to see you, Mr. Ravus. I could take you to where she is if you would like.
(Relieved, MICHAEL nods.)
Right this way. Just follow me.

MICHAEL, noticeably relieved that the previous woman was not who he was looking for, still remains on edge. The two men walk through a few quiet rooms. Depending on location, the room LOUISE is in can be a large, beautifully decorated room, or she may be sitting at a bench or a table outdoors, in a courtyard perhaps. As the men walk through the quiet halls, they begin small talk.

DOCTOR
How are you related to Louise again?

MICHAEL
She’s my grandmother.

DOCTOR
Oh, how wonderful. I didn’t know she had a grandson. It’s a pleasure to meet you. Louise has been looking forward to this ever since she heard that she will be having company this evening. Even put on her best Sunday clothes for you. (Another warm chuckle.)

MICHAEL
(Nervous and quiet.)
How nice of her.

DOCTOR
(Sensing the tension, he keeps his warm personality and attempts to relieve the tension with conversation.)
Your grandmother is very loved here, you know. When was the last time you visited her?

MICHAEL
It’s been... a while.

DOCTOR nods, seeming to understand, and leads MICHAEL into the room where LOUISE is sitting quietly and alone, peaceful. She gazes out of a window silently, almost in a sad way. LOUISE does not seem to notice the two men entering the room. They approach quietly behind her, and the DOCTOR speaks softly.

DOCTOR
(Placing a hand gently on LOUISE’s shoulder.)
Louise, I brought someone here who would like to visit with you.

Suddenly, like a firework, LOUISE stands up excitedly, worrying the DOCTOR for a brief second, until he releases a soft chuckle admiringly.

GRANDMOTHER LOUISE
Oh, yes! Company! Thank you. Oh gosh, it is so nice to meet you, Michael! Don’t be shy now, come give your grandmother a hug.

Stunned, MICHAEL stands there shocked as LOUISE runs around to give him a hug. MICHAEL simply pats
her on the back.

DOCTOR
(Joyful from this reunion, smiles at MICHAEL and pats him briefly on the back.)
Let me know if you need anythin’ at all, okay? I’ll be right in the other room if you need me.

MICHAEL
(Staring at LOUISE in slight shock and wonder.)
Yes, yes. Of course. Thank you.

DOCTOR exits the room. LOUISE smiles largely at MICHAEL, taking in every detail of him.

GRANDMA LOUISE
(Guiding MICHAEL to a chair next to hers.)
Oh! Please, sit down, child.

MICHAEL
(Stuttering.)
It’s... It’s nice to finally meet you. I...

LOUISE
Tea?

MICHAEL
Um... Sure.

(LOUISE pours MICHAEL a cup of tea warmly from a kettle sitting on a tray on the table. She hands him his cup and pours her own. They both sit.)

LOUISE
It has been too long, hasn’t it?

MICHAEL
Yes, I suppose it has been far too long...

LOUISE
How long has it been?

MICHAEL
(Gently, and unsure of what to say.)
Louise, it’s been years... I must have been a little boy still... Do you remember?

LOUISE becomes suddenly absent minded and stirs her tea with a distant look. Although the look is distant, it is not sad.

MICHAEL
(Quietly, MICHAEL sets down his tea of which he has barely touched. Unsure of how to act around LOUISE, MICHAEL breaks the silence.)
Louise... Louise, I came here to talk to you about my father. The night he died, they told me at the police station that you were the last person to see him alive.

LOUISE
(Suddenly awakening from her stupor.)
Ah, yes. Back when your father and I went flying together. (Beat) We still go flying to this day, you know.

MICHAEL
(Fidgets in seat.)
Flying?

LOUISE
(Setting down her tea, she nods and smiles.)
Straight up to the Heavens.

MICHAEL
I don’t understand. Do you mean...

LOUISE
(Suddenly becomes stern.)
Of course you don’t. You can’t see.

MICHAEL
Louise... I’m sorry. I’m just not understanding, I guess. I can see fine right now. Maybe you should get some rest first, and then we can talk later?

LOUISE
(Grips the edge of the table.)
No, Phil, you can’t. You can’t, you can’t. You cannot. (Pauses and collects herself. The warmth returns to her.) Not yet anyway.

MICHAEL
(Pauses)
My name is Michael, remember? But it’s okay. Maybe you don’t remember. That’s perfectly alright. (Beat) My father—can you remember anything about him on the day he died?

LOUISE
(MICHAEL gets up and paces as she speaks.)
Oh, yes. My lovely son. It was just yesterday that he came out and visited me.

MICHAEL
He what?

LOUISE
He came to visit me! Felt real bad for me, I guess. Though I don’t know why. I’m doin’ just fine out here. (Chuckles to herself.)
MICHAEL
(Stops pacing across from LOUISE, and stares awkwardly at her in a brief moment of silence. He is visibly disturbed and upset.)
I came here to ask you some questions about my father. You see, I need to find closure because...
(Takes a deep breath and begins pacing again.)
Okay, I might be getting ahead of myself now. Look, my father and I were never close. You know that we were never a close family. But I know now that it was a mistake. I wasn’t there for him in the end, but you were. I just want to know how he was. You were with him the day he died. Is that right?

LOUISE
(Stands.)
Come now, come now, sit back down. Why are you getting so worked up when we are just gettin’ to know each other?
(Long Pause, MICHAEL looks at LOUISE, unsure of what to think of her still.)

MICHAEL
(Speaking quietly, and unsure of himself. As he continues speaking, he becomes a little more confident.)
Look, my father’s death is pretty important to me. Would you please tell me about what happened that night? The officers at the station told me that you had left just minutes before I arrived.

LOUISE
(Sits back down.)
All right, all right, just come sit back down here. But first, would you like to go flower picking with me?
(Wistfully) Oh, how I love flowers. So beautiful this time of year. Such a lovely smell too. Especially tulips... My favorite. Why, are you familiar with tulips dear?
(LOUISE continues to ramble as MICHAEL speaks.)

MICHAEL
(Distressed.)
Do you have a husband? Do I have a grandfather I could talk to? Any way I could contact him?

LOUISE
Especially the yellow ones for some reason. They have a beautiful smell. And taste!
(LOUISE chuckles.)

MICHAEL
Yes, tulips. Excuse me for a moment.

(MICHAEL goes briefly into the next room. He searches for the DOCTOR, and once he finds him they stand in the doorway together and watch LOUISE sits there happily, without a care in the world.)

DOCTOR
She’s so happy, isn’t she? Such a joy to have here. What was it that you needed, Mr. Ravus?

MICHAEL
I don’t think she remembers anything and it’s... hard to talk to her. Do you know if she was married or not?
DOCTOR
(Sighs.)
I do think she was married, though she never has once talked about it. She’s odd, but lively, isn’t she? Unfortunately, I believe that her husband left her long ago.

MICHAEL
Yes, it is unfortunate. Hasn’t anyone tried to look up records about him? Do you know his name?

DOCTOR
I’m not sure about his name. Like I told you, she doesn’t speak much about him. And I’m not one to pry on that sort of business.

MICHAEL
And what if I found out his name? Could you look him up for me then?

DOCTOR
I wouldn’t be able to do that, sorry. Besides, I’d imagine he’s long gone somewhere else now. Or dead for that matter.

LOUISE
Phil, you’re not leaving now, are you? You can’t leave just yet. We haven’t finished.

MICHAEL
(To DOCTOR, politely, though you can tell that he is bothered by the lack of information.)
Thank you.
(DOCTOR nods and exits. MICHAEL sits back down with LOUISE with a heavy sigh.)

LOUISE
You know what we can do tonight? We can go out to the gardens and look at the stars, Phil. (She looks out the window, with a happy and distant look.) The stars are so breathtaking out here. Sometimes, they talk to me.
(MICHAEL nods and looks around room. He sighs and pushes his hair back.)
I’m sure they would love to talk to you also. So bright and beautiful. Just like your eyes.
(MICHAEL looks at LOUISE with a sad look in his eyes.)

A flashback occurs. A couple walks slowly through the quiet of the night air. Beauty and peacefulness surround two newlyweds. LOUISE and PHIL walk along a path, not saying anything. The stars are out. They are both somber.

YOUNG LOUISE
Why?

PHIL
(Desperate and upset.)
Have you ever thought about what’s right and what’s wrong? If you knew that I was better off without you, wouldn’t you leave me if you thought it was right? Even if it killed the love that you carry in your heart, Louise?
(Both YOUNG LOUISE and PHIL sit down on a bench and YOUNG LOUISE picks up a flower from the
ground beside her. They both look out into the open, not saying anything for a moment.

YOUNG LOUISE
Phil...

PHIL
I do love you. I really do. But I can’t just go on like this anymore. I can’t pretend that we’re happy this way. I know that you’re not very happy at all anymore. I’m sure not happy. Do you think I can be a father? I’m not ready to be a father. Louise, please...

YOUNG LOUISE
Where will you go then?

PHIL
(Pauses.)
I have been offered a job out of the country. Louise, please quit messing around with that flower and listen to me.
(YOUNG LOUISE steadily places the flower on the ground beside her. PHIL kneels on one knee in front of YOUNG LOUISE as if he were proposing.)
This could finally be my chance. I can travel the world, like we’ve always talked about. I can finally live my dream.

YOUNG LOUISE
(Refuses to look at PHIL. She places her hand on her stomach and speaks softly.)
I thought I was your dream.
(Beat, long pause between the two.)
Will you ever come back to me? We could still be a family. Please, the baby...

PHIL
(Pauses.)
No, I can’t. I shouldn’t. You’ll be better off without me. You know this. You’ve been an independent woman all your life; why would you need me now? Deep down, you’ve gotta know this. Please, look at me, Louise.
(Sits back next to YOUNG LOUISE.)
You see that star there? (Points.) That bright one, just left of that tree?
(YOUNG LOUISE somberly looks up into the direction PHIL is pointing.)
Yes, that one. I always look up at the stars when I need to think. And for some reason, that one always draws my attention. It’s like it’s trying to tell me something. Trying to speak to me. Trying to tell me that I’m not alone. That star will be there for you too, Louise.

YOUNG LOUISE
(After long pause, she slips off her wedding ring, and places it in the PHIL’s hand.)
I wish you luck.

PHIL
That’s it then? That’s all you have to say about this? Suddenly you have no emotion?
(Stands to pace, frustrated.)
YOUNG LOUISE
I wish you luck. Go out and live your dream. I know you’ll be an amazing man.
(PHIL pauses to see if YOUNG LOUISE has anything else left to say. She doesn’t.)

PHIL
I’ll be on my way then.
(PHIL stops pacing next to YOUNG LOUISE. They both stand PHIL brushes YOUNG LOUISE’s cheek.
YOUNG LOUISE has no reaction and continues to play with the flower in her hand. PHIL sighs and walks
off into the distance, leaving YOUNG LOUISE in the garden alone. Angrily, she begins to rip out a small
bed of flowers that is next to her. She sobs, but stops once she tears out one single tulip. Staring at the
flower in her hand, the tears subside. She stands there and places her hand on her stomach. She looks
down at the bench where PHIL once was, and then at her stomach. She rubs it in silence. YOUNG LOUISE
then sinks down to the ground. Pause. She suddenly gets up, drops the flower, and begins to waltz,
slowly at first. YOUNG LOUISE laughs and smiles slowly and hums as she picks up the torn up flowers
from the ground. Continuing to hum, she increases speed in her dance. Flashback ends.
MICHAEAL and LOUISE are sitting in their chairs as the DOCTOR enters cheerfully into the room.)

DOCTOR
Louise. Time to take your pills. I almost forgot. Now I know that you don’t like taking them. But please,
just take them okay?
(Hands LOUISE her pills.)

LOUISE
Oh, sure. I always do take them.
(Winks at the Doctor)

DOCTOR
(Chuckles warmly.)
Oh, Louise. We need you to take your pills though. You might get into some trouble if you don’t. They’re
meant to help you get better... You might as well take them.

LOUISE
Alright, alright. I’ll take them if you leave me be, you nurse!

DOCTOR
(Laughs and pats LOUISE on the shoulder.)
Take care of yourself, please.
(Starts to exit the room and is followed by MICHAEAL. MICHAEAL stops him.)

MICHAEAL
Excuse me, but can you tell me exactly what her (Hesitates) condition is?

DOCTOR
She’s been brought to us because some of the folks around here thought that she had gone insane after
her husband left her. They say that she has problems confronting reality.

MICHAEAL
What do you mean?
DOCTOR
She doesn’t exactly see the world the way that we do. Though, I can’t see any harm in that. As we grow old, we begin to force ourselves to face reality. Little by little, hopes become broken and fall apart, we settle, we stop bein’ romantic. We allow our dreams to dwindle. But not your grandmother. When she was admitted here, I couldn’t understand at first why exactly she was here. Then I began to study her. She’s the only one around here that has kept her hopes alive. Her dreams. Her livelihood. If you ask me, your grandmother has her life more figured out than anyone else around here. And that sure is to be admired Mr. Ravus, not judged as insanity.
(Both look at LOUISE as she looks around blissfully. DOCTOR nods respectfully to MICHAEL and exits. MICHAEL sits down with LOUISE.)

LOUISE
(Shoves pills into her pocket.)
Now where were we?

MICHAEL
Um. Aren’t you supposed to take those?

LOUISE
Pills are for weak people who are old and sick. Do I look like an old, weak, sick person to you?
(Stands and walks to a space of flooring in front of her. Lays down sideways to press her ear against the ground.)

MICHAEL
Before my father died, he told me why I could never see you. Told me you were crazy. If those pills are meant to help you, why wouldn’t you want to take them?

LOUISE
Michael, can I tell you something?

MICHAEL
I guess. Thanks for calling me Michael.

LOUISE
Come closer.
(Walks towards LOUISE.)
Closer. Let me whisper it in your ear.
(MICHAEL kneels down near his grandmother. LOUISE shouts impossibly loud.)
Have you listened to the soil today?!

MICHAEL
(MICHAEL jumps up as LOUISE stands up clapping and laughing; the DOCTOR rushes in the room, worried about the sudden shouting.)
Oh God, Louise. I can’t... Doctor. My father. Maybe I should go. This was a bad idea, coming here. I’m sorry, I’m sorry...
DOCTOR
Give her a chance...

LOUISE
(Recovers from laughing and sits back down.)
Oh, Michael, won’t you stay for just a little while longer? Just for some more tea?

MICHAEL
(Sighs, and looks at the DOCTOR, and then back at LOUISE.)
Alright. But please... Can we please talk...

LOUISE
Why, I have been doing that exact thing. Only you haven’t been cooperating. Doctor, fetch us some tea.

DOCTOR
Of course, Louise.
(Gives MICHAEL stern a look of warning before exiting.)

LOUISE
Now come and sit, my child. May I ask you one question?

MICHAEL
(Sits down.)
Sure.

LOUISE
You’re not happy.

MICHAEL
That wasn’t a question.

LOUISE
Well, are you?

MICHAEL
I’d like to think so. I can’t really complain much, I guess.

LOUISE
Are you married?

MICHAEL
You said you only wanted to ask one question.
(LOUISE looks expectantly at MICHAEL, waiting for the answer.)
I am married. We’re just not together... Not at the moment...

LOUISE
(Becomes very excited and laughs happily.)
How could you have not invited me to the wedding? Your own grandmother? Tell me, what is my grand-
daughter in-law’s name?

MICHAEL
Naomi. I loved her as much as any person can be loved. She was always there for me whenever I needed her. I was just so upset, I guess, that I thought I didn’t need anyone, even her. I haven’t been the best husband... I told her to leave and that I didn’t need her. I realize now that I made a mistake. That’s why I came here, looking around for you. I can’t make the same mistake with Naomi that I made with my father. I need her back. I want her to love me again. This all make sense? I thought that sending her away would help me with the loss of my father, but now I’ve just lost another person that I love.

(As MICHAEL speaks, he becomes more and more upset. LOUISE is oblivious to this.)

LOUISE
Are you familiar with pigeons?

MICHAEL
What?

LOUISE
You know, the birds?

MICHAEL
Not particularly.

LOUISE
(Stands and starts soaring around like a bird.)
Pigeons, when separated from their mate, they will travel far and wide—across oceans—thousands of miles even, just to be with the one they love. 
(Soars out of control and stumbles into MICHAEL as he catches her from falling.)

MICHAEL
Careful, Louise. (Pause) Are you saying that I should go out and find her?

LOUISE
Love causes pigeons to do remarkable but unexplainable things. Now, if you were to go find your pigeon, well wouldn’t that be something remarkable?
(LOUISE winks at MICHAEL, and MICHAEL coughs nervously and scrunches his face up in with a stern look as he leads LOUISE back to her seat.)
Now, enough on such a dreary topic. What is it that you really wanted?

MICHAEL
(Shakes head as if awakened from his deep thought.)
Right. You’re right. Listen, Louise... I thought we could talk about... (Clears throat nervously.) My father passed away on August 18th, two years ago. You were there weren’t you? Please, tell me everything that my father said and did that day. I need to know who he was.

LOUISE
(Suddenly pushes away her chair and does a quick dance.)
Rain day. Rain day.

MICHAEL
What?

LOUISE
(Runs to MICHAEL and spins him around with her. MICHAEL goes along with it and dances with her for a moment, but then tries to hold her still.)
That was Rain Day. Oh how wonderful. Have you ever danced in the rain? It’s such a pleasant feeling. Especially on a warm, August day. With a nice cup of tea afterwards. Oh, how I love tea.

MICHAEL
Louise, I asked you about my father, not about dancing around in the rain. Please, I need you to listen to me. (Sighs, obviously exasperated and upset.) We can talk about rain later.

LOUISE
Would you?

MICHAEL
Would I what?

LOUISE
(Claps hands and looks at MICHAEL.)
Dance in the rain.

MICHAEL
I don’t play in the rain anymore. Not since I was a child.

LOUISE
Maybe it is child’s play...
(Becomes sad and is led to her seat by MICHAEL.)

MICHAEL
That’s right, just settle down there.
(MICHAEL returns to his seat as LOUISE talks and gazes out into the audience, as if she is in a dream.)
Do you know how many colors tulips come in? A great many. Around 150 colors I believe. All so vibrant. But what people may not know is that there is a particular tulip that comes in a not so vibrant color. It’s the gray tulip. Dull, but so, so beautiful.

MICHAEL
And how many of these gray tulips have you seen exactly?

LOUISE
Dozens. Maybe even hundreds. If you look real closely at a flower bed of colorful tulips, there will always be a few gray ones mixed in. Some are accidentally planted, others not.

MICHAEL
(Speaks softly, as if afraid of hurting LOUISE’s feelings. He is more gentle with his words now.)
I can’t say that I’ve seen a gray tulip before.

LOUISE
Everyone has, Michael.

MICHAEL
(Stands up to leave.)
It’s getting late, and you probably need some rest. Thank you for trying to, well, yeah. Maybe I’ll come back and see you some other time.
(The scene changes to another flashback, to a small police station within the town, two years back. The two SHERIFFS of the town are standing with LOUISE. LOUISE is quieter, and blank. The SHERIFFS speak to her, but it is as if she sees right through them. Outside, rain pours. The air in the room smells of tragedy.)

SHERIFF 1
I’m sorry, Miss Louise... But your son did not make it through the accident. I’m so sorry for your loss. If there’s anythin’ we can do, anythin’ at all to help, just let us know.

LOUISE
Oh, I’m sure that won’t be necessary, officer. Where is he being held?

SHERIFF 1
They’re over there at the hospital with his body now, waiting for your further instruction. Your family has also been notified of the incident. Your son’s wife can’t be reached, but your grandson is flyin’ over from Denton.

LOUISE
My grandson?

SHERIFF 1
Yes, Michael Ravus? You can wait here for him here in the station, if you’d like.

LOUISE
(Becomes suddenly anxious and nervous.)
No, no, I’m afraid I can’t do that. I have to get going now if he’s coming up here. My son wouldn’t be happy with me if I waited here for Michael.
(The SHERIFFS give each other a look.)
Thank you, officers, for your help. Goodnight.
(LOUISE exits police station. The two SHERIFFS stand by the window and watch her walk away into the rain.)

SHERIFF 1
Poor woman, to have that happen to her. Outlivin’ her son must be tragic for her. They say that her husband left her with nothing but her pennies and pillow. She’s gotta be all on her own now.

SHERIFF 2
Yeah, and they also say that she became a downright loon after that. Sayin’ that she didn’t even seem
upset about him leavin’.

(LOUISE walks slowly, head down. She appears as if in a daze. Abruptly, she halts in the rain. She looks up to the sky and smiles. Looking around, she then begins to splash in the puddles. The SHERIFFS continue watching her out of the window. There is a pause before the next sheriff speaks.)

SHERIFF 1
Do you think she’ll be alright? Maybe we should go and help her.

SHERIFF 2
Yeah right, the only thing that could help her is if she’s committed into that mental hospital down the road. Maybe I can make a few phone calls to see if they can look into it. They can check up on her and maybe even see about gettin’ her in for an evaluation.

SHERIFF 1
(LOUISE begins to waltz in the rain joyfully.)
Oh, come on now. She ain’t harmin’ anybody.

SHERIFF 2
Yeah, but what if she does? She could crack at any moment. I’ve seen my fair share of people ‘round this town go crazy. She needs to understand how the world really works.

(LOUISE continues to waltz around and hum, seeming as if she had not a care in the world. The scene changes back to MICHAEL and LOUISE. LOUISE remains in her chair, as MICHAEL is heading out. MICHAEL stops to look back and he sees his grandmother with a look of joy on her face. Sighing, he turns back and approaches LOUISE once again.)

MICHAEL
(Approaching her side, he speaks softly.)
Did you love him?

LOUISE
(Not at all surprised that MICHAEL did not actually leave.)
Who?

MICHAEL
My father.

LOUISE fold her hands thoughtfully, and MICHAEL doesn’t wait for an answer, but he hesitates as he speaks.

I envy you, Louise. Do you know that? It’s almost as if his death did not harm you one bit.

LOUISE
Let me ask you one thing before you leave.

MICHAEL
Yes?

LOUISE
I often wonder if it is better to try picking out every gray tulip in the flower bed to toss away after they appear, or if it is better to dance among them all, not caring if they’re gray or not. The gray tulips are only here and there among the other beautiful tulips, but they are always there, conspicuous. So tell me Michael, would you choose to dance among them? Or would you pick at them endlessly with despair just because of their color?

(As LOUISE speaks, MICHAEL stares off into space, thoughtful. Slowly, he begins to realize what LOUISE is saying. After she is done speaking, he remains still and quiet, with a look of sad thoughtfulness on his face. Slowly, he kneels down next to LOUISE, who remains in her chair, and takes her hand. MICHAEL looks her in the eyes fully for the first time. LOUISE smiles sweetly.)

MICHAEL
Louise... I’m so sorry... I didn’t know.

LOUISE
(Hushes him with comfort.)
Shhh... It’s okay, child. It’s okay. Stand up now.

(LOUISE and MICHAEL both stand up. LOUISE takes MICHAEL’s hands in hers. The sweet smile still remains on LOUISE’s face.)
Now, go.

MICHAEL
Louise, you shouldn’t be here. Come with me. You could live with me if want. You don’t belong in here.

LOUISE
No. I belong here, Michael. I feel safe here. I’m content with my life here. My time has passed, Michael, but you still have your journey.

MICHAEL
No.

LOUISE
Michael.

MICHAEL
(Pauses.)
Thank you.

END
Here

Here in the vacant flat of the Midwest
where everything risen rose itself from a sea.
Here we were predicated on how we hung

the salt from our shoes, took them off to keep our pools clean.
How we kept our homes in Raid and electricity. How we, like
a coast, held ourselves in the shapes of receivers, repeatedly stricken
helpless and endless in hopes of becoming important.

We wanted to splay, to realize. We wanted to stay the sun’s geometry.
Crossed by planes, we lived in patterns of unadulterated freeway.

We overran our faucet mouths, watched our neighbors’ hackles rise
like laundry. We flapped ourselves into fruition, moving deftly atop
the breeze. When we dried we dried seemly and stiff, and what boundaries
unlaced—we hopped the brittle fences and the ground fissured beneath our feet.

Pathos

I want a parade and I want it to end I want you to be in it also I want the crowd to act out every example
of looking lonely or lovely in this rain and ingenious plastic I want a fence small enough to stand inside a
large shoe I want a weak little motor that moves breakers, sends things coursing I want a plane that
takes off its jacket and beckons to you and some emptiness for you to crash it into I want you to build
me a veranda in your backyard or sailboat I want you to stand in the middle of an enormous storm I
want a land bridge or trampoline and they’re like the same thing just with vastly different amounts of
cheering I want a goal I want you to wash up and never be found I want you at a gas station and all the
pumps are covered with bags and inside of them is an option to get hit by only the lightning and not the
hail I want a long trip and it takes forever I want to buy you some better luck I want all things to be
possible with the right equipment and you to be abseiling down the mountain without your favorite
umbrella I want a broken anchor and you can use it sometime I want all good men to wear ridiculous
shirts and you in a shirt with fake wings and real momentum to go flying off to wherever in your
incredible grace and lacquer I want everything at once make it stop

I Would Please Like to Know

when the morning is over so my day can begin.
So much inglorious waking already. I am trying
to be a passive flash in your periphery. Trying to
light my hair into your soggy side. Wondering
your body curled on my violent head, does it make
you a small lampshade or a very large hat. Thinking
if you make me leave this house I won’t be
leaving this house until you make me.

In this dream we are flying to somewhere that is
not America but still raining. You point at the clouds that
buoy you like huge and astonishing children.
Standing there and shivering. You want to be all

swim out and save them. Only I‘m all No dice, compadre.
You put on a sweater and I put on some goggles and ?it isn’t all
right but we understand, we spend all day ?reaching and the air
beneath our arms holds up

what we are thinking. Which is about summers
and whether we’re doing this correctly. Which is
if we were really made to have parents and occasionally
wear shoes. Which is whether any of this is actually
miraculous, which it is, all this sun and all this rising
and also we are here and we’re waving.
Creation

I) her stone siren lips crack and cry heresy,
tickled by cold brass vines.
marble palms outstretched,
loveless eyes boiling with judgment,
hips inert and impenetrable,
she shouts loose a mouthful of birds
and locks away her light.

II) nectar trickles down her infinite shoulders,
as clay cicadas waltz through artificial candles.
she watches electric thorns slither up untouchable temple steps.
she tears tufts from her flawless head.
she denies, she despises, she doubts.
her fingers grow soft and fragile
as she swaddles her body with trembling arms.
it shall not be.
she shall will it away.
she shall mend her shattered world.
it flies from her limbs before she can extinguish it.

III) warmed at last by envy,
she aches for her throne.
with a mind now compromised,
and intangible desires,
she grips his throat.
she breaks and slams and wails until his feverish brains spill out,
tears at his hot red body.
beats away the fire.
fruitless, she licks her filthy hands,
and lusts for the moon.

Evolution

I) his teeth shatter.
they rattle down his lacerated throat
like coins in a soda machine.
it cleaves his skull in two and leaves him witless.
it’s green lightning, it jolts through his dried mud flesh,
forced into tissue paper veins even as he wears his fingernails down to nubs
and leaves a trail of unholy fluid on the concrete.

II) his tongue forgets the taste of language,
so he splits himself with his screaming.
scraping the walls of his chest cavity,
tearing free his lungs,
slinging the dead organs from his visceral prison.
deflated, useless
they give the wall a wet, insignificant  slap and slide down like slugs.
he refuses to become it.
the nameless, inorganic fluorescence.
he drowns defiantly,
in pieces unwound and out of reach.

III) rising from the black,
he arches his back.
frayed white fish meat forms knots around the root of his spine
like hair caught in a lathe.
bloated starfish hands grasp canopic jars,
lined with cold linen and mercury.
he is a captive no more .
with newborn bones still flexible,
he tells his flesh obey,
and reclaims the sun.
Before the hunt we were timid, cold and afraid, shivering in the mud under some grimy rock in the rain. We scavenged for food in the day, slinking about until the night sent us scurrying back into our holes. Soon our heads got the best of us, and we learned to set wood ablaze. Now the night feared us, and we ate of those from which we formerly hid. We sharpened our sticks and ran and ran and chased and killed and gorged upon their bodies. Then we used the cliffs. It was easier. We ran the beasts off the edge one hundred at a time until there were none left. And we moved on to the next place.

We grew our heads and made sounds and shapes to mean ideas and organized ourselves to function in little gatherings. We started trading beasts and plants for comforts and currencies and created God too. He told us what to do, so we plunged our sharpened sticks into the throats and stomachs and hearts of those against us and took their beasts and comforts for our own. We made things for ourselves. We stacked stone to make the high and mighty walls to guard the places where we lived from those who needed what we had. We lived and ate and procreated endlessly and grew ourselves in numbers. We raged and pillaged against those who dared to stand in the way of our expansion, and in turn they did against us. We needed more space. It was easier that way.

Soon we began to hunt for beauty and what truths around us we could learn and from those truths what easier ways to live we could make. We stood proud upon the bow of a wooden vessel on the glistening sea and went off into the horizon for new comforts and beasts and spaces. We found new people like ourselves, but different, yet we killed them all the same because we needed what they had. How we procreated and ate and grew from those new beasts and comforts. We were everywhere. And we hunted everywhere for what new truths we could find to make it easier.

Suddenly it was upon us. It came almost all at once. And its looming massiveness was fueled by everything around it. Its metal shell emitted a heat so ferocious that it embedded itself in our very hearts. It was cared for by all of us as we burned and hacked and sawed and smote the soil to feed its gaping maw. We gorged it. Procreated with it. And grew and grew and grew. We killed disease and shattered air and space and time. It killed beast and raised plant for us. We made nothing for ourselves. We couldn’t, it wasn’t easy enough. We burned the blood of the world into the air and churned out our existence. We zipped around in our little metal boxes. We told ourselves that it was better this way. After all, how easy life was now. Our little packages of happiness, cranked out by the machines and gears and belts of the new system were intoxicating. It was easier. Why would we stop?

We raped and pillaged and murdered the world down to the very rock. We ran it all off the cliff. And the world could give no more. But there was nowhere new to move. We turned with twisted, mangled faces on each other and clawed and gnashed and tore at the flesh. There was no warmth, no food, no shelter, no beauty. There was only cold, and then we were no more.
Inside the Details
Hallie Galvan
Rock Bridge Senior High School
Writing Portfolio
Michael McGinty

Writer’s Statement

As the title suggests, my portfolio is about focusing on details from new perspectives. Through my work I have tried to add a child-like attention to detail within subjects that may be harsh or sophisticated. Most of my works do not include names so that readers can better relate to the writing, being able to put themselves in the subject’s shoes and better empathize. I firmly believe that focusing on detail can either be the death or life of a person. In most of my works this attention to detail better shows hardships of life, but in works like Small Moments the detail helps add a childish air to a peaceful drive.

Without a Trace

Your fingertips traced patterns on me
Leaving marks
As if a child had drawn there
But I can't wash them off
And they're growing on their own
In the night
While I sleep
Your footprints appear
On the inside of my eyelids
When I wake
They escape
In the form of tears.

Small Moments

Light dances around the pavement
As if providing patches
That little children could jump to and from
When in reality the leaves are the rulers
Throwing shadows onto the ground
Creating splatters that remind me of Pollock.
The rustling of branches
Mixes with the purr of engines
As images fly past me,
The road endlessly stretching ahead
The refugees above the road
Strain for sun
Stuck between two longings
While still clinging to the trees
For the last life
Before fall
These are the small moments
That make my day,
Before it even starts.

IN THE DARK - POETRY
My cheeks rosy from the drink
I ever so often lost myself in.
My cheeks still rosy
When I found myself in the dark
Twisting and turning.
And what’s that underneath me?
What’s that voice?
God?
Did I say he could open the door
Or did he just let himself in.
But now my jaw is locked around something.
And God’s white light that people often refer to
Has just filled my throat.
An awful taste.
And a push that tells me God’s not here right now
Maybe he’s on vacation.
Closing my eyes and imagining
How a love that’s supposed to be so good
Could hurt so bad.
I feel a burning and a stretch.
Something tells me Satan’s here
And his fingers have found their own way.
Vile and Cheap.
He slips away
Or was it they?
Two hazy figures in front of me.
He must have brought his demons.

Putrescence

Once I was in love with the mystery of fall. The long days and nights of summer had me dehydrated, waiting for the wind and rain fall could bring. The trees whispered stories of how weak their limbs were when autumn came, I knew how they lived through it, though.

So what is happening to me now? I lay in my bed all day, my friends and family have started calling me a weed, a common *mobile vulgaris*! Maybe they’re right, my limbs have grown scrawny and drag against the ground. The other girls have a blush on their blossoms, all their petals in the right place, yet mine are falling apart, ripped in all sorts of ways and starting to brown around the edges. The lilies and tulips smile up at the sun, relishing in the last bit of rays as summer comes to a close. I can’t feel but a tingle on my skin and the aching as my stem rots from the inside out.

Once I was in love with the mystery of fall, but I’ve realized that fall only brings decay to the weak. The trees are much stronger than I.
First Kiss

I noticed little things over the years, the way his eyes slightly watered when I told him of the pain other boys had brought me, the feeling of having a close friend even though we didn’t talk every day, the way he would go out of his way to include me in a conversation with his friends if I walked up, how easily I could remember little details about his life or things he would tell me. It was a million tiny things that, when you added them all up, meant we were supposed to be together. I always knew it, and I waited for this inner truth to appear. It made me shake just thinking about it, but nothing made me shake as bad as the day inner truth became real life.

Duct tape tapped vigorously on the back bumper as we drove through the streets. I had to focus on my legs, compelling them not to shake. Finally the car rolled to a stop, the tire brushing against the curb slightly before we parked. I took a deep breath and rushed to the front door, trying not to appear too anxious. The sound of yipping dogs was slightly muffled by my thoughts as he opened the door and kicked them out of the way, yelling an obscenity at them. I’d been downstairs many times before, the last of which had been only a week or two before. This time and the time before had seemed different than all the others though; an air of hope had decided to take home here, mixed with my nervous fast-paced breathing. It made an atmosphere almost like smog, hard to ignore and choking.

We looked through his collection of movies, most of which were shitty, until we found a British movie he claimed to be fantastic. After some convincing and a full description of the movie, I allowed him to start it. Slowly I sat down next to him, sinking into the middle of his worn couch, holding my breath through what seemed like a million previews before the main screen came up. Finally he pressed play and leaned back as the movie started. A man walked onto the screen in a police uniform, but the audio was only background noise as my gaze shifted from the screen to his tilted head, his shoulder, his hands. They rested lazily in his lap, but his fingers seemed tense, as though he didn’t know what to do with them. I realized that maybe I wasn’t the only one in the room who was nervous. I also realized that I’d been staring and quickly turned to the screen once more.

Soon after the movie started I gradually inched closer to him; my hands started twitching as I did so. I knew that he had noticed the space between us shrinking but had chosen to keep his eyes suctioned to the TV. Eventually I was close enough that my breath moved his hair ever so slightly. I stayed that close for a long time, fighting a battle over if I should put my head on his shoulder or not. Once I did I automatically thought it was a mistake because his arm stayed stiff under my weight and his hands continued to be planted firmly in his lap. My thoughts scrambled around the inside of my skull, and the rest of my body started to shake along with my hands.

“Are you cold?”

He asked without looking at me. I wondered if he wasn’t looking at me because he was nervous or just uncomfortable. I assumed it was the second but still didn’t move for the sake of not looking like an idiot.

“No, I just shake when I get nervous.”

It took me a second to even process what I had said. There went every chance of me not looking like an idiot. I felt him harden a little and look at me as I quickly looked down, avoiding his eyes.

A single word managed to find its way out of his lips: “Oh.”

I felt his body soften as if he was melting. His arm swung awkwardly around my shoulder, and he snapped his head back to the screen before I could look up. The relief in me sighed. It was the kind of feeling I imagined someone finding water in a desert would feel. For a while we sat like that, acting as if the other wasn’t there but focusing solely on the areas that touched each other.

The ending credits rolled, but we stayed where we were. Finally he looked at me, and this time I didn’t avoid him. I looked at him and, before I could over think it, leaned into him. His arm suddenly didn’t feel awkward around me. For half a second he didn’t respond just blinked at me, and then he
slowly placed his lips against mine. My hands reached up to let my fingers part through his hair. I
couldn’t help but smile against his lips as I felt his arms wrap around my waist, pulling me in.

A million tiny things added up to this second, and I wouldn’t have changed it at all.
The wind blustered and howled ripping at my hair and face like tiny daggers. I was sure I had frostbite at this point, my ears and nose burning from the frigid blizzard winds. I looked back, barely seeing a thing behind me, only an ever going emptiness of white and gray. Frode was right: I should have stayed in the cave with him, but we needed food, and the nearest village was at least a thousand paces away. So, I braved the storm, not knowing when it would ever lift. I wasn’t even sure if I was heading the right way, the snow so thick I couldn’t see five paces in front of me. I am walking into oblivion, not sure where I was even going.

I don’t know how long I had been walking; my legs ached with every step, and my head spun around in circles. I stopped in my tracks, hopelessly lost. I could feel Hypothermia setting in; my mind said to keep going, stop now and you may never move again. I couldn’t move anymore, no matter how much I protested. The wind rattled my bones to the point I couldn’t even feel them anymore. I felt myself falling forward, straight into the ground. I hit the snow, the cold piercing my face like tiny spears. My entire body felt numb; was this my end? In this empty world of snow an ice, no one would know or care. I wouldn’t ever see Frode again. Even worse, I wouldn’t be able to apologize, and I wouldn’t be able to say sorry for my stubborn actions and rudeness. I wouldn’t be able to say how much I loved him, how he was the best bud one could ever have. I began to close my eyes, tears running down my cheeks. I felt myself fading into the snow. My eyes fluttered open for one last time. I noticed something, a silhouette. Was I hallucinating things? Possibly going insane? I could barely see it, but it was moving directly towards me.

I awoke in a bed of fur, wondering where I was. Valhalla, floating on air right now? No, I was sure I was alive, wasn’t I? I quickly realized I was moving, flying possibly? I looked around, all I could see was a forest engraved in snow an ice, a frozen kingdom shaped by the icy winds of the north. I lay there, mesmerized by the cold but beautiful scenery, dozing off and back again as the soft movements rocked me to sleep. Where am I? It finally hit me, where am I headed? I sat up and laid my eyes on two twisted horns, like the ones you would see upon an elk. I quickly realized who it was.

“You came back!” I cheered, hugging his icy blue fur that lined the back of his neck.
“I should have just left you there,” he said, shaking his head.
I grinned, “But you didn’t.”
He let out a heavy sigh, “You’re right. I didn’t. But next time I will.”
I laughed, “Sure you will!” I teased, caressing the fur behind his big fuzzy ears. He let out a laugh and shook his head, I could tell he was smiling,
“It’s good to have you back around.” I smiled at his comment; it bid me well to know someone cared for me in this frozen world.
“Where are we headed?” I asked, peering off into what seemed like an empty land of white.
“I believe we are headed for Easthaven.” He said in a stern, but happy voice.
I moved to where I could see his face, “Easthaven? The City of Light? Won’t we have to pay to get in?"
““We have money.” He answered.
“I know!” I said checking my satchel to make sure the little amount of money we had was still there, “but is it enough to pay the tax?” I questioned, feeling the gold coins between my fingers.
He nodded, “If it wasn’t enough then would we be heading there?”
I sighed, rolling my eyes, “Fine, fine.” I said, defeated.
I climbed onto his head, tired of twiddling my thumbs, “How far are we from the city?” I asked looking along glistening snow.

“It’s right over the hill. See it?” he smiled looking at me with his golden eyes. I took a closer look.

“I don’t see a dang thing.”

He rolled his eyes, “Look over there,” he said motioning towards small pillars that pierced the top of the hill. I glanced at them; they were a part of something, something big.

“Is that a castle?” We neared it, getting an even better view.

“Maybe.”

We stopped when we got to the top of the hill. I leaned over his head, laying my eyes over a gleaming city; it was the most beautiful sight I had ever seen in my entire life. Icy pillars twisted and emerged from a large and glorious castle that stood in the center of the city. Houses and shops lined the streets. I imagined they were full of life, with busy shopkeepers selling their goods amongst the streets. Children played games and sang. It was a proud city. I scanned the walls that protected it, looking for the entrance gate. I looked until I laid my eyes upon two fierce looking dragons that guarded upon their mighty pillars, and in between them was the gate. “There!” I pointed.

He nodded, “I see it too,” but his gaze was on the two dragons instead. They both were white, with sharp, twisted horns that stuck out of the back of their heads. Their backs lined with tiny little spines that resembled daggers, and at the end of each of their tails was a spade. They sat there perfectly still, almost as if they were frozen in time.

“I wouldn’t want to mess with those guys.” I thought aloud.

Frode nodded in agreement, “At least this is a sign dragons are accepted into the city.”

We made our way to the gate, where we could pay the tax and enter the city. I hopped off of Frode and made my way to a muscular guard who stood by the entrance. His helmet covered his face entirely, and his armor was made of gleaming steel with little designs imprinted into it. “Halt” the man ordered stopping me before I could go any further. “Please state your name and business.” He said clearly, looking at me in the eyes.

I stood up straight and made myself look presentable, “My name is Alek, and I wish to enter the city of Easthaven.”

The guard nodded, “And what about him?” I could tell he was motioning towards Frode.

“He is with me,” I said in a stern voice.

The man moved aside, “You may enter.” He announced. I smiled and began to walk in when he stopped me again. “Pay up.” Ah yes, the tax that I almost forgot about. I knew he was forgetting something.

“How much?” I asked, reaching into my satchel.

“Ten nok.” I nodded handing over the money. “The city will benefit from your donation.”

Frode and I walked through the magnificent gates in awe. They were beautiful, and seemed almost entirely made of ice, a type of stone called frostrock, which is formed under the ice itself. It’s pretty popular in architecture because of its swirled features. I walked into the city streets, holding my breath. I have never seen a more marvelous city before; in fact I have actually never been to a city. I gazed upon the many shops that lined the streets, exactly how I imagined it, only better. I walked to the town square, Frode following closely behind. A gigantic castle loomed over me. I could only dream of the majesty it held within its doors. My body was frozen with amazement. People were staring. Guess they don’t get many outsiders coming through, or maybe it was because of Frode. Did it matter? I ignored them. “Isn’t it amazing?”

He nodded, “Indeed it is.”

I was about to embrace him like I used to when I was little, when the castle doors flew open. I spun around with a look of shock. Two lines of men came out side by side and parted in the most organized fashion. Frode was just has dumbfounded as I was, and we both stared as the scene took
place. The court was completely silent as a man and a woman emerged from the castle, the man looked very noble, obviously the king with the crown upon his head a sign of his authority. The woman that stood by his side was just as noble looking; only she appeared younger than him, her face flushed from the cold. Her blue eyes searched the streets until her gaze landed upon me and Frode. I wanted to introduce myself, being a foreigner to the city, but my words stuck in my throat. For a brief moment her eyes met directly with mine, and the half scowl on her face turned into a look of curiosity. She whispered something to what I perceived to be her husband. I tried to hear what they were saying, but they were too far from me. After a moment of silence the women looked back at me with a stern look on her face, “I invite you to a feast.” I stumbled over myself. Wait. What? “Come,” she beckoned me inside.

I hesitated a moment. “What about Frode?” I asked.

“Frode?” she replied cocking her head, “very well.” I quickly followed her, unsure of what to expect next. I looked back at my friend, who shrugged as if saying, go with it.

I entered the castle; Frode following me like always. The doors quickly closed behind us with a loud bang. A wave of warm air rushed over me; it felt so nice to be out of the cold for once. I glanced around the huge place. “Take off your cloak, ma’am,” she requested. I quickly pulled it off, setting it down on the coat rack next to me. She motioned me inside to the banquet hall which I obeyed without hesitation.

“Take a seat.” She pulled a chair out for me; I sat down quickly. Frode laid down in a corner of the great hall where there was enough space for him to rest. The women sat across from me and ordered her men to fetch food for us. I marveled at the castle’s beautiful interior. Most of the furniture was ivory or a deep oak wood. “What is your name?” she asked, snapping me back to reality.

“My name?” I replied.

“Yes, your name.”

“Alek.”

“And where are you from, Alek?” my name lingered at the end of the sentence.

“Riverton,” I answered with a friendly smile.

“Ah, you’re a long ways from home, aren’t you?” she smiled slightly. The room fell silent; I had no idea of what to say. I didn’t want to be rude, but I also wanted to say something. I don’t know where my voice went at that moment. “Do you know who I am?” I looked into her twinkling blue eyes, almost has blue as mine, like the sky.

“N-No, I don’t actually.”

She seemed disappointed in a sense but put a warm smile on her face anyway, “I’m Queen Adelina Eriksson, the first.” She glided towards me, graceful in every step. I felt jealous of how much grace she wielded within herself. I was only a clumsy oaf that could only show an equal amount in a fight, not even that. She was now right next to me, and I could feel her hands playing with my hair. I wanted to smack them away, my mood having grown a bit sour. “Which side of the family did you get your hair from? It’s so soft and pretty.” She looked at me with great curiosity, I really had no idea how to answer that; no one in my family had the vibrant red-brown hair like mine. I was adopted, so how would I know? My father took me in when he had found me wrapped in a blanket on his door step. I didn’t have a mother, but did it matter? He took care of me just the same and raised me to be more of a man than anything, even though he knew I was a girl. He taught me how to hunt, fish, sword fight, and fight like a man. I still had my ‘girly fetishes,’ like caring about my appearance and wearing the occasional dress, but I was raised to be a tomboy not a girly girl.

“I don’t have any,” I finally answered, not wanting to reveal anything about the little family I had, which consisted only of my father and uncle, who I loved dearly. Queen Adelina frowned, dropping my hair.

“I’m sorry.”
We sat, drowning in our silence, when one of the maids burst through the doors on the left corridor of the great hall. “Mrs. Adelina, my dear, you are needed at the front pillar of the wall.”

The queen stood, irritation in her voice, “It’s not him again? Is it?”

“Yes, he’s back.”

“Very well. If that’s how he wants to do things, then that’s how they shall be.”

I jumped to my feet, “What’s going on?”

They both looked at me. “It’s none of your concern,” she said with a stern face.

I straightened my back to make myself look taller, “Tell me what’s wrong, and maybe I can help.”

Queen Adelina glanced at the maid and back at me, “Very well, but there isn’t any time to explain. Follow me and stay close.” I glanced at Frode who had already recognized it was time to move. I hopped on his back as the queen re-opened the castle doors. Frode stretched his wings and flew out the doors. Despite the cold, it felt nice to have the wind blowing through my hair again. The flight was short, and he landed on the castle wall right between the other two dragons, their necks craned, looking over the massive army that camped outside the castle walls. I could see Queen Adelina running towards us; the dragons drew their attention to her.

“Queen Adelina,” one of them spoke to my surprise, “King Madigan is back.” His voice was deep.

“As if I didn’t know,” she sighed heavily. I tried to count all the tents that were set up; there were hundreds maybe thousands of them.

_These guys mean business_, I thought to myself as I scanned the land with my eyes. I glanced at Queen Adelina who was now standing next to us, wearing a suit of gleaming armor. I climbed off of Frode, “Do you want to explain what’s going on?”

She rubbed her temples and ignored my question, “What does he want now?”

The dragon peered down at her, “He wants an offering to pay for the loss of his only heir, or he will attack.”

She shook her head, “What does he want us to pay him with?”

The dragon sighed, “I’ll tell you, but you’re not going to like it.”

She looked off towards the camps, “Tell me.” I looked at them both unsure of what to expect, but I knew it wasn’t going to be good.

“He wants you to send a maiden to him for sacrifice.”

“What! I won’t allow it, prepare—”

“Wait!” I interrupted her order.

Frode looked at me, “Alek, what are you doing?” His whisper sounded frantic.

Queen Adelina and the dragon both stared at me. “What is it?” She sounded irritated by my interruption.

“I want you to send me.” My words made her stumble back, as if she was pushed by an unforeseeable force.

“Are you nuts!” Frode yelled at me.

“No, I’m completely sane.” I muttered.

Queen Adelina tried to say something, but she kept stuttering over her words, “A-Are you sure?” she finally answered.

“Yes.” What did I just get myself into…? Frode flicked his ears; I could tell by the look on his face that he didn’t want me to go.

“Very well then; raise the gates!” she commanded without hesitation.

I began to climb down the ladder; each bar drew me closer to my doom, but deep inside I knew I had a plan, and if it worked, I’d be able to rid this kingdom of this evil tyrant. I dropped to the ground, landing directly on my feet. The gates slowly rose, as I watched, placing my hand on the helm of my sword. Frode watched in horror as I trotted towards the opening; I could tell this was putting him
through a lot of pain to watch me go like this. Two men approached me from the other kingdom; their armors were very different from the ones here.

“Are you the maiden that Queen Adelina has sent?” I nodded, gripping the handle tightly. A tall man came up behind them wearing a huge crown made of gold, dotted with sapphires, emeralds, and rubies. He had one blue eye, but the other was bulging out and was the color of milky blue. It made me sick just looking at it. “Here is King Madigan.” One of the men shouted, the king circled me, observing every detail I had.

“Yes, yes. Very nice,” he said feeling my hair. I closed my eyes, waiting for the right moment, my hand holding on to the sword for dear life. The only thing I could hear was the snow starting to fall. “She’s perfect.” He grinned a smile was riddled with insanity. I looked up at Frode and the queen. They both watched holding their breath, hoping for this to be over with soon. The king lifted my chin with his finger, “Tell me your name.” His fingers were bony and cold, sending chills down my spine.

“Alek,” I mumbled under my breath so he couldn’t hear me.

“What?” he asked cocking his head

“I said, my name is Alek!” I yelled drawing my sword from its sheath. “And it will be the last name you hear!” My sword burst into flames. The man screamed as the guards turned to run. Frode and the queen gasped at the sight as I shoved my flaming weapon through the man’s chest. He stared into my eyes, tears rolling down his cheeks. “You clever girl,” he uttered before falling dead on the ground. I pulled my sword from his limp body. Frode jumped to the ground along with Queen Adelina, both staring at me dumbfounded.

“You scared me half to death!” Frode finally yelled at me, breaking the silence. “You should have told me what you had planned!”

I smiled at him, “But then it wouldn’t be as believable.”

Queen Adelina approached me slowly, avoiding the body, “You’re a very brave girl,” she paused. “I think you’re the person I’m looking for,” she said grinning, peering into my sparkling blue eyes.
The Writing Virus
Madelyne Hartleroad
Platte County High School
Short Story
Wendy Assel

Google is searching for: *how to plot a successful murder*

Things were going great for Ms. Janette Robinson, the author of a record-breaking series that had been published in thirty-eight languages. Her protagonist, Damarian Smith, and his friends had been featured in countless podcasts, and Hollywood was even considering producing a movie. Damarian’s life as the *prodigy child* of Magiks Academy was a thrilling one, stocked to the brim with Wrath battles, magical fruit, and enemies who wanted his head mounted on their fireplace mantle. But things were finally slowing down for the guy.

“Not for long,” Ms. Robinson smirked. For a while she had been plotting his untimely demise. It was flawless! He would face his ultimate nemesis, the Necromancer, and for the first time in seven whole books, Damarian Smith would be unable to cheat death. “It’s karma,” Ms. Robinson told herself. “It comes to all heroes.”

But there was just one teensy weensy problem… Damarian Smith was too smart. And Ms. Robinson, being the omniscient god of her characters, knew it. He would be able to foresee his death from a mile away. And then he’d turn around. Damarian was a hero, but he was no selfless martyr.

“So, how do I kill him?” Ms. Robinson muttered. She decided to take the advice of another best-selling novelist. It was time to pay a visit with her cast and let them voice their opinions. She closed her eyes, envisioning her precious darlings conversing with her about the plot.

***

Damarian Smith, hero extraordinaire, glanced up from his homework that he was supposed to be *viewing with an obvious lack of interest*. He groaned with an irate glare. Finally! It all made sense! The writer was going to kill him! “Hey, writer! This is not going to work!” Damarian shouted. He heard the sound of typing keys suddenly stop, and an omniscient voice penetrated the school cafeteria scene.

“Oh?” Damarian heard the voice say. “And would you like to voice your reasoning on this?” Ms. Robinson, the unfortunate (unless you factor in having millions of cash to swim in) creator of Damarian and his friends lived by the *let your characters take over your life* philosophy.

Damarian knew that there were two types of authors. One variety dictates your every action, your every word. They control what kind of character you develop into. Luckily for Damarian, Ms. Robinson was of the second breed. It gave him someone to argue with, because the second type listens. They watch their characters like ravenous hawks. Ms. Robinson noticed every development that her precious darlings underwent. She even allowed them to argue their cases and present their own ideas. Well, most of the time.

“Everything is looking up for me!” Damarian yelled at the sky, where the merciless writer was watching him in amusement. “I’m closer to figuring out the identity of your evil ‘Necromancer’ than anyone in this world has ever been before! My posse and I are back at school, safe and sound! No hell-fiends popping out of the walls, and you haven’t sent a Wrath down at us for three whole chapters! And perhaps the most important reason, after five whole novels of being embarrassingly single, I finally got a girlfriend!”

He heard a chuckle, and the typing resumed. As though a play button was pressed, the Magiks Academy cafeteria whirled back to life. His homework vanished into thin air, leaving Damarian standing in the middle of the lunch line, looking rather lost.

“Hey, what’s wrong with you? You look like you’ve glimpsed your own death,” a voice behind him said. Damarian whirled around to see the female protagonist of the story watching him.
“Sierra!” Damarian took a double take. “What happened to you?”
Sierra’s gaze glanced up at her bright blue hair that was braided down her back. “Oh. That. Well, you’re familiar with the whole ‘smart brunette’ stereotype, correct?” Damarian hesitantly nodded. “The writer decided that due to this stereotype, my hair color made me mainstream. So now I’m... blue-hair, I guess.” She blew her punk bangs out of her face and stared back down at her lunch tray. “If that makes any sense...”

“Nothing ever makes any sense,” Damarian commented. “Our writer is cracked.”

***

Two Books Later

It was almost time to meet the final boss of the series: The Necromancer. In order to encounter the antagonist of the series, the author had plotted a series of fatal “tests” that the main character had to maneuver through.

Damarian was determined not to die, no matter how hard the author wanted to axe his head off and pursue with planning some heartfelt resurrection. “Tragedy makes people bawl like seals,” Ms. Robinson had murmured once while Damarian was trying to save the history professor from an ill-fated ‘accident.’ “Readers drag out the ice-cream and keep reading while they open the fridge. It hooks them. They just have to keep reading until a satisfying happy moment bounces along.”

She’s not going to be any help this time, Damarian thought. So, chapter by chapter, he had predicted the invasion of Wraths onto school property, avoided being captured by a gang of murderous thugs, tricked a professional assassin, and made it through the Lava Caverns with only a singed eyebrow.

“What’s next?” he screamed up at the writer. His hands were sweaty, and his head throbbed, moaning for rest that was promised never to come—not till he was eternally asleep, at least. “You just killed about half of your side characters! Me?”

“You know what I’m doing,” she commented wryly. “You decoded my plot half a book ago, but you still don’t know who the Necromancer is.”

“Yeah, well, I’m about to find out,” he shouted. “Wish me luck!” With that, Damarian flung open the doors leading to the Necromancer’s lair.

A girl stood in the middle of the dark, abandoned throne room.

“Hayley,” Damarian said softly. His girlfriend watched with an uncharacteristic hostile gaze as Damarian brushed his bloody hair back behind his ear. His shirt clung to his skin after days of non-stop fleeing from enemies. “Boy, am I glad to see you!”

“That’s funny.” Hayley slowly walked towards him, her head held high and tall. Her pale skin looked flawless in the dim light shining through the covered windows. Not a strand of her golden hair looked out of place and her school uniform was completely untarnished. She should look like a wreck, after the fire back at school and all... And how did she...

“Wait! Stop! Everybody freeze!” Damarian threw his hands up, and he heard the clacking of keys silence.

“What now?” the writer complained. “Do I have to make you shut up? Let something happen to you without protesting, for once! This is the ultimate plot-twist, the most important point in the whole series!”

“So, I was right!” Damarian cried out victoriously. He pointed at Hayley. “She’s the Necromancer! Isn’t she?”

Silence.

The typing resumed. Hayley folded her arms across her chest and began to laugh at Damarian in mockery. “You always thought that you were clever, prophecy boy!”

Words slipped past his mouth. Words other than his own, words forged by another mind. “What are you talking about, Hayley? Hey, are you alright?” Damarian felt his hand stretch towards the girl, his fingers beckon for a warm hug and a kiss...
“Don’t touch me, you scum!” Thunder cracked across his hand, and energy shot him back into
the wall. Damarian moaned, struggling to retake his body and wring the writer’s neck. “I’m afraid you
won’t make it out of here alive. Unless you kill me. But are you capable of that?”

Hayley advanced on him. Her soft, gentle hand cupped underneath his chin. Damarian felt a
whine creep up his throat. I just want it to be over... He scooted back against the wall, pressing his hands
against the bricks, feeling for a way out.

“Is this the ending?” He centered the last of his magic in his hands. A stun flash. But maybe he
could distract them both... He looked his evil girlfriend right in the eyes, and then he flicked his gaze up
to the heavens. “You’re going to kill me here, at the hands of my own girlfriend? You got bored of me, so
you’re going to slit my throat? I guess you really don’t care about saving the world, do you, writer? What
kind of best-selling author are you?”

The typing came to an abrupt halt, and he heard the sound of cracking ceramic and splashing
coffee. “That’s it!” The writer screeched. “I am going to shut you up, you ungrateful little—”

“Me? What have I ever done?” he asked innocently. “I’m just responding to this hell you’ve
been throwing at me.” He felt his thoughts churn as he thought up possible endings to this almost
unpredictable scenario. “Oh, I got it! I’m going to kill Hayley, but I’ll be sooo depressed afterwards. I’ll
drag my arse home and shut myself up in the closet until my other love interest comes along and finds
me.

“By then,” he continued, “the partying will be over, and you can cut straight to the epilogue. Just
announce who died while I pout my pants off and such. Or... am I going to commit suicide? I just can’t
bear the thought of slaying my dear lover Hayley. So, forget saving the world. I’ll just spare myself from
all the misery. Let Sierra be the hero and all.”

He waited for a response. Nothing came, except for the sound of a computer booting off. The
clanging of keys, a slamming door... The revving of a car engine...

“Well, she’s gone.” Damarian stood up and held out his hand to Hayley.

“Now what do we do?”

He shrugged. “Hang around. Wait for her to come back and screw up our lives again. So what do
you suppose she was planning?”

Hayley interlocked her fingers with Damarian’s and the two of them slowly walked out of the
Necromancer’s lair. “I dunno,” she said once they had made it through the Lava Cavern. That had been
one thing that Damarian had always admired about her. She thought things through and didn’t reply
with spontaneous, incoherent nonsense. Like some people did while they wrote books...

Hayley shrugged off her blazer, sweat beginning to gather on her forehead. “Personally, I believe
that you would’ve had me passed on. And then you’d go through that depression phase. Hiding in
closets and refusing to eat... Just like in every other best-selling novel.”

Damarian laughed. “Wouldn’t that be a sight to see?”

“It would make for a great movie too!”

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“So I decided to kill him,” Ms. Robinson, the author of Damarian’s series, concluded.

“Seriously?” Mr. Evans snorted. The moderator of *We Are Writers Club* snapped his fingers, his
eyes twinkling. “Just like that?”

“Why not?” Ms. Robinson spread out her printed copy of the ‘ending.’ “He was practically
begging me to!”

The members of the support group twitched uneasily. “What about the Necromancer?” one of
them asked.

“I’ll let Sierra defeat her. It can be the shining moment that she’s always been waiting for.” She
jotted down some ideas that qualified as a shining moment in her note pad as Mr. Evans raised another
concern.
“After five whole books, are you telling me that you’re just going to let Damarian Smith, the prophecy child of modern literature, die?”

“It’s been ten years.” Ms. Robinson set down her pen and wrapped her slim fingers around her coffee cup. “It’s time for another hero to step into the limelight.”

Mrs. Hubbard, another writer attending the meet, shook her head. “Just, after all this time.” She began to chuckle and she looked up into the young, amateur writer’s gaze. “You know, there’s a reason your characters have been bucking no matter what you try to write.”

“And what’s that?” Ms. Robinson’s eyebrows rose with curiosity. She clicked her pen and prepared to jot down the advice.

“They’re trying to take their own lives, jump off of the page! And I say, let them! See where it leads you!”

Mr. Evans snorted. “I keep all of my characters on a tight leash.” He raised his hand, his thumb and index finger just a small gap apart. “An inch long! They can buck all they want, but I’m never letting them go anywhere.”

Ms. Robinson laughed, feeling as though she was going to break down and cry. “Why does writing have to be so difficult?”

“Honey, it’s never easy. What amuses me is that your main character argues with you.”

“You should see her live streams,” Mr. Evans murmured.

“Maybe I should just put the series on a permanent hiatus. Become an interior decorator. Or I can just kill them all!”

Mr. Evans and Mrs. Hubbard gave each other a knowing smile. So the writing virus strikes again, they thought. Just please let it not be me next.
Writing Portfolio
Amelia Himebaugh
Lindbergh Senior High School Portfolio
Jessica Laney

Writer’s Statement

I selected these pieces both for their individual strength and for the diversity of genres. I like to write in different genres and forms and hope that these selections indicate that.

The first piece, “Kirkwood,” is a personal essay, one of my favorite forms of writing because of the control of language and theme that it requires. I picked this essay because I think it weaves together several motifs and metaphors into a larger theme of memory and achievement, while leaving some ambiguity at the end.

Next is a collection of poetry. The poems have shared traits of emphasis on word choice, internal rhyme, and use of metaphor. “Boxing,” focuses on a strong metaphor of regulated fighting as self-perception and achievement. It attempts emotional appeal without romanticism. “You Are Nothing” focuses on word play and internal rhyme, using the intricate nature of language to parallel the examples of the intricate nature of life.

The third piece, “How the Other Half Lives,” is a humorous article written for my school’s magazine. I regularly write humor articles for the magazine, and enjoy trying to combine the forms of news writing and humor. I focus in this article on satirizing early 20th century investigative journalism and on subtlety self-deprecatory narration. I also focused specifically in this article on using quotes from interviewees to contradict my narration.

I hope readers will react to my work with understanding but also the desire to think more about the pieces. I want to include subtlety in my writing, but not so much as to the point of subjective abstraction. I want my writing to make people feel something, but for readers not to understand everything about a piece on their first reading.

Writing has been a huge part of my life: it’s what I like to do most, what I’ve achieved most in, and what I plan to do in the future. Since childhood, I’ve loved creative writing. Through the support of my family, friends, and teachers, I’ve been encouraged to publish some of my work in magazines and self-publish other work. This support and the minor success I’ve experienced as a result of it have made me realize that I can be successful in writing (or in a lot of other things, if I work at them). As I apply for colleges and begin to think about careers, I find that it’s possible that I could be successful in a creative career, doing what I want as a profession.

Personal Essay/Memoir
Kirkwood

Today I went into downtown Kirkwood, parking in a free garage, which was dark and grimy despite the sun outside. I walked into a plaza that housed quaint cafés and quirky restaurants and trees planted within metal cages embedded in bricks. Four years ago, there was a shooting at the city council building across the street. Seven people were killed. Today, there’s a mom and young boy selling lemonade as a fundraiser for the UFO, an organization that supports overseas troops. Next to the courthouse there’s a veterans’ memorial and a train station. The train tracks seem to go on forever, but there’s no way to tell because they bend slightly and are obscured by a hill. I cross over the tracks to the memorial.

The veterans’ memorial is a sort of well-kept garden with a large piece of stone in the center. N
names are engraved into the dark slab of stone, and a bold mantra hovers over them: “To those who lost their lives in the struggle for freedom.”

I walk a little further, over to a second memorial. There’s a lighted lamppost between the two, even though it’s much too early in the day for outdoor lighting. This next memorial is similar to the first—garden-walkway, dedicated slabs of stone. But this is a memorial for the people who died in the city council shooting, not a war. Each of these victims gets an individual slab of stone. I start to think about legacy. Is there a difference between dying in a war and dying in a shooting? Do the slabs of stone guarantee a legacy? Do they even guarantee a memory?

A bird hops along dangerously close to the nearby train tracks. I don’t know if the bird is aware of the tracks, or the possibility of a train hurtling along and smashing it. The soldiers knew they were hopping on the tracks, but did the shooting victims?

A metaphorical train may have been difficult to hear approach, but the real train announces its presence far before it allows itself to be seen. There’s a huge rumbling that fills the area, and it gets so loud that I begin to think it could be something worse than a train. But the train does appear, and it keeps appearing. Car after car rumbles by, each filled with hundreds of pieces of coal. All the coal looks similar; it blends into a mass, impossible for one piece to stick out from the rest. Another train passes by the first in the opposite direction, and then they’re both gone.

I walk through a little park where no one is playing. Just like pieces of coal bounced off the train, pieces of the people who were here before lie around. I find a bench dedicated to Susan, a rock dedicated to Bill. I find a discarded lunchbox, a plastic spoon, and one shoe. I cross over a bridge dedicated to the city council members killed and walk by a building with a door that leads to nowhere. It’s possible that no one remembers why the door was there in the first place, or where it led to.

On my way back to the parking garage, I pass the veterans’ memorial and the building where the council members were killed. I buy a glass of lemonade.

Poetry

**Boxing**

Give it a hit, sport  
Right in the jaw  
Knock out some teeth  
And when it’s your arm held up,  
Smile red and hold your head  
As high as they hold you  
Let them admire you  
Before your expire  
True,  
They may be wrong—  
You’re not special  
But neither are they, and  
They don’t know it, and  
You don’t know it either  
Sometimes you think that  
The belt around your waist  
Belongs.
You Are Nothing

You are nothing
But a simple machine
Sections of interconnected vectors,
Bones that break from sticks and stakes
Double-knotted to tendons,
Tenuous rubber bands balled into a man.

You are nothing
but calculations and catalyzations
Dancing enzymes moving in time to hydrolyze,
A constant crusade to attract;
Molecules attempt again and again to permeate
The membrane, the walls in your brain

A whole prison block of cells,
Calvinist doctrines that damn you to hell,
You are nothing but your faith
What makes you see
And makes you believe
What you would die for and kill for
You are nothing that hasn’t been seen before
When seven billion live today
And before that ninety billion more
And humankind still isn’t even a papercut
on the cascade of stars,
masquerading through galaxies,
far, far—
that counterbalanced universal countenance;
You are nothing in the mammoth of Everything.

You are nothing
but selected traits
Like blind dates,
Helpless at the hand of probability

You are nothing
but a point on a slope,
hyperbolic curves with the facility for
exponential hope

You are nothing
But an ant on an odyssey
A captain in the seething sea
Running your head into a great white wall
Until you are nothing at all
Humor

How the Other Half Lives: An Investigation into the Woes of Those Without Smartphones

“Send me a selfie!” they say.
“Put it on Instagram!” they say.
“Call me!” they say.
“I can’t!” I say.

Smartphones: can’t live without ‘em; I don’t have one.

Like an increasingly smaller number of middle-class teens, I live without a smartphone. No
iPhone to call my own, no Android to fill a void. Instead, I call, text, and take low-quality pictures with a
Pantech GoPhone. My life without a smartphone sometimes seems like hardly a life at all.

I know well the hardships of the dumbphone life: having to wait until I get home to check
Facebook or Twitter —on my computer, at that; sending texts and knowing that the recipient is
confused about which emotion I’m feeling, since I can’t attach emojis to my words. How many marriages
have crumbled because of a misinterpreted “lol”? Sometimes I’ll go out to a restaurant or to an idyllic
field with a sunset. I’d love to take a picture of my food, and/or a close up of a flower to show to all my
followers, but my phone’s camera is too blurry. Instead, I have to take a picture with my DSLR camera,
and the only way I can amass followers via mobile is to found a travelling cult. Sigh. Next, I might leave
said field and try to find my way back home. Alas, I’m lost, but I have no directions app to turn to.

We all know how those with smartphones live. We can see it all over our social network feeds. I
was curious to find out how the other half lives, to explore the dark world of dumbphones and to expose
the squalid conditions there. I expected to hear problems, anecdotes similar to my own, but never to
the extent that I did: inner turmoil.

“My whole life I’ve been lost. I just wander around, I’m a tumbleweed,” Rachael Meara (11)
said. Meara is a fellow dumbphone user and exemplary of the hopelessness and directional confusion
common among the smartphone-less.

Even more alarming than the lost souls are the strange conditions that dumbphones can
develop. Dumbphones seem particularly susceptible to damage from normal wear and tear.

“There’s this weird orange mass that’s growing out from the middle of the screen, so
sometimes I’m not able to read text messages. It’s a little worrying,” Rick Lewis (12) said. Lewis tried to
put on a brave face, but I sensed a similar orange mass growing from the center of Lewis himself, an
orange mass of despair and smartphone-less-ness.

Smartphones, on the other hand, never experience glitches or, say, cracked screens. But while
iPhone users have shiny Apple stores with “geniuses,” dumbphone users only have Tupperware
containers full of rice.

What I never expected to find when I began my investigation were advantages to having a
dumbphone. It may stem from too much time away from a front-facing camera, but I found a delusional
thread of hope among many dumbphone users.

“I don’t find myself on my phone as much as a lot of other people,” Meara said. Wesley
McCutchan (11) also cited time away from his phone as a positive.

“I still do all my day to day things with [my phone], and instead of calling people, I can just
write letters,” McCutchan said. McCutchan also declared that he was “more social” because of his lack
of dumbphone. Lewis even went so far as to suggest that his flip phone helps him in the dating world.

“You can take it out of your pocket, flip it open, and wink at any ladies that might be passing. I
haven’t actually tried that, but it’s guaranteed to work,” Rick Lewis (12) said.

Apparently, these dumbphone users don’t seem to mind their cell phone situation much. But
what about when phones start to affect school?

“A lot of classes... require you to have a smartphone. In fact, a couple of times I’ve had to take
quizzes on other people’s phones,” Meara said.

Could there be more to the word “smartphone” than just a name? Do smartphones actually make students smarter? And do dumbphones make students...dumber?

“False,” McCutchan said.

“No. And you can quote me on that,” Lewis said.

These two don’t seem to think so, but I’m not sure that we can trust the judgment of someone who has an orange mass growing in his stomach. Maybe smartphones are not all bad. While they can be distracting and offer no suave way to get the attention of ladies, they do have maps and cameras and the internet.

And I suppose I have noticed a few advantages to my own dumbphone. With no access to mobile maps, I’ve become proficient at reading street guides. T9 predictive texting is a fun and puzzling way to spend time, and Lewis points out that no one would ever try to steal his phone.

Perhaps the most notable advantage is the least obvious. As McCutchan notes, “The call quality is fantastic.”
Thin Sliced Skies
Diamond Inscho
Bode Middle School
Poetry
Josie Clark

They fall in sheets as thin as glass that breaks my heart,
causes my soul to dissolve into nothingness.
Crumbling with the darkest hues,
your pupils pour your stories into mine.

Please tell me you'll stay safe as you fly away with the birds this winter
and leave me with the dead Earth that falls away
like the ashes of our past.

Your fingernails are splattered with paint
and regret,
chewed to the skin,
draining out the marrow of your bony fingers
connected to mine.
Our hands are twisted into one mass of fumbling;
failing.

I trip over the puddle of salt and rust that was once us.
The sores on your mouth tell the deepest stories.
Deeper than the ocean floor -
I see its blackened light in my daydreams.
I hope you don't feel the numbing chill of it too.
My lungs collapse under the weight of your hope, deflated
like my heart.

You slipped, and I fell.
We have the wildest stories
imparted to the beasts in the night,
monsters under the bed.
Ghosts in the attic played games with us when we disintegrated;
decayed.

I looked up at the stars in the night,
wished that my skin wasn't as pale as their shine,
wanted to color in the lines because, if I could,
we wouldn't be here.
We could become stardust:
reborn and fixable.
The perspective would turn out positive,
burnt to a crisp that smells of smog and waters my eyes –
with cliché sensitivity that freezes our time.
Maybe—
just maybe—
we won't be so harmless after all.
Writer's Statement

Everyone likes making things. We like to leave our mark on the Earth, to create some little token to prove that we existed, that our lives had a point, and that we mattered. If we don’t make anything, then we will all die and disappear, and all our work and pain and joy will have been for nothing. And so, on a certain level, I write because I want to know that my life meant something.

At least, that is how I would explain myself if I were trying to sound impressive. If I were to be honest, I would admit that I started writing because I was lonely. I had no interesting stories of my own, so I imagined them, along with dozens of screwed up, miserable characters.

Eventually those characters grew into my own little imaginary family. I designed their universes, and I made some of them happy and others very sad. While I am no longer lonely, I still obsess over these fictional worlds. Every time I finish a story I feel oddly accomplished, like I've done something that matters. When I write, I lose touch with everything around me, the story absorbing me entirely. It becomes my life, and I work myself into screen headaches on a near daily basis, but I can’t stop.

Every piece in this particular portfolio, titled “And So They Start Again,” shares a common theme. Each story focuses on one or many small moments in a character’s life that change the character entirely. I never intended for the stories to fit together in any certain way, I wrote them all at different times with different moods and goals. Many of my own personal beliefs and fascinations have just slipped into them on accident. So, because it happens to be something that I think about, each piece has wound up examining the ways in which the most inconsequential occurrences can trigger or prevent personal growth. They also share many motifs, such as subway stations and fluorescent lighting. The characters are all discontent. Some are terrified, some are ignorant, and others are genuinely insane.

I am proud of everything that I’ve written for this portfolio, but a few of the pieces hold much more personal significance than others, such as “Chatting with a Childhood Friend.” Others are more distant. I have never been in any situation similar to those I wrote about in "Losers and Lost Causes." The poems fall somewhere in between.

Obviously I want for each poem and story to leave some emotional impact on whoever reads it, no matter how small. I would probably be upset if someone managed to read “Chatting With A Childhood Friend” without laughing once or twice, but I think that reading is and should be a highly personal experience. Subsequently, two individuals should not be able to appreciate a piece of writing in exactly the same way. I never intend to write moral lessons. I write stories. Meaning should come from a piece of writing in the same manner we find meaning in real life.

That being said, I would not have shared these had I not personally believed that they mattered. I hope for solely my own sake that whoever is reading this agrees with me.

Personal Essay/Memoir

Chatting With a Childhood Friend

I was locked in the backroom cinema of the Church of Scientology, watching a two-hour long recruitment video when I realized Jesus was right.
There are very few moments in our lives in which we are genuinely free. When I was four years old my family moved to a new neighborhood. A girl a year younger than me lived three houses down, and within the first few days after we had officially moved in, that girl’s family invited me to go to the park with them. Three days prior, my friend Emily had taught me how to pee behind a bush. And so, unbridled by social norms or convention, I allowed my imagination to embrace that lesson, to expand upon it, to explore. And looking back on that moment, squatting in the grass as the girl’s mom Agnes hurtled to her house in search of a plastic bag, I realize that I was truly untroubled. I had the moral strength to eschew society’s unwritten doctrines and to exercise my independence. To be my own person, outside of the rules and the law and basic etiquette. In that moment, I was liberated. I have spent all of my teenage life striving to return to that state.

Throughout sixth grade I had planned on attending a highly ranked, highly pretentious academic institution with my best friend at the time, Abigail. I anticipated many years of intellectual discourse, of friendship, of happy little memories to think back to when I grew old and rickety that could distract me from the my rapidly approaching death. At the very least, I assumed Abigail would still like me.

By sophomore year, I had spent the majority of my time with a desk in the library. Abigail, in turn, had developed a reputation as the nicest person at our school. She quickly accumulated a loyal posse of admirers whilst I scared everyone away. I started conversations with strangers about how I once saw my alcoholic step-grandpa sleepwalk through his house naked in the middle of the night to grab another light beer, and I ended those conversations by loudly and angrily disagreeing with that stranger’s political views. She had no reason to waste her time with me. The first night of winter break in seventh grade, I emailed her and told her that I didn’t want for us to drift apart. She responded by telling me that I “don’t know what it’s like to have a boyfriend” and that I should “just leave her alone.” I cried for about two hours.

I was lonely, and it was entirely my fault. But when you’re a thirteen-year-old girl—and no one wants to talk to you but everyone seems to want to talk about you—it’s easiest to deflect the blame to someone else. No matter how much I grew or matured, even as I started making friends of my own, even once the sadness I once felt had for the most part dissipated, every time I saw her, I felt angry. In my mind, Abigail was the one person with the power to save me from the worst few years of my life, and she’d chosen not to.

I had to work so hard to regain my confidence. I had to struggle to reclaim the “so what if I shit behind a tree” attitude that once defined me. I lost my carefree joy and independence and became awkward and anxious. For a while I was very unhappy, and although I grew past it, that’s not an experience easily forgotten.

I didn’t waste each day paralyzed by hatred, but Abigail became a sort of omnipresent force in my life. When good things happened to her, I frowned, and when bad things happened to her, I laughed and smiled and wrote them down to cheer myself up on a rainy day. I can’t respect Zooey Deschanel because Abigail is a fan. There’s a twelve-page entry in my journal that I titled, “The Happiest Day of My Life,” and I’d imagine, if Abigail were to journal as well, she’d have titled that day “The Worst.”

This summer, out of nowhere, she texted me and asked to hang out. I prepared for what I assumed would be the greatest verbal altercation of the twenty-first century. I worked myself up. Each night, just before falling asleep, I’d think of one great insult that I just had to play over in my head again and again until it sounded perfect. I wanted to make that girl feel horrible. We planned to meet at a coffee shop. I arrived first. I chose the table furthest back and ordered a dirty chai tea latte with the hope that she’d order something plebeian like a mocha and that she’d ask me what I’d ordered. I’d tell her I ordered a dirty chai tea latte, and she’d feel inferior.

The moment she arrived, all of my planning fell apart. On top of ordering my favorite tea, she had the audacity to act friendly. Five minutes into the conversation, she apologized. She said she was an idiot, that she felt terrible, that she should’ve been a better friend. As tempted as I was to just agree
and let her grovel, I couldn’t. I couldn’t look at her, the person I’d long blamed for ruining my teenage life, the one person I’ve ever truly hated, and let her feel guilty. I never learned how to deal with other people’s emotions, so after years spent longing for a chance to tell her just how terrible she was, I forgave her without a thought, because not doing so would make things awkward. Rather than letting the momentous decision linger, I chose to act funny. I convinced Abigail that we should take the free personality tests from the Church of Scientology, and we ended up locked in their theatre watching a poorly guised two-hour indoctrination attempt.

In that small room, illuminated by the image of a short man with a nice haircut explaining his faith, I decided that I made the right choice. Hate is not constructive. If I’d kept holding onto that anger, I would have never grown. Hatred requires time and effort and persistence. Rather than moving forward, I had chosen to cling to the past. I had failed to recognize that everyone has the potential to grow. In forgiving her, I freed myself of her presence. I entered a new era of my life, without anger or loneliness or fear. I felt that I had finally let go of the years of awkwardness and isolation. I had reawakened the lighthearted, free-spirited, tree-shitting soul who had rested dormant inside me for so long. Even though it only happened because sad people make me nervous, in retrospect I looked wise. I’d done what Jesus would’ve, and I was ready to integrate that new, accepting ideology into every facet of my being. For weeks I felt as if I’d ascended to a heightened moral conscience.

Still, whenever I overhear someone complimenting her, the first two words that pop into my head are, without exception, “That bitch.” But maybe that’s just a part of the process.

Poetry

**Chance Encounters**

A rushing stream and rocky shore  
A man they’d never seen before  
A twinkle in his light blue eye  
A brief hello, a first goodbye.

A dark hallway, a darker face  
A woman wearing too much lace  
A laugh, a touch, a fleeting look  
An ode to that which he just took.

A child running through the trees  
A light drizzle, a gentle breeze  
A bottle crashing at his feet  
A fat man yelling on the street

A little face, a smaller hand  
A reach up to a bright blond strand  
A squeaking laugh, a closed-eyed smile  
A moment to make life worthwhile

A woman with a tired gaze  
A world fogged over in a haze.  
A beaming grin and squinting eyes  
A first look at the sunny skies.
A pounding throb inside his head
A quick insult, a look of dread
A chase, a toss, a booming yell
A musty, old, and ugly smell.

A man wearing a suit, a price
A smart, sly glance, a heart of ice
A night lost in a world too dark
A life trapped in a world too stark.

A group of kids across the stream
A hatching of another scheme
A moment where he wondered why
A brief hello, a last goodbye.

An Essay

I wrote an essay about the time my friend tried to kill herself.
When she sliced her wrists to rubble
With a rusty old razorblade,
Torn from its plastic pink handle.
A brand called Majesty that cleans up every corner
And leaves you smooth as silk.
I wrote about her lying there
Submerged in salmon water
That grew to something darker.
To the red smeared on the porcelain,
Dripped onto the tiles,
Brushed against the curtain,
Seeping out her broken skin and fading
Forever lost into the lukewarm pool she lay in.
I wrote about her, cold and naked,
Withering out of existence
Alone with the buzz of one fluorescent light bulb
Until her brother burst in screaming.
I wrote about her sleeping in the hospital,
Wires poked through every orifice,
Fed with tubes and always watched.
With her wrists patched back together,
But hidden by her sheets.
I wrote about how it hurt to see her.
I wrote about what I could have done.
I wrote about how I felt, and I wrote about how I changed,
And I gave it to my English teacher.
And my English teacher gave me an A.
Flash Fiction

Losers and Lost Causes

I went to an AA meeting once. I don’t even know why I went. I didn’t want to. And honestly I spent more time pacing around outside the door freaking out than anything else. It might’ve been the church. I’ve always felt weird in churches. People are too enthusiastic; it’s depressing. No… oppressive. That’s a better word. But anyway, I was standing in the hallway creeping out everyone who walked past. They looked angry, like they all had lots of strong opinions about society, which I guess shouldn’t’ve mattered, since they’d all thrown their lives away too. But I don’t know.

I realized I was being an idiot when a teenager passed me. How pathetic I looked. It still took me a few minutes to do anything, because I didn’t want the kid to think I was following him. I had to wait long enough that I didn’t seem weird. Like I didn’t already look weird. Anyway, I waited a bit, and I kind of convinced myself that it would all be okay and walked inside. When I had just gotten used to their bright lights and Jesus sketches, I saw him, back towards me, sitting in the middle of the oval.

It all came back to me. All the times they fought. Him yelling, breaking things. She’d scream, maybe struggle a bit. But never enough to make him stop. I’d always hide in the other room, watching TV or playing video games. Something stupid. For a while after she kicked him out, everything seemed better. I never saw him. I thought I was happy. I wasn’t, but it didn’t matter. He was supposed to be gone forever. I guess that’s not how people work.

The guy in charge made me stay. I tried to avoid him, my dad, I mean, as much as possible, like if I didn’t look at him he wouldn’t see me. But again, that’s not how people work. Once he noticed me, he wouldn’t look away. Eyes wide as hell. Everyone talked, but I ignored them, waiting to get up and leave the moment they stopped. When they did, I jumped up too fast and tripped over the chair. He was standing right there. Oppressive. He said something, but I didn’t listen. I ran, out of the room and through the hallway to the parking lot. He stumbled along behind me. When I was almost at my car, he croaked, “Please, listen to me.”

So I turned around, looked him dead in the eye, and told him, “I do not give one single shit what you have to say.” He shook his head, all angry, but I didn’t look at him. I pulled my door open, slammed it shut, and drove away.

And then, once I got home, I got completely fucking wasted.
Warmth
Lindsey Kolisch
Fort Zumwalt South High School
Poetry
Amanda Bramley

Through the window of our house,
the moon allows us a glimpse of itself,
and the glass is frosted from the sleet.
(It doesn’t allow us to evade the frigid air.)
The hot chocolate mugs,
yours reading “you’re so foxy”
and mine, “owl love you forever,”
rest on the coffee table, untouched except to bring sensation back to my fingertips.
(The liquid is no longer warm.)
My winter pullover and thick flannel-lined jeans lay in front of the fireplace.
(They aren’t frozen like icicles anymore.)

We sit on the couch,
both of us curled into the space of one cushion.
My toes furl under your left thigh.
(Not because they’re returning from deep Russia, or the Antarctic.)
I dig my head into your shoulder,
my nose resting against your neck,
where I can feel your pulse thumping steadily, comfortingly, under my chilled cheek.
My hands eventually find themselves under your navy Henley,
stealing warmth from your stomach.

Your left arm comes around my back,
hand enveloping my shoulder easily.
(Not because I can’t stop shivering.)
Every ten minutes your fingers fold under my sweatshirt
and rest against my pulse.
(Not because you can’t stop worrying.)
Your right arm pulls my legs closer into your waist
and your calloused, shaky hand rubs the side of my thigh.

The only sound that passes between us
is our breath,
yours is heavy, lingered with distress
and mine is light, lingered with anxiety.
(It’s not that noticeable.)

We’ve been in the same position for hours.
(Not because you haven’t been able to let go.)
Me, curled into your body heat, and
you, convoluted around my frozen frame,
like the rough, protective outsides of a walnut.
The phone has rung, and the door has tolled, 
and you haven’t moved other than to pull me closer. 
(Not because you’re afraid I’ll melt away.)
Once upon a time there was a beautiful princess, and no one ever wrote any stories about her because she never did anything.

Once upon a time there was a witch who lived in the forest. Someone with a cousin in Salem got the idea that witches need to be burnt, and now the witch has to deal with discrimination in the insurance industry in the aftermath of arson.

Once upon a time there was a boy who owned a horse. He rode the horse every day, in good weather and bad, and imagined himself riding into battle, rescuing fair maidens and battling dragons. On one particularly wet day, the path gave way underfoot. The boy came out unscathed. The horse was lamed. The boy bought a bike.

Once upon a time there was a girl in a red hood, and then there wasn’t.

Once upon a time there was a werewolf. He suffered extreme mood swings and cravings every month during the full moon and endured ignorant teasing from his mortal school-chums about his “PMS.” It really hurt his feelings.

So he ate them.

Once upon a time there were three bears that lived in a cabin in the woods. One day, while the bears were out for a walk, a young girl with golden ringlets broke in, stole everything they owned, and pawned it all at Brothers Grimm Seedy Secondhand Shoppe.

Once upon a time there was a princess under a spell, who had been asleep for a hundred years. Finally a valiant prince fought his way past many trials and terrors to reach her, and as he gazed upon her sleeping face and leaned in to kiss her, he gagged on her rancid morning breath.

Once upon a time there was a brave knight, who lived only to serve his king. He fought many battles and won much honor for the kingdom. During a feast the king held to celebrate the knight’s latest victory, the knight choked to death on a piece of mutton.

Embarrassed, the royal family swept the whole thing under the rug.

Once upon a time there was a wooden boy whose nose grew longer every time he told a lie. He quickly learned to put a positive spin on half-truths and went on to become a successful politician.

Once upon a time there was a queen who, after seeing the state of disrepair the country was in thanks to the king’s negligence, was forced to choose between her love for her husband and her country. With a heavy heart she poisoned the king and took control of the country, bringing it out of its downward spiral and making the land prosperous again.

Several years later she was forced by several small, violent men to abdicate the throne, because her step-daughter was prettier than she was.

Once upon a time there was a handsome prince, who grew up to be a wise old man. He heard about a princess who had escaped from a tower after being held captive all her life, and tutted at the news over his morning coffee. “What is the world coming to?” He asked, “Back in my day, a prince would have saved her.”
She pinned up photos with friends and to-do lists, bits of newspaper articles with words circled, receipts, doodles, a personal ad from 1994, a university sticker and a napkin with a phone number written in messy scrawl.
They take them down one by one and send them to a mother two states away, who holds them to her chest like the daughter whose body they never found.
Lights.
Harsh, white lights.
Unfiltered, assaulting, bright lights.
There are four of them—one in each corner of the bleached walls, and one in the middle, dangling precariously over me. They each hold knives that continuously stab my retinas if I look at them too long.

Lights, a voice whispers inside my head.
Lights, another supplies.
Several more join in, creating a chorus of “lights” within my mind. I start humming to block the noise. I tell them I don’t appreciate it when they take over without asking, but they never listen.

Something floats by—a black shadow. I follow it with my eyes and reach out to touch it. Damp, it makes my hand cold, tiny goose bumps blemishing my skin. I look down at my arm and realize it hasn’t moved the entire time—my hand is dry, my skin bump-free. A dark, metallic strap is wrapped around my wrist, the skin beneath it red and raw.

Why don’t you get up? one of the voices asks.
Get up, another repeats.
“I can’t,” I say, trying to pull my arms up. They don’t move, and I don’t know if it’s because of the restraints or me.
Move! one urges.
Dance with us, they say. Several black swirls appear above my head and circle around it, bobbing and twirling in the light. The light is really bright—like the sun. The sun is 149,597,887 kilometers away. My brother moved far away, to California. Elvis Presley’s twin brother, Jesse, died in birth. My birthday is in August—

No one cares about your birthday, one voice sneers.
Or that your brother ran away from the monster you’ve become, one supplies.
You can’t even concentrate on a single thought—you’re useless, another says.
Useless, one mimics.
Useless, another joins in.
“Useless,” I nod in agreement. Only, my head doesn’t move.
I am numb.
I try to wiggle my toes, but they remain stationary. I attempt to lift my legs, but they won’t move, either. I feel two more straps against my ankles; they make my skin tingle.

I see a figure out of the corner of my eye. It’s mostly white—almost blending in with the walls.

“Is it real?” I ask quietly.
Is it real? one of the voices repeats.
Yes, you ninny! It’s real! another shouts.
“Hello, Rosemary,” the white figure says, voice like a jaguar in a violin. It tries to inflict emotion when it speaks but falls flat.
Rosemary. Is that me?
Yes, it’s you! a voice coos.
Pretty name, another says.
Pretty girl, too, once, one of them mutters.
The white figure speaks again, a deep bass rumbling within its chest, “Are you ready for your treatment?”

“Treatment?” I ask, watching the figure rise from the corner. Its shoulders are narrow, and its body is long and lean. Its features become more pronounced—dark curls, blue blue blue eyes, large nose, sharp cheekbones, full lips. The lips try to form a smile, curling up at the ends, bunching the skin around them. It twitches on one side, ever so slightly.

“Yes,” the figure rumbles, nodding. Its cold eyes glitter in anticipation.

“Who are you?” I query. My voice is sandpaper next to his. I look into his eyes and am immediately swallowed by the icy abyss. I’m drowning in a frozen sea of apathetic waves.

Who is he? a voice whispers, breaking through the ice and pulling me back to shore.

Who?

Looks familiar, one says.

His smile never falters. “I am your doctor, Rosemary. Your caretaker. The one to save you.”

“Save me?” I ask, tracing his severe cheekbones in my mind. If I’m not careful, I fear they may cut me.

His smile grows wider, but darkens at the same time. “Indeed. I must save you from yourself.”

Why? My voice is tiny and insignificant.

“You’re demented, my dear,” he purrs, “haunted by demons and darkness.”

He means us! several voices gleefully announce.

“H-haunted?” I stutter as I’m pulled back by the tide, out to sea. I’m tossed by the Maelstrom in his eyes; it thrashes me in its inky tendrils and then spits me out, naked and exposed.

He nods, breaking the connection, leaving me gasping for air on the shore. “You have driven your family apart and are a danger to society.” He steps closer and places a bony hand on my face, stroking my cheek like a lover would do. Only his eyes betray him.

“What have I done?” I ask, trembling.

His face contorts to a look of pseudo-concern. “Oh, my dear, you haven’t done anything. It’s those wretched spirits that pervade your mind.”

It’s not us! a voice cries.

We didn’t hurt anyone, one moans.

We tried saving... another whispers.

“No,” I say firmly, “they didn’t hurt anyone.”

The doctor drops his hand, his face shifting to anger in a single blink. “If that is the case, then you killed your mother and grandmother, correct?”

Images of a fire rip through my mind... screams...

We saved you, a voice says. So hot, smoke in lungs...

You would have died, too, one whispers softly.

Not your fault. You couldn’t save them, another says grimly.

“No,” I say, breaking away from the memory. As if to reassure myself, I repeat, “No.”

He carefully replaces his cold façade. “Have any memories resurfaced?”

“No,” I answer immediately.

A dark brow rises imperceptibly and his lip twitches. He writes something on the white clipboard in his hands and mutters, “No memory.” He looks back to me—the twitching smile returning—and asks, “Has any feeling returned to your body? Are you able to move?”

Any feeling? a voice asks.

Can you move? another inquires.

“No,” I say, looking down at my body. It sits in the reclining chair, pale and stiff—like a corpse.
“Why can’t I?”
He writes more on the clipboard while muttering, “Paralysis.” Increasing his volume, he says, “Perhaps the treatments are working.”
“Treatments?”
You already said that, a voice snaps.
“Yes,” he nods, turning to walk back to the ashen chair he first emerged from. “We’re about to start your treatment for today.” He sits the clipboard against the wall and bends down to get something from the ground.
“What kind of treatment?” I ask.
“The same treatment you’ve had every day for the past year,” he answers, speech quickening in excitement. He rises from his knees, a metal headband in his hands.
“I don’t remember this,” I say.
No memory, a voice says.
We remember, another adds.
Tries to get rid of us, one mutters.
But we won’t leave you, several say.
His smile changes from a brighter appearance to a maniacal one as he strides towards me. “You will,” he whispers, placing the cool, metallic band on my cranium. It has two large plates, one on each side, that squeeze my head. He pulls a wire from his pocket and places it in my mouth.
Going to hurt, one voice warns.
But we won’t leave, another confirms.
Be brave, a voice says.
I feel my heartbeat quicken. What’s going on?
“Today we are increasing the voltage to 145 mA,” the doctor says, scribbling onto the clipboard. The way he keeps speaking—perhaps he’s recording his voice? He takes a seat in the chair and bends over a box on the floor. Wires run from it to the apparatus on my head. “We are approaching the maximum voltage of former patients—150 mA.”
Maximum voltage? And then what happens?
The voices leave, all the voices whisper, chiming one after another, eerily so.
“Starting current at thirty mA,” the doctor growls. There is a brief silence, like an indrawn breath, and I hear something hum to life. My skull begins to vibrate, though it is not unpleasant. Each of the restraints must be hooked to the machine, as well, because my entire body begins to tingle.
“Increasing current to sixty mA,” I hear him say, and suddenly a painful jolt passes through my body, only it’s a constant shock. I bite down hard on the wire, though it does little to alleviate the immense pain.
Hurts, a voice says.
Be strong, one stutters.
“Increasing current to ninety mA,” he says. A whole new explosion of agony unleashes itself. It reaches out and grabs hold of me, shaking me like the end of the world, rattling my body until I feel like my bones are breaking.
The doctor says something, and suddenly—everything fades to nothing.
It doesn’t stay nothing for long. The pain is gone, and I rise. Darkness surrounds me, but the light gradually pervades. Colors come slowly, lighter than they should be. Washed out, almost. Lines blurred.
I look down, and see the doctor below, slowly turning a knob on the contraption. He appears to be shouting something, but I can’t hear. Sounds are muffled, but intensified, like I’m in a seashell.
I am strapped to the metal chair below, my teeth are clamped around a piece of wire, and the same metal headpiece is attached to my cranium. My body is convulsing, waves of energy pouring through my frame.
How am I here and there?
No voices respond.
My head is eerily silent.
“One hundred fifty mA,” the doctor roars, leaping from the chair.
A surge seems to wash over me; my body convulses even more than before. The doctor watches in awe, a maniacal smirk on his mouth, taking meticulous notes and describing what’s happening aloud for the voice recorder.
Abruptly, my figure becomes still.
**Deathly still.**
I am sucked towards my broken body as the world diminishes around me.
*We... won’t... leave you...* I swear hear a tiny voice before I’m gone.

***

The following clinic card was found on 9/24/11 in Danvers State Hospital, which is scheduled for demolition next month, after several delays due to gas leaks. There is no record of a “Rosemary Jane Forsyth” nor a “Doctor Adams” as mentioned below. The card has been tested and verified to coincide with others of that particular era, so it is authentic. Patient or not, the details are quite disturbing. Authorities are baffled.

OFFICIAL CLINIC CARD---Danvers State HOSPITAL

NAME Rosemary Jane Forsyth Register Number 4487547075 Ward i--

Date of Admission 1/5/57 Sex F Age 20 Social Condition upper middle

Occupation author Nativity Caucasian Religion Catholic, no church

Last Address n/a, presumably with grandmother (now deceased) in Boston, MA

Military Record n/a

MODE OF ADMISSION { Voluntary n/a Certified

{ Transfer from Deer Island Criminal Judge Henry Flemings

MENTAL STATE on Admission patient exhibits signs of mental disturbance; i.e. speaking to voices within head, sees demonic spirits, etc.; patient displays extreme mood swings, including violent rages; holds no concept of time and frequently leaves consciousness

DIAGNOSIS schizophrenia; borderline insanity

Supposed Causes—Predisposing history of disease within family—mother Exiting same

Physical Affect vacant facial expression, overly acute senses, excessive sleeping

Dates of Previous Admissions 8/29/50, 5/9/54 and of Discharges 2/14/52, 10/31/56

DISCHARGED on 1/26/58; no Recovered no Transfer to
Length: 1 years no Relieved yes Died pronounced dead 1/25/58
Of: 0 months yes Not Improved Cause of Death electroshock therapy;
Residence: 21 days see below Escaped heart sent into ventricle fibrillation

Special Circumstances: patient was pronounced dead under the supervision of Doctor Adams via electroshock therapy (later confirmed by coroner); patient was then moved to morgue where eyewitnesses report patient rising from table and walking out of the door; patient has not been seen since; case pending—under investigation

***

Orders have been given to dispose of the unusual clin—
That’s not yours!
Sometimes, the defining moments of life declare themselves openly: a bold, italicized statement in a field of 12-point font. Other times, the world shifts by degrees, the water slowly growing hotter until the frog floats on the water—dead. She never went back to school after the water began to boil. Each week brought a different reason to stay home until, about a month later, the truth revealed itself in the form of a drugstore test and two red eyes. The water began bubbling out of control though her attacker still roamed free outside the pot; seeing no alternatives, the frog leaped.

Every day at 3:14 p.m., the entire neighborhood heard his feet pounding in the aisle. He reached the doors before the wheels of the bus stopped turning, before the driver could turn around and snap at him for the hundredth time to sit back down or so help him. Every day at 3:14, his heart and his feet raced down the steps and out onto the pavement leading home to an old ranch style house shrouded by trees. Every day, like clockwork—tick, tock, puff, pound—his glasses slid down his cold, sweaty nose only to be pushed up by an agitated hand, and every day we laughed.

On the good days, his sister’s face at the door stilled the pounding in his chest. They had both survived another day. On the bad days, his hands trembled as he unlocked the door and his heart went into overdrive, only returning to normal as he registered his sister watching TV or reading or doing anything, really—even crying requires breath—and he allowed himself to remember that oxygen did, in fact, exist. For a few hours afterward everything was calm and heavy with the silent sadness that neither one addressed. How could he tell her that after so many months, he still remembered the day he came home to find her asleep with a pill bottle next to her pillow, her skin the color of the dress she had put on for her burial? How could she tell him that on bad days, she sometimes wore the dress around the house, just in case? The night that followed the act, when life and death vied for control of the corpse already half gone, and the devastation on his sister’s face when she realized which side had won, these were sacred family secrets, to be neither acknowledged nor forgotten. So every day at 3:14 he ran home, and every day we laughed.

On this day, his hurried knocking on his own front door went unanswered. His half-frozen fingers frantically searched his pockets for the key he always took just in case. Fumbling with his pockets, with the key, with the lock, with the handle on that awful door that would never quite open and should have been replaced years ago. Could have, should have. His mom should have let him be home-schooled. He’d asked before, and she had, of course, refused, but he could have persisted. He could have worn her down until the ‘no’ became a ‘yes.’ Could have, should have. Fumbling again to put the key away and throw off his backpack, not caring where it landed...

“Jess? You there?” She was asleep. She had to be asleep, finally drowsy enough to slip off without the medication that never seemed to work anyway. Who knew how long she’d been awake? “Jess?”

Through the hall, the living room, the kitchen (he noticed the few knives they possessed were still clean). Up the stairs, panting, stumbling, scraping hands, crawling like an animal to the top of the landing, to his sister’s room. “Jess?”

There, on the bed. He ripped the covers back. “Jess!” His sister’s dark hair spilled around her, not quite hiding the open pill bottle tucked next to her pillow where her teddy bear used to sit.

His eyes screwed tight against the scene. This wasn’t real. They are four and eight, fighting over some disputed Halloween candy. Five and nine, and the girl is teaching her brother how to jump off the swing set. She gets grounded after he breaks his arm. Twelve and sixteen, he confides in her alone about
the bubbly feeling that arises in his stomach when the boy in biology talks to him. She listens and smiles sadly. They are anywhere, any time in the history of their lives but here—his high school graduation, her wedding. This isn’t real.

When he opened his eyes, she was still there, wearing a different white dress and a blank expression. The boy guessed right, in a way. After months of trying, his sister finally found a way to fall asleep.

He missed the bus the next day. Instead of hallways, he passed through a blur of sirens and tears and black—everything black and behind it all, the white of his sister’s dress that she would wear forever. A week later, he came back to school. At 3:14 that afternoon, the bus arrived at his stop, and the boy disembarked, but something was different. After a minute, we saw it: he’d stopped running.
You know how people say, “I never saw it coming.” I mean, come on, they always see it coming. Well, in my case. Not only did I not see it coming, it ran right over the top of me.

“Hey, Jen!”
“Hey, Faun!”

We were as familiar with one another as sisters. We’ve been going to school together since Kindergarten; the minute she stole my Elmer’s glue to finish her project, we became best friends. She knew what I was thinking before I knew my thoughts. Spookily, we rarely spoke in complete sentences, because we knew each other so well; spoken words were not necessary.

The look on her face told me that she could tell that something was up. “I’m walking home alone today.”

“No, you’re not. I’m coming.” Her mind was made, and there was no changing it.
“What happened to…?”
“He left.” My dad left yesterday for another girl. He wasn’t worth finding, just another step dad gone wrong.

“Ah I see, just the Three Musketeers again?”
“Yep.” Faun affectionately called us this – my Gran, my mom, and me. Ever since my biological dad left the day I was born, I have had more men in my life than I could count. The new one is always “the one that’s going to stay,” but he never does.

BRRRRRRRING! The dismissal bell sounded, and like a balloon that burst, kids came pouring out of their classrooms.

“It’s Friday the thirteenth!” Fauna was all about superstitions especially Friday the thirteenth, the “unluckiest day of the year.”

“Hey, I’m just glad it’s Friday—whether it’s the thirteenth or the thirtieth.” This week had been so long. I wish I could forget it all.

As the crowd pushed its way through the door to freedom, I felt Fauna grab my arm and pull me in the right direction. She was taller than me, so she could actually see above all of the heads to see where we were going.

As we approached the street, I checked both ways, as my mother enforces, then began to cross.

“JEN! WATCH OUT!” I had no time to process what she had just said. I was in the middle of the street, and a bus was charging right at me. The last thing I saw was Fauna crouched down with a look on her face like she had just seen a ghost. Then it went black.

Jennifer, Jennifer, can you hear me?” I could smell the pungent smell of sickness and medication. There was a blob of blur that I made out as a girl. I was in a strange room and quite uncomfortable in the rock-hard bed underneath me. The girl was probably 16 and beautiful. From her long flowing hair and her perfect posture all the way to her combat boots, but I had no clue who she was.

“Jen, it’s me, Fauna,” It’s nice to put a name to a face, but I still don’t know who Fauna is, so I must be Jen. “Come on Jen, you remember right? Gosh, you don’t remember me do you?” she mumbled. With a slight shake of my head, Fauna fell to the ground in a heap, bawling.

I heard the door open, and two ladies dressed in all white escorted her out while she reached for me yelling, “You have to remember me! YOU HAVE TO! I’m your best friend!” the shouting continued, but after the door slammed, all I could hear is a far away screech.
A lady walked in and looked to be in her late 40s. She had almond skin, like mine. I noticed dark hair that was neatly braided down her back and a soothing aroma that followed her in. She sat down next to me and said, “Hi Jennifer, how are you feeling?”

“I feel fine, but I would like to know where I am and why I’m here.” I felt like I should remember this woman, but my memory is so cloudy, I can’t seem to remember anything.

“Oh honey, the doctors mentioned that you might have lost your memory.” A single tear dropped from her eye and slid to the floor. “You are Jennifer, and you need to rest. That would be for the best.” It sounded like she was trying to convince herself that her words were true. “All of this will come back to you. It will just take time.” It was all over her face that what she said wasn’t true. Whatever my life has been before what happened, I would never remember it.

“You’re my mom, right?” I put the pieces together. She looked very similar to what I think looks like me, and she looked too old to be a sister. If she was my mom, where was my dad?

“I am your mom.” I caught a glimpse of a smile, and if I hadn’t been paying attention to it, I might not have even known it was there.

“Then where is Dad?”

The look on her face deepened; I had just hit a touchy subject, but she responded, “Let’s just say that he couldn’t make it.”

After 14 long agonizing days with nurses coming and going, checking my blood, giving me medicine, I was approved to go home.

“How you feeling, hon?” I learned that my grandmother, Gran, lived with me and my mom and that my dad was out of the country for business. He couldn’t call or email and didn’t know when he would be back.

“I’m fine. Just ready to be home.” I somehow knew right where my room was and where my secret stash of candy and books were. I have learned that I didn’t forget everything. I remember little details, like the general idea of what we did in school and my favorite food but not people or the emotions connected to them.

“Knock Knock!” Fauna had visited me every day back at the hospital telling me about myself. I knew now that we were best friends since forever. We spent the night at my house every Wednesday. Every Friday, we went out for ice cream at the chilly rock at the “beach side outlets.” I wish I could remember it all; it seemed like a great life. “I brought you favorite, Mrs. Barker, snickers with extra caramel. For Jen it’s a blend of Reese’s Peanut Butter Cups and hot fudge.” There was a lost look in her eyes which were tearing up, “It’s your favorite.”

I grasped the cup of creamed goodness and shoveled a bit of everything into my mouth. The flavors danced around on my taste buds, the cold custard with the warm, smooth thickness of the fudge with the solid chunks of chocolate and peanut butter. This was possibly the best thing I had ever put in my mouth.

After a long talk, I excused myself to bed. Fauna was still there, but I figured that she would want to talk to my mom.

I drifted off to sleep, and I saw a flash of light full of colors I had never seen before. It consisted of many different shades and blends of blues, greens and purples. All of a sudden an image flashed before me. It felt like I was in the movies, in total darkness with the one giant glowing series of pictures with sound.

An image of a six year old girl with dark almond skin, dark brown hair that almost touched the floor with another girl about the same age, a little taller, bleached hair, eyes the color of the midday sky, and a long graceful pale frame. They were dancing around, practically jumping and leaping with joy over something I couldn’t see. They plopped down on the bright pink bed and opened the brown cardboard box, and by the look in their eyes, it must have had angels singing in the background and golden shimmering light shining coming from an unknown source. The pale girl pulled out a baby doll that,
according to the package, could blink and talk when you press her tummy.

“Oh my gosh, Faun, SHE CAME!” Both girls screeched so loud that I had to cover my ears.

“What should I name her?” Faun asked.

“Oh man, I don’t know, Kelly?”

“Kelly it is. Great name, Jen!” I guess this is me and Fauna. I wonder if this is real or if I’m just desperate for memories and forcing fake ones.

A different scene appeared, and this time I felt like I was really there, smelling the fresh cut grass and feeling the late spring breeze against my legs. The same girls from the last scene, me and Fauna, were skipping around, probably about eight now. I must have had my hair cut because it didn’t even reach the small of my back. Fauna, however, looked the same.

They were heading to the beach in their squeaky flip flops, dressed in swimming suits, and towels draped on their shoulders.

“Where is John?”

“He left yesterday.” Who was John? Was he like a teacher or a friend? This isn’t making any sense. Could he possibly be my father?

“Ah, don’t let it bug you. Have fun with me,” Fauna said with a wink.

While my mind was racing, the scene changed, and I was looking at teenage Fauna. She was sitting in my chair backwards and staring at me with her head at an angle.

“What?” I said. It was getting awkward; I felt like she was staring into my soul.

“You are just handling everything so well.”

“What do you mean?” I no longer had control of my mouth; it was forming its own words but almost in sync with my thoughts.

“With David leaving. He was your favorite stepdad yet.” What did she mean? As far as I know my dad was on business. How could I have a stepdad? But then again, as far as I know is only about one day. Light seeped through my eyes, and I began to wake. I glanced over, and unfortunately, it was 4:30 am. I crawled out of bed and crept to the kitchen. I searched for a granola bar, but all I could find was fruit loops.

“Couldn’t sleep?” I hadn’t heard Gram coming, but the truth was that I couldn’t go back to sleep.

“Nah,” I debated asking Gran if my dad was really on a business trip or if he left. So far, I have tallied two stepdads in my dreams, John and David. “This is a weird question, but is my dad, my real dad that is, on business?”

“Well, hon, that’s a question for your mom, but because she is asleep, I’ll tell you. However, between us, I didn’t tell you.” I saw a twinkle of mischief in her eye; as I have learned, Gram is pretty ornery.

“Kay,” I replied with a wink.

“Your biological dad left when you were born, and ever since, your mother has been looking for ‘Mr. Perfect’, if you know what I mean, but so far, not so good.” She gave me a moment to let it all sink in. I don’t know what to say after that. I wasn’t expecting that. I guess the look on my face showed it.

“How bout you go back to bed so you can get some rest before church.”

When I got to my room, I couldn’t possibly go back to sleep. My mother lied to me, she lied. How could I trust her anymore? I didn’t know if I could. That whole day, I didn’t speak to anyone. I didn’t want to hear anymore lies, or truths. I wouldn’t be able to tell, so I just wanted nothing of either.

“Will you stop giving me the silent treatment all day?”

No response.

“Come on, honey, what’s wrong?”

“You lied about Dad.” Those were my only words to her before I walked away.
Fauna was in my room when I got home. I walked past her and shoved my face into my pillow and cried.

After about a minute of my self-pity moment, Fauna spoke. “You found out, didn’t you?” I nodded into my damp pillow. “You want to spend the night?” Again, I nodded. She got up and patted my back and packed a bag for me.

On our walk down the street, we said nothing. She could tell what I was thinking, just like she did in the dreams.

We approached a two story cottage with bright red shutters and a dusty porch swing. We skipped up the stairs and pushed through the door. Fauna lead me upstairs and to the right to her room. It looked exactly like what I had dreamed; they must have been real memories.

I examined the rest of the room and noticed that her dresser was still pale pink and her desk was still white. I saw a little toddler chair in a corner with a baby doll sitting in it. “Kelly,” I muttered.

“Yeah, I got it when I was six.” So we were six. “You were there with me; how did you know?”

If I told her that I dreamed about it, I’m sure she would think I need to go to a mental hospital, but then again, what did I have to lose. Besides, being in a little room where people come and visit me every so often wouldn’t be much different that now. “It was in a dream I had, must have been a memory.”

She nodded like she understood and that it was no big deal, but her eyes looked like they did when she saw Kelly in the memory, amazed, in awe. Her look changed into a question, then to a thought, and back to amazement. “You remember anything else? That is, besides your dad.”

“Just after David when you were in my room, but no, nothing else.”

“You do realize that if you would tell anyone else this that you’d...”

“Be sent to a mental hospital for examination, yes I do, which is why I am opening up to you. If you are all you say you are, I can trust you,” I squinted my eyes at her.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m giving you the side eye.”

“You are so weird.”

“I know.” The night went on, and we did normal teen things; we watched movies, drank too much soda, and stayed up for most of the night.

“You know that you are going to have to forgive your mom.”

“I know, but that is so big, I don’t know how she could...”

“She was trying to protect you; she probably wanted to start fresh again. She...”

“I just don’t know; how do I know if all of my told memories are what really happened.”

“How about this: if you come to a truce with your mom, you can sit down with me tomorrow night, and I will tell you about you.”

“Wait, you mean I talk to her when I get home from school tomorrow?”

“Don’t be silly, after losing your memory over the weekend, you won’t have to go to school all of this week!” Sweet, now not only do I have to speak with my mom, but I have to spend the whole week there too without Fauna to be able to swoop in and take me for a ride? I don’t know if I’ll make it.

“Things won’t be so awkward with your mom if you just talk with her.” I swear that she is a mind reader; we should look into that someday.

After I walked home to let Fauna rest before school for her tomorrow, I found Gran sitting on our porch step. “What are you up to, Gran?”

“Looking at the stars, well to be more exact, looking for a shooting star to wish on.” When she saw my skeptical look, she continued, “What? They say that the dust from the star will capture your wish, and if you’re lucky, it just might come true.”

“Yeah, and who exactly says this?”

“The ancestors,” and with that her gaze went back to the stars. I got to thinking. If I had one
wish, what would it be? Would I want all of my memory back? Or would getting all of the memories ruin my ‘fresh start’? I could wish for the truth on my life, but that might end up with the same effect.

Just then, a ball of fire soared across the sky, and I heard Gram gasp. Now was my time. What would I do? I wished for all of my pain to end. I didn’t know where it came from, that was what I wanted the most. The star became brighter and brighter. I was drawn closer with an irresistible urge to step into the light.

Epilogue

Fauna

“Will everyone please bow their heads.” I have been in shock ever since that day. I should have called my mom to come pick us up. I should have jumped out and pushed her away like they do in the movies. My life will always consist of “should haves.” Even though I am told to move on, I will never be able to. “Our dear heavenly father, we are here today mourning our sweet friend Jenifer Barker whose life was cut short by a distracted bus driver.” I have decided to shut out my life. It should have been me that got hit that day. This is no superstition. This is life. “In your son, Jesus’s name,” and everyone said, “Amen.”
“One week, Victoria, one week and that’s all.”
“Mia, you know that’s not possible, especially with the little info you did give me,” I protested, rubbing my temple with my thumbs. My breaths were restricted with the stress of the task I had just received. “Sure, money speaks, but it’s as if you’re setting me up for failure.”

“Do you want me to go somewhere else for this? Because I really think you want to be the one to eliminate this person.” Mia looked down at her fingers, inhaling the smoke from the cigarette between her rough lips. “And yeah, money does speak, but the loudness depends on the amount, right?”

“Right, Mia. And your point is?”
“How loud is the money screaming your name? Huh? How loud?”
“Too loud to think,” I sighed and knew I wouldn’t be getting out of this. “I’ll do it, but the time doesn’t start until tomorrow at this very time. End of discussion.”

“I knew you would do it.”

“I’m doing it for the money, not you,” I pointed out and watched as her small frame left my office, red hair swinging, hips doing the exact same.

Day One 11:27 p.m.
I searched through the info Mia handed to me, but that just caused me to be even more stressed. I couldn’t allow myself to be that way. It’s day one of fourteen, and I already want to give up. I told myself months ago that I was done, that I’d never do this again. I have other things to worry about than destroying the ones that have been targeted.

I have a family to worry about now. I have a wonderful husband and a beautiful seven month old baby girl. This ‘hobby’ couldn’t be my hobby anymore. I have a family now and can’t bring them into this.

So, what was so different about this elimination? What made me say yes?
Life’s too precious to give it away to someone else.

“Honey, it’s almost midnight. You should really be getting to bed,” Drew, my husband of three years, said while he wrapped his arms around my torso. “C’mon, let’s go.”

“But you don’t understand, Drew. I have to get this done tonight - or at least half,” I shrugged him off and reorganized the stacks of papers and colored folders in piles by how important they were to this task. I paused for a minute, glancing at my dark oak desk in the study across from my daughter’s bedroom. Turning to look across the room into hers, I sighed and dropped my head.

Why did I say yes?

“She’s fine, Victoria. Sound asleep like a baby should be, okay?” Drew reached for my hand and walked me to our bedroom, down the hall of the old white apartment we rented in Chicago.

His hand in mine made me forget about the bad and remember the good. I felt goosebumps again like I used to, like nothing could ever harm me or my family. His hand gave me the relaxation I needed to close my eyes without needed medication. It made me think everything was okay when it really wasn’t. I needed to snap out of it, but I couldn’t because I was already in bed; him playing the role of the big spoon while I was the little one. His hand still in mine.

My body was comfortable, and my eyes started to drift closed when our security alarm started blaring with high-pitched annoyance. We both groaned and got up, reporting to our spots - I to Ellie and
Drew to the break-in. This event wasn’t the first time, actually. It wasn’t anything new to the both of us, but I knew that this was different.

I paced myself in four big strides to Ellie’s room, finding her crying her little brown eyes out. I reached her cradle and placed her in my arms, making her feel comfort and safety. I walked around and tried to shush her with a few lullabies. I turned to her window and fear took over the insides of my body and paralyzed me.

“Drew - Drew, honey, did you find the break-in yet?” I managed to say without waking baby Ellie.

“No,” he said but then saw the window and sighed in disbelief. “Vic, you told me you were done with this. No more games, remember?” He looked away from me and took Ellie from my shaking arms and out of her room.

I walked up to the window, closed it and wiped the marker off the window. In dark red lettering, it read: day one’s dead. It was no longer on my child’s window but rather on the sleeve of my arm, all smeared together.

Day Two 7:49 a.m.

“I heard you wanted to talk to me?” Mia walked in abruptly, not giving a hoot.

“Well, something like that,” I murmured and walked over to my own window, remembering last night’s event. “Mia, I don’t appreciate you threatening me through my daughter,” I toward her in hatred. “My daughter isn’t in this? You created war between us.”

“I’m not the one who did it, sweetheart. But if you want war, I’ll give you one.”

“I want out of this now, Mia. No more games,” I walked closer to her.

“You go, she goes, Vic. Do you really want that?”

“Why are you doing this? You want someone dead, kill them yourself.”

“That’s not the problem, and you know that. I’ll kill if I want, but I just thought you’d be the one to do this elimination.”

“If you don’t want to get your hands dirty, you gotta give me more info, Mia. These things aren’t easy, and you just seem to not care. This thing,” I waved my hands around furiously, “is way out of hand, and it’s only the beginning. I need answers to solve this question. Do you get that?”

“The answers are in your very own home, Victoria. Open your damn eyes,” she huffed and once again strutted out of my office.

Day Three 5:41 p.m.

Five feet, four feet, three feet, two feet, and one. Home. I entered through my front door with Ellie balanced on my right hip and mail in my opposite hand. Today was a long day. I had to cancel many appointments so I could focus on the one thing my life depended on. Once I walked into my home’s environment, my body seemed to be happy again.

Our home phone started ringing when I entered the door, as if I set off a trap. I nuzzled Ellie into our loveseat and ran to the kitchen with her diaper bag and my briefcase in hand. But I didn’t make it in time. Crap.

“Victoria, it’s your mother. I was just calling to see if everything was okay because Mrs. Berman called me and told me you canceled with her. And that never happens, honey. Is the baby okay? Are you okay? Is Drew okay? Just call me back, Vic, okay?” The answering machine clicked off.

I hit the redial button and waited for her to answer. “Mom, I’m fine and so is everyone else. I’ve just been stressed, that’s all. I’ve been having tons of people come to me this week. It’s hectic,” I lied casually into the phone, smiling even though she couldn’t see.

“Oh, okay. I just wanted to make sure.”

“Well, bye. Ellie’s getting fussy.” Second lie in less than a minute. I hung up. If only the lies were
the truth, and I could possibly believe them.

I knew that tonight I would be popping some sleeping pills because I haven’t gotten anything close to rest. My body is too hyped on this, too tense to relax. My eyes won’t close anymore. Blinking seems to be harder than it should be, too. It’s totally stupid, and I’m probably scary looking.

Day Four 2:03 a.m.
I forgot to take the sleeping pills last night. Again. I planned that for the last two nights, but my mind was too busy to remember a thing. My head is deleting everything I’ve remembered from the past few days. Things are crazy, and normal no longer exists within me. I need sleep.

“Drew, wake up,” I lightly pushed him against his back.
“What?” he groaned and rolled over to face me.
“Do we have sleeping pills?”
“Nope,” he closed his bright green eyes, trying to fall asleep again.
“I’m going to run to the store. I’m also taking Ellie with me.” I got up and dressed in jeans and a tee.

“Victoria, get back into bed and leave the poor baby alone.”
“Drew, I need to sleep, okay? You don’t understand. Everything’s hectic, and I need peace.” I rushed out of the room, took Ellie and left quickly so he couldn’t protest.

Inside of my black SUV, I strapped my baby girl and myself in and floored the pedal to the ground, leaving the apartment behind - far, far behind. I was going crazy, wasn’t I? Pure madness with a baby in the back asleep and my features frail and frizzed. But with that craziness and madness, guilt sat deep inside, hidden away. What was happening to me? I’ve never experienced anything like this before.

Halfway to the store, my phone went off, probably Drew telling me to come home. When I looked down, it wasn’t Drew - a private number.
It read: Tic, toc, sweetie. Desperate times call for desperate measures.
A photo was attached - a photo which I opened and wished I had not.

Day Five 3:52 p.m.
“You know, you got good aim, miss.” A man handed me more bullets to load into my US M1903A4 Sniper Rifle.

“Well, they do say practice makes perfect.” I reloaded and adjusted the telescope, aiming for a headshot. Deep concentration flowed through my veins; the world became quiet again. I pulled the trigger and watched the bullet pierce the non-existent skull that will soon belong to my selected target.
Everything made sense now. So much freaking sense. I just can’t believe I let it slip by like that. How stupid am I to not open my eyes like Mia suggested? She was so right though - hard as it is to say. I do want to take this person out. The person made everything so personal. Oh, so personal.
“What’s the practice for?” the older man pushed farther.
“Hunting season’s coming pretty soon,” I lied and gathered my belongings, walking away.
You must be dedicated,” he said behind me, reloading his gun.
Yeah, dedicated to kill the ones who make life hell.

Day Six 10:19 a.m.
The pieces are coming together to form the puzzle. I was blind when it came to this one task and don’t understand why. The broken pieces make a whole once again, and so much relief has been lifted off my shoulders. I was finally able to sleep last night.

Now I know the full truth to the long nights and no sleep and restless lies and fake kisses. It’s breaking my heart to know. This person is family - we’re family. How could they do something like this? I know everything, and it burns to realize it’s them and their truth. Their mistake was their truth, and it
screwed up all the memories.

“Hey, babe,” Drew walked into the study with breakfast on a tray. “Thought you might want to eat. I got your favorite, turkey bacon.”

“Thanks,” I bit into the bacon and turned back to my laptop. “What time did you get home, honey?”

“Two this morning. Sorry, babe,” he smiled and sat on our red leather couch imported from France.

“What’s with the ‘babe’ act?” I questioned him, raising an eyebrow.

“You’ve been stressed, and I know this is your last one and stuff.”

“How do you know it’s my last one?” I quizzed him. He didn’t know anything. We haven’t even had a real conversation in a week.

“Well, isn’t it?”

“I don’t know, Drew,” I sighed and looked away from him.

“Vic, we have a family, okay? We need each other to make a whole.”

“But you don’t get it. Once I’m in, Drew, I’m never out. Everyone knows my name on the streets, and people will still come to me even if I decline. This isn’t a hobby, it’s a job.”

“Your job is being a therapist, babe.”

“Cut the ‘babe’ crap, Drew.”

“Victoria, calm down.”

“Don’t tell me what to do,” I raised my voice and stood up, facing him. “You never get it. You act like you do, but you don’t. You’re never home at night, never there for us. Ellie needs a father, Drew. I take care of her, even when I’m doing my dirty work. If I want to be done with this, I will. I stop when I say I stop.”

“I like it when you’re mad,” Drew smirked and walked closer to me.

“I like it when people die,” I imitated him and left the apartment - but not without Ellie.

Day Seven 11:02 p.m.

Ready and loaded. Nobody was inside the house. Nobody knew it was coming. Most importantly, nobody knew I was waiting.

The voicemail picked up, but the phone never rang. “Mia, it’s your father again. I found a new apartment like you suggested. It has everything you want surprisingly within your budget. Let me know soon because Tokyo is a busy place and places go quickly.”

I lightly breathed in and stayed on the loveseat. I counted down the seconds that turned into minutes for them to walk right through that old oak door. I’ve been waiting for this moment to occur - my time to seek my very own truth in life.

“Oh, c’mon. Tokyo is the perfect place to start over,” her voice rang through the hallway, echoing to my listening ears. She was here, my target within my own reach.

After this moment in time, my life will be put into good hands - I believe in that.

“Sweetheart, not until everything clears up, okay?”

“And when will that be? Huh?”

Their footsteps traveled into the kitchen, lights being turned on as they went. I felt hurt inside to know that I had to kill the one who was close to me. It hurt to know they went behind my back and fed me lies that I believed. Most importantly, it hurt because I knew the truth, and he still acted like nothing happened.

“It’s the last day and you know that. Fifty-eight minutes, honey. Just fifty-eight,” he tugged her into a hug and kissed her like he used to do to me. Total betrayal.

It was time to move.

Pulling the scope up to my eye, closing my left to focus, I fired my gun toward the one who
started this. I watched as the person grabbed for their leg, just a minor injury, and fall to the ground. They cried for help, but it only came out as a squeak.

“Victoria, what a surprise,” he turned to face me, smirking. I just wanted to shred him into pieces. How could he act so okay at a time like this? How could he do such a thing to me? To us?

“Why, Drew? Why did you do this to us?” I stood up and held my gun upright and ready to fire if it was necessary.

“The real question is why not?” Drew moved slowly to me and watched as I breathed heavily with my weapon pointed at him.

“Fine, but tell me this. Tell me a truth and a lie,” I furiously spoke.

“Truth: I’m not innocent,” he paused for a second. “Lie: I love you,” he whispered, breaking every inch of me inside. So, everything was a lie - our relationship, our family, our memories. All lies.

Teary eyed now, I pulled the trigger and watched as the bullet pierced his head, exploding all over the white walls. It was sad, but he deserved it. He truly did. Everything we built now crumbling like bricks. I was satisfied with the end results of this all. He’s dead. Me? I’m heading to Tokyo.
I walked up the sidewalk and caught a glimpse of the familiar white house with black shutters. The red swing on the porch moved gently in the wind. After passing the forsythia bush in old Mrs. Coleman’s yard, I usually would run the rest of the distance to the house, leaping up on the porch, skipping the two brick steps in the front and bounding through the door as if it were my own house. Today, however, I took cautious steps after the sidewalk ended.

The yellow caution tape snaked around the house. I looked at the white colonial with the red door as if it were a stranger’s home. However, it’s not. The memories of my childhood were in that house: the time we made cookies and spilled the flour all the way upstairs, our discovery that Mentos and soda DON’T mix, and the rogue baking soda volcano for our fourth grade science fair.

I slowed down a little because I saw two police officers in black uniforms talking to a man in an overcoat. They were deep in conversation, and I managed to slip past them and grab the key hidden under the flowerpot. I stuck the key into the lock and the door opened with a creak. I tiptoed past the many strangers in uniform and came to the back stairs.

Then that I saw it. Thick and brown, it had been there for a while. I followed the trail up the stairs and around the corner, stopping dead in my tracks. A bulging black bag lay in the center of the hall. It became hard to breathe. I was drowning, unable to comprehend what was happening. I needed to find Jenna and tell her that something terrible had happened at her house. Who was in the body bag? Jared? Of Jenna’s brothers, he had been the most troubled. A drug deal gone bad may have brought this nightmare into their home.

Bob and Viv Jones rounded the corner, cheeks flushed, with tears rolling down. I ran to them, and they opened their arms to me. I didn’t know what was going on, but I knew that it would affect all of us. The crushing weight of what had happened was just beginning to dawn on me.

Later, the music played its solemn and mournful melody as I stared down at the white casket, knowing I would never see Jenna again. She had been not only my partner in crime, but my confidant. I told her everything, and those secrets we’d shared for twelve years were gone. She had been deteriorating for months, but I had been too conceited to see it. Only after the trigger was pulled did I notice how much she struggled. If I had looked past my own problems, maybe Jenna would still be here. Maybe the suicide wouldn’t have happened.

The pastor stood behind the casket. I saw his lips moving, but the words were lost to me. My flower petal induced headache made my senses a blur. I recalled bowing my head to pray multiple times, but the next thing I knew was being ushered to the kitchen. On a normal day, I would’ve welcomed the home cooking of the pot luck. Today, though, was not a normal day. I drowned my sorrows in gravy and tried to keep my eyes from swimming with tears.

“Sydney, get your things together. We’re leaving for the cemetery in ten minutes,” my mother said.

“Do I have to go? It’s raining…”

“Bob and Viv would want you to be there. Jenna would have as well.”

At the mention of her name I stood, slipped my rain slicker over my dress, and exited the building.

I watched the raindrops race across the cool glass and silently made bets on which would win. Everything was being done to keep my mind off the ceremony that would be performed once the car rolled to a stop. Through the tinted window I saw the sign: “Baker County Cemetery.”
My father’s shoes squished as he came to open my door. A Mary Poppins umbrella was snapped open for me. With each step toward the white tent, a feeling of dread began to spread through me. I stepped onto the carpet and heard the pitter patter of the rain hitting the top. Viv Jones came up to me, trying to speak through her tears.

“We found this in Jenna’s bedroom,” she handed me a pristine white envelope, “and it was addressed to you.”

My arms entangled with my best friend’s mother, as I hugged with what strength was left in me. Her build was so similar to Jenna’s, and in my mind, I was giving my best friend one last hug.

Sitting in the treehouse, the only sacred place Jenna and I had, I lifted the flap of the envelope and pulled out the wet letter. The ink was smeared, but still readable.

Dear Syd,
I wish it didn’t have to end this way. Pulling the trigger was a choice though, and I guess I can’t take it back. By the time you read this, I will probably already be seven feet underneath the cold hard earth. That reminds me of playing little league softball. Remember that little chant we used to do? “Down the road there’s an old cemetery. That’s where the other team is gonna get buried. Six feet wide and seven feet under, when we hit, we hit like thunder…”

The crowd’s cheers rang in my ears. We were down by one, with two outs. It was the ninth inning. Jenna strutted toward the plate, and we began to chant one of our silly tunes. We were shushed by coach as the pitcher threw her a fastball.

“Strike one!” The umpire called.
I took a deep breath and reminded myself that she had two more chances. The second pitch came whipping through the air as Jenna swung...too late.

“Strike two!”
I mentally spoke words of encouragement to Jenna. All she had to do was hit the ball, and we would win. McKenna was on third; a single would do it.

The pitcher started her wind up as everyone on the bench held their breath. Time slowed as the ball came in. It looked a bit outside of the strike zone, but at the last minute it curved in...right over the plate. Jenna assumed the ball’s path would stay steady.

“Strike three! You are outta here!” the umpire screamed.
Jenna hung her head as she made her way back to the dugout.

“See? I told you she couldn’t hit the ball if her life depended on it! She lost the game for us!” the burly girl sitting next to me croaked.

I sat there wordlessly. Jenna looked at me with expectation, but then her demeanor completely changed. Hurt dawned on her face, and tears brimmed in her eyes. I hadn’t said the words, but I hadn’t denied them either. I couldn’t even defend my best friend.

Those were the days—nothing was complicated, and we were naïve. Six months later someone (that would be you, Sydney) spilled the beans that someone (that would be me) had the biggest crush on the reigning kickball champion...

I sat on the swing as Jenna’s breath tickled my ear. “Yeah, so, I really like Timmy O’Malley.”

“Timmy O’Malley? You have a crush on O’Malley?” I shouted much too loud.

A hand was clamped over my mouth as people began to stare. Timmy O’Malley was a certified jock, the two-time Kickball Champ, starting center on the basketball team, and a legacy of sorts.

“You need to be quiet. Now, I’m going to go to the bathroom, and when I get back you better still be sitting on that swing,” Jenna threatened as she began to walk away.

My fingers twitched, and I fidgeted. I had to tell somebody. This isn’t the kind of secret I could keep! I jumped off the swing and ran over to Megan Carlisle.

“Hey, Meg. Can you keep a secret?”
She nodded furiously.
“You can’t breathe a word of this to anyone.” I said with caution as my words turned into a whisper. “Jenna has a huge crush on Timmy O’Malley.”

“No way!” she replied with excitement.

“Yes way. Now keep quiet!”

“My lips are sealed. Pinky promise.” We locked our little fingers in the age-old ritual.

By the end of recess word had spread throughout the entire fourth grade. Jenna was mortified as people chanted “Jenna and Timmy sitting in a tree. K-I-S-S-I-N-G.”

Her eyes bore daggers into mine as she strutted up the sidewalk back to class. I had no idea if she would ever forgive me.

Oh well. I got revenge that time when I died your hair purple while you were sleeping. The worst time in our entire friendship was probably last year when you sent me those hate messages...

“Hate messages? What hate messages? I never sent her any hate messages!” I said aloud in the empty treehouse.

I knew that Megan and Alyssa were at your house when you sent them. They despise me. Suddenly, it became clear.

“Guys, I’m gonna go to the bathroom real quick, and then we can start the movie,” I stated as I walked away from our living room.

I heard a vague, “Quick! Steal her phone!” from Alyssa, but I figured that they were just spamming me with selfies. I should’ve thought more of it.

As I exited the bathroom, I heard snickering coming from my two friends. One of those selfies they took was definitely going online. Megan threw my phone onto the couch as I sat down. “I’ll get you guys sometime, just you wait.”

Megan and Alyssa hadn’t been spamming me! They had been texting Jenna hate, from MY phone!

I knew I was losing you to the popular crowd, but I didn’t expect you to leave so soon. Just like you didn’t expect me to leave so soon. This isn’t your fault. My choice had many contributing factors, and it wasn’t all you. Sometimes life takes crazy turns, and I just couldn’t live with it anymore. I’ll miss you.

Love,
Jenna

I re-read the letter. Something seemed missing. What did she mean about “contributing factors”? That doesn’t sound like something she would say at all. I felt like there was more to this.

As I climbed down from my perch, I saw Jared through the trees. I figured he was lighting up right about now. Cries racked his entire body, and he trembled. He heaved onto the ground, bending at the waist. Nothing came out. Like me he probably hadn’t eaten since Jenna’s death. I weighed the pros and cons of going to sit with him. I found myself sitting on the ground next to him. What should I do? Rub his back? Cry with him? Tell him to be strong even though I’m not strong enough myself?

“Oh. Sydney, hi,” he choked out.

“Hey, Jared.” I had no idea what to say to him. He had never talked to me during Jenna’s life.

“How are you doing? That was a stupid question—er, my sister just killed herself. I’m sorry, that was too blunt. I mean she just went...”

“Jared,” I said cutting him off, “it’s okay. I feel exactly the same way you do.”

“No, Sydney. You will never feel the same way I do.”

The next two weeks were agonizing. People at school stared at me like I had two heads. I was isolated from my peers. So much for Jenna “losing me to the popular crowd.” I was still boring old me, but school was different without Jenna. Everything was different without Jenna. It made me sick knowing that I had something to do with her death. The fact that I befriended Megan and Alyssa was betrayal in its purest form. Jenna would never know that I didn’t send those messages. If I could take back that night they came to my house, I would, but in life, there are no second chances.
I exited Baker County High School and made my way toward the local supermarket. I had a small list of items I had to pick up for my mother and a few items for my brother. Then, finally, this torturous day would end. The first thing on the list was seasons 1-7 of Mythbusters. Obviously my brother’s request, and the last thing I wanted was my backyard to become ground zero. I came around to the DVD section and ran into none other than Jared Jones. His stack of movies toppled to the floor with a clatter.

“Sydney! You need to watch where you’re going next time!” Jared scolded me with a smile.

I couldn’t help but look into those eyes and see the monster he had been before Jenna died.

“Hello? Syd? You there?”

I snapped back to reality. “Oh, sorry. Here, let me help you clean this up.”

As I bent over to pick up the fallen DVDs I noticed Jared’s pale bare feet. If I had to guess, I’d say his shoes were probably on a telephone wire, advertising another drug dealer in the neighborhood.

I stood up and brushed off my jeans. Jared walked with me through the store, occasionally running to pick up groceries for me. As we came to the checkout I pulled out my wallet, only to be pushed aside by Jared. He reached into his pocket and came up with exact change. The clerk took his cash and handed over the receipt. I stood back and watched in awe as my best friend’s jerk of a brother grabbed my bags and hauled them to his car.

“Shotgun!” I yelled even though it wasn’t really necessary.

For the first time I saw his face light up with a smile. “Okay, sis. Whatever you say.”

I jumped up into the seat of the truck and looked out the window as we pulled away from the supermarket. Jared had called me sis. Now that Jenna was gone, I was the closest thing he had.

Jared dropped me off at my house fifteen minutes later. As I started to get out of the truck, he locked the doors.

“Jenna, we need to talk.”

Apparently he was crazier than everyone said. “Jared, it’s me: Sydney. Jenna is dead.”

“NO!” he shouted into the quiet car, making me tremble. “It was my fault, Jenna. I didn’t know what I was doing. I was drunk that night, and-and I snapped. If I hadn’t...”

“JARED! What on earth are you talking about?” I practically screamed. Did he really think I was his late sister?

“I had too much alcohol in my bloodstream. My arm grabbed the knife on its own, Jenna! My mind was in it! The threats I made that night weren’t true! I had no idea what I was doing...”

“Come on, Jared. What is going on?” I said, trying to bring him back.

“Jenna, why did I have you withdraw the money from Mom’s bank account? Why did I use it to pay for the gun? I have no idea what I was planning, I swear!” With that statement he slammed his head against the steering wheel. “WHY?” He moaned.

My mom and dad weren’t home, nor was my brother. I jumped out of the car and shook violently. Jared was a psychopath, so I did the only thing I could think of. I called the police.

Within minutes, the cops arrived at my house. My mother showed up right behind them. After being questioned, they marched Jared away in handcuffs. My eyes flooded with tears, and I saw blurry red and blue lights flashing. My mother put her arms around me, and I sobbed for the millionth time in two weeks.

The air was musty in the old treehouse. I stared out into the colorful trees of the fall. Jenna’s suicide hadn’t been my fault. It was Jared’s, technically. She hadn’t been able to live with the guilt she felt from stealing from her parents. Jenna was forced to take the money from the account, so that her brother could buy a gun, the gun with which she would kill herself, not a month later.

Over the course of a month I had seen one sibling in handcuffs and the other in a casket. Two lives had been lost, with one bullet.
“Four Eyes!”
A common and unoriginal insult for a kid with glasses that small minded twerps made up to make “nerds” feel inferior. Of course that doesn’t mean it hurts any less. I felt anger build inside me. What gave him the right to be so mean? I wanted to rip my glasses off, throw them on the ground, and stomp on them until my lenses were shards of glass and my frames dismembered pieces of metal. My anger turned into rage that settled in my stomach, leaving an empty feeling. Suddenly, tears began to wet my eyes as I tried to blink them away. Was it really that bad that I had glasses? Did it make me so different that he had to mock me constantly for my impaired vision? I couldn’t contain my sadness; I let my tears flow down my cheek and drip down my chin. I hid my face so no one could see that I was weak.

Time past and soon after I didn’t need glasses as much. After what seemed like forever, my new contacts finally came in the mail. Now I won’t have to wear those goofy glasses anymore. I thought as I opened the box that contacts would change the way people saw me. I won’t be called a nerd or a geek because now I have the glorious contacts. These will surely change everything.

“You’re not pretty.”
The statement will forever be burned in my mind. I remember wishing I would be absolutely beautiful when I grew up. My hopes and dreams of that were crushed by one person, because that is all it took. I felt my heart break and a strange urge to cover my face. My reflection was my enemy because when I looked in the mirror my flaws were all that I could see. As time went on I began to believe that I was truly ugly, that I would never be the type of “pretty” I wanted to be. I started to hide behind my big sweatshirts; they gave me a false sense of security.

However, as I got older I didn’t mind how I looked every second of every day. My hair did not need to be shining and flow through the breeze like a shampoo commercial. I didn’t need to cover my face with big name brand makeup because who really cares if your eyes are “bold.” I later realized to accept how I look because beauty isn’t one specific look or image that society has drilled into your brain, it’s what’s on the inside that counts (cliché, I know).

Over the years I’ve learned I cannot please everyone because there will always be something “wrong” with me. Sometimes I just have to look in the mirror and not look at my flaws but the beauty of everything I am. Words are painful to live through, and some will always stick, that little critic in my head telling me I am not good enough. The power of words affects a person greatly and hurts worse than any physical pain. Words create the wounds in our hearts that will never fully heal. Words are the daggers that are plunged into self-confidence. With kindness we can help mend shattered hearts that have been damaged in an ongoing battle with society.
Teresa is the girl who lives down the street and around the corner, in the house made of dusty bricks with dusty tables inside. She’s wild and fun, makes me misbehave, takes me on adventures every day. When I’m with her, my words turn into laughter, my bare feet blacken on the streets we run through, and my legs ache from the pedaling and jumping and never stopping. But in her house are too many people: her mom with no husband, her two brothers Paul and Eric, her Auntie whose name I don’t know, and her old granny whom I’ve never seen with my own eyes. And inside that house it’s dark, like wandering into a cave unfit for human life. All the lights are burnt out and the smell of old furniture from thrift stores hits me when I walk in, just for a second, just to use the bathroom. And then there’s the old Chinese food containers on the coffee table and her brothers that run from one end of the house to the other, flitting in and out of the corners of my eyes like dirty little flies.

Brothers
Paul and Eric are tornados, little creatures filled with energy enough to power a generator. They’re twins with short Mohawks and baby faces so cute that I can’t help but pinch their cheeks. But they wear the same clothes every week and smell like garbage, like their mom has never thrown them in the tub and scrubbed the dirt from behind their ears. We walk them home every day after school, Teresa and I, and they follow us around like they’re on invisible leashes. I don’t mind, but Teresa hates them being around and yells at them like dogs. Most days we walk to my house to get two bikes. We ride off fast as lightning with Paul and Eric running behind, complaining that their feet will fall off. Teresa laughs the hardest when her brothers get hurt. Times like that scare me about Teresa, like the time Eric fell from a high-up branch and thudded to the ground like a sack of flour. His leg was twisted around behind his body, cracked in two, but Teresa laughed and laughed as he writhed on the cold dirt. And then she ran away, pulling me with her. We left him there.

Melody
Teresa’s mother has wrinkles like a cracked sand desert. They flow down from her eyes and through her face in rivers and streams. Melody is her name, like a song from music class, but she never sings. She’s not happy. She’s a silent Melody. I’ve never heard one word from her, not even an “Are you hungry?” or a “Have fun kids!” That’s probably because she’s never around; Teresa has to take care of her brothers because Melody doesn’t get off work until five, but when five rolls around she never comes home. Sometimes we play until eight or nine, even ten, and her mom finally pulls up in a red truck. She falls out of the passenger side door, and a man in the front waves timidly at Teresa whose face is as blank as printer paper. I ride away on my bike without saying anything. What would I say?

Hate
Melody stumbles outside in the mornings with a ratty robe on and slippers that have gone through the dryer and are twisted, matted down like two old stuffed animals. She walks out with a frown and picks up the paper like it’s carrying bad news, and every day Teresa leaves the house with a frown and comes to mine, knocking on the door like she has a secret, all quiet so my dog won’t bark and snap its teeth. She hates dogs. She hates a lot of things; the smell of orange chicken, spiraled notebooks, anything the color red. Sometimes I think Teresa only hates, that she doesn’t feel the love most feel for their mom or dad or sister because even when she smiles her face contorts in a way that looks unnatural and her laughter comes out like daggers and her eyes are empty like the happy inside her has dried up.

Lost
Teresa and I go places we like to think are our own. We fill the days any way we can.
down in the jungle behind my house, where the big cats and spiders the size of our faces live. We swing on branches across the river like we’re Tarzan. We wander into back yards and abandoned houses and empty garages. We climb up into trees and down under bridges trying to find something that’s ours. Teresa says she is looking for something, but she never tells me what. We look until it gets dark but we never find it, no matter how hard we try. Eventually, I say I need to go home because my parents will be worried, but she always begs for me to stay, just for another hour. And when I leave I can tell she stays outside for a long time after I go, sitting on her front steps, looking for the things she lost.

Father

Teresa’s dad died when she was 5 years old and he was only 30. He was a Jamaican man the color of night, with a shiny oil face and a smile of one-thousand-watts. In the picture I’ve seen, they’re at an amusement park called Boomers! in Florida. The sun was so bright that day that their eyes are scrunched up in the picture. His arm is around her in a bear hug that engulfs her small toddler body, and her afro hair is collected on top of her head in two cartoonish puff-balls. I’ve never seen Teresa as happy as in that picture, as when she was little and innocent, as when her dad was still alive. She tells me that he overdosed on alcohol and drugs and that he didn’t even know what he was doing until he laid down and died right there in her mother’s bathroom. She tells me that he was naked with drool falling from his mouth and his eyes rolled into the back of his head, blood as bright as a comet’s tail dried between his nostrils. She tells me like it’s a story in that morning’s newspaper, her face still blank as printer paper, her eyes as dark and dead as her father.

Old Man

Teresa lives a double life. She sometimes gets picked up in front of her house in a sleek red convertible, the top down and an old man her mother’s age in the front seat. The man wears cool wrap-around shades and smart clothes, like a movie star come to save the day. He’s a businessman, one of Melody’s old boyfriends who still hangs around and likes to bar hop in the city with her almost every night. He always picks up Teresa and takes her out shopping on the weekends. I don’t know where exactly that old man takes her, and I don’t think she does either, but she goes along with him to the mall or the ice cream parlor or wherever it may be. He buys her the treats her mother can’t. Teresa doesn’t have all the little things. My parents buy me clothes and shoes, new school supplies and notebooks with sparkling Hello Kittys on the cover. I know that her mother doesn’t have the extra money. I also know that sometimes she’ll leave her kids roaming the streets at night, locked out of their own house, and that she doesn’t wash or feed or clothe them, and that every once in a while, when it’s raining really badly, they’ll wander up to my front door just to dry off before venturing out into the rain again. I know this and so does the old man. He tries to make it up to her, but the next day when Teresa is wearing her new backpack or rhinestone sandals or fake diamond earrings, she still has that frown on her face, and she still hates the taste of apples and spiral notebooks and anything the color red.
As I walk among the headstones, piles of fallen autumn leaves play restlessly around my bare feet, floating upward momentarily before being dragged back down to the cold earth. A few have clustered into natural drifts, half-concealing the old, cracked headstones that line the field like uneven rows of teeth.

Never have I found graveyards to be the scary, unwelcoming places others say. These are the places where our loved ones were laid to rest in eternal peace. Why would someone fear that? I walk here often in order to clear my head.

In the distance, the light from the setting sun dances through the trees, picking up the bright fall colors and painting them over the small, gated field. The stones cast long shadows, reaching longingly towards the approaching darkness as if they wish to be reunited.

My feet roam endlessly through the crooked rows, and I subconsciously name each person as I pass. So many times have I wandered this path that I feel I know them. Each person has his own story, her own life carved into the stone. Some even mark the final resting places of whole families, laid side by side.

As a light breeze picks up, it sends a few leaves tumbling down from their branches. I think about how amazing it is, how the leaves must fall for the trees to live. They spin around my head in a dizzying effort to reach the ground. I lift my arm to grab one, but it dances just out of my reach.

As I watch them descend, a calming memory, one of just days before, centers in my mind. Autumn leaves spun around us as my little sister and I danced through a huge field, trying to catch one of the hundreds twirling around us. Each time my hand neared one, it twirled just out of my grasp, diving wildly towards the ground or floating dreamily back towards the treetops.

In the distance, I could hear my mother as she laughed, her voice accompanied by the sound of my father’s large, black camera. Both sounds remind me of home. Off to my left, my sister was waving her arms wildly, spinning in circles with her head tilted back, hair flying around her. Each time a leaf came close, she would smile and chase after it, yelling commands in attempt to get them to cooperate.

As I smiled as she jumped into the air, grasping eagerly. The leaves avoided her fingers like repelling magnets.

A few moments later, the wind died down, and the leaves began to fall more irregularly. We both ended up approaching our parents empty-handed. My sister was panting and smiling, her long blonde hair blowing away from her face. As I looked over at her, I noticed with amazement that we were almost the same height. With a pang, I realized that she was now fifteen.

Slowly, she stepped ahead of me, and I watched a few leaves tumble down from her thin shoulders. As they settled, the last few became caught in the yarn of her sweater.

“Hey,” I said with a grin, brushing one softly off her back, “looks like you’ve got a few friends with you.”

She didn’t seem to hear me.

Carefully, I took the leaf and let it blow in front of her, guiding it towards her hands, smiling as her face lit up. Gently, it tumbled into her outstretched palms.

I watched her with a smile as she brought the leaf slowly to her chest, her eyes looking into the distance. For a moment, she looked lost, the leaf bringing some past memory to her mind. I sighed and reached over to touch her shoulder, my fingers just brushing the wispy yarn on her sweater before she
unfroze, resuming her walk towards our parents.

“Look!” She said, holding up her fist triumphantly, “I caught one!”

My mother smiled gently at her, her eyes full of emotion. Softly, my father reached over to rub her back. They turned, walking back through the fallen leaves. I followed them happily.

I look over at the dusty road that leads to a stony-gated entrance. Back at home, my sister should be working on her homework, probably grumbling about the increasing amounts each year.

I sigh as I think about how old she is getting. Of course, I am always happy on her birthdays, they mean that she is one year older, one year wiser, one year farther along in her beautiful life. She is learning new things, seeing new things, living new things. That’s all you could ever want for your little sister.

“I miss elementary school,” she said one autumn day, swinging her legs from the tree branch she was perched upon and looking down at me. “Middle school’s a pain.”

I looked up at her. “Just wait for high school,” I said jokingly, kicking a pile of leaves into the air and grinning up at her. However, her face didn’t lighten, and after a moment, my smile faded. I sighed, remembering just how intimidating my sixth grade year had felt. Looking into her earnest eyes, I breathed out gently. “I know,” I amended, “it’s a huge leap, but it gets easier.”

A crease appeared in her brow as she swiped impatiently at a leaf blowing by, sending it spiraling out over the street. “Everyone says that,” she said sourly.

I bit my lip and grabbed a tree branch, pulling myself up next to her. With another slight sigh, I placed my feet on an adjacent bough and rested my head against another, turning to look at her.

“Maybe that’s because it’s true.”

She frowned at me, and I grinned, nudging her with my shoulder. After a moment, I added, “at least the food’s better.”

There was a pause as she nodded in agreement, then shook her head, seeming confused at my comment. “No. No, it isn’t!”

I grinned. “I know.”

She shifted her body so that she could look at me more easily, and despite her smile, I noticed seriousness in her eyes. “Will I really get used to it?” she asked, and I paused. For a moment she was still the little girl I’d grown up with. I realized that the newness of the school was really bothering her and that she wasn’t that little girl anymore.

I looked her in the eye and nodded. “Yes,” I said sincerely, letting a light smile touch my lips, “you’ll get used to it. And remember, no matter what happens, I’ll always be there for you.”

She smiled in return and rested her head on my shoulder. “Promise?”

I stroked a few stay hairs away from her face. “I promise.”

We stayed like that until I heard my mother’s voice calling from an open window.

I smiled as I think about them, about how they always love me and trust me, no matter how hard I make it.
I was out with my sister. She was kicking around a soccer ball, and I was sitting in the tops of our trees, watching her practiced movements. In a few weeks, she was going to try out for the high-school freshman soccer team, and as I observed her excellent control, I grew confident that she’d make it easily. She dodged invisible defenders and maneuvered the ball carefully around them, weaving an impenetrable barrier around it. After a while, she took a shot at a space between two trees, sending it exactly where she wanted. As the ball sailed through however, it struck a branch and changed course, rolling out into the street.

I immediately jumped to the ground and ran after it, not wanting my sister to go out into road in the darkening evening. Quickly, I overtook it, and I snapped my foot behind me, attempting to propel it back to my sister.

My foot sailed right past.

I laughed; I was out of practice.

My sister brushed past me and quickly picked it up, looking warily down the road.

As she ran back, I followed, swinging my arms in the cooling autumn air. We had just reached the driveway when my hand accidentally brushed against our trash can. Garbage flew everywhere as a sudden gust of wind caught it up, sending it dispersing throughout the air. The can had overturned. My sister watched silently, her expression lingering somewhere between horror and hilarity.

I laughed and stepped forwards as the wind died down, leaving us with a mess to clean up. Squatting, I reached for a crumpled piece of paper, but another gust of wind sent it skittering away. I was just grasping for another one when the garage door creaked open on its old hinges. I stood and turned around guiltily as my mother walked out, staring incredulously at the mess.

“What happened?” she asked, addressing my sister.

I looked over guiltily, but my sister just looked around at the mess, shrugging. “Suddenly it was just everywhere.” Biting my lip, I stooped down to retrieve an empty wrapper, but again it blew away.

“Well, clean it up as best you can,” my mother replied, nudging a paper plate with her toe, “but watch for cars, ok?”

My sister nodded solemnly before bending down to gather up my mess. I looked over at her and smiled. There were a few random pieces of debris stuck in the yarn of her sweater. I walked over to brush them off.

“Hey,” I said as they floated off and gently settled on the ground, “looks like you’ve got a couple of friends with you”

I don’t blame her for ignoring me.

The sun is now kissing the top of the horizon, and I begin to make my way back through the cemetery, towards home. As I walk, the tops of my feet are brushed with both the warmth of the setting sun and the coolness of the shadows. In some places, the leaves have been swept clear of the graves adorned with flowers and letters of love. I kick one of the mounds as I pass, and the leaves explode into the air.

Each year, once enough leaves had fallen from the trees, my sister and I always went out to form the largest leaf pile possible.

We raced outside and grabbed the rakes, competing against each other to see who could wrangle in the most leaves. This year, I would have a real run for my money. My sister was one year older and one year faster; the sixth-grade soccer team had really worked her out. Within seconds, our pile began to form next to the road.

Occasionally, the wind would pick up and send part of our pile spiraling away, but we always managed to rake it back in. Our efforts ended up creating a pile that was level with the middle of my thighs.
I allowed my sister the honor of being the first one to jump and was rewarded with a happy grin. She stepped into the street and gave herself a good distance. Then, letting out a laugh, she sprinted towards it and threw herself into the air. The pile exploded when she hit. Cheerfully, she bounced up and grabbed a rake, and we quickly reformed the pile. For hours, this was our carefree routine. We jumped in together, did cartwheels, summersaults, and cannonballs. For that afternoon, nothing could bring us down. We were unbound, immortal, completely pure and carefree.

But everything has an end.

Before we knew it, the autumn light was almost gone, and it was getting hard to see. We decided to remake the pile a few last times before packing it up, and as we raked, I thought about how I had only a few more years of enjoying these types of things with my little sister. I was a freshman, fifteen years old, and in less than four years I would be headed off to college.

Just as we completed setting up the pile, a breeze picked up, knocking down hundreds of leaves from the surrounding trees. Dropping her rake, my sister ran out into the street, waving her arms and jumping. I quickly joined in, and together we grasped for leaf after leaf, giggling as they continuously evaded our reach.

I followed one across to the other side, but it predictably dodged my hand. In my mind, I knew our chances of snagging one were pretty low, as it was dark out, but I turned back to try again anyway.

Just as I stepped on the road, I heard the soft sound of a car’s engine off to my right, looking over just in time to witness a truck swerving hard onto the street. It began speeding our way. The autumn light was almost completely gone, but for some reason the truck’s headlights weren’t on. Then I saw a bluish glow coming from in front of the driver. It was a phone; the driver was distracted.

I screamed out my sister’s name and ran towards her. She was oblivious to the truck, her back was turned, and she was continuing to laugh and jump around in the road. At the sound of my voice, she paused and turned to me, grinning.

“Look!” She said, holding up a clenched fist triumphantly, “I caught--”

She never finished the sentence.

Grabbing her waist, I pushed her away from me with all my strength, sending her tumbling into our pile. I fell back, landing hard in the middle of the street, the force causing me to lose balance. We both sat up, and my sister began to laugh, thrilled with our new game.

I grinned sadly in return, watching the leaves tumble down from her shoulders. Once they settled, I noticed that only a few remained, captured in the wispy yarn of her sweater.

“Hey,” I said, closing my eyes to preserve her smiling face, the one thing that I could never bear to lose, “looks like you’ve got a couple of...”

My voice died with the last few rays of autumn light.

I’ve now stopped in front of a small headstone, tears sliding down my cheeks. The grave is only a few years old, but already time is beginning to wear it down. A few leaves are stuck in the hairline cracks along the top.

I look at the epitaph, written in memory of a young girl, of a teen who loved the world, who put joy into everything she did, who cherished her family.

I sigh and turn away, casting my eyes up at the first breaths of moonlight easing through the trees. A cool autumn breeze strokes my cheek as it gently releases handfuls of leaves into the air. I smile as they whirl around, echoing the memories that dance through my mind. With a practiced hand, I reach out and grab one. A single tear lands on the top of the grave, shining and iridescent in the moonlight.

With a sigh, the leaf drops from my grasp, falling back to earth. Another tear joins it as it comes to rest upon the small grave.

The girl was only fifteen when she died, saving the one thing she’d never let go.

Though I have fallen, my little sister lives on.
I fly into the science room my legs working at high speed (I was always worried about being late back then). I am the first one in the class, as always. My teacher, Mr. Travis, glances up from his desk where he scans the paper he hold in his hands. I give him a small smile and look for a place to sit. My class doesn’t have a seating chart, which I really like because it meant that I can sit next to Rebecca and Stacey, my only friends in the grade. But today is going to be different; neither Rebecca nor Stacey are here today. I would either have to sit alone or attempt to sit with my cousin.

My cousin walks in with her group of friends; she looks happy, laughing and smiling. She sits down at a table with her friend Drew. I despise Drew; he is horrible and mean and very rude. The rest of her group sits at a table near them. There is one empty chair next to her. I decide to take my chances and place my stuff next to hers. My cousin, Sydney, turns and looks at me; she makes a face like I am something stuck at the bottom of her shoe. Sydney turns and whispers something to Drew, who turns and looks at me. They share a look, and then they leave me alone at the table. I look down at my feet. I should be ashamed, and I already know that I don’t belong with them. I know my place.

10 minutes later

“We are studying photosynthesis today; you will be doing the sheet I am handing out to you with a partner. I have assigned you each a partner, and I expect this project to be finished by the end of class tomorrow,” Mr. Travis announces. The popular kids in the back of the room groan and give each other looks. I am worried that I will end up with someone who will expect me to do all of the work, someone like Drew or even worse, Sydney. But I don’t get partnered up with either of them. Sydney gets partnered up with a girl named Delaney Bradford, and Drew is partnered up with Austin Cray. I get partnered up with Prescott Sims; he is by far the cutest guy in our grade and is the most popular. I am ecstatic; he, however, is not. He turns and looks at me, all of his friends laughing at him for getting such a lame partner. He turns around, and I hear him groan and whisper something to all of his friends. They all laugh.

Prescott walks over to my table and sits down in the seat next to me. I blush because I know he is embarrassed to be seen with me and that he can’t wait for this nightmare to be over.

“So...how do you wanna do this thing,” Prescott asks, avoiding my eyes.

“Uh I-I-I was umm, thinking that I could do the paper and y-y-you could help with the drawing,” I stutter.

“Works for me,” he says.

I bend my head over my paper and start to fill in the answers to the questions, while he looks around to see if anyone is noticing what he’s doing. I am almost finished answering all of the questions when the bell rings. Prescott gets up and practically dashes from our table. I hastily grab my things and quickly walk after him.

“Prescott,” I yell, “Don't forget to do the drawing!”

He turns back for a split second, “Okay.”

He turns back to his friends, and I hear him say, “I can’t believe I got stuck with that weird chick! I mean seriously; her cousin is like, really hot, and she’s so...not hot! Seriously guys, help me!” The whole group cracks up, as they walk away. My eyes start to sting, and I feel sick to my stomach. I rush to the nearest bathroom and lock myself in the end stall. I start to sob; the tears come fast and thick.

What happened next scarred me. It is what changed my view of things. It changed me.
I hear laughter floating in from under the stall door. I stifle my sobs. I had been crying for over ten minutes, and I had already missed most of lunch time.

“Hahaha, dude I know! I can’t even believe I’m related to her! She so stupid! She needs to learn how to dress and how to freaking fix her hair,” Sydney says.

“Oh my God I know, right! I can’t believe I actually used to be friends with her,” another voice says. My stomach fills with dread; I think I know who it is. I peek under the stall door and see a pair of brand new green and pink O’Siruses. It’s Trista, we were best friends in fifth grade, but everything changed when we got to middle school. She changed, and I didn’t.

I don’t come out of the stall. I stay in there until they leave. I listen to all of the degrading comments they have to say about me. They go on and on about my clothes, my friends, and even my family. I don’t say a word. I know my place.

When I get home at the end of the day my mother is there, all happy and smiling. I smile weakly back.

“Hey honey, how was school?” she chirps.

“It was good,” I say, putting on the mask I have been wearing all of my life.

I am still wearing that mask, and I probably always will. I am afraid to take it off, I’m afraid to see what is inside. What my cousin did to me is inexcusable, but in a way she helped me. She taught me that you can’t be yourself if you want to be popular and if you want to fit in. It just doesn’t work like that. To have friends and to fit in, you have to fake it.
Invincible
Jordan Roodman
John Burroughs School
Poetry
Shannon Koropchak

I first consumed the word “flirt”
When I thrust my way out
Of my heaving home backwards,
Splitting apart the only person
Who would have caressed me;
The woman who had sworn off her gushing crimson relief
In buried hope
That my eyes wouldn’t fade into the brink of my spine,
That I wouldn’t carry around the same gaps as she
Between feathered veins
And twisted ropes.

I adopted the word “tease”
By twirling smoke around my tongue,
Savoring the chemicals that
Abandon clenching souls,
I gently exposed the whites of my eyes
To a camouflaged red,
Stained the same as the retching rock that lay beneath my chest,
Escorted by the sting of faulty confidence
That tauntingly drips
From a swelling some call lips.

I envelop myself in the word “seduction,”
Shrinking my dress down limply,
Tripping forward, smiling loosely,
Dirtied lashes quivering against my cheek,
I am invincible, I sneer,
Before swallowing heavy gulps as
His nails stretch me thin,
Smoothing over my stretch marks,
Gently kneading my bones and
Swallowing the scars I’d so brashly etched
Until I bent slanted, collapsed, and laid
Nailed upon his naked gut.

I blew rings
Even after that retching rock
Snubbed me,
I am invincible, I howled.
And then,
I was invincible, I whimpered.
Cornelius Aver rose from bed with a grimace. Joints creaking, he gently placed his feet on the cold wood and stretched with a groan. Gazing out the window, he eyed the morning with delight. Descending down the stairs, he was greeted with the sounds of breakfast and frolicking children. At the landing he was nearly toppled by Ernie chasing Andrew with a fork, screaming “Give me my sausage back!”

Grinning, Cornelius walked behind his wife Patricia and clasped her shoulders, sighing happily. She responded with a kiss on the cheek, asking, “Are you going to begin on your Concerto today?” He nodded, saying, “I’m feeling it today. But first, a stroll.”

Cornelius walked along a dirt road, admiring the long, wispy grass encroaching on all sides. Songbirds flew overhead, chasing one another in a rainbow of colors. Clusters of trees sprouted at varying distances from the road, huddling in packs, jealously protecting the streams and ponds which sustained them. As the birds exchanged calls the streams incoherently answered with the same intensity and enthusiasm. Cornelius smiled jubilantly at the spectacle, heart filled by this outpour of emotion from nature. Thus inspired, his newborn “Requiem for Memoria” began writing itself in his mind. Birds’ wings shrunk as their bodies lengthened into flutes, while streams’ waters morphed into the flowing horsehair of bows. Nature whispered to Cornelius through gusts of wind that whipped past his ears. The grass and trees swung back and forth in the wind like violins, and Cornelius found himself commanding a wild, natural orchestra.

But then the orchestra began playing too fast, outpacing his tempo. Cornelius tried to conduct it back into meter, but Nature was playing by her own tune now. The sky darkened, the air became thick with cold. Condensation rose from the grass and fog enveloped the majestic landscape, reducing Cornelius’s world to an orb of fog. Grasping his robes he shivered, realizing that he’d wandered off the dirt path and was now lost in the grass jungle. Long bristles that once caressed his legs now bit into them. Birds mocked Cornelius from above, but he couldn’t see them. The stream’s once reassuring murmur closed in, harassing him. Trees cackled. His orchestra had revolted, assaulting him with a vengeance. Cornelius ran, desperately hoping to find the road.

Eventually he returned home. Bursting through the door, on edge, he sat down, regaining his breath. Patricia asked nervously, “What’s wrong? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

Regaining composure, Cornelius responded, “It’s just some abominable fog. Ruined my stroll.” Patricia gazed outside, nodding. “Don’t worry; it should clear up by tomorrow. Why don’t you go play with the grandkids for a bit? They’ve been waiting for you.”

Cornelius got up and walked to the parlor. Ernie and Andrew were playing chess with Teddy spectating. Ernie was being slaughtered. Then Cornelius arrived, sitting down next to Ernie. “Mind if I play a bit?”

“Sure, Grandpa!” Ernie said excitedly. “Please play for me. I’m gonna lose.”

Cornelius gazed at the board for a minute. Andrew smirked, “I know you’re smart, Grandpa, but even you can’t win from here.”

Five minutes later Andrew gaped in shock as Cornelius smirked, “Checkmate.”

“Grandpa, I hope I’ll be smart like you someday!” Teddy said in awe.

Later Cornelius helped the grandchildren with their schoolwork. Questions of times tables, history, and basic algebra were all answered with ease.

Soon it was afternoon, and Cornelius moved on to composing at the piano. He grasped the blank
pages of his “Requiem for Memoria” and sat down. The ideas poured from mind to piano to paper like water. Suddenly, his fingers stumbled. Cornelius was puzzled. He never made such simple mistakes. Brushing this off as a consequence of being unsettled by the fog earlier, he continued playing.

At the end of the day Cornelius and his wife Patricia had dinner. Gazing lovingly at one another, they recounted memories they had shared over the decades. “Remember when Steven tripped and fell onto his face at our wedding?” Patricia said with a smile. “We’ll never let that one go.”

Cornelius frowned. “Why was he there again?”

Patricia laughed, saying, “He was your best man, silly. You should remember these things.” However Cornelius still couldn’t quite put a face to the name.

“It’s late. You should probably go to sleep.” Patricia teased, “You seem dazed.”

Cornelius was lying awake in bed. The air he breathed had become wet. He felt as if he was drowning. Rising out of bed, Cornelius found himself staring down the snout of a tornado of fog. Veins frozen, Cornelius watched as this tornado sucked a cloud of bright colors and smells from his face. Meanwhile all he could do was breathe in quick, miniscule breaths. Faint from the lack of air, vision dimming, Cornelius lunged out of bed at the malefic cloud, attempting to rend it in two. Yet he grasped nothing, smacking to the floor while the cloud chortled mockingly. He got up and chased the cloud, which was tinged with the colors it had stolen. However the vortex escaped through the window, into the wall of fog encamped around the house. Cornelius collapsed back on the bed.

He found himself tucked in as if nothing had happened. The window was closed. Blinding sunlight was streaming into the room. The fog must be gone then. Elated, Cornelius practically jumped out of bed, hurrying downstairs. No one else was awake. Opening the front door to the porch, he couldn’t wait to breathe in fresh air and clear skies. Except to his horror, the fog still encircled the house. A swirling vortex, it resembled a soup of gray tar. Peering deeper into the fog, Cornelius recognized faces of various people yelling in excruciating pain, yet no sound was made. A violent smell of metal assaulted his nose. Hearing children whisper in his ears, Cornelius turned around to find no one there.

Foggy tendrils extended towards the house, attempting to infiltrate. But worst of all, the day seemed brighter because the sun had swelled to twice its original size; half of it was reddening with blood. This reddish hue was both brighter and pierced through the fog, casting everything in a red tint. Shuddering, Cornelius ran back inside, hardly believing what he just saw. What could he possibly do in response to this?

He was suddenly in the parlor again. How had he gotten here? The chatter of children emanated from the room. Teddy and Andrew were playing chess. Ernie spectated.

“Mind if I play you, Ernie?” Cornelius asked.

Ernie said, “I’m not Ernie, I’m Andrew.”

“But I thought Teddy and Andrew were playing each other.”

In response Teddy raised his hand saying, “No, I’m Ernie,” while Andrew proclaimed that he was Teddy. Cornelius rubbed his eyes vigorously. In doing so, molten masks of fog slid from the faces of the three kids, revealing their true identities. Bewildered, Cornelius wondered what had just happened.

“You can still play me though,” Andrew offered, always eager to play chess.

Cornelius obliged him, and the two squared off. Cornelius was casual, confident in his ability to best a ten-year-old. This hubris resulted in a blunder, and soon he was on the back foot.

“Don’t worry, Grandpa, you can still school me,” Andrew reassured. But try as he might, Cornelius simply couldn’t. He blundered again and again, beginning to be frustrated. “Stop going easy on me, Grandpa!” Andrew teased. Brows furrowed, Cornelius made a gambit. It failed catastrophically with Cornelius losing. Cornelius stormed off. “Why are you a sore loser, Grandpa? It’s not like you.” Andrew seemed crestfallen.

Disturbed, unconfident, Cornelius sought his piano, at which he could reassure himself of his ability. He could always return to the land of music, where he was a god and never doubted himself.
Cornelius began musing over how to continue his Concerto. Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, and all the other great composers began making suggestions in his mind, and from them he drew inspiration for his own. Playing a bit of each from memory, weaving them together with ease, he composed effortlessly. Sighing with relief, Cornelius’s spirits were restored.

Then a finger slipped. Flabbergasted, Cornelius looked at his fingers and tried to play the snippet from Mozart’s Fantasia again. Odd, his fingers kept faltering at the same part. Straining to recall what came next, he envisioned the notes on a sheet. But eerily, even in his mind’s eye the notes were obscured by bleeding fog. Heart racing, Cornelius switched to a bit of Mozart’s Requiem instead, dancing through it. Except when he got to the middle, his fingers were paralyzed, unsure of what next.

A deep chortle emanated from the piano itself as malevolent fog slowly rose out of the cracks between keys, enveloping the piano. Panicked, Cornelius thrust his hands through the fog and onto the keys, playing frantically to strike back. The fog was held at bay so long as he played, but whenever he faltered in the middle of a piece it seized the opportunity, mounting a counter-offensive. Convinced this was a losing battle, Cornelius smashed his fists on the keys, yelling shrilly, creating an appalling sound that ricocheted around the house.

Soon Patricia was at his side, eyes wide. Clasping her arms around him, she quickly pacified Cornelius, who was now still as a rock. In a quivering voice she asked, “W-What’s wrong, honey?”

Laughing monotonously, Cornelius responded bitterly, “Huh! What’s wrong? What’s wrong?! First I mix up my grandkid’s names, then I lose to a novice, and now I can’t even remember my favorite pieces that I’ve known for fifty years! This confounded fog won’t go away; it’s interfering with absolutely everything in my life!”

Puzzled, Patricia asked, “What fog, dear? The fog cleared up today. Calm down, you just need to think about something else for a while. No grandkids, no music, no fog, just us.” Patricia caressed his shoulders. “Here, let’s admire this beautiful house of ours.”

Walking away from the piano and down the hallway, Patricia guided Cornelius to the staircase. Running parallel to the staircase along the wall was a whole timeline of pictures progressing from the bottom of the stairs to the top. Many pictures depicted Cornelius and Patricia smiling, yet Cornelius had no recollection of these. However, one picture in particular caused deep feelings of guilt to bubble up within Cornelius.

He was clad in army clothes, holding an M1 Garand. A battle was taking place. An enemy soldier crouched and raised a gun at him, yelling in German. Training took over and Cornelius primed a grenade and threw it at the corner. Next thing he knew he was inspecting the enemy, whose arm and leg had been blown clean off, oozing with black blood.

Holding the torso that was left, Cornelius gazed down and was aghast. The enemy was a mere boy, no older than thirteen. Even worse, the kid was identical to his own son. Fog rose out of the body and clung to his hands. Scrambling away he ran out of the building. The fog still clung to his hands, no matter how much he wiped!

“Why?!” Cornelius exclaimed. “Why was I there?! Who was I even fighting?” Grasping the picture frame, he hurled it down the staircase, and began doing the same to the other portraits on the wall. Patricia tackled him, crying, “Who are you? Where is my husband?! He never had such a temper!” She hugged Cornelius until he was calm again.

Cornelius was in bedclothes clutching a chipped bedpost. He had no idea whose bedroom he was in, but Patricia was sleeping here for some reason. Cornelius felt a prickling sensation on his neck, and turned to find a tendril of fog extending from the open window to his nose. With a start he swiped at it and kept swinging until he had pushed the tendril back out the window, slamming the window down on it, severing it as if with a guillotine.

Gazing outside, his heart dropped into his stomach. The army of fog poised outside advanced slowly, towards an inevitable stranglehold over his house. As the walls closed in, the tendrils reaching
for the house multiplied, striking for the open windows. Cornelius’s limbs crystallized. Then he rushed out of the room and gazed down the hallway, which had open windows gaping on one side. Going down the line, he slammed the windows on multiple tendrils, which writhed on the ground, emitting a hellish screeching sound. At the end of the hallway, he came to the last window.

Instead of just a tendril, a foggy head was attached to the end of it. It raised its gaze to Cornelius who shrank away from the sight of his own face in its features. The head sneered in his own voice, “Can’t you see, Cornelius? You’re already ours. Give up. There’s no point in resisting. No one ever wins this battle.”

Shaking his head viciously, Cornelius roared “I will not submit!” punching his likeness backwards. The head snickered amusedly. Cornelius shoved the head out of his house and closed the window, breathing a sigh of relief that it was over.

Cornelius gazed out a window. The sun was completely bloody, a black halo encircled it. He went downstairs for breakfast. Sitting down to the table, he was startled to find three kids also eating at the table. Perplexed, he asked, “And who might you three be?”

One giggled, responding, “Good joke, Grandpa. First you mix up our names; now you don’t remember us.”

Cornelius frowned, saying, “But I’m not joking.”

Another kid laughed, saying, “Don’t play stupid, Grandpa. You’re too smart to forget that. Quick! What’s eight times twenty-three? You love showing off to us.” Cornelius sat stumped for a minute, until one kid yelped in excitement, “It’s 184! I beat Grandpa! That’s never happened before!” This humiliation continued, as Cornelius was repeatedly bested by these children.

Eventually Cornelius flipped the table onto the children, bellowing, “I will not be humiliated by rascals like you!” and stormed out.

Cornelius stomped down the winding hallways of a house. The walls were dull gray, all the pictures, portraits, and decorations were alien to him. Cornelius was in a stranger’s house, and wanted out, but he was trapped inside by the fog waiting for him outside. He went to his piano. It was the only object in this house which he still recognized, still enshrouded by fog. He grasped his Concerto, and realized all that was left was a climax. “So be it,” Cornelius said resolutely, crackling his fingers.

He waved away the fog, but this time it returned aggressively, shackling his arms. He broke free, frantically playing, holding the fog back briefly. It lunged towards him again, but he responded with increased speed and intensity. Pouring his mind onto the piano, Cornelius played like a madman, counteracting the insanity of the fog. Colors of all kinds fled from the keys, skewering the fog, which recoiled, shrieking in agony. The fog reconfigured itself into a giant maw and lunged at Cornelius’s face, but in turn Cornelius smashed a chord into the maw.

All anxiety, all uncertainty of the past couple days had deserted Cornelius. He mastered the situation and would fight the fog on his own terms. Every strike he would parry, every lunge he would dodge, and slowly the fog retreated out of the room, leaving the glorious, glorious colors of the room before the fog’s conquest behind. Cornelius convulsed in pure joy, tears streaming down his face. He grasped “Requiem for Memoria,” now completed, and kissed it triumphantly.

“Honey? Was that you I heard laughing?” A wizened woman entered the room, offering a tray of muffins. Seeing his tears, she rushed to his side, asking, “What’s wrong? Was it the fog again?” Cornelius was uncomfortable with this woman showing so much affection for him when they were complete strangers, and pushed her away. Her face was obscured by a writhing mask of fog, her voice was distorted. Cornelius didn’t know why, but he felt like he’d just lost something.

At midnight, Patricia rose out of bed, walking to the stranger’s bedroom. Gingerly placing herself over the man, she grasped a pillow in her hands, shaking uncontrollably. “I’m sorry.” She whispered. The man opened his eyes, and she almost faltered, but his eyes were a gray soup without pupils, disgusting
her. As the man’s face assumed a hellish expression, she covered it with the pillow, placing her body over it. His arms flailed around, beating her on the back, but she stayed resolute.

After it was over, she removed the pillow, and beheld her husband again. Cornelius looked so peaceful now. Patricia even thought she saw him smiling a little, thanking her for her act of love.
Author’s Statement

I selected these four essays to submit, because I feel that they contain some of the strongest and most transforming memories that I’ve ever had. They are my ode to the beauty in everyday life, and I want people to react with smiles. I want the readers to be reminded of their past - places they’ve been, time spent with family, or even their former selves. I want to relate to people; I want them to think, “Yes, I’ve felt this way before!” Everybody has the need to understand themselves, and in my life, writing satisfies that need. Through the process of writing, I discover my true emotions and opinions, and then I use them to entertain others. Writing has, does, and always will allow me to express myself through words.

Personal Essay/Memoir: Le Palais Garnier

It’s silent in the Garnier Palace, but I can still hear voices. They are faint, the echoes of opera singers in the distance. Surely, they’re the sounds of the opus in performance upstairs. Or maybe they’re the indistinct drops of rain colliding against the firm walls of the opera house. I, however, like to imagine that those echoes belong to the voices of long ago, endlessly bouncing around with nowhere to go but forward in time. I follow those echoes to the main attraction – the Grand Staircase.

Four marble women watch me from the stairs, frozen in their seated position, destined to hold up candles for eternity. The great detail of their stone faces creates a false impression of life. Or perhaps they do have a life of their own; it’s difficult to tell under the dim, yellow light. The banisters are engraved with the tedious, twisted patterns of the Renaissance. There are gnarly faces among the contours – a stern Greek god, a muse with flowing hair, a half-decent angel – all there to pay homage to music. Their stony lips seem to absorb the melodies of the opera house and whisper them back to passerby, melancholy love songs that have long outlived their crooning suitors. A surprisingly small amount of visitors for such a legendary place arrives, just a sprinkling of tourists here and there, mostly couples and photographers. I suppose every Parisian knows the building like the streets they walk on each day.

On this particular day, the streets in front of the opera house are covered in flurries and raindrops. The building itself smells cold, as if Old Man Winter blew his icy breath into the room. It has the strong odor of a stone quarry, an earthy sort of clean that I can’t get enough of. It smells old, but it's not unpleasant, aged but somewhat pristine, like the scent of a remodeled, childhood house. I feel as if I’m breathing in the past.

Amidst the complex maze of marble staircases and crystal chandeliers connecting the grand entrance to the ballroom, is a single, bare corridor with not a shimmer of gold in sight. It’s darker than the others and contains a modern feature – an all-glass elevator nestled between four smaller staircases - two leading up, two leading down, all of them closed off with a velvet rope. It’s especially cold in that obscure corner and especially empty. The only illumination comes from a faint, green emergency light and two barely lit wall lamps. A split, side-view map of the theatre attests to an entire other world beyond those forbidden steps. The opera house was built on top of a reservoir that is (supposedly) still filled with water, with long tunnels branching out from it. I’m tempted to trespass and discover what
inspired Gaston Laroux's *Phantom of the Opera*, but perhaps the stairs are closed off as a safety precaution.

I hurry out of the darkness and into a more inviting hallway. This one has costume displays - modern, shiny glass fixtures that don't seem to belong in the old building. But inside those glass windows are aged articles of clothing, just as intricate as the carved stone walls that surround me. The dresses of Carmen are dramatic: deep crimson against burnt charcoal, edged with black lace. I imagine a prima donna flouncing about in the rich colors, commanding attention from the audience with every manipulation of her voice. The lively outfits of Don Quixote have been embroidered with canary yellows and candy reds, with sheer panels of bright cloth hanging from the waist. A young ballerina must have worn those pieces as she captivated spectators with every prance and tiptoe and plié. The royal, Spanish suits of Don Carlo are navy blue with cream frills, embroidered with gold string. Handsome opera singers probably wore their fitted jackets with pride, belting out notes with force and power.

As I enter the ballroom, I'm immediately pulled into a forgotten world of mahogany furniture and enormous, gold-framed frescoes, painted so realistically that I feel as if I could fall in. Alabaster busts of previous music directors line the wall; Beethoven-esque faces with stiff collars and wild, wavy hair. I can only imagine what elegant waltzes they witnessed in this old dance hall, what beautiful people have passed them by. In my mind, I see a striking young girl wearing an emerald gown and a masquerade mask. She's twirling around with a tall gentleman in a crisp, black ensemble. The bright flickers of the candles are reflected by the beads on her full skirt.

But right now, the dim, yellow lighting is interrupted only by a few rays of white light peeking through the thick, red curtains. The light, although there isn't much, is reflected by the golden swirls of crown molding. My eyes begin to trail the heavy, gilded patterns that embellish the ceiling, but I'm jolted out of my dream by the shrill voice of a tour guide leading her group.

"Il est six heures cinquante!" barks one of the workers. "Aller, s'il vous plaît!" It is ten minutes until closing, so I begin to leave the ballroom. But before I head off, I have to turn around and stare at the beauty for just a little while longer. As I exit the corridor, I look up one last time and notice something I had missed before – I am standing under a small, domed ceiling – a sort of miniature arch built into the normal, level wall. The entire dome is painted deep blue, the color one might expect to find at the bottom of an ocean trench. A golden sun glimmers in the center, with wavy, long arms reaching out to specks of gold and silver. The blue area is specked with these luminous dots; some near, some far. It takes another shout from the building worker to jar me out of my daze. Finally, I take a step back and realize what I'm really looking at: a night sky. Who else has admired this before me? As I reluctantly wander out onto the front steps of Le Palais Garnier, not even the frigid air can wake me up. All I can think about is a young girl in a gown and a masquerade mask, gazing up at a warm, night sky in a golden ballroom.

Personal Essay/Memoir: Terminal

People are the most interesting in airports. You see, when someone is in an airport, they are there for one of three reasons - to meet somebody, to leave somebody, or to be somebody. Due to this, emotions are always present and in abundance. I know this because my parents are immigrants, and my family is scattered across the globe. My eyes begin to trail the heavy, gilded patterns that embellish the ceiling, but I'm jolted out of my dream by the shrill voice of a tour guide leading her group.

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couple, the kind that wear khakis, sunhats and fanny packs, making the most of their newfound time. Every so often I find a new couple returning from their honeymoon in Honduras. Oh, and I mustn’t forget the impatient businessmen who arrive with the rest of the herd, but are the only ones who have no one to come back to. There is always somebody waiting for their child to come home from the army, and there is always a romantic hoping to see their significant other on the other side of the country. All of these people, these memories, stick with me. But some of them stick longer than others.

The first trip I remember taking was our flight to Moldova. I hadn’t seen my grandparents, uncles, aunts, or cousins for twelve years, and this was to be the biggest reunion yet. Our plane flew from Orlando to New York, from New York to Poland, then from Poland to Ukraine, where my uncle would pick us up. There were many interesting passerby at the airports, but in New York, I saw a girl that I still remember. She was young, probably eighteen or nineteen, and she was beautiful. At least, I thought so. She had thick, brown hair and bangs that were cut straight across her face, and she was wearing the prettiest sundress I had ever seen, a cheery shade of yellow, cinched at the waist. I think it was made from chiffon or some other delicate fabric. Together with her black heels and suitcase, she reminded me of a sunflower.

I’ll never know exactly why she stood out to me, but I think it’s because from the minute I saw her, I knew she was the kind of girl that I wanted to be. Everyone else was grumpy, or busy, or impatient, but she was calm and happy, even though she was all alone. She had a freshness about her, like a newborn kitten venturing out of its bed to explore the garden. At the time, I was shy and unsure of myself, so naturally, I liked everything about her, from her cheerful attitude to her confidence. Eventually, she caught me staring and smiled. I wish I could remember what her face looked like, but all I see is my own face when I think of her. We were there to meet somebody, and I like to think that she was there to be somebody.

Weeks later, it was time to come home. Our plane was late, causing us to miss our next flight in Chicago. When the announcement was made, a woman from our row let out a great big huff and plopped into the chair beside me. She was tall, thin and tan, the ideal model. Even after a six-hour flight, every caramel hair remained intact in a ponytail. Once we located a hotel, we went back to inform her, but she kindly refused, saying that she would rather wait the night through on the bench. I wondered why she wouldn’t book a room. Was she so tired that she didn’t care? Did she have the money? If I had money for another room I would’ve offered it to her. I like to think that she had a lot on her mind and wouldn’t need to sleep anyway.

Once upon another time when we missed our flight, my parents and I were forced to wander around a Detroit airport for half a night. As I propped my feet on a chair, I noticed a man sleeping on the couch across from me. He was rugged, with gray stubble and tattoos and worn-out clothing. But as rough as he was, he looked harmless in his peaceful sleep. He might’ve been homeless, but I like to think that he was waiting, just like the woman in Chicago. I hoped to see him the following morning, but he was gone when I came back.

My favorite people-watching experience was at an airport in France. In the baggage claim area, it was so crowded that it was impossible to see the travelers individually. All I saw were hordes of fashionable Parisians and groups of sly gypsies who preyed on foreigners. A chubby, enthusiastic fellow almost persuaded us to take his cab into Paris - that is, until he mentioned it would cost ninety euros. Waiting by our terminal was a great deal more pleasant, especially whenever I chanced upon other English speakers. A pair of ballcap-wearing men standing by us were of particular interest.

“We’ve been here for a week, Tom. How much do you know?”

“Ah, un petit peu,” the man replied with a thick American accent, giving us all a laugh. Across the aisle stood an impressive character, just as memorable as the girl in the yellow dress, but in a very different way. He appeared young and inexperienced, but he wasn’t dressed meekly or modestly like she was. His black hair was slicked back, and he sported a black suit with a red tie and loafers. What
intrigued me was his age; he couldn’t be any older than me, but everything about him shouted “I’m
grown.” It was odd to see such a young man dressed as if he owned a financial empire. And perhaps he
did. He appeared uncomfortable; maybe he thought we were judging him. He was standing with us in
the “normal people” line, until the boarding call was made for special priority flyers. I still wonder what
he was doing all by himself; was he a young businessman there to meet an employer? Did he meet with
his daddy in Paris? I secretly think he was there to prove himself, to be somebody.

I often wonder what I look like to everyone else at the airport. I wonder what they thought
about me when I couldn’t stop crying, what they imagined had occurred to make me so emotional. I
wonder if they thought I was careless when I ran around the airport, searching for the new jacket I had
left behind. Maybe there are other people out there who invent stories about me too. They must,
because there isn’t much else to do in an airport than eat and people watch. We are at our most
interesting in airports. You see, when someone is in an airport, they are there for one of three reasons:
to meet somebody, to leave somebody, or to be somebody. I’m usually there for all three.
Warm tears ran down my face. The cuts on my arm burned. My head was swimming in pain and regret. The need to leave, to find somewhere else in this cruel world gnawed endlessly at me. I grabbed for a tissue box on my bed side table, but my hand found my journal instead. My fingers brushed its smooth surface. It’s what kept me sane this last year. Maybe reading it would help ease my mind, I thought. I picked it up, flipped to the first page and began reading.

August 1st
Senior year. A year that’s supposed to be filled with homecoming dresses, college applications, fond farewells, and the ultimate goodbye party, prom.
I can already see my year ahead of me: being pushed around by the popular girls in the school. And for what? My braces? My height? My glasses? This year I want to change all that. But how can I? My mom has no money, I still have my braces, and Dad’s on his death bed. He’s starting to have major headaches, and when he went to the doctor they found a large tumor in his brain. They say there’s not much they can do, but they’d do what they could.

I remembered the day that the doctors came back with those results. It was the saddest day of my life—at least until then. There would be a lot more saddest-days-of-my-life to come. I flipped a few more pages and continued to read.

August 30th
This first month of school seems to be just like any other month of my miserable life. My dad gets more and more treatment that sucks my mother’s pocket dry. My days at school look somewhat like this: “Hey loser!” (Get shoved up against a locker; my binders fall.) “Why don’t you just crawl back into whatever hole you came out of!” (Laughing, lots of laughing.) I’d crawl around the floor looking for my glasses and my homework draped out across the tile.
And then there’s my mother. Most nights I cook dinner because she usually is with my father or nowhere at all. I wish I had a friend to talk to and not just a stupid book.

I would regret those words later. Friends can deceive, books have nothing to do but listen and tell. I flipped some more pages because I was not in the mood to read all the other stuff I wrote.

September 13th
Most would say that Friday the 13th is a day of bad luck, but today is the best day of my life. I got a promotion at work. Although it’s multiple shifts, it will be enough money to buy contacts, eventually. Eventually.
There is also this girl who moved in from Chicago. She seems all alone, very depressed. I wonder if she’s having some of the same issues as me. Anyway, I think I might introduce myself to her tomorrow. Maybe this year won’t be so bad after all.

Damn was I wrong. Very wrong. Beyond wrong. The year got much worse after this, and that girl contributed to that. Another few pages flipped.
**September 28th**

Turns out that this new girl has been going through some things just like me. She was transferred here because she was bullied in her old school. She really understands what I am going through, and although the bullying continues for the both of us, we have each other to lean on.

I really do feel bad that I got her stuck in something she tried to leave behind, but whenever I try to apologize, she says there’s no need. I guess she’s just grateful for a friend like me.

Again, wrong. I didn’t know it then, but she had a deal with them. I wouldn’t realize until later. She was deceptive. But bullying would be the least of my problems soon.

**October 9th**
My dad passed away. It was a silent night, and he passed without any struggle. So says the doctor. I wish I could have been there to say one last goodbye. He was the nicest man you would ever know. He was respectful, careful, and gentle. I can never imagine the rest of my life without him. But this nightmare is now reality. And you can imagine what my mother did. She left me. Not literally, but mentally.

Then I go to my new friend for comfort, of any kind really. But when I start ranting, she seems distant. Not the way my mother is, but it’s as if she’s not really listening. Now I feel alone again, and those bullies don’t seem to give up a single day to let me grieve. In fact, it seems they don’t acknowledge my pain or the fact that my father has passed.

I wish there was someone, anyone, I could really talk to.

I paused there. More tears started to pour down my face. And my dress started to become uncomfortable, the lacy fabric rubbing on my skin. It was drenched in pop and ripped at the edges. But who cared? Right? I flipped some more pages and landed on a day that was a big game changer for me.

**November 1st**
It’s funny how things can change so quickly. Just in September I actually had a friend; now she hangs out with the popular clique, the group that bullies me. And exactly 23 days ago my dad died. There’s just an empty hole in the house and in my heart. Actually, last week, I created a habit of cutting my limbs. I have a total of 5 so far: 3 on my thigh and 2 on my forearm. I guess depression finally makes its mark.

I’ve added to that recently—so recently that sticky red blood dripped onto my bed and my dress. In a funny way it felt good, the warmth sinking into my skin. The pain from the blade fades the pain in my heart.

**November 18th**
I finally was able to buy my contacts. To heck with those stupid glasses. But in a way, it doesn’t really feel like an accomplishment. I’m already in a deep pit of depression. My father is already dead. I have no faith. But I try to keep myself up. So what, I might not exceed 5 feet, be prom queen, have a friend. So what if I cut myself. So what?

But The Bullies won’t let me live my flaws down. Not even my (ex)friend. Who, by the way, has joined in bullying me, probably by some stupid agreement that she will “get the guy of her dreams” and “never be bullied again.”

Such stupid lies, I can’t believe she fell for it.

I was wrong: this was not making me feel better. In fact it made my skin crawl with hatred. But I
embraced it with open arms, so I kept reading.

December 11th
We have about 10 days before Christmas break. I have to say, I’m quite excited. 2 full weeks without having to see the ugly faces of The Bullies. Although, this is the first year without dad’s lively Christmas spirit. But I’m sure I can make do. I might even cheer my mother up. That way I don’t have to be the mom of the house. I even called over the family. It’s been a while since I’ve seen some of them anyway. Bliss to come. Hopefully.

Hope. A treasured thing. That’s what the holidays had come to mean to me: hope for a better future. When I was young it used to be about Santa and presents. I never saw the real meaning until then.

January 2nd
Happy New Year! And this will definitely be a new year for me. Even if it’s just you and me, Journal. My New Year’s resolution is to stop The Bullies reign of terror and to stop cutting myself, but that’s another story in itself. Don’t know how the heck I’m going to do it, but it’s my New Year’s resolution, might as well live up to it.
Besides that, my mother has started to cheer up and, more importantly, started to cook. Especially when the relatives come over. They really put her mind at ease and mine as well.

They did. They gave me confidence that I never had before. My older cousin even gave me ideas on how to get back at The Bullies. A laugh escaped my lips. So many memories, good or bad, are kept in this little journal. When I die, this book will come with me.

March 28th
I haven’t written in a while, sorry. I’m just too dang depressed to focus on writing. In fact, that goes for all my school classes too. My grades have dropped drastically from A’s and B’s to D’s and F’s. My mother and my teachers have finally taken notice to the bullying going on. I would have told them earlier, much earlier if I didn’t think I’d get burned in the process. Not only by the principal (because The Bullies charm would overtake the truth) but also The Bullies giving me hell for “tattling” on them. What a cruel little world we live in.

That was so true: the world is cruel and unforgiving. If I ever had kids, that’s the first thing they would learn. It sounded cruel but that was just the way of the world, right?

April 3rd
Happy birthday to me. Today I’m 18. Whoopie! Not that it’s going to change anything. It’s just a number. I mean, The Bullies won’t let the teachers or even the principal get in the way of them bullying me! It’s freaking ridiculous! They just don’t bully me in public anymore, and now they hurt me. More than before, like it’s emotional and physical. Why do they hate me so much? That’s what I’d ask them if they were civil enough to answer.
The only upside to my birthday is the cake. Mom makes awesome cake.

Mmmm. Mom’s cake. It made my mouth water at the very thought of it. It may even have made me happy if anger and hatred hadn’t smeared my thoughts. I turned the page to the last thing that I wrote—just a week ago.
May 5th
So, there’s about seven days until prom, and I forgot to mention in my other entries that I was helping to design it. Well that is a bad idea because they expect me to go. Especially now that three people have bailed. And what’s worse, they need me to announce king and queen. So, no hiding in the corner or laying low. I guess I’ll be dress shopping soon.
This is going to be the worst night of my life.

I was so right about that. My dress was ruined, drenched in soda and out of my own anger, ripped and tear-soaked. Whatever self-esteem I had fell through my clutch. Whatever sanity I had dripped away. Whatever reason I had to live faded away to memory. Fresh tears started to pour down my face; my heart started racing as a realization hit me. I didn’t want to live. I looked back down at my journal and grabbed for the pencil on my bedside table.

May 12th
Well, this is it, I guess. My last entry. I’m not really sure what to say. I’ve never written a “goodbye” note. But I guess I should just say goodbye. Goodbye old friends, family members, life. With warm regards to anyone who bothers to read this,
Caroline

I closed the book and walked quietly to my bathroom where a full tub waited for me. I placed my journal on the edge and slipped inside, sliding under the warm, peaceful water until the bubbles were all gone.
Subject journal

Subject 306: Subject has slow brain development. Though he has matured longer than most and all organs in body (besides previously mentioned brain) have developed well, the brain is still at 3 year old level. Subject 306 will be drained and used as a donor subject.

Subject 307: Subject has slow development of skin around legs, slow development of brain tissue and slow development of stomach and intestinal tissue. Dr. Lewis suggests prematurely draining the subject. I refuse. Subject 307 will be allowed the traditional 6 month development time. Decision about whether or not the subject will be used as donor will be decided shortly before draining.

Subject 308: Subject’s development is stable; it’s aging at a uniform rate of 39.107 days per 24 hours. Subject 308 is reaching its fourth month and is developmentally, body and organ wise, approximately 11.78 years old. Subject 308 will be used as a donor subject.

Subject 309: Subject has perfect development of muscle tissues and internal organs according to all scans. This subject is similar to many that came before it. Subject 309 will be used as a donor subject.

Subject 310: Subject is the last subject in this chamber. It seems to be developing in a rather odd way. Though slightly younger than other subjects, all organs and tissues are developing much more quickly. Brain gained minimal function three weeks ago with scans showing activity in the medulla oblongata region of the brain. Breathing occurred when lungs developed. Muscles twitch at random. Possibly our first true success.

Dr. Lee did not know how to feel about the new success of her subjects. She felt an overwhelming sense of pride as they slowly began to gain function and develop at a successful, uniform rate. It had taken so many late nights sitting at a cold metal desk working various equations and then reworking those same equations to get to the point she was at now. It had taken a countless number of donor subjects. She had witnessed hundreds of her creations being drug off in mobile cooling units, being transferred to a hospital a few blocks down the street to be cut open and torn apart, their organs and skin used on the living. She felt some sort of joy knowing she was saving multiple lives with every donation but at the same time it evoked the emotion of despondency within her. Her creations, the subjects she had labored over for months at a time, were going to be garbage just like those before them.

Dr. Lee let out a sigh as she saved the spread sheet with a few swift key strokes, her fingers pressing translucent buttons suspended in the air. She stared at her document for a second, part of her staring past the semitransparent screen and studying the test subjects 404 through 407. Three of them looked just like her. The other one looked like her colleague Dr. Lewis. It had taken several months for Dr. Lee to get used to the idea of seeing herself in these glass prisons; to see herself suspended in the green gelatinous liquid and to see herself develop rapidly from an embryo to an adult in a matter of months. When she first saw subject two be drug off in a cooling unit, she neared tears. Dr. Lewis, though, had placed a firm hand on her shoulder and muttered a phrase she would never forget in her ear. “They are not human,” he had begun, “they feel nothing.”

“Cheers!” a lab technician called, raising a large margarita glass in the air. The other lab assistants joined him, liquid spilling out of their glasses and onto the floor as they did.
“To amendment 385!” he cheered, taking a large sip of the alcoholic beverage that filled the glass to the rim, the pale green liquid dripping down the sides of his face and onto his cotton button up shirt. Most followed his example and took a large gulp of their own beverages. Others, on the other hand, were unable to properly bring their glasses to their lips. These people simply chuckled and spilt the beverage on their clothes instead. Dr. Lee stood aside from the group, sipping some bottled water in silence. She watched as her assistants partied, all of them celebrating the new constitutional amendment regarding Dr. Lewis and her creations. The Supreme Court in the Northern Americas had ruled that no constitutional rights extended towards the clones. “They were not born of man. Therefore, they are not man.” Dr. Lee shuddered and sipped nervously at her water.

It had been several years, and many successful clone batches, since the first living clone was brought into the world. Subject 310 had been the first of their clones that was living when drained. It was able to do most basic functions on its own with little guidance and learned as quickly as a normal eighteen year old would. She soon recalled the furious arguments she had gotten into with her partner. She remembered the late nights they had stayed up bickering in the lab before separating and going to cool down in their own homes. Dr. Lewis urged Dr. Lee to either continue to use the clones as organ donors, whether they were alive or not, or to sell the clones as indentured servants. Dr. Lee liked neither of the options presented to her.

By the time Dr. Lee finally agreed to Dr. Lewis’ proposition to sell the clones, several more living ones had been created. They, along with subject 310, were the first to be dropped into the vast ocean that was mass consumerism. She remembered the bright cheerful commercial the company the lab had partnered up with aired that introduced the new “product.” The commercial showed the clones happily serving a family; they smiled cheerfully as they did. It mentioned how they were incapable of any emotion besides happiness and, therefore, were incapable of any forms of violence. It mentioned how they were great with kids and how they could cater to you and your family’s every whim. It mentioned how you could buy one for only as much as a new car. Dr. Lee looked down at her stark white lab coat and realized how dirty she now felt.

Dr. Lee barely noticed the door on the far left of the cafeteria open, but the slight movement caught her eye. She saw Dr. Lewis stumble in, his center of balance clearly off. He had a wide grin spread across his slender, attractive face. He scanned the room with his icy blue eyes, trying to pinpoint his partner and colleague. Dr. Lee knew he was looking for her, but did not draw his attention in her direction. She didn’t wish to speak to him right now. He had changed since they had their success with live cloning. He had gotten greedy and seemed almost bipolar.

Despite the fact that she stood as still as possible, he soon spotted her. He waved his free hand in the air, the other busy holding a tall glass bottle with a pale pink liquid within it. Jia felt it was necessary to reciprocate the action, though it was forced. He walked over to her, greeting many of the lab technicians as he did. Especially the drunken women.

“Jia!” he cheered, placing one of his hands firmly on her shoulder. The force pushed her glasses down the bridge of her petite nose. She brought her free hand up and pushed them back into place.

“Good evening, Mitchell.” Jia Lee greeted in her usual quiet, mouse like voice. The scent of strawberry schnapps drifted from Mitchel Lewis’ body, hitting Jia in waves. She felt like she was getting a buzz off his scent alone.

“Drinking water on party night? You’re always so serious!” he chirped, clapping a hand against Jia’s back again. She managed a fake smile, nodding slowly. She took a quick look at his face. He was cleanly shaven and had well groomed brown hair that was gelled back in a rather fashionable style. He was rather handsome, but Jia was not attracted to him like most women were. She knew what he was really like.

“Well, since you’re sober, I need help with a new batch. We can’t wait till tomorrow; they need to be drained tonight. They’ll get soggy if we leave ‘em in too long.” He ordered her, his voice changing
rather suddenly. It had darkened and became sterner. Jia was familiar with these sudden mood swings though and was not surprised.

“I suppose I’ll head over to the lab.” She muttered back, looking down at her bottle of water. “Want me to send a technician with you?” he asked, his voice lightening once more. Jia shook her head.

“No. They’re all too drunk,” she replied, beginning to walk towards the door. She did not wait to hear his response, for she did not care. When she reached the door, though, she casted a single glance over her right shoulder. She found Mitchell being surrounded by a group of pretty women, each with a heavy amount of alcohol in her blood. They were all giggling and laughing at his terrible jokes and innuendos. As Jia opened the door and stepped out into the white hallway, she felt dirty once more.

She began down the hallway, white flanking her on all sides. She walked quietly through the building, repeating the same route she had taken every day for the past fifteen years. She realized now how she was stuck in a Mobius loop: forever trapped making and tending to clones she felt nothing for. Jia knew no other form of science after so many years of focusing on this one aspect of it. She knew this was the only place she could make her living. Yet, she didn’t feel like she was living at all.

Jia reached the door that lead to the cloning chamber. She held her finger to the print reader and then allowed the face scanner to examine her features. She heard several locks undo with loud, mechanical “clicking” noises.

“Welcome, Dr. Lee,” a voice called out. It was electronic and inhumane but very familiar to her. Jia walked into the lab, and the metal door slid close behind her. This was the main cloning lab, hundreds of large glass tubes lining the walls, all stacked vertically. The lab was more of a long and wide corridor than the traditional square room found in many other places in the facility. The ceilings were made high in order to make the best use of the space. The tubes were stacked one on top of each other, held in place with metal, mechanical arms. Two walls held the tubes and, for each of the tubes that were resting on the ground level, a metal bed was set a few feet in front of them. The room reminded Jia of an odd, overcrowded hospital. As many metal cots as possible were stuffed into the corridor. She didn’t realize how many clones they were producing at a time until now.

The row that was touching the ground was the home of the oldest clones. These were six months old and what she would be prepping to be shipped to a happy, rich family. She turned and walked to her right where there was an odd metal device sitting in the corner. Jia waved her hand over it, and the metal device projected a transparent computer screen and keyboard into the air slightly in front of it. She signed into the server and typed in the commands to lower the tubes on the right hand side. As she pressed “enter,” Jia turned and watched the lowest layer of tubes rise up slightly and turn horizontal, via mechanical arms, and lower gently on the metal tables. Jia walked to the row of tables that were now burdened by the metal tubes. She bent down in front of the first one, pulling out a thick rubber hose that was located under the metal bed and attached it to the base of the glass tube. She watched as the green phoraplasm slowly filtered out.

Jia then proceeded to walk towards a large metal shelving unit that was on the wall opposite of her. She felt silly that she hadn’t done this before draining the phoraplasm like she usually did. She opened it slowly, the metal hinges screaming as she did and reached into it. Jia grasped the synthetic fabric material strap that was attached to a medium sized satchel with her fingers and forced it from the shelves. Letting out a sigh, she walked towards the first clone, one labeled 2320. She looked down at her mirror image, watching as its chest slowly rose and fell, watching as its body twitched and spasmed. They always did this when they were first drained.

Jia reached into the bag, her hand finding its way to the left side. It had a firm fabric going down the middle of it, the barrier preventing the two items from mixing within the bag. Her fingers gripped around a cool, tubular object. She pulled it out, looking at the syringe. It had a large warning label that heeded that it was an anesthetic. Jia popped the lid off, revealing a sharp needle point. She looked at it
for a moment, examining the fine metal tip. She had always hated needles.

By the time Jia had woken from her trance, the clone had already begun to stir. Its slanted eyes began fluttering open, revealing a muddy brown iris—just like Jia’s. The doctor stared at it for a moment, allowing it to regain most of its conscious.

“You are a clone,” Jia began. “You feel nothing. You obey.” The clone opened its mouth to protest but was interrupted by Jia quickly plunging the needle into her jugular. The clone struggled for a moment, its arms flailing, its body contorting as it tried to fight through the wave of exhaustion that was clinging to its mind and body. It soon ceased to stir, the anesthetic working its magic on the clone at last. Jia bent down and reached under the bed once more, pulling out a long, thin plastic tube. She could hear the air being suctioned into the tube and she quickly placed it in the clone’s mouth. Every time she used this instrument she thought of being in a dentist’s chair, her saliva slowly being drained from her mouth. She shook her head, pushing the thought aside. Jia reached her hand down into the other half of her bag, her fingers finding a long, thin plastic object. She pulled the item out, looking at the capped scalpel in her right hand for a moment. Frowning, she pulled the protective plastic seal off revealing its razor sharp edge.

Jia stared at the blade, never quite used to holding the instrument. She had always wondered why she had to do this part, wondered why they couldn’t just create a machine to do it for them like everything else. Dr. Lewis explained to her that this made the clones more submissive, but Jia was unsure of his theory. Ignoring her rushing thoughts, she leaned over the edge of the table, hovering over the clone’s face. Using her free hand, she opened its mouth, the tongue twitching slightly in the mouth cavity. Jia released the subject’s jaw and proceeded to stretch the clone’s tongue out as far as she could.

The scalpel felt odd in her grip. The tool was extremely light, yet it weighed on her so greatly. She put the sharp metal edge deep into the subject’s mouth, placing it gently on the back of the tongue. The organ was so soft; it was easy to cut and easy to remove. She had done it so many times before, yet this time it felt so much different. Jia took a deep breath in and applied pressure to the blade. Blood squirted from the clone’s mouth, spraying Jia’s white lab coat with dripping crimson. She forced her hand to the right, slowly slicing the soft tissue and muscle. She was nearly done with this first clone when she heard gurgled screaming; the vocals distorted and horrifying. Jia quickly tore through the final chunk of flesh, pulling the tongue completely out of the mouth and quickly taking a step back.

It was the clone.

It looked directly at her as it jerked around, blood spraying in every direction as it did. Jia hadn’t had time to cauterize the wound like she would under normal conditions. Without any further hesitation, she reached into her pack once more, pulling out another dose of anesthetic. She flipped the cap off, lunging forward and pinning the struggling clone down with her free arm. She quickly took aim for the neck and forced the needle into the same spot she had before. The clone twisted and contorted in agony for a few moments as the anesthetic took effect. In its last moments of consciousness, it turned its head towards Jia. Its dark eyes were filled with pain, more pain than Jia had ever seen before in her life. Its eyes soon fluttered shut, but Jia could not move or look away.

“They’re not supposed... They’re not supposed to feel pain...” she muttered in shock. She listened to the rhythmic sound of the tube suctioning blood from the clone’s mouth for a few more eerie moments. She recalled what Dr. Lewis had said to her from the very beginning. “They are not human. They feel nothing.”
I walked down the hallway, staring at my feet, not making eye contact with anybody. I could feel eyes on me and heard their whispers.

"Look at that fag."
"She’s probably going to see her girlfriend."
"Don’t go near her; you might catch the gay."

Their whispers were nothing compared to the loud voice that lives inside my head. He was much louder, and his screams filled me with pain as I walked down the hallway to my locker. When I opened it, a note fell to the floor. It wasn’t folded, and the words on it looked up at me: Cut a little deeper next time and die. You won’t be missed.

And that’s how it was. Every day I awoke and forced myself to get out of bed and face another day. I knew that I shouldn’t be so sad all the time, because there were people in this world who were in even worse shape than I was. But still, I felt so depressed. I tried to go to the school counselor about it, I tried to pull myself out, but she started preaching to me about how I shouldn’t express my homosexuality to other people, because I may influence them to be gay. My friends really helped me, but in the state that I was in, I didn’t think it would have been that easy to pull me back out. I just kept drowning and drowning, deeper into the dark blue waters they call depression.

My mother noticed the way I was acting. It was weird to her because before the seventh grade I had been very happy and fun to be around. But since I had come out, I didn’t smile. I didn’t laugh. I just kept staring at my shoes, and they peered back up at me. I never really fully told them what was going on, and though they would ask me over and over again, I couldn’t bring myself to tell them. I knew my father wouldn’t understand, because he would talk about homosexual people all the time as if they weren’t even people. My mom was cool about it, but still, I was so scared she would not understand. I needed my mom and dad more than ever, and I didn’t want to lose them.

I began to cut my skin. The blood felt good as it poured out of my wrist. The pain the blade produced was a different kind of pain than the pain I felt within me. I hid every cut carefully, under a huge ACE bandage. I only told a few friends, but my parents were totally clueless. I wore long sleeves every day, keeping the giant bandage hidden from wondering eyes.

I went on for a while, hiding many cuts under that bandage. After a while, you couldn’t even tell there was skin under there, just a mess of cuts and dried blood. I was sitting in class one day when the intercom sounded above me.

“Cici Sheeks, please come to the office.”

Did I have a choice?

I followed her into a tiny office towards the back of the school. I knew what was coming. I knew what she was going to make me do next. Mrs. Levi calmly asked me to remove my jacket. There were only a few cuts that were not covered completely from the bandage. I was so relieved that she didn’t
make me remove the bandage, which contained every comment and name in which I had been called throughout the year. We talked for a little while, which was mainly me spilling out a bunch of lies about why I had cut my skin. After a few minutes of rambling on, she came to the conclusion that I was not only confused about my sexual preference but also that I had severe emotional issues. Every lie that spilled out of my mouth made her think more and more that I was cutting only for the attention I was getting. Having to sit in a cramped office and explain myself to a homophobic school “counselor” was the worst type of attention.

When she had heard enough of my fake story, she led me into a huge room with a long table. I sat in the chair closest to the window, where I could see kids running for gym. As I sat at that table, I longed more than anything to be one of those kids. I wanted to be out there, instead of in this empty room. I saw a group of my friends walk by. Would they know where I was? Are they wondering where I am right now? Why can’t I be out there with them now?

I sat in that office for minutes that felt like years. I knew she was calling my dad. I knew he would yell at me as soon as I stepped off the bus and tell my mom, who would be even worse. My stomach turned as if I were on the top of a roller coaster, about to fly down a steep hill.

When Mrs. Levi walked through the door, I knew that it was done. I was done. You would think that I regretted cutting in the first place, but at the time I was just imagining the sharp blade that waited for me when I got home. I followed her once again to her “office” where she recited a few more things that made me feel even worse and sent me on my way to my next class.

I walked back feeling completely empty, like a deflated balloon. When I walked back into my class, I felt eyes on my back as I stared down at my shoes, which looked back up at me with understanding eyes. For the rest of the hour I looked out the window, watching the kids walk by. I knew that in a few very short hours I would have to face my parents, who would yell and make me want to harm myself even more. But for the moment, I had this view of all the kids walking by, and my secrets stashed away under a bandage, protected from the evil called life.
The light from the attic gives off an eerie glow as we pull up to the house. I notice that it is not just a regular light bulb, but a candle. I can tell by the way the light moves and bounces on the walls. “Do you guys see that light up there?” I ask.

“No, what light?” questions Elizabeth who is fifteen and incredibly bossy. Well, to me anyway. She is interested in pursuing Mom and Dad’s profession of art, only instead of painting (which is what Mom and Dad do), she draws. She is actually really good at it, too. She’s still mad about leaving her friends and her boyfriend, but Mom and Dad keep telling her she’ll make new ones. She has Mom’s physical characteristics, with long chestnut hair and the most vibrant green eyes you have ever seen.

“The light in the attic!” I say persistently. I am the younger sister. The one who everyone thinks is the baby of the family. No one ever believes me, sometimes not even Mom or Dad. I inherited Dad’s genes of regular dark brown hair, but I still have the green eyes. At ten years old, I’m a lot more grown up than people give me credit for. I mean, I want to draw comic strips when I grow up, but that’s still a professional career. Since the rest of my bloodline has an interest in fine art, making me the outcast of the family.

“Emily, there is no light whatsoever coming from that house; have you lost your mind?” Elizabeth says in that big-sister tone I hate.

“Nevermind. It must have just been my imagination.” I sigh. I swear it was there. I saw it with my own eyes, but when I look back up at the attic window, it is as dark as the night.

The moon was up, and stars sprinkled the sky, like a million diamonds glittering in the night. I stared at them, wondering how there could be this many stars. The city didn’t have many stars. Since we moved to the country, a lot of things have been different. As I carry the box inside, I notice a tiny movement out of the corner of my eye. I freeze mid-step. Goosebumps crawl up my arms, and I can feel someone staring at me in the shadows. There is no light outside but the moon, stars, and what little comes from the hallway just inside our front door. When I look into the shadows, all I can see is a tall tree with large branches. It must have just been the tree rustling in the wind, and my imagination ran wild on me. “Emily? Are you coming inside? I can’t hold this door open forever!” shouts Mom. I jog inside, and before I enter the door, take one look back, still wary. The night is still, with the only noise coming from the cicadas, crickets and frogs. I was sure that the hot, sticky, Louisiana night air held no breeze.

The house is big for four people; even with my mom and dad needing two whole rooms for each to paint in. They have their own galleries all across the globe, being most famous for landscapes. We move around a lot. When they get tired of one landscape, we move to another. The last place we went was the longest I think we have ever stayed in one place, which accounts for two years.

There are six rooms total and four bathrooms. There isn’t a basement, but instead a cellar. On the first floor, there is a kitchen, living room, one bathroom, and a dining room. There is also a small pantry room and two bedrooms. Then there is the second floor, which is divided with two bedrooms to the left and two to the right. The whole house is set in tones of white, blue, and some bright yellows as well. The whole outside of the house is white, even the shutters.

We put the boxes in the empty living room. The furniture is coming the next day. “So, does everyone want to sleep here tonight?” Dad asks.

“I guess so; the furniture won’t be here until tomorrow, and it would be pointless to all sleep in our own rooms,” says Mom. We get out our sleeping bags and lie down on the hard wood of the living
room floors. My dad leaves the hallway light on for a little light. After goodnights, I drift off to sleep.

In my dreams, a girl in a white nightgown calls to me. Her golden hair and bright blue eyes are stunning. A soft glow behind her makes her seem an angel. “Emily... Emily come to me .... Emily... I have a gift for you,” the girl calls.

“Who are you?” I ask.
“My name is Lillian, and I have a gift for you...”
“What gift?”
“A gift that involves eternal happiness.”
“Really?”
“You will be forever grateful,”
“Okay,” I say, but just as I feel myself starting to move forward, I awaken.
“Emily, what are you doing?” calls a familiar voice, my sister.
“Get back here and away from that pond!” she calls.
“Wha...” I stutter as I look down. I stand before the pond, my feet submerged within the icy, green, murky water. My nightgown barely grazes the surface. What am I doing out here?
“How did I get out here?” I say, beyond confused.
“You must have sleepwalked or something. I don’t know. Just get back here before you catch hypothermia from standing in that freezing pond water. Do you even know what time it is?”
“Um...”
“That’s what I thought. It’s four in the morning.”
Four in the morning? What in the world was I doing?!
“I’m coming.”

In the house, my mom and sister help to warm me. I put my feet in some warm water and wrap a blanket around me while they fix some hot chocolate.

“I don’t know what inspired you to take a trip to the pond at four in the morning,” my mother says.

“I already told you; I don’t remember even getting out of my sleeping bag,” I plead. Being the youngest, I was always accused of telling lies. At ten, though, I should think I would be out of the lying phase by now. I just don’t get it.

Later that morning after breakfast, the moving van arrived with all of our furniture and my parents’ painting supplies. As we unloaded and put everything where it should go, I couldn’t get the dream from last night out of my head. Who was this girl? And what did she mean by gift?

That afternoon, I went out to the pond. The water was murky and dark. Nothing grew in it, not even algae or moss. It looked dead. I stepped up to the water’s edge and looked at my reflection in the water, freezing and my whole body going numb. My breath caught in my throat as I stared back at the reflection in the water. I was not looking at a reflection of myself, but—

“Emily! Supper’s ready!” Mom called, stopping my thought process. I took one last look into the water, and then sprinted full force back to the house, my breath quick and harsh. I would not be visiting that pond for a while. I had not seen my own reflection in the pond, but the girl from my dreams.

I lay awake in my bed that night, wondering if that dream would come back. The face of the girl in the pond haunted me. Then, I heard a sound. I could hear it coming from upstairs in the attic. It sounded like someone walking back and forth, dragging something big. A moaning sound came to my ears, full of pure agony. My heart ached for this person, whoever it was; until I realized that the person who was making that wretched, horrible sound was me.

Elizabeth:

“Have you seen Emily today?” Mom asks me.
“No, actually, have you checked by the pond?” I say mockingly.
“I’m serious Elizabeth; if you know where she is, you need to tell me.”
“If I knew where she was, I would tell you, but I really don’t.”
“Fine, but go check in her room just to be sure.”
“Ugh, fine, I’ll go check,” I sigh.
I climb the stairs to Emily’s room. A girl is in there, but it is not Emily. She is a girl Emily’s age with blonde hair and blue eyes.

“Who are you?” I ask.
“Lillian. Who are you?” the girl says.
“Where is Emily?” I ask.
“I am Emily,” the girl says. Suddenly, she is right up close to my face. “I am Emily.”
“What have you done to her?” I ask.
“I am Emily now,” Lillian repeats.
“Lillian! I want to know what you have done with my sister NOW.” I tire of her games.
“Her body has taken the place of mine,” Lillian says. “A trade of sorts,” she adds.
“Well, go back to your own body, and give my sister back!”
“It does not work that way; our souls must switch before midnight tonight, and I will not let that happen,” Lillian says.
“Oh yeah? I will, and I’m going to go and get her right now.”
“So let the games begin,” Lillian says with a smile as I run down the stairs and back into the kitchen.

“Mom! Mom! Mom!” I scream.
“What is it? What’s wrong?” she says.
“It’s Emily. This house is haunted. The ghost, Lillian, has somehow switched bodies with Emily, and we only have until midnight to switch them back!” I say, sobbing.
“What are talking about? Is this some kind of joke?” Mom asks, scowling at me as she dries a plate from last night.

“Mom! I’m telling the truth! You have to believe me! I think we somehow must find Lillian’s body and try to get Emily’s soul back to her body, and Lillian’s back to her own. The ghost, Lillian, is out to get us though.”
Then, Lillian appears in the room.
“You mortals don’t get it. My body is long gone; I am nothing but a mere decaying skeleton now. Years I have waited for the perfect match to come along, Emily,” Lillian smirks.
“If you wish to attempt to switch them back, you must bring back my own body and get rid of me before Emily will fully take my place at midnight,” she adds.
“So let me get this straight: we have to find your body, get rid of you, and Emily will come back?” I say, slightly confused.
“Perhaps, but good luck with the other one,” Lillian says almost like she knows we will fail, as if this was all planned.
“What other one?” I ask, but Lillian is already gone.
“Well, number one, I don’t know whether to believe you or check us both in at a mental hospital,” Mom says.

“Mom, I saw the ghost the same as you. We don’t have much time to waist, so are you coming with me, or am I going alone?”
“I guess I’m coming with you. I don’t know what else to do.”
We both skip breakfast. Our stomachs are too tied in knots. We change into hiking clothes and go outside.

“Which side of the woods do you think she’s in?” I ask.
“Let’s just go left first.”
The woods are dark with very little sunlight coming through. I can’t help but wonder how all of this is possible, how all of it is somehow real. I see something in the distance, hanging from a tree. As we quicken our pace and get closer, it becomes clearer. A rope hangs from a tree, a noose on the end. I feel like I’m going to puke. Mom just seems to be sad.

By noon, we have not yet found anything. I am starting to lose hope. Neither of us is hungry enough for lunch, so we start to walk again. These woods seem to stretch on forever. Turns out, several people have hung themselves in these woods. It’s almost like we’re walking through a horror movie gone wrong.

By late afternoon, Mom decides that we have gone the wrong direction. It is starting to get dark. Just when we are about to turn around, I see a house in the distance. We decided to explore it and, if we did not find anything, go back to the house. As we got closer, I could see that the place is a ramshackle thing, with many missing components. When we reach the door, I see two bloody handprints on the window. My heart skips a beat. I turn to ice. A scream lodges in my throat, but I am too scared to let it out.

Dad:

Waking up, I notice the house is unusually quiet. I change into some comfortable clothes, figuring that we would be unpacking boxes and putting everything away today. I find nothing in the kitchen. I guess the girls went out to eat without me. I feel someone staring at me from behind. I slowly turn around, prepared to defend myself, but find only a girl. Actually, the decaying body of a girl with no eyes, just sockets, and bits of flesh gone. She has on a white nightgown, stained with crimson. I slowly back away, turn, and run out the back door.

Running, I sprint to the right, into the woods. It is getting dark; had I really slept that long? I run through the trees, not even caring where I was. I am not looking where I am going and fall straight into a hole in the ground. The hole is deep, and I can’t get myself out, even when I am standing on a large bed of wood. I hear footsteps. “Hey! I’m stuck! Please help me!” I shout. Then, I hear a laugh, filled with pure evil and a hint of twisted humor. I do not think that this person is going to help me.

A liquid starts to pour on me, stinging my eyes. I quickly shut them and my mouth too. The stream moves away, going all over the wood. I smell the liquid on my arms—lighter fluid. Then, a match comes down, and everything, including me, lights with a start. The heat is so intense, so bright, until everything goes black.

Elizabeth:

As I turn the handle of the door, my heartbeat grows quicker. “Mom, you stay out here and watch for danger, and I will explore the house.” Stepping inside, I look around. There is a bed in the corner and a dresser. A door on the back wall is closed. I go to the dresser first, opening the first drawer and finding knives of every shape and size, many of them bloody. I quickly shut the drawer and move on to the next one. I open it slowly. Inside are three things: a rope, a small and dirty shovel, and lighter fluid. The last drawer I am afraid to open because of what had been in the first two drawers. I open it slowly again, until I catch a glimpse of what is inside. I gag. The inside of the drawer is filled with various body parts. I shut it and back away.

Next, I open the door leading to a bathroom. The mirror is shattered. I look to the claw-foot tub in the corner, filled with blood and a person. A dead, rotting, bloody person. I don’t stick around to see anymore. I run to the door, except it is locked. I look out the window, past handprints. In the distance, Mom hangs from a tree, a rope around her neck. I slowly back away from the window, too paralyzed to do much more. Then I feel a cold blade at my neck. I am led out the back door from the bathroom, where a pile of dead, decaying bodies has accumulated. All are carved with intricate designs, bloody designs. Emily rests on the top of the pile, freshly carved. We have been tricked. I hear a gruff voice say,
“You will be my next masterpiece.” Then my world goes black.

Lillian:

I know I have won. But I do not want to win. I want to go home—to see my family. This is exactly why I am doing this. At exactly midnight tonight, Emily will take my place as a spirit, walking this earth for eternity. I will be free at last. As the midnight bell sounds, I see Emily before me. I laugh. I am finally free! I feel myself going up, up, up. But as I should know, I can only go so far without wings, and I feel a force pulling me down, down, down. The fire that burns eternally comes into sight, and I cry out in grief for what I have done. I am not free. I am trapped forever.
The Highest Hands in the Room
Wesley Slawson
Central High School
Poetry
Vicky Bryan

Clap your hands,
to the beat of our heart,
entranced by the sound of a soothing guitar.
Raise your hands,
get lost in the sound of self-induced ecstasy.
Rejoice!
The crown of thorns has been lifted
from your oh-so-weary head.
The rusty nails have been ripped
from your poor tired hands
The Spear has left your side.

O, what joy comes to those who close their eyes in bliss
and step forward into spiritual abyss.

Can you feel it?
The Blood of your God dripping down your throat?
What an atrocity it is to dilute such sweet nectar,
to null the purity of your flesh with The Body.

Why yearn for a boring love?
Why settle for the lackluster?
For the price of your heart you can sparkle and glitter;
then maybe the eyes that look to God could grace your presence.
A few yards behind the Nebraskan farmhouse where she raised my grandfather, my great grandmother Zenobia grew a jungle of vegetables. Tomatoes, potatoes, squash, carrots, watermelon, beets, kale, peas. Hand-sized leaves curled and spread open for light. Thick tendrils of vine tangled with one another like hands gripping tightly. Each day she hauled buckets of water on her back and spilled them at the plants’ roots. She dropped her raw knees into the soil and weeded; standing, clumps of mud fell and left a brown stain. She harvested, digging with both hands to yank up potatoes and weighing the ripeness of a tomato in her palm. Sweat ran trembling from her shoulders down her stomach and spine, following the paths of her muscles. But each year she bent her increasingly sore back to push aside the soil and place more seeds in the earth.

Sitting in Grandpa’s dining room, I listen to him paint stories of his childhood: a separate plot cultivated expressly for corn to be popped; every night Zenobia uprooting a vegetable—dirt-caked potatoes, six handfuls of pea pods—for dinner and cooking them in butter and salt. Grandpa speaks of his mother as if laying out each anecdote for us to turn over in our hands.

“She was a brave woman,” Grandpa says, leaning forward on his elbows, a root beer float melting in front of him. “She was a strong woman.”

Zenobia was born in 1917 and married my great grandfather, Herbert, five years before the United States entered World War II. Beyond this I know very little about her besides the pattern of her farm: the rows of beets with purplish pink stems and long green leaves, the tomato plants drooping under the weight of their fruit, potatoes stuck beneath the soil. She died when I was barely six. All my memories of her are instead of the farm: her jungle, windows cottoned with spider webs, the moon rising tremulously over thin rods of corn.

A few years ago, after my great grandmother died, we auctioned off the belongings from her farm. The cookware, the piping, the small oil paintings of ducks, the delicate cloth doilies, the silk flowers, the gardening tools. People gathered in clusters on the front lawn, fanning themselves with numbered paddles. The auctioneer stood on a plywood platform, words flooding out of his mouth. People thrust up their numbers and waved them frantically to claim the big ticket items: a walnut dresser, a mattress frame, a desk. It felt like a sin to let people buy her belongings when they had been in the family long enough to be given their own separate branch on the next mapping of the tree. The day before we’d had a private family sale, snaking among rows of tables fat with items for purchase. Now our sorrow was public.

Other people were dazed. They wandered to touch the hot flank of a silo or stared into the green quiet of long pastures. Dad led me to the empty barn. Standing in the center, hay scratching my ankles, I could still smell the manure and leather lingering even though horses hadn’t lived in those rotting stalls for years. We tramped up a small hill to watch the cows chew grass on a neighbor’s property. Tiny green burs jabbed into the fibers of my socks; when I pulled them off I pricked my finger. In Zenobia’s living room mice darted, nervous and chittering, from under her old dusty couch and into the walls. No one had lived within these rooms for some time, and even the air seemed stale, unstirred for too many years.

Outside in the sapping heat, I stood against a stranger’s truck, burning my thighs. My family trudged around the land, pausing at certain landmarks to watch the invisible reel of their private memories.
Shoppers left her yard, satisfied, the beds of their pickups weighed down by dented farm furniture. I imagined Zenobia, cultivator of families, hanging her coat in that dark armoire, frying an egg in that shallow pan. As they disappeared down the gravel driveway, the shoppers’ trucks were swallowed by the dust.

In the end my family was left behind to stare at the empty rooms. A squirrel’s feet scratched against the attic floor over our heads. We murmured quietly for a few moments and slunk into our cars. I gazed up at the house with its cracked paint and shifting shutters. It would be the last time I ever saw Zenobia’s home standing, and I didn’t know well enough to say goodbye.

Several years later Grandpa and I stopped outside the farm. We bumped to the side of the road, the tires crunching on gravel. He turned off his minivan and paused for a moment to stare out over the corn fields of his childhood in a sort of reverence. Sweating in my cotton shorts, I tried to take in the land of my ancestors, of the farm and of Zenobia Stobbe.

The farmhouse had been churned over by a bulldozer and turned into a field. The roads stretching up to Zenobia’s home were consumed by corn in neat, measured rows. But I could picture the old farmhouse if I tried: a ghost house, tall and white with a peaked roof against the blue Nebraskan sky. Behind it, a great jungle of vegetables.

I am Zenobia’s great-granddaughter. Each weed she pulled led to me, every vegetable cut from the stalk, every bucket of water gurgled over every stem. I come from a line of women who held the sky on their backs while dirt made stripes beneath their fingernails. They were queens of fields, conquerors of jungles, cultivators of lineages.

Zenobia’s home may be gone, but her land is still rich with her spirit. It is as expansive as the corn. As deep as my roots.
Other Writers Say It Better
Rennie Svirnovkiy
Marquette Senior High School
Poetry
Emily Jorgensen

I think I'd be a fantastic painter if I weren't so awful at it. Every time I'm faced with a canvas I start sketching and eventually the thing is a mess of graphite and charcoal and soot because somehow, every time this senior gets at my tarp.

I wander the school during newspaper on the days she tells us to go and get pictures of something newsworthy. The other day, I went out to the track, and it started to rain, and when I sank back to the main hall, two girls asked me, "Is it raining?" I just nodded because the only thing that'd have flooded from my mouth would've been, "No, it's National Baptism Day, God Fucking Bless." When the bell rang, the hall was overwhelmed with punks and I swear I didn't know three quarters of the kids on the floor.

The boys at my school have started growing out their beards and trending insomnia. Maybe not all the boys. Maybe just one. But it's the one I see least, and it's funny that he makes such an impression. He has a thing for leaving doors open, and the one between us is wide and wonderful.

David Sedaris said "Weird doors open. People fall into things." Pretty much.
One night I was awaked by the jolting of my body and the sounds of heavy breathing. I found myself on the floor in my bedroom. It took me a second to realize my brother was on top of me rubbing his body on mine. I remember asking myself what he was doing. I remember wondering if I should ask him what he was doing or tell him to stop. I wondered if I should move. I noticed what he was doing was uncomfortable. I decided to move and try to get out from under him, but he held me down. I wondered again what exactly was going on. Should I do something? Should I say something? I searched for words.

I noticed the only thing he had on was a T shirt. While he was rubbing his body on me he was also trying to lift my night gown up.

“Bubbie, what are you doing?”
He whispered, “Don’t talk, people are sleeping!”
“But what are you doing?” I asked.
“Nothing, just don’t talk and don’t tell anyone about this,” he said.
I wiggled a little and tried to turn over onto my stomach hoping he would stop and leave.
“Quit, Trisha, you’re making too much noise!”
I continued to try to wiggle free and said, “Can you please stop? I want to go back to sleep.” Bubbie did not stop. Instead he told me to hold on just a little bit longer. I tried again to push him off me, but I couldn’t.

“Trisha, hold on!” he said in a much meaner voice. I felt really scared. I didn’t know what to do.
“Please stop,” I begged as I continued to try to get out from under him. When he was finally done, he got up to exit the room with his blanket wrapped around his body.
I sat up, afraid to move. I felt myself shaking. I got up and went over to Tara’s side of our bed. My little sister was still sleeping. I knew I had to make a choice to wake her up or not. I didn’t know what to say though, and I definitely didn’t know what to do. I didn’t understand what exactly had just happened and why. I felt like I was all alone

I knew my Dad and his girlfriend Cindy were home. I called Cindy “Mom.” I knew my brother Craig was home too, but I felt like I was totally alone.

“Tara, will you wake up with me? I’m scared.”
“What’s wrong, Trisha?”
I told her I didn’t want to be awake by myself. She sat up in bed and stared at me for what seemed like a long time. Then I started crying and turned my face.

“Trisha, what happened?” Tara asked.
“I don’t know, Bubbie was in here,” I said.
“Doing what?” she replied.
“I don’t know, but it was uncomfortable.” I said.
“Did he hurt you, Trisha?”
Tears streamed down my face. I climbed into bed next to her and said, “I want to go to sleep.” I pulled the blanket over my head.

The next morning I awoke to loud music blaring from the TV in our room. I shared a room with Tara at that time. I got up and turned the TV down. I looked at Tara and said, “Tara, should I tell Mom or Dad?”

“Yes, you should, but do it when Kevin isn’t around.” I felt too scared to tell.

A couple weeks passed. I wanted to tell, but I just couldn’t do it. I didn’t have the guts to tell. So,
since no one knew about it, he continued come into my room when everyone else was sleeping. I knew now that what he was doing was wrong. I began feeling more and more scared. I started to feel lost and didn’t know what to do. I could feel my life was changing. It was like I was on a sinking ship. I was at war with myself. I felt like what he did to me was somehow my fault. I worried that if and when I finally did tell, no one would believe me any way. I thought my dad would be mad at me. I worried I would be punished.

Eventually I couldn’t take it anymore. My brother did it about six more times in the month, and I knew that, if this was going to stop, I had to tell someone.

One night when Dad was gone with the boys on their paper route, I decided to tell. I begged Tara to go with me. “Mom, I need to tell you something,” I said with a shaky voice. I was already holding back tears.

She must have known something wasn’t right because she said, “What is it? Is something wrong?”

I looked down and said, “Yes. Something happened to me.”

Mom said, “Go on, finish.” She looked at me like she was really worried.

I looked down again and said, “Bubbie has been touching me.” I was shaking more and felt like my heart had stopped. When I looked up, I saw her face. She had tears in her eyes. I started crying hard. She motioned for me to come to her. She hugged me and then sat down. She said, “I’m sorry Trisha.” Then she said, “Don’t tell your dad. I will tell him.”

I was afraid, so I asked, “Am I going to be in trouble?”

“Of course not,” she replied. “There’s no reason to be afraid. You’re not going to get in trouble.”

Later, after Dad and the boys got home and were settled, Mom asked to speak with Dad.

Mom said, “Kids, why don’t you leave the room.”

While we were in the other room, I could hear them talking. I listened as close as I could. I could hear Mom crying. Then I heard, “Kevin, Trisha has come to me with something that has happened to her.”

“What is it?”

“Trisha said Kevin has messed with her.”

Then I heard Dad say, “How come Trisha went to you with this news? I would like her to tell me when stuff like this happens to her. I’m her father.” I could tell by his voice that he was angry. “Don’t tell anyone. I will work this out.”

We all went outside to play later that day, and Dad told me to come talk to him.

“Trisha, Cindy told me something and I would like to know if it is true.”

“Ok” I said. I was scared again and thought he could tell from my voice.

He kept going, “Has Kevin been messing with you? I want you to be honest with me.”

I replied, “Yes, he has.”

Dad said, “Are you sure? Because if he didn’t and you say he did, you can get him in a lot of trouble.”

“Yes, I’m sure,” I said. Then it hit me; he didn’t believe me. I felt sad and confused.

Dad ended the conversation by saying, “Don’t tell anyone. I will work this out myself.”

The next day after school, Cindy was waiting for Tara and me by the third and fourth grade doors. Tara and I ran over to her shouting, “Mom!” We both grabbed her and hugged her tight. The three of us left the school and started walking home. I walked more in front, Tara was kind of behind me, and Mom was behind her.

I heard Mom say, “Trisha, we are not going home. We are going to Ron and Nina’s house today.”

“Okay,” Tara and I said.

“Hey Tara” I said.

“What?”
“A cookie says I can beat you to Ron and Nina’s.”
“Okay fine, and a bag of chips say I can beat you!”
“Doubt it, but it’s a deal. Wait, it has to be Fritos. Are you ready?”
Tara shouted, “Yes!”
Tara passed me, so I ran over to the side of the street that Ron and Nina lived on and counted the houses as I passed them.
“Three, two, one.”
When I got to Ron and Nina’s house I stepped onto the porch and looked back. Tara was almost there, and Cindy was pretty far back. She was way down by Conner’s house. I turned back around and rang the doorbell.
“Hi, Princess,” Nina said when she opened the door.
“Hi,” I answered with attitude. I remembered how much I disliked her. It seemed like she was always rude to Tara and me.
“Go on into my room. Your mother and I have to make a phone call,” she told us.
Nina went inside and sat down in her chair. I went into the kitchen and waited for Tara to follow me.
“Nina, may Tara and I have a glass of water to share?” I asked.
“Yes. Ron, make the girls a glass of water to share.” she demanded.
A few minutes later, or as it seemed, Cindy walked into the kitchen and asked Tara and I if we could go to the computer room.
“I’m playing first, Tara!”
“Fine, and I’ll give you that cookie I owe you when we get home,” I said as I walked off.
The room was silent.
“Tara. Do you hear Mom crying?” We looked at each other, and both moved at once to follow the sound and find Mom crying. We both gave her a big hug. She wiped her tears.
Then she said, “It just breaks my heart that he doesn’t believe his own daughter. He doesn’t believe her.”
I heard Cindy speak those words and kept replaying them in my mind. I wondered what Mom meant. Then I realized she was talking about me.
My dad doesn’t believe me.
Part I

“Aye, Marcus! You comin’ to DQ after practice tonight?” my friend Yogi yelled across the gym. I sighed. Sometimes I hated having to always turn down the invitations to hang out after basketball practice, but little Melodie couldn’t take care of herself. “No, thanks though. Gotta babysit Mel.”

Yogi shook his head. “Dude, you gotta get your parents to cut you some slack. You’ve babysat her for the whole season. You makin’ me think you don’t like us no more or something.” If only that was all that was the matter.

I headed for the daycare center to pick up Melodie. Opening the door gently, I called out, “Mel? Time to head home, sweetie.” I felt the judging eyes of the receptionist on my back. Melodie came running to me and wrapped her arms around my long legs. “Look what I made for you, Bubby!” I bent down to pick up the tiny braided bracelet that spelled out M-A-R-C-U-S in little beads. “Thank you, Mel! Let’s get going. We’ve got a bus to catch.”

I settled Melodie on my lap to save space on the crowded bus. I was glad that my neighborhood was the first stop, because there was only so long I could sit with so many pairs of eyes staring at me. They think Mel is my child, that a black kid living in the ghetto couldn’t possibly be responsible enough to take his baby sister home from school. Melodie seemed unusually tired, curling up on my lap and closing her eyes. I hope she isn’t getting sick. There are no more nonessentials to cut from my monthly budget, and buying medicine might force us to downgrade to one meal a day. The bus squeaked to a halt at my street. I dropped four quarters into the bus driver’s hand and said, “Have a good night, sir.” I hated having to take the city bus home from school because I lost one precious dollar every day. A dollar could buy ramen noodles, a can of soup, or a shirt from the thrift store. A dollar could make life that much easier for Mel and me.

I opened the squeaky door to the small, badly damaged house. The door was smashed, about to fall off its hinges after the druggies breaking in and searching for drugs or money. That started after they heard about my mom and dad. They thought that this house would be a breeding ground for the “good stuff.” It’s another reason I try to stay away from my house as much as I can. It’s dangerous for Melodie. I went into the kitchen, Mel following behind me. “Alright, Mel, let’s get some food in that belly of yours.” I looked on the counter for my food choices. I used to keep food in the cabinets, but I dismantled them for firewood after the heat got turned off. “We can have cereal, soup, Ramen, or mac and cheese. You pick.” After some deliberation, we chose the chicken soup. "Bubby, why can't we have turkey sandwiches like we have at daycare?" Melodie asked as she swirled her soup around in the chipped plastic bowl.

"I don't know. We just don't." I tried not to let on to her that we were dirt poor, that the bills were piling up, that we couldn't afford most of our basic needs.

It used to not be this way. Just 6 months ago, we were doing fine. Mom and Dad weren’t around a whole lot, but someone was always there to watch Melodie. We weren’t too poor, but we certainly weren’t upper-class. I thought we were unlucky because I didn’t have an iPhone or a pair of Jordans. Little did I know that in a short time, I would be scrounging for food and water, one of the bottom-feeders who was made fun of in our school. Four months ago, my dad got caught smuggling drugs for a friend of a friend. He’s in jail now. Mom had been battling a drug addiction and mental illness for years,
and she took the money and ran off with her dealer. I don’t miss them much, actually. They were awful to Mel and ignored me completely. I just miss the security of having other people around, and the money, of course. Now we’re trying to survive. I hate my situation, but I don’t think about it. I have to focus on the present, and getting me and Mel out of this mess.

"Let’s go grab the mail!" I said, trying to sound cheerful. Melodie nodded. "Okay!"

I hurried outside, grasping her warm hand in one of mine. Once we were inside, I took a few pieces of wood from the pile and started a fire in the fireplace. Mel sat beside me in front of the warm blaze, using a moth-eaten pillow as a cushion. I opened the first envelope, which was an ad for a local window-cleaning business. I threw it into the flames. My heart sank as I opened the next envelope. “We apologize, but we cannot hold your position as Walgreen’s Cashier,” it read. Crap. What was I going to do now? Without my Walgreen’s job on the weekends, there was no money to buy food, clothes, water, medicine, the most basic essentials. We would have to become beggars, homeless bums on the street. I couldn’t—no, I wouldn’t—let that happen to Melodie. Suddenly, I knew what I had to do.

Part II

“What? You’re quitting? Why?” Coach Hughes raged. “You’re the best piece of basketball talent I’ve seen in years, and you’re a good kid. You set an example for your teammates and influence them in a way that I can’t. I can’t let you leave the team. What about your scholarship to Michigan State? You’re throwing your future away. Why, Marcus? Why?” I could hear the coach’s frustration and could feel it by the way he looked at me while he was on his rant.

I sat quietly in a chair in Coach Hughes’ office. “Do you really wanna know why I’m quitting the team?” I wanted to tell him. So badly, I wanted to pour out my soul to him, to tell someone about the hell I was living in. But I knew I couldn’t. I had to be strong. My body became wracked with sobs. “I’m really sorry, Coach. But some things are more important than basketball.” I wiped my eyes and stood up, ashamed of my momentary weakness. I had to be strong for Mel. I walked out of the office, trying to hold onto one shred of dignity.

With my newfound free time, I decided to go job-hunting. I stopped at McDonald’s, Home Depot, the gas station, Barnaby’s Pizza, anyplace I could think of. They all said the same thing. “Sorry, kid. We’re not hiring.” What I knew they really meant was, “We’re not hiring you.” At the end of the day, I had no job, no place on the basketball team, no house, nothing. I was a gigantic failure. I had failed myself, and more importantly, I had failed Melodie. Nothing could make me feel worse.
I look into her big, blue eyes, and I know that she is my sister. We get our blue eyes from our mother. Her hair is the same color as mine, dirty blond, a trait we get from both of our parents. I place my hands on the small of her back and push forward, sending her flying in the air. The swing’s squeaking is drowned out by her contagious laughter. Ever since she was a baby, she has loved when I take her to the park and push her on the swings. She always says, “Tris, I love you, I love the park, so let’s love them at the same time.” I was only nine when she was born, and I swore that we would be best friends. I want to spend all the time I can with her before she gets older and hates me for no reason. All of my friends fight with their siblings, and I never want that to happen to us. Kristen is only five, and I can feel her drifting away from me. Thinking about it makes my heart hurt. I decide to focus on her sweet smile, so innocent. I tickle her side, and she squeals, making me burst out laughing. I look around the park and notice a little boy and girl, around eight years old, racing each other down the slides. A woman walks past us, carrying her crying daughter. I peer into the woods that surround the park, and I notice a set of eyes lurking in the branches. They focus on mine for a second and disappear. I feel uncomfortable and brush it off, deciding it’s just some kid playing in the woods. Yet I can’t shake the feeling that we are being watched.

Kristen kicks her legs, screaming, “Higher! Higher!” I push her with all my might, and she kicks her legs violently, sending her right shoe flying. My eyes follow it, landing by the teeter totter. I laugh and tell her that she needs to tie her shoes better. Then I remember I tied her shoes. I give her one last push and walk over to the shoe. I bend down to pick it up and notice the gems on the side are falling off. I brush off the dirt and turn around. I scan the swings for my sister and find nothing. I panic and scan the entire park. I run over to the slides and ask the children if they have seen a little blonde girl. They shake their heads. I run my fingers through my hair and take a deep breath. My eyes search the jungle gym and find only a little boy picking his nose. I tell myself she’s just playing hide and seek and shout her name.

“Kristen, this isn’t funny! Come out right now, little miss!” I shout. “We can play hide and seek at home!”

No reply. I try to think where she could have gone, and a part of me dies when I look into the woods. I run, almost tripping on a little girl. My heels press into the soft soil. My heart races. I think of all the ways she could get hurt running through these dense woods. A branch appears out of nowhere and smacks me in the face. Above my right eyebrow stings, and I brush my fingers across it, wiping away blood. I keep walking, leaves and twigs crunching under my feet. A limb snaps off to my left, and I freeze. I am not here alone. I realize it must be Kristen, and I shout her name. A large black figure emerges from behind a thick oak tree. A breath gets caught in my throat. That is not my sister. I begin running, gaining speed every second. Everything around me becomes a blur. I try to focus and figure out a way out of these woods, but my heart is beating too fast. As soon as I think I am safe, my foot falls into a hole. My body stumbles forward, each movement awkward, and I fall. My face hits the ground hard. Dirt finds its way into my mouth, and I gag. I lay there, motionless. A searing pain spreads through my ankle. I must have sprained it. Twigs snap in the distance. Someone is coming. I try to push myself up, but my ankle crumbles under the weight. I hear footsteps and turn my head. My eyes focus on a pair of black boots in front of my face. One swings back and kicks me in the jaw. My vision blurs. A shooting pain spreads through my head. I see the boot swing back again, and my vision goes black.

I open my eyes to see darkness. I try to move, but I am in a tight space. My breath quickens, and
I start to panic. My claustrophobia is setting in. At first I think I am being buried alive, but then I hear the sound of a highway. I suddenly realize I have been kidnapped and am inside a trunk, possibly heading to my death. I bang my fists against the ceiling and scream. Hot tears stream down my face and trickle into my mouth; the taste of salt makes me nauseous. I sniffle and continue to sob. I cry out for my mother, but I know nobody can hear me. The thought of being alone reminds me of Kristen. Worry fills me. What if this person has my sister too? What are they doing to her? I can’t let her get hurt. I bang my fists harder, knowing that I cannot give up. I must fight. I will survive. I will save my sister.

Soon my throat and knuckles burn from screaming and punching. I can feel the car slowing down and notice we are turning right. My body sways with the vehicle and bounces over a bump. The car begins to rattle, and it reminds me of the time my family drove out to a farm and we drove across a long dirt road. We must be going into the country part of Warner, Missouri. I have always lived in the more urban part of Warner, and we never traveled out to the country part very often. I always enjoyed the vast land, full with rolling hills and trees. It seemed quiet and safe, until now. The car comes to a stop, and I hear a door slam. The trunk pops open, and the light stings my eyes. I push myself up, kicking and screaming. I thrust my arms in awkward angles and try to wrestle my way out of the tight trunk. A man lunges at me, putting his hands around my throat. He punches my stomach and shoves me back down. I thrash at his round face. His dark brown eyes pierce into me. Those were the eyes in the woods. My mouth finds his hand and clamps down, tasting blood. His screams sound like a mangled animal being skinned alive. He brings his hand back and smacks me across the face. The pain is fierce, making the edges of my vision blur. He swings his hand one more time, hitting my ear and knocking me unconscious.

I wake up in a dingy room and find myself on a table. The walls remind me of a basement after it has been flooded. Water stains cover the ceiling. The air is wet and cold, filled with a pungent smell. I wrinkle my nose in disgust. I try to sit up, but my wrists and feet are tied down with leather straps. I twist my leg, and the pain returns in my ankle. I turn my head slightly, sending an aching pain through my head and notice a small table with surgical tools laid across it. My entire body throbs, and I feel the need to give up, but I remember my sweet, innocent little sister. I can make it through this. I rock my body to the side, hoping I can get closer to the small table. I twist my wrist so that my fingers are millimeters away from a scalpel. I rock my body harder, ignoring the excruciating pain in my ankle as my fingers grasp the handle. I turn it around in my hand so that the blade is facing the leather cuffs. I begin cutting and feel the leather give way. My hand breaks free and a flood of relief rushes through me. Soon all of my limbs are free. I sit up and swing my legs over to the side of the table. I pull up my jeans and peer at my ankle. Purple, green and black mix together and cover the skin. I touch the outer bone and all around and decide it’s not broken. Across from me a wooden door is slightly open. I stand up and try to relieve the weight from my sprained ankle. Before I take a step, I grab a large knife from the table. As I begin to move forward, I hear a floorboard creak. I freeze and hold my breath. Taking a few more steps, I peer into a dense hallway. It has the same pungent smell of the room, but intensified. The hallway is dark and eerie, sending a chill down my spine. At the other end lays a spiral staircase. I stumble forward and hear a man cough. I place the knife behind my back. Now is the time to fight. I watch as a tall man makes his way down the stairs. He turns his head, and his eyes fall on me. He groans and stops in his tracks.

“How did you get out?” he barks. The words cut like ice cold daggers on their way out. My body fills with fear, and I feel myself shriveling up. I force myself to remember my sister and that I have to be strong for her.

“Well, it isn’t hard when your kidnapper is a moron,” I sneer.

“You think you’re so smart, little girl,” he snaps. “But I am the one with power. I’ll be sure your sister has a front row seat to your death.”

“You will never hurt me!” I scream. “You will never hurt my sister.”
He laughs, "She’s a brat, you know that?"

"Where have you put her?" I ask.

"She’s with my wife. After her fifth miscarriage, she couldn’t bear the loss of another. I have been watching you two. I decided she was the perfect little girl. She has the same features as my wife. I thought I could just get away with her, and you would run home, but no, you had to come chasing after us. So I decided that I would just kill you."

"You are insane. Where is your wife? I want my sister back!" I scream.

"It’s funny, you know. Right now, I doubt your parents even realize you’re gone; your sister is playing in the living room with my wife, and here you are screaming at me. Nobody even knows where you are. Nobody will ever know," he taunts.

With those words, he lunges towards me. His hands reach for my throat, but I am too quick. I pull out my knife and hold it in front of me. The knife pierces into his flesh, right above his stomach. I shove it deeper, and his body crumples to the floor. I watch as the life leaves his eyes, and I feel his warm blood cover my hands. I shove it deeper, and his body crumples to the floor. I watch as the life leaves his eyes, and I feel his warm blood cover my hands. I pull the knife out and stab him again, only this time right near his heart. I want him to feel pain, like the pain he made me feel when he took my sister. Only my pain was worse. Nothing is worse than fear. Blood drips from his pale lips, and his body lies dead on the floor. I check his pulse to make sure and feel nothing. I feel nothing. I just took the life of a man. I never knew that I was capable of such destruction. The realization of what just happened hits me. My heart feels as though it burst open, revealing every weakness. I lean against the wall, out of breath, even though I have not moved. Beads of sweat line my forehead, and I wipe them away with the back of my hand. I stare at the drying blood on my hands and try to remember why I am here. I made it, and I must save my sister. I step over his twisted limbs and run up the stairs. Adrenaline is coursing through my veins, dulling the pain in my ankle.

At the top of the stairs, a wooden door awaits. I twist the doorknob, and it slowly creaks open. I walk into what appears to be a bedroom. The walls are painted a sad grey, and a queen sized bed sits against the far wall. It’s covered with a beige quilt and two white pillows. The bed is made perfectly enough to bounce a coin off of it. The only other pieces of furniture in the room are an empty vanity and dresser.

I walk out of the room and into a kitchen. From here I can see the rest of the house. To my right is a dining room, and to my left is the living room. A cabinet blocks my view, and I can only see the back of a couch. I take a couple steps forward and notice my sister sitting on the floor, playing with a Barbie. A smile is planted on her lips. She has no idea what has just happened. On the couch, a woman sits with her back to me. The wife. Light blonde hair flows over her scrawny shoulders. Her back is slouched and sagging, like she has no strength left inside her.

"I’m sorry," she whispers.

"Your sorry won’t fix anything," I snap. My heart hurts for her, but she does not deserve my sympathy. "Don’t move, or you will regret it."

I pick up a cordless phone sitting on the counter next to me. I walk over to my sister and stand between her and the woman. I hold my knife in front of me for protection. She looks harmless, but I can’t take any chances. I hold the phone in front of me and dial 911.

"911, what’s your emergency?" the operator asks.

"Yes, I’d like to report a kidnapping and a death," I reply.

I look at the woman on the couch and ask her, "What’s your address?"

"9142 North Oak Traffic Lane, Warner, Missouri." Her voice is low and depressed.

I put the microphone to my mouth and repeat the address.

I sit there, staring at the wife, as I wait for the police. Her body is hunched over, and I can hear her sniffle. Her hair covers her face, but I can recognize the pained expression of disappointment and grief. I feel sorry for her. She and her husband have suffered so much loss that it drove them insane. I
pull my sister close and kiss her forehead. We sit there on the carpet together, comforting each other. Finally, in the distance I hear the sirens. Before the police arrive, I have to ask her one question.

“Why?” I ask.

“You will never understand,” she says, sitting up straight. Her voice is cold, without emotion. “You will never understand.”

The police burst through the door before I am capable of saying anything else. My body goes numb, and I stay perfectly still as I watch them handcuff her. An officer appears in front of me, and I see his lips moving, but I don’t hear anything. I watch as they pick up my sister and carry her outside. I don’t know what makes me move, but I find myself standing and walking towards Kristen. Finally, I remember why I am here and why I had to kill a man. I had to do it. I had to protect her. I run to her and scoop her into my arms. She is the reason I survived. She is the reason I will go on.
There she was: perfect hair, latest trend clothes, being followed by a group of wannabes with the same characteristics. Ashlyn Corpen. She was the most popular girl in school, captain of the cheerleading team, dating the senior football star, tons of friends. Then there’s me: the geeky new girl with natty red hair, glasses, and headgear. I thought this would be my year, the year I finally would get the chance to start fresh with new friends and new reputation. When I moved in with my mom over the summer, the town dentist, she found a small gap between my back teeth that required a full face set of embarrassment. My life couldn’t have gotten any worse.

The first day wasn’t the best. Everyone pointed, laughed, and made not-so-pleasing remarks shooting straight towards me. Not like I hadn’t been used to it from past schools. The torment I’ve had to live with dug into me like a knife gutting a fish. But that’s just the role I was given in this thing called life, and according to what the preacher says, God gives us each a part to play. Thanks.

We were in home room when the laces on my dress got caught on Rickey Schwart’s backpack zipper and tore a hole clear around my thigh and lower back. My face instantly became beat red. I followed the teacher’s finger to the door and walked to the nurse. I took my jacket off and wrapped it around my torso because I could see there were already people waiting for the nurse. I took a seat on the bench and sat quietly.

The sound of crying carried through the hallway. I turned my head, along with everyone else, and dropped my jaw when I saw who it was coming from. It was Ashlyn. Her hands were covering her face, and she was choking on her breaths. She was walking quickly towards me, almost running. She barged through the line and stumbled into the nurse’s office. All eyes were on her, as usual. The tears that continued to flow from her eyes and down her cheeks were now being followed by her mascara, I almost felt bad for whatever had happened.

The nurse took her back into the bathroom, and when they came back out, I was the only one still waiting. She opened a drawer full of clothes, but it seemed as though she couldn’t find what she was looking for. Being as nosey as I am, I asked what happened. Ashlyn gave me the death stare, and I got the hint to shut up and not worry about it. After that I didn’t say anything else.

She picked up the phone and called home, while I eavesdropped on her conversation with what could have been her mother. She told her that she had gotten sick during class and puked on her clothes, and that she needed her to leave from work and come get her. Ashlyn told the nurse that there was nothing her mom could do for her because of the job she was working on.

I turned towards Ashlyn, “I have a pair of clothes in my locker if you want me to go get them.” We are about the same size, so I figured she might take my offer.

“No.”

The nurse looked at her. “If there is nothing anyone else can do and you wouldn’t like to go around the rest of the day wearing your breakfast, I suggest you take the offer.”

“Fine!”

I walked to the sophomore hallway to get the extra set of clothes. It’s hard for me to believe that Ashlyn Corpen is really about to borrow my clothes. My attention was caught when my left shoulder bumped into Rickey.

“Watch where you’re going, loser!” he said as he turned his head back around and continued walking.

It made me want to cry. It wasn’t my fault! Why was he out here? Why wasn’t he paying any
more attention than I was? Why would he yell at me like that? These questions jumbled through my head causing me to lose focus. I got the outfit out of my locker and walked back to the nurse’s office. Rickey and Ashlyn gawked at me as I approached. I handed her the clothes and sat back down. Quite surprisingly, it looked good on her. She gave me a smile, said thank you, and walked away.

Untying my jacket, I showed the nurse my hole. She gave me the phone and allowed me to call my aunt at home to bring me pants. Ten short minutes later she had brought me a pair of jeans. I gave her a hug goodbye, changed my pants and had the nurse write me a pass back to class.

On the way back Ashlyn stopped me in the hallway; it seems she had been waiting for me all along.

“Hey, I just wanted to say thank you again. I don’t know what I would have done without your help. Also, where on earth do you shop? I love this outfit.”

“It was a Christmas gift,” I replied.

“Huh, wanna maybe hang out after school tomorrow?” she asked.

My stomach dropped, and my face blushed. I can’t believe she just asked me that. “Yeah, sure!”

“Cool. I’ll text you. Can’t wait!” she said as she walked away.

“Me either! See ya!” I hollered back. I guess this was going to be my year after all.
The Hero
Samira Zantout
North Kansas City High School
Personal Essay/Memoir
Steven Epley

There is one memory I cannot shake off. It was during the 2006 Lebanon War, when I was a little girl and about ten days shy of my 9th birthday:

“I wake up in the middle of the night and sit up. I look to my mom and dad who lay beside me, sound asleep. I look across the bedroom at my brothers, also sound asleep. I do not lie back down; I do not move at all, in fact. I simply sit there, stare out at the moonlit bedroom, and listen. I do not know what I expect to hear, but I can sense that my sleep would be interrupted if I fall back to my pillow. Soon enough, I begin to make out a sound outside. It seems distant at first but gets louder as it nears. It resonates from the sky. The loud buzzing shoots across the night sky, and I watch the source of the noise fly away from my window’s view. I tense up and hug my knees to my chest. A new noise cuts across the city, this one of a siren. Blinding lights illuminate the world outside as the lights search for the buzzing noise. The lights are accompanied by crackling noises that remind me of my brothers’ video games: the games with monsters, where a hero must shoot at a creature to save the world. Before the war, we used to love those games. Another sound comes around. Something drops from above. Anti-aircraft machines fire at the sky. With those games, there is only one button to press when the hero dies: restart. The buzzing noise persists as it flies back and forth, scattering bombs on its path. When the hero restarts, the world in the game restarts. Bright flashes illuminate the city streets. A cloud of smoke gathers in the distance. After all, a video game can only end when the hero is successful. If the hero is not successful, then the game is not over. A loud boom echoes from down the street. Another explosion disturbs the world outside, allowing a haze of yellow smoke to loom over the city. All at once, my parents and brothers wake up and get dressed with lightning speed. I hear the urgent, panicked yells between them, but I am only focused on that buzzing noise, out in that marvelous, bright yellow sky. I think about how the hero could save the city from that monster. Another bomb drops from the sky, and I wait in a state of haunting tranquility for the explosion to sound. That yellow sky flashes white with the explosion, and the ground begins to shake. This one feels close; this one feels real. ...”

A mere child at the time, the war in itself was not very traumatic for me. I owe that to my vast imagination that allowed me to exist more in my own mind than in my reality. Also, I did not personally know someone who had died, nor was my city in the direct line of danger during the war. Therefore, I was lucky. However, when most people hear of my hazy, late-night memories during the war, they immediately become sympathetic. In many people’s minds, war is this obscure, uncomfortable subject that no one knows how to sensitively approach. War equals destruction; war equals suffering. This is true for all wars. However, with my experience, war can build as much as it can destroy.

The war began during the summer, which was my family’s favorite season. Our favorite tradition during the summer was the beach. Usually, our side of the Mediterranean meant the sun was unmerciful, the water was dirty, and the beach was cluttered with trash. It may not have qualified for a portrait, but it was absolutely perfect to me. That beach represented watermelons, sandcastles, jellyfish stings, ice cream, and the most fun my family shared every other summer weekend. I had never felt closer to my family than on those summer days. Whenever a mountainous wave came my way, I would close my eyes and panic to swim away. However, I never truly had to worry. I would always open my eyes to find myself held up above the wave as my brothers or father had lifted me, taking the wave’s blow for me.

The summer of the war, however, marked the change for everything. My parents no longer looked forward to the beach; in fact, I was the only excited one. However, even my enthusiasm faded
when we got there. The beach was completely deserted. The sand was cracked and dry, the sky was
gloomy, and the water was calm. It was as if nature itself pitied the war. I did not recognize that beach.
There was nothing familiar about it, yet I took it upon myself to cherish every moment I spent there that
day. This feeling of finality in the air made me observe the beach as if I could never see it again. In fact, I
came to observe everything in my city the same way that summer.

Days afterward, family friends came over. They remained for the next day and the next day and
the many days after that. In fact, they most likely spent a good majority of the month at our home.

One morning, I wandered in search of my mother when I walked into our living room. The adults
were circled around the television, intently watching the news updates. The screen was focused on a
missile site outside the borders of the country. The reporter was talking too fast for me to understand. I
moved in closer to read the Arabic script flashing across the screen. There was a list of cities considered
“under threat of war.” Our city was not included, but our guests’ city was. My mom later described our
guests to me as “refugees,” people who seek safety in a foreign place to avoid danger.

After that, I began noticing the huge population that suddenly overran my city. Empty
apartments around my neighborhood had almost a hundred people living in areas designated to hold
barely a quarter of them. I observed people offering strangers on the street a bed to sleep in.
Storeowners were giving away their products for free to those in need. Toys were given out to children
as means of emotional distraction. Refugees came in masses and were able to find citizens who would
give up their own food and shelter to give them a home. Everyone was poor at the time, but everyone
managed to find something to give away.

One morning in particular emphasized the generosity I saw during that summer. My family and I
were enjoying the day with our guests when sirens rang. None of the adults knew if the sirens were
based on suspicion or a true threat. Regardless, we all went down to the basement in our building. On
the way, my father and brothers went to all of our neighbors in the building and advised them to come
down to the basement. We stayed in that basement for hours. There were perhaps 12 apartments in
our building, with one or two families living in each. All of the adults were praying when we heard the
first explosion go off not too far away from our location. Children started crying. I simply sat there and
listened, completely immersed in my own thoughts.

Even with the sirens blaring on and explosions sounding in the distance, a couple of adults
decided to go back to their apartments to bring food and water for all of the families. Suddenly, other
adults went up to bring toys for the children. Others followed suit and went up to bring food, blankets,
and pillows. The next thing I knew, the adults returned, and a feast commenced. People were talking
and laughing over the shriek of the sirens. Children were playing and laughing, completely disregarding
the explosions they sobbed over minutes before. This beacon of life in a city overrun by the threat of
death continues to fascinate me. Even as bombs shook the very core of that building, people decided
they wanted to live, not just survive.

After the sirens subsided, everyone packed up their belongings and went home. In my
apartment, the adults rushed to the television for news updates. Although the attacks were much closer
to our home than usual, the damage was not too terrible; many of the bombs detonated in unpopulated
areas. Another update chimed in; the war was scheduled to end with a cease-fire in about a week.

Our guests decided it was time for them to go back home, for the news update cleared their city
from the threatened cities list. After many words of gratitude from the guests, they departed that night.
Later on, my family would hear news from the guests that their home had been bombed during the war,
barely a day after they had fled their city.

With a cease-fire date underway, I thought that things could go back to the way they were
before that summer. However, my parents had other plans. For the past twelve years, my parents had
been waiting on the papers they submitted for my entire family to gain immigration visas for the United
States. The war had paused the process. However, after the cease-fire announcement, the process
continued and was finalized. We were going to the U.S.

After that, we had dinner at my grandparents’ family house for the last time, enjoying that family atmosphere. My parents told everyone about the news, and I remember feeling as lost as everyone else looked. I did not know how to react to leaving the family that I grew up surrounded by, so I made light of the goodbye hugs my family exchanged at the front door. I believed my mother with all of my heart: we would be back soon. I tried to reassure my cousins of that, hugging and hanging onto them all the while. That scene haunted me afterwards, as all their tears began to reunite in my memory and all the sentiments left unsaid came to mind.

On the night before the cease-fire, my family was driving home, and I looked out the window at the wreckage that had become of my city. Gas stations had been bombed. Bridges had been bombed. Ship harbors had been bombed. The major airport had been bombed. Every possible means of escaping had been bombed. Countless houses had been bombed, and I could not comprehend why those bombings were necessary. With almost one million Lebanese citizens displaced from their homes and a majority of the fatalities consisting of innocent civilians, the war had dazed my country.

The cease-fire was set to take place on August 14 at exactly 8:00 AM, a little over a month after the start of the conflict. The two sides ruthlessly kept the war going until the early hours of that morning. During those early hours is when I believe my late-night memory of the bombings had taken place:

“… As the bomber planes begin taking over the sky, my mother grabs me by my hand and pulls me out into the corridor, as close to safety as we can get in our apartment. I try to picture that victorious video game hero in my mind again. As car alarms begin going off and closed doors in the corridor fly open from impact, that image engraves itself into my memory.”

The forces in the city that summer had stripped away everything familiar from me. They took away a culture and a family. They denied me a true connection with my roots. They destroyed my city and they destroyed innocent lives. They were the monsters. However, those monsters brought out the generosity of a wounded human, the kindness exhibited by those that shunned their own suffering to save a stranger. They taught me that, regardless of the world outside my four walls, I hold the decision to either live or merely survive while waiting for death. Those monsters taught me to be my own hero, to save my own world. War causes unimaginable destruction in its wake, yet it managed to build my identity as a human as much as it destroyed my world. War taught that me that I could not allow the monsters of my past to terrorize my future. Whatever direction my life took, those monsters must strengthen me, not burden me. As the hero in the video games, the only road I would take is the one that leads to my success. And if America happened to be on that road of mine, I would make the best of it.

Interestingly enough, I decided I would not die that night.
Miraculously enough, I live to tell the story.
He always looked at her arms. On her biceps the filaments of dark hair were speckled with white dry pinpricks. Why won’t they ever go away, she complained. He watched her slather lotion in the dim grayness of her room, the smell of magnolias clinging to his clothes long after he had picked them off the ground and slid them soundlessly on, wafting behind him as he wandered down the street in the dark and crept back into his room to the applause of crickets. In the summer there were mosquito bites for her to worry at, for her straight strong fingers to trace scratchy ellipses around, afraid to rupture the resentful scab in its areolas.

He always looked at her arms; they were the last to go, long after her eyes had drained and he was even afraid to brush her earlobes for fear that they would crumble. One day the wind ran too fast and too recklessly and knocked her down, arms and all, and when he sat by her and waited he counted the limp dark hairs, one by one, outlined against the white death of the sheets.

He always looked at her arms because the intravenous tube nestled in the crook of her elbow. Just a piece of plastic that he could break in a heartbeat—but it kept her with him, something he was never strong enough to do.
It is early fall now, your favorite time of year. The trees are still green and leafy, vibrant under the crisp autumn sun, but there is briskness to the air; the world is sucking on a peppermint. Normally on these days you run as fast as you can down the gritty sidewalks under the perfect blue sky, because you can. Now, the cold bites through your clothing and your delicate skin, into your fading limbs, where it settles in the marrow of your bones. Your friends are still out in shorts, but you wear layers, thermal tights under thick sweatpants, long sleeve shirts under cozy hoodies, yet the cold nips; your face is defenseless, and when you have to be outside you tuck your chin into the large circle of protection that is your sweatshirt’s neckline.

Aren’t you hot in that? they ask—not only your friends, but people you walk by in the quad, audacious freshmen and solicitous teachers with whom you have never had a class.

I’m always hot, you joke, jamming your fists deeper into your kangaroo pocket.

You are still incredibly thick: around the waist, around the thighs, around the upper arms. You can still pinch the fat encircling your torso into a disgusting roll, squeeze it upwards until the tissue bulges grotesquely.

Hi, you make the roll say, I don’t want to be here.

And I don’t want you to be here either, you say back to it, I’m glad we’re in agreement.

Hatred is best when it is mutual, and your body reciprocates cooperatively. Soon you feel fluttering in your chest, see long strands of hair everywhere, watch the bags under your eyes balloon until they are almost more prominent than the flat, lusterless irises above them. You are always weak, always tired.

You have the energy of my little finger, your cello teacher informs you, holding up her pinky.

You have an audition in two weeks, and you have touched your instrument four times in the past three. You can see it in her eyes: she is on the verge of giving up, even though you are her star pupil.

You need to practice, she tells you, which is how you know you’re screwed, because any serious musician who needs to be told by their teacher to practice is screwed.

Your dad has given up early; he merely watches you eat with a simmering rage in his sagging black eyes. Every once in a while he explodes, but the futility of this hits him soon enough. You both know that he does not have the guts to have you hospitalized, stuck with IVs and injected with 5000 calories a day.

It’s your choice, he says to you out of the blue. It is 12 AM, and you have just finished your homework on the computer in his room, the only one with an internet connection. Your books are in your arms, and you are making your quiet way back to your bed, which you will slump into and never want to get out of.

You simply nod. It is all you have the energy to do, an indication of how much you care about what he has to say on the topic.

Breakfast is half a slice of bread and a glass of water.
In Spanish she asks me, “Que hiciste esta fin de semana?” What did you do this weekend? I shake my head wearily at the ceiling because everything in this pallid classroom, even that lifeless wall of flaking plaster, knows that I cannot speak coherently in English, let alone in Spanish. But she holds me and only me in her determined gaze. She cocks her square head over to her shoulder and purses her lips up in a plump V and somehow expects my fat tongue to swat back a response in fluent Spanish. She’s a bony brunette, 5’3”, and oddly pretty. She’s got dark blue discus of eyes and a wiry nose that sharpens off at the end with snark. Her skin is an overseas shade of tan, although she persistently claims to be completely, 100% American. As though there is such a thing.

I wonder how she found her way from a high school all the way through college and back to a high school. I wonder if she fell in love with Spanish the way I imagine anyone falls in love with a language—drunk to the raw core of bone with impracticality, on 201 prescription medications for a volatile case of insanity, ultimately, bound and kissed and dragged away by a notion so violently seductive as dreams.

I finally decide to answer when a jumbled stream of words spits out of my mouth, springing across the turbulent classroom and its criticizing inhabitants. Smug smirks are hastily bitten down by bleached white teeth that have been trained to look kind and think mean. They are swapped for faux glances of pity that barely conceal the teenage conceit straining to rush up from under sore pink gums and cackle victoriously in the open air.

What I meant for them to hear flutters aimlessly like a handicapped butterfly, trapped at the bottom of my throat. Maybe if my watery blood had dared to take the crimson hue of courage, the papery wings of that butterfly would have risen up and flown. I imagine beautiful words spinning off my tongue and diving lithely into the great lake of classroom beyond my shriveling lips. Beautiful words with their R’s rolled into the seductive purrs of exotic felines, lingering on their N’s with the tender caress of vague lovers.

Instead, a shrill screech of laughter stabs the unsuspecting air. A series of bullet-quick snickers are shot from nostrils loaded with condescension. The students are beady-eyed birds pecking voraciously at a crumb on the ground, and their excited titters grow louder and bolder until they shriek one raucous caw together in tribal union. Even the tight-lipped teacher lets her scrawny fingers drum against her hip in perfect tempo with the viciously squawking fowl closing in around me.

I am the worm, with no other purpose than to be snatched up in one of these battling yellow beaks and greedily swallowed whole. I must crawl like a groveling coward across the carpet just to avoid that warm gulp down to intestinal walls dripping with beige mucus. Clenched claws will thunder jealously after my glistening trail of slime, hungrily tearing up the carpet threads in my wake, the lust of the hunt rapidly thawing the ice in their veins. I will have no choice but to inch on, willing the shallow grooves of my body to somehow ignore the thumping vibrations of the barbaric chase behind me. Only once I have slipped underneath the door and out of the room will I finally be able to slump against the wall and dip into respite. Only when the prey hears its predators beating powerlessly against the stern wooden barrier that protects it from the damp caves of their mouths can it finally unfold its lungs and breathe.

Yet, I have not moved. The students tap their tennis shoes on metal desk rims near their ankles and chuckle contemptuously at the stale waft of classroom rushing out the open window to play with kinder breezes in the sky. Their expectant sidelong glances at my steadying heart turn into crumpled
countenances of confusion. They toss this unfamiliar situation amongst themselves, each mind examining it with crunched eyebrows and a cautious touch of hand. Soon they chortle at the little toy that once confounded them and sneeringly pitch it at the wall to splat against the surface and slide down to settle forever in the spider-webbed margin of the room.

They motion with sharpened fingernails to the carcass now huddled in the corner, their onyx eyes demanding my half-singed heart rip open and gush brooks of blood. They want my shoulders to stoop over with the blow of a broken heart, my stomach to churn with sour scarlet vomit, my body to plummet to the floor and convulse in a cloud of inky smoke.

Instead, my heart fires a jolt through the arteries of ashen flesh and into lanky limbs that sway idly from my uneven shoulders. They are instantly struck with life, rising no longer as the shyly unshaven arms of a teenager but as the majestically arched wings of a hawk brushed with every shade of gold.

Shards of light break off from my rippling wings and crash into splinters on the ground. These jagged glints sail across the room, ramming themselves into the black pupils of the gaping birds who watch, blinding them with brilliance. I stand in the middle, my gleaming talons of ivory firmly hooked into the carpet, my ears savoring the whistle of the wind as it consumes all sound in the room. A head bobs up and down in the periphery of the whites of my eyes. I swing around to see another hawk, the gold of her wings greyed over with decades of soaring in fusty winter cold. She is nodding, her diamond eyes twisted into gratified grins of triumph, and somehow, I recognize those eyes. The navy discs of my stubborn Spanish teacher.
The ocean’s warm breath
Welcomes me like an old friend
Its shadowy depths
Grab me like a lost relative
As I dive in
The cool waves eat me up
And swallow me whole
As I break the surface
The seagulls call to me
Welcoming me home

These Girls

White bikinis
And chipped nail polish
Dark mascara
Set above crystal eyes
These girls
Have it down to a science

White Shoreline

We spent the day searching for seashells
As the smooth waves rolled over
Our sun-baked feet
Even as a blue moon
Rose over cresting waves
I could still taste the sea salt
On the tips of my wispy blond curls

Rain herself

When I open my mouth
On an August afternoon
Raindrops seem to collect
They lick my forehead
And collect beneath my toes
My favorite scent comes off
The pavement in waves
The smell of rain herself
Four Legs in the Morning
Luke Arnce
Carl Junction High School
Poetry
Anne Nicolas

Child’s Guardian

My friend and I occupy the same space
Our smiles are shared parentheses
But we don’t talk of the shades of our kidneys
Or the cries the branches make
When the aspens fall
Swiveling from their cotton beds
We’re of the same axis
Not plane
And in the bleaching sunlight
I’m discovered Appalachian
While he and the airmen hold their ears to the clouds
And wilt
The spiderwebs between our worlds grow taught
We pluck the chords in tandem
The water holds me like a hand
And he bathes himself in bent beams of radiance
He leaves me reaching ever upward
Like a babe towards its mother’s thumb

An Invisible Life

They climb the corporate rungs but discover them elliptical
And are trampled as curios underfoot
Ashes in the sand
Clay men with hidden flames in their lungs
Coyly abbreviate their lives with
Invisible ink on leather and glass
They aspire and sacrifice
But remain asymptotes
Second class citizens in the city they built
And if one day the hand of God migrates
Expect the state to wither
Invertebrate
As the builders diffuse like the tear-soaked mascara of an abandoned bride

The Journey

You cannot ascertain what is serpentine or silk
With only acetone and milk of magnesia
We hold on to our anguish
Like cold applesauce in splayed fingers
But shy away when the kitchen knife falls
Psychic and actuary alike
Grasp at atomized straws from behind
The same rosy glass

It seems to me that seeds are mostly negative
Worry  Doubt  Despair
But I think we grow when we’re sewn
Flesh sealed back with only a silvery line of memory to show
It’s fun to grope for the prize at the bottom of the crackerjack box
Because of the sticky syrup
Not the plastic
And with age we soar
Glistening chandeliers thrown arabesque
Into the crisp atmosphere
While the amber umber and earthy tones of the soil
Cobwebbed eyes
Tissue-paper skin
And ghosts of bygone chessboards
Home
Friendship Coaster
Courtney Bales
Platte City Middle School
Personal Essay/Memoir
Kelly Miller

Friendship: something rarely obtained yet easily broken.

“I’m moving in the summer,” Charla had said to me near the end of the school year.
“What? You can’t! What am I gonna do without you? You’re family to me; you’re my sister,” I
tried to plead with her, but it was no use.
“I won’t be too far, I think.”
“It’s far enough! I won’t be able to focus in school without you.”
“Sure you can. You can call me whenever you want, even invite me over sometimes.”
I knew what would happen, but there was nothing I could do to prevent the move. I called her
every 2 weeks from then on. Eventually, she was never there whenever I called. Our friendship was
more distant than I had thought. I missed her though, like I had lost a limb in a war. I was right: I wasn’t
able to focus.

Seventh grade started off the pretty good. Three of my friends had moved away the year before.
I only had one true friend left, but even then she hung with another crowd. A handful of students moved
in this year, more than the year before.

The year dragged on, my grades in a constant downfall. Nostalgia had taken over, making it
harder and harder to focus, alongside family problems. There was always a deep pit of sorrow inside of
me that I couldn’t shake away. I didn’t think I could go on with the feeling and the spiky chain of grades
pulling me down. I didn’t want to carry on going to school, and my mom understood. She let me stay
home for a week, until we received a letter from the school, stating my mom would be charged with a
fine or even hard time if I didn’t return to school. I couldn’t do that to my mom.

Little did I know my mom was still pursuing help for me. Apparently in the fourth grade I had
been evaluated by my teachers because I was a slower learner than the rest of my peers. They had
suggested I had A.D.D (Attention Deficit Disorder), but my mom and dad never really did anything,
waiting to see if I would grow out of it. I never did. Now my mom tried to do something.

She scheduled an appointment at the clinic, so they could decide what to do. We were sitting in
the waiting room for about 20 minutes before anyone realized we were still here. When they finally
called my name and ushered us in, we had yet another long wait. This wait was even more aggravating
than the first, because not only were we waiting again, but it was for the nurse who doesn’t do
anything. After answering all the questions and explaining the situation, the nurse left, leaving us to
another wait. When the doctor finally showed up, we had to repeat what we had told to the nurse
because apparently the nurse didn’t go over anything. My mom was starting to get fed up with the long
waiting and the repeating, just as I was. The doctor asked different questions after we mentioned it
could be ADD. When the doctor asked, “Who’s your best friend?” I thought to myself, Is this question
necessary? Answering “Charla” and stating she had moved away might’ve swayed them in the wrong
direction. The doctor left the room along with the nurse, leaving us waiting for the fourth time today.
When the doctor came back, he suggested I had a deep depression. Although that might cause me to be
off focus, I certainly didn’t think this was the case. My mom had asked the doctor if it was ADD medicine
that he was prescribing, which he confirmed, but he lied: it was depression medicine.

Being newly prescribed with this medication, I found myself more tired than usual. I also felt
empty inside, emotionless, like no matter what you could say I’d stay in that same gloomy state of
fatigue. The medication wasn’t helping my focus but instead made me fall asleep in class. Let’s just say
my mother had something to say about that.
Continuing the search for help, my mom found Innocent Anya. Yes, his name is Innocent Anya. Anya was honest, unlike the previous prescriber. He asked many questions, all of which were relevant to find out what type of ADD I had. After several appointments, I was prescribed with the right ADD medicine. Slowly, my focus and grades began to rise.

While this big part of my life took place, a new chapter opened. With all the ADD drama going on, I bypassed the new student in some of my classes: Riley Schmidt. She now plays a big part in my life. She caught my attention in my 8th hour social studies class, in a group project, some stupid scene drawing. Her artistic abilities were better than half our class combined. I started to get to know her, later on finding out we share a lot in common. Riley was in a swim team, had artistic abilities, was an amazing writer, had a great sense of humor, and overall is a great friend. As our friendship grew, so did my grades.

Later on, I met more new people, such as Daesjah. Little did I know she didn’t want to make friends, for a very specific reason. Becoming friends with Daesjah took some time. She was a hard cookie to crack, but I was determined. Finally, halfway through the year, Daesjah finally caved in completely. Riley, Daesjah, and I all sat at the same lunch table every day. We started to give each other super-villain nicknames, just for fun. Riley was Negativity Girl, Daesjah was Poison Ivy, and I was Distraction. Ironically, the names fit most of our personalities. Riley being sarcastic, Daesjah having the bitter-sweet innocence, and I, either getting distracted or distracting those around me.

It was sometime in February when Daesjah announced she’d be moving away. Her father was in the military and had been relocated closer to the base. Daesjah’s reason for not wanting to make friends was because she knew she’d be moving away again. In this brief moment, I thought back to Charla. I would not let sorrow and depression take over me again, like it had with Charla. I would meet more people, who would move away or become distant. When life gets me down, I now make sure I have a friend to turn that frown upside down.
Chasing after Siku, the snow crunched beneath my feet. “Come on, we have to beat the snowfall!” she yelled back. Doing my best to keep pace, I jumped over fallen trees, slid across snowed over boulders, and ducked under branches. Siku had always been fast, while I was best at hiding. Siku stopped abruptly, making me crash into her.

“Watch it, you bee-brain,” Siku laughed.

“Why'd you stop?” I asked, panting.

“Well if you didn’t notice back there, we crossed the river. We made it.” Looking back now, I could see the outline of the iced over river; guess I didn’t notice when I was in a desperate flurry to catch up.

“Shila, help me make a suitable den.” Siku waved me over to a sturdy tree with low branches.

“Ehh, I can work with this.” Circling the tree, I found a split in the ring of branches. Lifting them out of the way, I propped a rock under the branches to keep them up. Crawling in the makeshift entrance, I got to work transforming the snow packed ground underneath the branches into a suitable den.

After setting up a fire and waiting for Siku to return from a perimeter check, I drifted off into a hazy slumber. Colors swam and danced before my eyes. Chasing after the tempting lights, I found myself flashing past the mountains I used to call home and leaping over the lush and green forest Siku once occupied. I realized my dream was taking me through the places I’ve been, until I halted at the snowed in jungle. Not able to move farther than the tree we currently stayed in, I tried to see the journey ahead of us. Flickers of light just beyond my reach told me to expect company. Sadly, I was only able to dreamwalk, whereas Siku could walk further than the path.

When the sunlight crept into my eyes, yanking me out of my dream, I rolled over and shook Siku awake. Her eyes shined a brilliant blue, letting me know she had been Spirit sprinting. Pulling myself to my feet, I threw some spiny branches into the dull fire. Ducking under the entrance and out into the blinding world, I stretched. Siku joined me shortly after, her eyes returning to blue-gray.

“So, I dreamwalked last night. There’s a camp not too far from us.” I yawned, rubbing my eyes.

“Yeah, you probably guessed what I did. If we travel for two days’ time, we can reach some lush plains.”

“But Siku, in two days is the Ghrian Athru (varying sun). I won’t be able to keep up with you in Nadurtha (the natural) form. I highly doubt we’ll make it past that camp without rubbing their fur the wrong way.”

“We have no choice. Unless you’d prefer frostbite over sunshine.” Siku’s words brought nothing but silence as she disappeared into the warm depths of our makeshift den.

Silently trudging through the snow, carrying a satchel filled to the brim with herbs and other necessities, I became one with the shadows. Sneaking about and hiding was my specialty. Siku, though, is a warrior at heart. For us both being Leath Daonna (Half human), our personality traits clash. Some would say I’m the brains and she’s the brawn, but I would disagree.

“Will you stop standing there thinking and get a move on,” Siku whispered harshly from within the shadows.

“S-sorry.” I quickly trudged on, careful not to alert the nearby camp.

I had made it to hilltop just past the camp when I heard Siku’s panicked whimper. I quickly spun around and trudged back to where she was standing.
“What’s wrong?”

“My foot is stuck! Help me dig out the snow.” Siku tried to keep her voice low. Working swiftly and silently, I began to claw Siku’s foot out of the icy trap. Siku shook her foot as I dug, making the snow release her from its icy claws. We had already lost valuable time, and we weren’t as far as we could’ve been. I could see the disappointment in Siku’s face, but that wasn’t going to stop me from running as fast I could.

“C’mon, Siku, the faster we move the faster we get there.” I turned towards the hilltop once more, letting Siku lead the way.

After hours of running, she signaled to stop. I could see something caught her attention. Scanning the area around us, I saw nothing.

“Shh.” She signaled me to walk forward, but I knew she wasn’t following. Because I moved swifter than Siku, we had decided in moments like this I would be bait for anyone who poses a threat. She would fall back and stay on the sidelines, always in range to swoop in and take the battlefield.

Crossing my arms over my chest, I began to walk forward. I set my sight on the tree just to the left of me and slowly turned my direction that way. Rustling from the opposite tree quickly turned into battle cries. Taking a leap of faith, I sprang for the tree. Not hesitating to look back, I began to scale the tree.

Screeches from below told me Siku took action. Now at the top of the tree, I peered down at the snowy battlefield. Several Póir Leath (Half Breeds) clawed at the base of the tree. Siku slowly made her way to me, hiding behind several trees for cover. Once she stalked over, the Póir Leath quickly took a break. Quietly descending the snowy branches, I joined Siku on the ground.

After setting up another makeshift den, I settled in next to the fire. Although we covered more land in half the time, we never made up the time we had lost. It was less than 24 hours until the Ghrian Athru, and we hadn’t made it to the plains. I could tell Siku was completely exhausted and filled with disappointment. For the next three days, we were forced to make do with what we had as a home.

Lights flashed before me, yet again performing their mesmerizing dance. Chasing after the colors like a kitten batting at yarn, I stumbled over the mountains, rolled through the plush forest, darted through the rocky hills, and bulldozed past the snowy jungle. I halted at the edge of the plains, the captivating colors faded into the flowers that lined the swaying grass. Squinting to see all the beautiful colors, I was pulled out of my dream by a panicked cry. Stumbling awake, I blinked away the blurriness. Scanning the den for Siku, I rushed outside. Yet again looking around frantically, the blinding snow taunted me.

“Siku?” I called for her. A weak wolf howl was my only response. The Ghrian Athru had taken place, it was only a matter of time before it got me too. Stumbling back into the den, a pain in my side threw me off balance. Another wolf howl sounded, stronger this time. Another sharp pain in my side seethed through my body. I cried out in pain, locked in place. My nails sharpened to claws, my teeth into fangs. My anatomy began melding into that of a feline.

Hours passed until the aching pain faded away. I rose up on all fours, stretching my sore body. Balancing myself to my new structure, I slowly made my way outside. The moment light hit my eyes, I reared back. I came close to crashing into Siku whose wolf form was always magnificent. I always envied how noble she appeared. I felt petite and fragile next to her. I blinked, adjusting my eyesight. Siku flicked her tail in the direction of the plains. Slowly placing the soft pads of my paws onto the snow, I headed in that direction. Siku already adjusted to this environment. I would never be able to keep up with her, even at walking pace.

We walked together until we reached the border of the snowy jungle and the lush plains. Something about the plains draws your attention, lures you in. As much as I wanted to leap into the grass and roll down the plush hills, I couldn’t. I had an eerie feeling deep in my stomach, like a silent voice whispering “no.” Something didn’t feel right. I wish I could tell Siku how I felt, but the Ghrian Athru
limits your abilities when it puts you in Nadurtha form. As I extended my paw towards Siku, she sprung across the border. No! Siku! I took a step closer, right at the edge. What had she done? I watched in horror as Siku disappeared into the grass, never surfacing.

After contemplating what I should do, I finally came to a solution. I closed my eyes and summoned the ancient colors before me. The colors swam and danced in their welcoming routine. *This is no time for parades; Siku’s in danger.* The colors immediately halted their show and dissolved into an image. Peering at the strange picture, I soon realized it was a map of the previous locations I’ve travelled in the past. Frantically looking about the map, I looked towards the lush forest I had first met Siku in. *This was surely going to work, wasn’t it? I mean, just go back to where I met her, restart the journey, and do it right. Yeah. That’ll work.*

Blinding light surged into my eyes, causing me to shudder and quickly shut my eyes. When I opened them again, my surroundings had changed. I stretched, dreamwalking always made me sore afterwards. Now, to find Siku.

*Siku’s Point of View*

I couldn’t let her find me, even though I knew she would. I had seen myself die time and time again. *But why? Why do I jump in every time?* I looked down at the overgrown grass. *Oh yeah. The poisonous plain lures in Spirit Sprinters.* The toxin from that treacherous weed keeps eroding the lands I love so much. I kept running because I knew Shila couldn’t keep up. Even though she dreamwalked, the Ghrian Athru still took effect. It was only a matter of time before I had nowhere else to run.

Watching from the shadows, I saw Shila standing there.

“Siku, I know you’re there! I’m here to tell you about a journey,” Shila called out. I didn’t respond but turned the other direction. She always thinks I forget about what happens, but I am a Spirit Sprinter. I see the future and all the outcomes. There is no saving me. The plains will erode the lands further until it reaches me, the last Spirit Sprinter.

“Siku! There you are!” I spun around at Shila’s voice so close.

“You! Why are you trying to save me! I can’t be saved!” I tried to plead with her.

“Why do you keep jumping in then?”

“There is no other choice. The plain is deadly, eroding everything until it become its own toxin.”

I sighed, turning. “Let’s get this over with for once. But this time, don’t dreamwalk. Jump in with me.”

“But Siku!”

“No.” I began walking. To accept death willingly is to live a good life. And knowing Shila, I’d say I lived a good life. And so I walked with her, into the inevitable.
You may know me as Twitter. Full of-

Hey, Twitter! What’s Happening, Girl?

Don’t even get me started, FB.

That bad, huh? Tell me about it. There were these girls on Facebook today, and they were all like, “Jenna is totally betraying Brad because she went out with Jake,” and I’m all like, “no one cares.” And then Jenna saw the comment and went on and on about how-

Okay, FB, no more than 140 characters please, and anyways we were talking about me. I was just about to talk to these nice people about my does and don’ts when using me.

Okay right. Go ahead then.

You may know me as Twitter. Full of celebrities, friends, and even a few weirdos. I help you connect with people across the world, but did you ever stop to think about how I feel about this?

I know, right. Like I help people connect with each other after a really long time, and they may even become soul mates—if they don’t fake it, of course. Oh! That’s another thing all this catfishing what’s up with that?

Ahem! Like I was saying. I’m being neglected and abused. I’m here to let you know that I’m tired of your stupid hashtags. Everything was perfectly fine at first. A few tweets here and there, mostly dedications and shoutouts, but now I can’t go two seconds without my notifications going off.

Ba-Ding!

Here’s another one: gabby loves harry: @Harry_Styles follow me please because i love you alot <3. Really, these are the worst, those desperate teenage girls bothering the objects of their obsessions. Get over it. If I’m getting agitated every time @1dsexgods decides to tweet about how much she loves Louis Tomlinson’s bum, I know he is too. This is just one of the many things I hate about people and how they use me.

Oh my goodness! I love Louis! You should have saw this picture that someone posted of him wearing this striped-

The other thing I absolutely hate is the #. Who came up with using that anyway? #thatgurltho #mentionatruefriend #dopthatfuntunthunhun I mean seriously what is a “thun thun thun”? And “twerk”? What does that mean and why is Miley Cyrus doing it on the VMA’s. I’m tired of # TBH [to be honest]. That’s another thing: all the abbreviations and slang. Teens of today might as well have their own language, because I can barely keep up.

Ba-Ding! Tayla B. Cladwell: @bestoftoday1 pretty pretty please if you ever ever feel like you are nothing you are nothing and you suck #InspirationalWomen And these people I mean come on. Get over yourselves. You’re not the queen of Twitter, not all of the tweets are gold, and definitely not this. The mean girls of twitter should be blocked. People want to be brave behind the screen and talk all bold but never have the guts to say it in person. The people who have the audacity to insult celebrities. Seriously? At least those people have jobs and are making money and not sitting on the computer, waiting desperately waiting for Justin Bieber to Tweet so they can Tweet back something totally rude and uncalled for.

Ooh. Someone just updated a status. Chillin’ with my homies! ;) Aww, Twitter, look at the cute little bro-mance!

Right. Relevant. Okay back to me. Twitter-hate sucks, and it’s worse that is has to come through me. I have to see every stupid and hateful and unnecessary comment. You may be able to delete them from everybody else, but I always remember. Don’t even get me started on the Bathroom Pic. Selfies.
Oh my gosh! I have the same problem here-FB, get it together!
Sorry. :(

As I was saying, do we really need to see if your towels match the shower curtain or if you forgot to put the seat down? Ladies, please, if you’re going to take aerial pictures make sure your breasts are inside of your shirt. I don’t want to get an update of pictures and get flashed every five seconds.

Ba-Ding! Sexology: @dffbefaebfaehflefehe. Fbiebebieefbew. Fvewr. Bfejrbfew, Bfjfehbf. Hbvefer. Giewrge. You didn’t really expect me to tell what they said did you? Let’s just say they are another add-on to my long list of pet peeves. The stupid random twitter pages that are used to be vulgar and ridiculous. Or the fact that users will go follow others users whom they don’t know to get a follow back then unfollow them. That is very childish to me. What is that some kind of tag or hide ‘n’ seek game? Because obviously I’m not in on it, nor do I get it. I swear this list gets longer and longer every time I write it.

Ewww. Sex. xD

One of the worst things I can think of is the user names some people choose. What is wrong with some people? Poppin Mollies, Bieber’s Yacht, Still waiting for Weezy, Jetlaggedface. What happened to the good name you were born with. Even if you just give yourself something clever like if your last name happened to be Sherlock why not go with No Dip Sherlock. If your name is Cydney perhaps go with the sly Cydney Not Australia. I just don’t understand how it all went downhill. You don’t need to document your every experience of life on me. News Flash! I don’t care. Do you ever wonder why, when you try to tweet, they sometimes don’t go through? It has nothing to do with your Internet connection; it’s a sign that your tweet just sucks.

What are Mollies? Should I know what that means?

Okay, FB, I’m almost done here, so can you sit quietly while I wrap things up here? Please?
Oh yeah. Right. Sure, no problem. It’s like I’m not even here.

I just want to live in cyberspace without pre-teens fangirling or slandering good people. I want to go look at how everybody is using me for non-idiotic purposes such as random facts about made up sex lives that never exist.

MMMMMHhhhhhh. La la la la...

Or maybe those pretend depressed people who post about how much they hate their lives so in turn they get fake support and followers who then in return only want people to follow them to make their pathetic social lives seem not that pathetic. What is twitter for, really? Is not about who I am or what I’m for; it’s what you choose to do on me. Whatever it is, make sure it’s not some lame joke you read on the back of a Laffy Taffy, or anything about cats.

Hey! I love cats!

xoxo,
@tired_of_# and Facebook too!
Space in the Universe  
Olivia Callow  
Central High School  
Poetry  
Kyla Ward

My grandma said the last time she felt beautiful was when photos were in black and white  
That day we spoke and danced monocromatic tones  
New age ragtime queens  
swinging to new heights on backyard porch swings

Sometimes Earth forgets  
absolute time accelerates around the speed of core values  
Over callow erosions

Shout  
lean your ear closer than gravity allows  
open your eyes  
wide, wide, wider  
unafraid of the sun  
Put down your microscope  
Gravitate toward a telescope  
Grounded

Because God gave us bigger things to look up to like Jupiter  
and people who send you Christmas cards on August fifth because love isn't seasonal  
Agnostic assumptions can't feed on atheist absolutes

She told me never trust a man who wears suspenders with his belt and trying to be fancy at a truck stop will get you nowhere

She still believes Pluto made something of himself every time he identifies with colossal constellations  
So we celebrate Pluto's Day with periwinkle pastries that aren't too big and tea too green to be envious

She used to sip coffee alone  
now we drink that green tea together  
With honey because eternal ebony wrap around relationships on bumblebee backs prove it lasts forever

I add extra honey  
with sticky fingers stretching facts, truths, and news articles that no one needs like elastic bones  
I reach for her hand
She holds mine
and she holds her own
I clasp prominent capillary pulse
Each year
closer to her hear beat

When I'm eighty-three don't ever snap me back
Photograph me without flash
Buffered memories are a thing of the past

I want all that natural light
Deliberately to map my prudence
Trailing
because if ever I see little girls crushing ant hills with their fingertips on elementary playgrounds
I'll show her my moth-eaten sweaters
Proving me whole.
Accidents of Birth
Orunima Chakraborti
Blue Valley North High School
Poetry
Michele Buche

Third day of Hanukkah,
I stand to the side.
Decorated kippahs,
around the menorah, family circled.
They sing
Lilting voices, soft Hebrew. My friend
Sarah, twelve years old, stands
between her mother and brother,
lighting each candle,
One, two, three, four.

My mind drifts this family
back seventy years.
Shaved heads, brittle hearts,
Sarah’s mother breaks off
bits of her bread, pushes shards into
my friend’s mouth.
In the snow globe
snowflakes puncture,
cruel wind rips cries from millions’ chests,
thrusts them into another.
Their eyes focused
on a crooked cross,
counting on and on and on.
Each skeleton there standing
One, two, three, four.

Today I am fifteen,
walking through India’s city
of Amritsar, with its golden temple.
Small square of Jallianwallah Bagh,
a place with no space for humanity.
My grandmother’s voice, her stories
wash over me.
I walk, trace the bullet holes in the walls,
so many, I feel a deep shame
One, two, three, four.

That April day,
ninety years ago,
in Jallianwallah Bagh.
People pressed to all walls,  
freedom talk, peaceful talk,  
soar through the garden,  
hope rising as India will rise.  
Children smile as parents straighten,  
listening to the brave.  
Then the first shot, first bullet, a bomb,  
saris fly, babies underfoot, brown limbs flee  
away from the white men,  
Queen’s men,  
that are at every turn, every way out.  
A red and yellow spot, hands reaching  
through the rusty gate. I see her, my mother.  
Cheeks I kissed goodbye this morning.  
excited to witness revolution.  
I’m running, spinning, bodies falling  
one by one, a choreography  
From the well behind me,  
it won’t stop, the splashes desperate  
One, two, three, four.

I have been born too late,  
loved ones born too early  
to know,  
to really know it all.  
But there is some left, that hatred,  
Intolerance.  
My school mocked for having  
too many Jewish students.  
Focused students, children who are  
this country’s future like any other.  
Hands reaching up and pulling down  
A brown woman crowned,  
representing her country  
in accomplishment, in beauty  
because she might terrorize  
with her foreign skin.  
Race, Religion, Gender, Class,  
Sexual Orientation, Age, Disability.  
One after another  
Pull us apart.  
But there is one bond,  
holding us together.  
One link through all of us –  
We are human.
We may have been the bad guys, but we’re not all that bad. Nobody ever thinks about things from the point of view of the other team. The Force is a team of villains, but we’re nothing like a team of stereotypical bad guys: people who only want vengeance against the team of good people. We actually care. The Force is made up of a team of freaks. Seriously. There’s me, Lenore Donovan or Blink. My power is invisibility. Levina Bolt, AKA Livewire. She’s literally electric. Grace Van Alden who is also known as Illusion. She is a telekinetic teleporter. Now, on to the males on the Force: Ryan Page, better known as Sprint, kinda self-explanatory (he’s a fast runner). Jake Hazelwonder stars as Prowler, the man who can turn into a panther! And last, but refuses to be least: Adam Lane co-stars as Trickster. We use Trickster to our advantage since he’s a shape-shifter. It helps.

“If we don’t practice, we’ll just get worse.” Jake announced to a small crowd of lazy villains called The Force.

“What is the point?” Grace asked, sinking lower into the couch.

“We’re gonna get worse anyway!” Ryan groaned.

“That was disrespectful…” Jake huffed under his breath.

“Everyone was thinking it; I just said it,” Ryan shrugged.

Jake did have a point. We needed to train, otherwise we’d lose. We were meant to lose anyway... I mean, we are the bad guys. How many times have you seen a movie where the bad guys actually win? Exactly.

“Jake, I’ll go with you,” I stood.

“Alright, we’ll just leave the blobs on the couch to sulk.” Jake turned and walked towards the training room. I followed.

He propped open the door. The room was filled with obstacle courses, knives, bows, arrows, and even a room you could practice your ability in alone. Levina frequently used the room to try and raise the number of volts she could reach, without exploding, that is.

“Why do you think they’re acting like that?” Jake asked, turning to me.


“Given up on what? There’s nothing to give up on.”

“Jake, I honestly don’t know. Maybe they’ve just lost all hope of ever winning against The Elite.”

The Guardians of the Elite are our enemies, the good guys who get all the praise, basically the X-Men to our Magneto. Superman to our Lex Luthor. The Avengers to our Loki. Batman to our Joker. The list of comparisons is endless. The Guardians of the Elite are made up of equally bad (good) heroes.

Jake raised his eyebrow.

“Why would they give up? They can’t be that hard to take down.”

“We’ve been fighting them for, like, six years! It’s time to face the facts, Jake. We may never win.”

You could tell when Jake was getting angry. He shoulders would tense, and he usually would throw the nearest thing. It could be an object or a person...

He gripped the knife tightly and threw it at the targets placed carefully on each wall. The knife hit the target. The knife struck so hard, that the target fell off the wall.

“Nice shot,” I smirked.

He whipped around, eyes fuming and eyebrows arched. He was most definitely angry.

The training room door flung open. The rest of The Force stood there—all four of them.
“Is everything okay?” Levina asked, peering in. Her hands were clenched in fists; her way of showing she was trying to resist turning into a ball of electricity.

“We heard a clatter,” Ryan confirmed, searching the room.

“The target fell off the wall,” Grace said after studying the room. She raised her hand, and the target followed her telekinetic commands, set back up in seconds.

I glanced over, but Jake was still fuming mad.

Adam walked in and whispered in my ear, “Is he okay?”

“He’s having a little temper tantrum.”

“Does he need a bottle?” Adam laughed.

“Stop it!” I slapped his arm. “He’s gonna hear you!”


Levina slowly approached an incredibly angry Jake. She whispered something inaudible. Jake snapped and whipped around, snarling. Jake was trying to turn into Prowler the panther. He’s sort of like the feline version of the Hulk. You won’t like him when he’s angry. But instead of turning into a huge, green, rage monster, Jake turns into a fierce panther. His green eyes slowly turned amber.

Levina, being the human taser, held a ball of electricity in her hand and shocked Jake enough to the point where he crippled to his knees. Jake fell to the floor, moaning.

“What did you do?!” Ryan said, appearing next to Levina quickly.


Her smile slowly faded.

“Oh, my God. I shocked him! I’m a monster!” Levina panicked.

“So, you’re okay with shocking a person from the Guardians of the Elite, but when you shock your own friend, you’re instantly a monster. I can’t believe the indecisiveness.” Ryan scoffed.

“Ryan,” Grace scolded. “It is not your place to decide what emotion Levina feels. That is her decision.” Grace always spoke like the Dalai Lama or Buddha or someone.

“Thank you for informing me that I can’t control emotions, Gracie. I’m well aware.” Ryan snapped his head towards Grace.

“Please, Ryan. Do not call me Gracie. It is an immature nickname for a woman my age. And I would like you to remember that I could snap your neck with a swift turn of my hand,” Grace stated calmly.

“Ooh, she owned you.” Adam mused, chortling at his own joke.

Grace whipped her head and glared at Adam. If glares could kill, Adam surely would be dead.

“Adam, I would appreciate if you would not add such ridiculous input in a conversation that clearly involves only Ryan and me,” Grace stated.

Adam rolled his eyes while Grace watched, scheming. We’re all pretty sure Grace is going to murder someone someday.

“It’s always the quiet ones,” Jake mumbled under his breath. I nudged him.

“Don’t encourage it,” I mumbled back.

“I heard you, Lenore. My senses are most definitely intact,” Grace replied, swiftly.

Grace turned to face me, looked me up and down, turned back, and swiftly walked out of the training room.

“You know,” Ryan began. “I worry about her.”

“Don’t we all?” Adam sighed.

The next morning, I slumped so far down into the couch I thought I was going to become a part of it.

“Members of The Force, please gather in the living room,” Grace spoke.

I shot up. The rest of the team sulked their way over. Levina sat down next to me and rolled her eyes.
After everyone was settled, Grace straightened her figure and cleared her throat. “At eight thirty-four A.M precisely, we received a letter from The Guardians of the Elite. I am yet to open the letter, as I thought I would wait until the entire team could witness what it contains.” Grace spoke like the Renaissance was coming back or something. “Thou shan’t wait any longer, my fair lady Grace,” Adam mocked. Grace shot him another death glare and scoffed. Grace’s thin and nimble fingers sliced through the envelope and gingerly pulled out a piece of paper folded evenly multiple times. Grace cleared her throat once more and unfolded the paper.

“Members of The Force:
We would like to challenge you once more. Not that we have defeated you multiple times or anything. We would just like to see you try again. We know you can do better, and we know you know that you can do better. If you accept the offer we have extended to you, we as a team would like you to meet us in the middle of New York City next Saturday at precisely one o’clock P.M. Not a minute more, not a minute less.
Yours Truly,
The Guardians of the Elite.”

Grace sighed and folded the piece of paper back to its original form.

“Well?” I began. “Anybody want to add their opinion?”

“Let’s do it!” Jake shouted excitedly.

“Jake, that might not be the most wise.” Grace said.

“So?! This is a chance to finally defeat the Elite. We could finally be victorious!” Somewhere in between ‘elite’ and ‘victorious’ Jake had climbed onto the couch and posed as if he were a statue.

Thus, training began. Electrical pulsing throughout the room, knife throwing, human targets, a shape shifter, an invisible woman, a panther roaming the halls, and even a telekinetic female Buddha. To The Force, this whole training thing was kind of a big deal. Well, technically speaking: it was an extremely big deal. It was like getting ready to have multiple near death experiences over and over again. And then one more time. The Guardians of the Elite were making a big deal out of this as well. For example, they went on every local news show and saying how they were preparing to defeat us once more. Jake still had hope that we’d win at least one fight.

There was one time where we almost won. Then I got hit on the head with a piece of metal. That’s always fun.

Saturday arrived quickly. Patiently awaiting the arrival of the Elite, I let out a nervous sigh and rolled my shoulders. Levina cracked her knuckles and looked forward.

The Guardians of the Elite had arrived. But there was something different. Their numbers were off. The last we had seen of them, they had six members as well. But today, there were only two.

“Where’s the other four?” Levina asked nervously. Her eyes scanned the two that stood in front of us. It was a girl and a boy. I recognized them as Lilly, a girl who could fly and do absolutely nothing else. The only two talents the girl had were flying and endlessly complaining. She never shut up. She always makes you want to wring her neck. The boy, John, however, was silent. He always stood there awkwardly and tried to flirt with Grace. I couldn’t help but laugh when Grace would whip around and go all angry Buddha on him.

“That’s the problem… they kind of, like, died,” Lilly put her hand on her hip.

“They died?” Jake asked skeptically, raising his eyebrow.

John nodded.

“Why do I not believe that?” I questioned Lilly, yet turned to Jake.

“I don’t believe it either.” Jake said keeping his eyes on Lilly and John.

“Well, it’s true.” Lilly shrugged.
“They died in a plane crash. I got sick, and Lilly had to stay back and take care of me. We told them that we’d catch up with them. They crashed later that night,” John spoke up.

“Oh, it speaks!” Levina squeaked. Jake elbowed her in the ribs due to the fact that this actually was a serious matter.

“So, that’s it. You win,” Lilly said. “Congratulations.” She turned on her heel and walked away.

“That was easy.”

Proudly, we walked away, too. I smiled. We had finally won, and we didn’t even have to do anything. Maybe we really are just too good to defeat.
The wooden boards of the gym bleachers vibrated slightly under the feet of hundreds of basketball fans clapping and stomping along to “We Will Rock You” and “Another One Bites the Dust.” The fluorescent lights glared on the players and fans. The players, girls suited in white and purple, had beads of sweat dripping down their faces. Their bright white sneakers squeaked against the gym floor while they darted back and forth down the court.

The air in the gym was thick, and with every breath came the faint smell of hot dogs, Gatorade, and sweat. The red lights of the scoreboard read 36 to 36, with six minutes left in the third quarter. A shirtless high school senior, body painted in red and white, stood in front of the fan section, screaming popular cheers at the top of his lungs. With an even higher volume, the fan section responded.

“The winner of tonight’s game will advance to semifinals next week,” an announcer explained through the speakers, barely audible over the blaring music and roaring fans. “Stakes are high between the girls.”

I stood in front of the student section, jumping, kicking, and rustling my sparkling poms with the rest of the dance team.

As the referee blew the whistle to resume play, my eyes fixed on a small boy, barely noticeable amidst the mayhem of the active students. He sat with his legs tucked close to his chest. His little hands pressed against his ears as he rested one flushed cheek on his knee, eyes wide.

Several years earlier, when Sam was only two years old, my parents, my aunt and my uncle had sat with my brothers and me in my aunt and uncle’s cheery living room. They lacked their usual comical undertones as they explained to us that Sam is autistic, though highly functioning.

“He might be socially and developmentally behind some other kids his age,” my mom explained gently.

“Certain sensory stimulations overwhelm him,” my aunt added. “Hearing loud noises or touching things of different textures is harder on him than they can be on other people.”

“We already know he looks up to you three,” my dad told us. “We need you to continue to encourage him like you always have.”

We nodded solemnly. I thought of my peers with disabilities; they were rarely teased, but especially during elementary school there was a divide. I cringed slightly at the thought that my cousin, who loved to run and play just as much as any other child I knew, might not be understood by those around him.

As we walked outside to meet our cousins, who were giddily clambering up and down the slide in their backyard, my brothers and I quietly agreed that we would look out for him and try to help his peers understand, no matter what the cost.

My eyes locked in on Sam, curled up in the heart of the student section, overstimulated and afraid. I lowered my poms, crept out of my position in the dance line, and wove through the crowd up to Sam.

“Hey kiddo, what are you doing up here?” I whispered through his hand, which was still cupping his ear. “Why don’t you go sit with Auntie Dawn? Or buy some more pretzels from the concession stand?”

“I want to go home,” he whimpered.
“The game’s almost over, Sammy!” I reported with my best smile, glancing up at the scoreboard. The game was still tied, and the fourth quarter was quickly approaching.

I followed his gaze, which was fixated on the exit of the gym. My sense of disappointment grew each second; the game was so close and I, an avid basketball fan, wanted desperately to watch through the end.

“I want Mommy,” he replied frankly.

“Mommy will be back tomorrow. I’m watching you this weekend, remember?” I reminded him.

“Maybe, once the game is over, we can go get ice cream. How does that sound?”

He shook his head. As a buzzer blared, he flinched slightly and nudged his head into my shoulder.

“Please,” he murmured softly.

I sat for a moment, reflecting on the season that was culminating in this game. The games leading up to this one had been intense; the stands were packed with cheering fans every Friday night, but none so intense as that night. I thought of my utter excitement when we had demolished the competition the previous week to advance to this round and of the pleasant knot in my stomach from nervousness during the high-stakes game.

I looked up at the fans around me. Oblivious to the little boy cowering by their feet, they were jumping, cheering, clapping, and laughing. The excitement was nearly palpable, and the smiles were widespread across every face.

Almost every face. Sam remained curled in his protective ball, rapidly rolling a matchbox car up and down his leg, over and over. He winced when the stands rattled but stayed silent.

All the happiness, all the excitement in the gym was outweighed by the stress of such a sweet innocent boy. One night of cheering with the fans, I thought, was far less important than maintaining a sense of security for my cousin.

I grabbed Sam’s shaking hand, and we started towards the door together. With one longing glance at the court, where our star player had just sunk a three point shot to take the lead, Sam and I were gone.

From the parking lot, we could hear the crowd erupt into massive cheers as, presumably, our home team scored once more.

“Come on, little dude,” I said. “Let’s get you home.”

While my classmates glued their eyes on the riveting game, I changed Sam into his Lightning McQueen pajamas before settling down with a bowl of popcorn and the link to a Youtube video of a Minecraft tutorial on my laptop. As he nestled into my arm and began to doze, I thought back on my pact with my brothers and knew that, no matter who won the basketball game or what I had missed that night, I would never regret protecting Sam.
I’m aware of the teenaged girl sitting next to me while her friend stands a few feet in front of us with a camera. It takes only a few seconds for her to snap the picture, and then they’re both giggling and walking away as they look it over. This isn’t the first time this has happened to me, and I’m sure it won’t be the last. If I could roll my eyes, I would.

I don’t know what day it is. It’s hard to keep track when I sit on a park bench every day, not being able to turn my wrist to see what time it is or even to reach out and kindly ask one of the many passersby. I only know that it is not Sunday because the girl with the short purple hair and brown sandals has not come to sit at the other end of the bench and study her church notes.

I haven’t always been a stone man sitting on a park bench. I once had skin for my outer layer. Skin that could get sunburnt or cut open with a dull knife. Now there is something different, something harder, but it crumbles away with every sunrise.

I once had blood, veins and bones that made up my insides. I could experience an adrenaline rush, a good mood or even a drink of hot coffee.

There was also a time when I could move my hand to my chest and feel a heartbeat.

I can’t remember when things went wrong. Maybe it started when I refused to propose to Isabelle. When she had demanded a ring and threatened to leave, I let her pack her things and go. I never showed her the love she deserved.

After taking kids away from their drug addict and/or abusive parents and putting them in a warm bed or a clean diaper, I thought I would be thanked by at least one person. After doing this for 13 years I learned that it doesn’t matter if you’re helping a child find a better life, you will always be the bad guy if you take them away from their parents.

My job was emotionally draining, and as a 35 year old man I dealt with it in one way. Drinking. Isabelle of course never approved of it. Perhaps she felt threatened that I would choose alcohol over her, and I guess in the end that’s what I did.

I remember the first night I came home to her absence. I had somewhat expected it but had also somewhat hoped that she would still be there. The apartment had been melancholy as I walked across the floor carefully, trying not to disturb anything. If I disturbed anything, it might disappear along with her.

The first night I spent falling asleep to the sound of only one heart beat instead of two. I was hurt and lost; too much emotion had built up for me to handle. I felt the beating of my heart stop, and my chest ached as the anger, bitterness, and loneliness pushed their way from the captivity of my heart and flowed down through my chest and into my blood.

I gasped for breath and clutched my hand to my chest, trying to make it stop, trying to keep everything in the right place. I turned on my side, unable to do anything but feel. I couldn’t take it. I got up and drowned the hurt with the only thing I knew. I drank until everything inside was a dull murmur, trying to warn me that I had to allow these feelings to be a part of me, but I didn’t listen. I wouldn’t. I refused them just like I had refused Isabelle.

I spent a few nights exactly like that. Drinking and loathing my life. Little did I know that my sorrow was acting as hot lava inside my chest with the alcohol acting as heat and my heart forming a small igneous stone.

Two weeks later, I came home sober. As I walked out of the bathroom I caught a small glimpse of myself in the mirror. Staring at the tired, drooping eyes looking back at me, I watched as the circles
underneath the eyes grew darker and the stubble from the corners of my mouth turned into more stubble across my whole chin and up my jawline to my hairline. I looked back at empty eyes.

I felt my mouth twitch into a pitiful smirk. I made a fist, and before I knew it, the image was gone. I didn’t even notice the blood coming from my hand. I was only satisfied with the fact that the person I saw in the mirror was shattered.

I quickly walked to my bedroom where a full body mirror hung on the inside of the door. I ripped it away, slamming it against the wall, hoping it would lighten my bones, helping me to feel something again. As glass flew around and through me, I began to feel heavier. Every mirror in the house, anything that would create a reflection, I destroyed it. When I was finished the floors were covered with snowflakes of glass, but I didn’t notice as I sat on the couch.

I don’t recall how many hours I sat, staring at the dented in wall, but I do recall that the longer I sat, the heavier my bones grew. My blood flow slowed, and even if I tried to concentrate on it, I couldn’t feel it. The adrenaline I should’ve felt was reacting with the emotions that made their way into my veins many nights before, creating something physically hard and heavy. Everything under my skin was forming into hard, durable metamorphic rock.

My body ached for several days. It wasn’t the cuts on the surface; it was the twisting process of forming into rock underneath. I couldn’t leave my house. I didn’t want to better myself. I didn’t want to go to the doctor. I knew there wasn’t a way to fix it.

On a Sunday I pushed myself outside and closed the door behind me, but I didn’t get into my car. I began to walk down the street, slowly. I put one foot in front of the other, pushing myself, forcing myself to walk to the park. It was only a few minutes before I noticed that my right pinky finger was becoming hard and rugged. I knew I had to get to the park.

A few minutes later, my hand was completely sedimentary rock. I kept moving, kept walking. I was only a block away when my left hand developed into stone, and as I reached the concrete path that led me to the bench, it became impossible for me to use my right leg. I was panicking and desperate but also exhausted. I used my left leg as an anchor and pulled my stone leg behind. Step, drag. Step, drag.

My motivation was fading; it seemed as if the hard bits would overtake me right there in the middle of the path. They didn’t. Step, drag. Step, drag. I kept moving, and the bench came into view. I had to get to that bench.

Her bench.

Step, drag. Step, drag. I eased myself onto the bench, and as I propped my stone arm across the back rest I looked straight ahead. And God hit the pause button. All of my skin hardened; my eyes, my nose, everything was rock. I was stone, completely rigid and still. I could do nothing but watch as the sun dipped down and rested on the horizon.

A small figure walked to the bench; I could see it from the corner of my eye. I wasn’t surprised as it developed into a woman wearing brown sandals with a notebook tucked under her arm. Her church notes. Her purple hair was flat against her head, only reaching the bottoms of her ears.

Isabelle.

She didn’t look at me as she quietly sat down on the other end of the bench. She breathed in through her nose and slouched against the backrest as she let it out through her mouth. She opened her notebook and whispered to herself as she read the notes over.

I wanted to stretch two inches more and touch her shoulder with my fingertips. I wanted to bring her close to me, but I physically could not. I prayed that she would look, maybe even glance at me. Notice me, even for a second. Maybe she knew that it was me all along, and maybe that’s why for the hour that she was there, Isabelle sat at arm’s reach, simply reading her notes.

As the sun disappeared, Isabelle closed her notebook, took a last deep breath and left. I was alone.
It’s getting closer. I cower in the dark corner, trembling with fear, crying out as it finally reaches me and—

I shoot up out of bed, drenched in sweat. Tears stream down my face. I frantically shake my head, trying to clear my brain of the nightmare. This is the seventh time I’ve had it. Every time, the terrifying thing, the demon, gets closer and closer to me. I always wake up at the exact same time, right when it’s about to kill me. I have no idea why I’ve been having the nightmare almost every night. It doesn’t make any sense. I went to my mom about it, and her advice was to stop hanging out with Jenna, my best friend who is pretty much obsessed with dark and creepy things. She’s always talking about death and “monsters” and stuff. She even dresses the part. All black clothes, heavy eyeliner, jet black hair that used to be brown. But I know this has nothing to do with Jenna. It’s something much, much more. I peer over at my alarm clock. I have about an hour before I’m supposed to get ready for school. I close my eyes, hoping to get some more sleep. But a few restless minutes later, I decide it’s no use.

Forty five minutes later, I am seated at the kitchen table, showered and dressed. I shove the last bits of my blueberry muffin into my mouth as my mother comes stumbling into the kitchen. She shrieks at the sight of me, her hands flying up to her mouth.

“Sara, you scared me to death! What in the world are you doing up so early? You’re usually still sleeping at this time!” She grabs a coffee mug from the cabinet.

“I woke up and couldn’t go back to sleep. Sorry for scaring you. But what are you doing up this early?” I reply with one eyebrow raised.

“I have an early meeting today.” She sits down across from me.

“I got the paper for you.” I slide the plastic covered newspaper across the table.

“Oh, thanks sweetie.” She unfolds it and starts to read, absorbed in her own little world. That’s usually the case these days ever since my dad died three years ago. I was only eleven then yet can remember the morning he got in the car wreck. Kissing him goodbye as he left for work, catching the bus just in time for school, coming home to see my mother sobbing in the living room. When I heard the news, I silently went to my bedroom and stared at the ceiling for hours. No tears. Just thinking. Why me? Why him? Why us? I rarely think about him now. It’s hard to. My mom never talks about him, doesn’t seem like she even remembers him. But I know she does. She’s always been great at guarding her emotions. I scrape my chair back from the table, knowing my mother wanted to be left alone to do her stupid crossword.

I thunder up the stairs to my room; I have about fifteen minutes before it’s time to go to school. I sink down onto my bed and open my bedside table drawer, rummaging around for the worn leather journal, my dream notebook. Once I grasp it, I flip it open and start a new page.

I had it again. The exact same dream that I’ve described a million times but can’t find the answer as to why I keep on having it. I will update if anything new happens in it.

I snap the notebook closed and shove it back into the drawer. I sigh, grab my knapsack off of the floor, and go back downstairs.

“I’m leaving!” I call out to my mom. There’s no reply. I roll my eyes and head out the front door, purposefully slamming the door behind me.

“This is so awesome! A mystery! We need to find out why you keep on having it! So it’s like…a demon?” Jenna excitedly asks on our way to school. We’ve ridden the same bus since kindergarten
which is when we became friends in the first place. She’s pretty much been my only friend, besides
Matt, who I just recently became friends with last year.

“Yeah, I guess. It’s this little girl. I can never remember what she’s wearing, but I know she has
long, dark stringy hair and no eyes. They’re just black holes. She’s really pale, too,” I explain, shuddering
at the image.

“Oh wow…this is great! This is just so great!” Jenna exclaims with a wide grin.

“No. No it’s not. At. All. It’s creepy. I swear I even saw her in my room once!” I respond, nudging
Jenna with a frown.

“Whatever, Sara! This is seriously so cool!” By this time, we’ve pulled up in front our high school,
East Hill High. We frantically pile out of the crowded bus and sprint to the entrance doors.

A few hours later, I am sitting in math class extremely bored. Ms. Robinson is droning on and on
about equations and algebra and blah blah blah. I zone out, resting my chin in my hands. All of a sudden,
my eyes snap to a corner of the room. A little girl is crouched in the corner, her soulless eyes boring into
mine. The girl from my dream. She’s grinning and giggling, rocking back and forth. No one else seems to
see or hear her. I whip around frantically, my heart beating faster and faster.

“Sara?” Ms. Robinson asks me, tapping on my shoulder.

“Huh? Yes? What?” I respond, blinking furiously. I glance over at the corner. She’s gone.

“Are you okay…?”

“Oh...yeah. I’m fine...why?”

“Well, you looked …”

“Oh. Well I’m okay. Sorry. Continue on with the uh...lesson.” I blush, peering down at my feet,
my hair covering my face like a curtain. Ms. Robinson frowns, then goes back up to the front of the
room. I peer back over to the corner once more. Nothing. Maybe I’m going insane. That would definitely
explain all of the dreams and hallucinations.

At lunch, I’m explaining what happened to Jenna and Matt when Katie, a popular girl in my math
class, struts up to me.

“What was that all about in math class, huh?” She declares, flipping her hair behind her.

“None of your business. Now go away. Don’t you have some appointment with the nail salon or
something?” Jenna barks with a smirk.

“Whatever. You’re the one who needs an appointment with those dreadful black nails of yours.
So out of style.” Katie responds. She then stalks off angrily and sits back down with her little cronies.

Typical Katie.

“We have to ignore her. If we show her we care, she’ll be satisfied. Do we want her to be
satisfied? No we do not,” Matt says, taking a sip of his milk.

“I just want to rip out her fake blonde extensions and throw all her designer crap into the river!”
Jenna slams her tray down on the table.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you. Remember her dad? Big and powerful lawyer? Yeah. Watch
yourself.” I jokingly poking her with my fork.

“Yeah, yeah. Whatever. I need to go to the library. I’ll try to hide my inner hatred.” Jenna
responds with a wink. She exits through the big archway.

“Well. I should probably go to my locker and clean it out since I have some free time. It’s so
messy, every time I open it stuff falls out. I have no idea why I always let it get this bad.”

“Okay, I’ll see you in social studies,” Matt responds.

When I get to my locker, something seems...off. I frown as I notice little tally marks etched into
my locker. What in the world...? It’s probably Jenna’s handiwork, trying to scare me. She’s constantly
doing stuff like this. I spin the dial on my lock and swing the locker door open. Everything seems normal
on the inside. I bend down to grab my social studies textbook from the bottom of my locker and get the
eerie feeling that someone is watching me. I stand up and peer into the mirror I have on my locker door.
Standing a few feet behind me is the girl. She is giggling, rocking back and forth on her heels. I quickly whip around to see nothing. There’s seriously something wrong with me. Why am I seeing things that aren’t actually there? I slam my locker shut and quickly make my way to social studies.

The rest of the day, nothing weird happens. I don’t see the little girl at all after the locker incident. Now, sitting in my bedroom, I’ve convinced myself I’m just paranoid from my dream. Jenna refuses to believe that, though. She desperately wants it to be some big scary mystery. And Matt, well, I don’t think he even cares to be honest. I sigh loudly, snapping shut the book I was attempting to read. I’m just about to head downstairs to get some chips when I hear a faint giggling sound. I roll my eyes and groan in frustration. Now I’m hearing things? This is so crazy. The giggling starts to get louder and louder. I realize it’s coming from my closet. I take a deep breath and fling the closet door open. Nothing. Of course. All of a sudden, hands grip my shoulders and force me into the closet. I yelp in pain and pathetically claw at my attacker with my eyes squeezed tightly shut. It’s no use; all she does is giggle. Something hard slams into my head, and I sink to the floor. All I see is darkness.

*Jenna’s Point of View*

“Sara?” I call, bounding up the stairs. I’ve lived right across the street from her basically our whole lives, so it’s never a surprise when I just burst into her house unexpectedly. Her door is standing wide open with the light on, but she’s not anywhere to be seen. I step into the room, peering around. I notice the thin stream of light coming from under her closed closet door. What in the world would she be doing in her closet? I grip the door handle and slowly turn. The door swings open, and I scream, backing up into her dresser. I don’t know how long I was screaming until Sara’s mom came up and led me downstairs and outside. We’re now sitting with police officers, but I can’t force myself to listen to them. I can’t get the image out of my mind.

Sara. Tacked up on the closet wall with rusty nails. Grinning. Blood everywhere. Oh god, all the blood. And in the closet corner, behind the racks of clothes. A little girl rocking back and forth. Grinning. Painted on the wall, in blood, the words: NIGHTMARES COME TRUE.
“Mother, can we please go to the village today? Please?” I plead, my hands clasped together.

“Very well. Fetch your coat, and we’ll go,” she says with a sigh. I yelp in excitement and hurry to my room. I yank my fur-lined coat from my coat rack and quickly pull it on. Before I leave, I climb onto my bed and carefully stand up. Above my bed, I have many shelves lined with my precious porcelain dolls. I adjust two of them, whose names are Mary and Harriet, who are leaning slightly to the left. I grin, pat them lightly on the head, jump down from my bed, and hurry back into the foyer, where mother waits.

I have always been fascinated by the many shops and all of the interesting people in the village ever since seven years ago, when I was four years old. All of the bright colors and the fancy people walking along never cease to amaze me. In the cobbled street a frail, older man approaches. He reaches out to touch my long, blonde hair, and I jerk back, disgusted with his odd behavior.

“Excuse me, sir? What in Heaven’s name do you think you’re doing?” My mother asks in bewilderment. The man ignores her and stares deeply into my eyes.

“Little miss, do you like dolls?” he whispers to me.

“Err...yes. Yes, I do. Why do you ask?” I question, taking another tentative step back. The corners of his mouth rise up into a smug grin, and he quickly whips around and takes off down the street and into a dark alleyway.

“Well, that was rather strange. I assume there’s something wrong with that man. Maybe he should get himself checked.” My mother grabs my wrist and jerks me along. I nod, still dazed by the strange event. I can’t shake the feeling that something is terribly, terribly wrong.

Back at home in our little cottage, I am seated at the dinner table with both of my parents. My plate is full with many slices of chicken, heaps of mashed potatoes, and a large serving of fresh green beans from the garden. But I can’t get myself to eat. My mind is whirling about, refusing to let me forget about the strange happenings of the day. I try to convince myself it was nothing, that the man is mentally ill. But deep inside, I know there’s something more to it.

“How was your day, Lilian?” my father asks me, stuffing another forkful of meat into his mouth.

“Something very strange happened in the village today. Isn’t that right, Lilian? Tell your father what happened,” my mother cuts in, gesturing to me.

“Well...a strange man came up to me today and tried to touch my hair. And then he asked me if I liked dolls. When I told him yes, he smiled and ran off. It was really odd.” I stare at my plate. My father bursts out laughing and sets his fork down.

“That is rather strange! That man probably belongs in some sort of mental institution!”

“That’s exactly what I thought, dear,” my mother says with a grin. I force myself to smile, although it’s a very feeble attempt.

‘Lilian Porter, eat your dinner.” My mother frowns at my full plate. I sigh and begin to eat, pushing the troubled thoughts out of my mind.

Later that night, I lay in bed, burrowed under the covers, my mind racing. I know I am being silly, but my natural instinct is sending loud warning signs. Many hours later, I am simply too exhausted to think about it anymore, and I nod off into a deep slumber.

I awake to bright sunlight filtering through the window. I squint, and press my face into my pillow. It’s no use; I know I’m ready to get up. I go downstairs to see what father and mother are doing,
They are both seated at the kitchen table, my father drinking a large mug of dark coffee while reading the newspaper and mother reading one of her mystery novels.

“Good morning, dear. Would you like some breakfast? We are leaving for church soon.” My mother glances up from her reading.

“No, I’m fine, but thank you. I suppose I’ll just go get dressed.” Mother nods and returns to her book. Once back upstairs, I fling open my closet door to find my favorite pale yellow dress. I frown as I flip through the many racks of clothes, the dress nowhere in sight.

“Mother? Have you seen my favorite yellow dress?” I yell, leaning over the railing of the staircase.

“I just washed it, darling. I hung it up in your closet.” She sounds a bit irritated. I roll my eyes and search my closet once more. The dress is definitely not here. I sigh and pull out a pink, flowery skirt and a white, ruffled blouse. It will have to do. I then open my jewelry box, intending to wear my pearl earrings and necklace. They’re not there either. I feel my eyes start to well up as that jewelry is very special to me. My Grandma Rose gave them to me as a birthday present three years ago, and she passed away just last year. I quickly wipe away the tears and snap the jewelry box shut. I suppose I will just wear my diamond studs today. I then head to the bathroom to get changed, and as I reach for my bottle of perfume, which is always right in the same spot on my bathroom counter, I realize it’s missing as well. I groan in frustration and fling open my bathroom door. I thunder downstairs, red with fury.

“Stop playing tricks on me! It’s not funny! Where are all of my things? I demand you tell me this instant!” I rage, my parents just staring at me with puzzled expressions.

“We have absolutely no idea what you’re talking about, dear. What is missing?” Mother’s voice is calm.

“My favorite dress, my valuable pearl earrings and necklace that grandma gave me, and my favorite perfume! And who knows what else!” I scream, stomping my foot down on the hardwood floor. Now calm down. Is it possible you simply misplaced those things?” my father asks, shooting me a glare.

“No! Someone has hidden them or taken them or…something! I have no idea, I just know my things are missing, and I want them back!” Tears rolling down my cheeks.

“We have absolutely no idea what you’re talking about, dear. What is missing?” Mother’s voice is calm.

“My favorite dress, my valuable pearl earrings and necklace that grandma gave me, and my favorite perfume! And who knows what else!” I scream, stomping my foot down on the hardwood floor. Now calm down. Is it possible you simply misplaced those things?” my father asks, shooting me a glare.

“No! Someone has hidden them or taken them or...something! I have no idea, I just know my things are missing, and I want them back!” Tears rolling down my cheeks.

“You are being very dramatic young lady. Perhaps you should stay home from church today.”

“Fine, I will! Gladly!” I angrily respond as I race upstairs and into my bedroom. I furiously slam my door shut as loud as possible and fling myself onto my bed. Shaking with sobs, I climb back under the covers and go back to sleep.

A few hours later, I awake to the sound of faint tapping on my window. I slide out of bed and peer out the window to see nothing there. I frown, displeased at my silliness. My anger must be making me delusional. As I turn back around, I notice all of my dresser drawers have been pulled out and rummaged through. When I got up to look out the window, they were all closed. I scream and race downstairs into the foyer, where my parents are just coming in through the door, back from church. I fling myself into my mother’s arms, my eyes wide with fear.

“Lilian? Whatever is the matter?” my mother asks, smoothing down my hair. All of a sudden, she gives a loud gasp.

“What? What is it?” I ask frantically.

“Your hair...your beautiful hair...oh dear...”

“What are you talking about, mother? What’s wrong with it?” I reply, reaching for the back of my head. I scream as I feel a smooth, hairless spot.

“Lilian, you silly girl! Why on Earth would you cut your hair so dreadfully? You’re certainly old enough to know not to cut your own hair! Now you have an extremely noticeable bald spot!” My mother says, giving me a piercing glare.
“No, mother! I didn’t do this! I think someone else did it to me! I have no idea why but I think someone did! And also, someone’s been in my room! I heard tapping at my window, and I went to look, my dresser drawers were open as if someone had rummaged through them and—”

“Not this nonsense again. Lilian, no one is messing with your things. Are you feeling alright, dear? First you foolishly cut your own hair and then try to blame it on someone else. And now this? Maybe we should take you to see Doctor Robinson and—“

“No father! I’m not mental! You must believe me! Come and see! I will show you! Quick, come look!” I respond wildly, gesturing for them to follow me upstairs. They give each other an unsure glance and follow behind me. I swing open my bedroom door and gesture towards the dresser. All of the drawers have been put back into place. I gasp, my hands flying up to my mouth.

“Just a few minutes ago the drawers were open! I swear! Oh mother, please believe me! Father?” I say, my voice faltering.

“I’m calling Doctor Robinson immediately. Lilian, you’re going mad. Are you ill? Do you have a fever?” My father says, feeling my forehead. I push his hand away angrily.

“No! I am not going mad! I am telling you, it—”

“Oh, honey. Come downstairs. We’ll discuss getting you some sort of assistance. And also an appointment at the beauty shop.” My mother says, wrapping her arms around me. I sob, knowing no one will believe me. This must have something to do with that strange man; I’m sure of it.

A mere thirty minutes later, my parents are downstairs talking with Doctor Robinson. I blankly stare at my ceiling; I have no more tears. All of a sudden, a hand clamps over my mouth. I kick and attempt to scream, but the hand is pressed tightly. I am tossed over someone’s shoulder, and my head knocks into the corner of my dresser. Then, darkness.

I awake on a cold, hard tile floor. As my vision focuses, I see shelves upon shelves of dolls of all kinds. I notice that many of them look exactly like some old classmates of mine who I haven’t seen in quite a while.

“Hello there, miss,” a raspy voice calls out from a dark corner.

“Who’s there? Why am I here?” I cry out, my voice trembling in fear. There is no reply as the man steps out from the corner. It’s the man from the village. He silently holds up a porcelain doll for me to see, and I realize this doll looks exactly like me. It’s wearing a pale yellow dress. Pearl earrings and a pearl necklace. Long blonde hair. As the man comes closer, I get a faint whiff of the scent of my perfume.

“This doll is just about done.” The man says, grinning wildly.

“What’s missing…?” I reply, my voice hushed.

“The soul.”
The Freeman’s Flag

Among the mountains in which they towed
‘Twas a rich and fertile land
Whom crops were plenty of what they had sowed
Yet taken by that of man’s hand

Taken were the sheep within their flocks
Whose numbers were many and bold
Taken were the riches beneath the rocks
The mountain’s stone heart of gold

The men’s fists sang of malice and rage
As the women’s reflected of tears
To turn life’s ripped and tattered page
And unlock all unknown fears

One step toward bondage, one step toward chains
One step toward death to some
A step away from lush plains
A step away from freedom

I long for the land where the wind is soft and sweet
And the meadows there taste of honey
Back to the forest’s cool retreat
Where the streams run of jewels and money

We must fight for our land from a time long before
When swords will fly and spears will soar
To open again the mountain’s door
And wave the freeman’s flag evermore

LIGHTS

The city roared with life as streets glistened, and the windows winked into the darkness

The rhythmic fall of the snow illuminted the silence in the valley as the moon’s shine reflected its solitude, its isolation on the pines

The skyline of the man-made beacon glowed surrounded by a crown of light, like a flame harnessed by a candle wick is stalked by a ring of energy
The black night was blanketed by a sprinkling of stars and constellations, looking almost as an abstract piece of art, delicately placed by the quiver of a paint brush.

This colossal palace of refulgence, this decadent and vibrant mass showed humbly through the lonely window of a bar, a man sharing his life to a drink in the dim light.

In the meek home, coated in cotton, with a hat of ember and smoke, through the hospitable window showed a tree, both lively and serene, shining by the mantle.

The morning broke, the dawn awoke, as the beaming sun shook off the winter’s night.

**A Whisper, Faint**

On the eve of spring was man’s life conceived
Whom restlessly tossed within the womb
Upon a drop of rain, and its clouded tomb
Among the cycle of a flower’s bloom
With man’s first breath, winter’s frost now grieved

The hour’s heat grew, along man’s body and mind
Man’s love grew deep for summer’s breeze
Her voice composed through the hum of trees
His heart she now forever seized
A once lushes youth, man tamed, and blind

Years began to pass, as crimson covers an autumn oak
Yet the breeze stayed, a now faithful chill
Through man’s eyes remained a beauty still
Autumn continued, so summer breeze until
No longer did her warmth arise, when sun awoke
Man grew ill, he withered like winter’s cold
While flakes waded in the bitter air
Her memory danced through his branches care
As he drifted to sleep, in his dreams she was there
The day became night, the falling flakes ceased to be bold

All the marvels of the year, how glorious is the life of those whom lived,
Day returned, alongside it spring, in which the faint whisper of summer breeze lurked over man’s shoulder.
Unspoken Words
Marissa Depietro
Bode Middle School
Poetry
Josie Clark

Unspoken Words

They’re the words that you hide deep beneath your covers,
the ones that aren’t meant to be told by anyone.

You hide them inside you,

but they try and crawl out of your skin like little s
p
i
d
e
r
s.

Those words are your secrets;
like everyone else you have your secrets.

You’re afraid to speak,
because they might
slip out of your
mouth.

Like
sand
running
down
the
sides
of
your
fingers.

You run, they tell you, but you can't hide.
Like glue they stick in your brain.
They’re mind controlling and drive you
H
Y
S
T
E
R
I
C
A
L.
They eat at your insides making you fall down in pain.

You try not to speak,
but the words, the rage, and the pain come pouring out.

Just like a waterfall beautiful but dangerous.

Some things are meant to be said,
but some things are meant to be kept a secret.

Hidden, like the small key in the darkness of your closet.

They must not be said.

If there isn’t a word or sentence for this, there must be.

It should go something by the means of,

unspoken words.
How to Make Paper Butterflies  
Victoria Dorr  
Bode Middle School  
Poetry  
Josie Clark

Now that she’s gone, who will teach you to fly?  
your sister  
your sister  
She taught you how to make paper butterflies  
With coffee strainers  
And pipe cleaners.  
She hung them up from her ceiling  
Along with the rest of the butterflies, the butterflies she made in first grade, the butterflies she tried to  
make at home,

the ones that succeeded  
the ones that failed  
the ones that looked pretty good  
the ones that resembled colorful paper wads

the ones, the ones, the ones  
the butterflies.  
The coffee filters  
Covered in marker  
and color.  
they twisted and turned  
spun and dangled on their  
thin colorless threads.  
Beautiful and beautiful and beautiful.  
your sister  
your sister  
The one who made you cute origami birds  
And fixed your mac ‘n cheese when Mom worked late.  
The one who held you, little eight year old you,  
When your parents divorced  
And you cried and cried.  
You sister didn’t cry.  
your sister  
your sister  
The one who made paper butterflies,  
but their wings couldn’t hold her up.  
Only when she jumped did you realize that she really  
couldn’t fly.

You were thirteen.

A third story window, and a  
broken  
neck. They found her, with  
twisted
limbs. She was left with a cracked body. You were left with a shattered mind.

You used to be held together by
Love and hugs and stupid on-the-spot lullabies about bunnies and carrot cake.
When she died, she took those with her,
Along with your happiness,
your sanity
and your life,
as well as hers.
Now,
you are held together by
Red threads,
Wrapped over and over;
A balloon
Tied around your wrist
So that it doesn’t float away.
You lie awake, thinking about how the stars need a bit of shining.
Yeah, the moon’s been looking a bit dull too lately.
The paper butterflies swing, daunting pendants,
a sharpened pendulum, descending to you in your pit of emptiness.
They are memories,
a gallery of nostalgia,
a reminder of the actions that can never be reversed.
They are anchors, dragging you down to the recesses of your mind,
a place where you cannot eat
cannot sleep
cannot breathe.
And you’re sick of it, sick of crying, sick of hunger sick of being sick.
tear them down
tear them down
tear them down
the feelings
the hatred
the butterflies.
You feel lighter, but emptier,
laughing, with tears streaking your face.
You will never forget her,
but you won’t allow her death to cause yours.

Now that she’s gone,
She cannot teach you.

That will not keep you from learning how to fly.
When I walk down the infamous hallways of Excelsior Springs Middle School, I see not the smiling faces and good students calmly sauntering to classrooms and smiling at teachers. No, not here. I’ve never been able to brag that my school is a high scorer, and I’ve never been able to put my nose in the sky, raise my pinky, and look down on those other schools, and I’ve never had anything gourmet for lunch. Not in this place. But, I love it just the same.

You see, when I moved here, my parents didn’t move here for the all-star football teams or even the mineral waters downtown. They moved here for the ambience, the people. This town is the epitome of small Midwestern towns. This is a place where I can look into the sky, feel the cool breeze on my face, and feel accepted. I’m here for a reason: destiny.

The hallowed corridors of this academy have become my home, because nearly every memory I call my own take place within some reaches of the public school system. I can remember my first football game and nearly every award I’ve ever earned as a result of something to do with school. All of my friends, every relationship, every interview, every idea I have has been because of this place. Every aspect of my childhood has been somewhat reformed because of school, through the good and the bad. It’s as if I am owned by this system, as if it is an ever omniscient force, the backbone of a young life.

Every Friday night, I would soak myself in Black and Yellow paint and cheer ‘til my throat was sore and my lips were chapped and bloody for our hometown football team, and eventually joined their ranks. The second I could perfect my embouchure, I joined the Tiger Pride band. Something compelled me to do this for this town, and to this day I’m trying to comprehend it. We have a Wal-Mart, a Price Chopper, a family owned Mexican restaurant, and an ice cream place. It’s called Dari-B, and ice cream is free to costumed patrons on Halloween. Stories flutter down the streets of the town’s “golden years” where Harry Truman would visit and our magical mineral water could cure ailments. Eventually, I suppose they became immune to our springs, because the town soon “died.” If you take a few minutes out of your day to go down to the VA near Lewis Elementary, you can hear the old men in worn out army fatigues talk for what seems like a lifetime about “how it all used to be.”

I wish there was a way to tell you were in the good old days before you left them...
~Andy Bernard,
~The Office

We’re the kids that get our culture from Felix Kjellberg on YouTube, from Seth Meyer’s Weekend Update, from The Doctor. You could say we’re modern. You could call us a lot of things. To me, it’s just this world we live in. This world around us, it goes to our head. I can’t turn on the TV without seeing a commercial for this week’s new iPad or see sad news about a school shooting. It’s just become a part of the itinerary. It all starts to blend, starts to become “normal.” School, with its bright sense of “safeness,” and the warm sense of home, and the bloody tides of the world rage on around us; it all starts to run together, starts to bleed. Like a sickly watercolor, the ones we used to finger paint in elementary school. Yeah, those were the ones. Where you weren’t quite sure what you were painting, but it just felt right to paint it. In the end, you get a B+ on it. Not quite perfect, but that’s because nobody sees it the way you did. That’s what we live in. And it looks different from every angle you see it.

You can’t walk 10 feet here without hearing some lingo for some website or modern matter. We’ve got technology on the mind. We’re psychological cyborgs in a way. Some could never distinguish
between Abraham Lincoln and the mailman but would put a name on Steve Jobs in a heartbeat. Alas, I can say the same for me as well. On a Friday night, instead of being invited to parties or dances, I put on my headset and lose myself in the swirling electrons. I almost lose my mind in the enthralling tails of the little green boxes in my entertainment center. I’ve been guilty of buying the latest in technology simply because it is the newest. The endless advertisement is almost used as a weapon, like a saber wielded by the rich and famous. Maybe I’m in too deep, but this is my view of the world.

It almost seems too dark. It almost seems too impossibly dark to be realistic. I’m sure we’ve all heard the stories our parents like to weave about their childhood and how different the world was then, and alas, I wish I could spin those yarns to my own children some day in the future. Unfortunately, it is a very different place. Where my parents had Vietnam and Scooby Doo, we have threats of terrorism and things on TV that children should never see. I can remember times when I was younger where I would sit in fear of the events around me. I remember seeing footage of 9/11 and Sandy Hook, of the Boston Bombing and the assault on Bin-Laden’s compound, and it soon became part of the background noise of my life. It’s too soon to see how it will all affect us, but it almost certainly will.

Perhaps I’m rambling on, maybe I’ve strayed too far from my target, but I think I’ve got my message across. This world we live in is a very complex one, so beautiful yet so dangerous. There is no metaphor great enough to describe it. This world is an amazing place.
The Clock’s Final Tick  
Barbara Dyer  
Bode Middle School  
Flash Fiction  
Josie Clark

Tick. The clock’s tick fills the emptiness of the large room just before the silence settles again. Tick. What has felt like an hour watching the clock has been a mere second. I peel my eyes away from the clock to look at him. The once rowdy and loud boy now sits silently in his chair, eyes glued to his journal.

The room that we are in is big. Almost too big. It is also empty; all that fills this large space is a massive clock and two chairs. These chairs have two people in them. The immense clock that looms over our heads ticks again. I shudder at the sound. It has never stopped, it will always continue on its way. The boy looks up from his journal and right at me. He opens his mouth as if to plead, as if to call for help. He closes it once again. I hear his voice in my mind, echoing through the silence.

“Emma,” his voice says, though the boy has said nothing. I remember how he used to say my name. How he used to always talk, ask questions, and run around the empty room, his voice and feet covering the ticking and filling the nothingness. Now the shadows loom, the silence consumes, and I am alone.

He continues to look at me for a moment, a silent wish, a plea for help clouding his beautiful young eyes. Tick. The clock says again, marking the passage of another second, another second closer. The boy used to ask what was closer, he used to ask why we were drawing nearer to something. He never understood until the day he felt its effects.

I can see the passage, the mark of seconds as it draws closer, yet he can feel it. It has become worse, so much worse for the young boy. All he can do now is draw in his journal; all I can do is watch and wait.

I turn my attention away from the young boy and back to the enormous clock. The pendulum swings lazily back and forth. Tick. The clock’s voice says again. Tears blur my vision as I watch it. I feel something hit my lap. I look down to see a piece of paper crumpled into a ball. I look over at the boy. He watches me. His eyes are filled with fear, filled with the plea that I cannot help. I unfold the paper. It is a picture of a man melting, his face stuck in a frozen scream. He is calling for help, praying for rescue, yet nobody can hear. Nobody can help.

Tick. The clock is oblivious. My tears stain the page, smearing the picture. Tick. It is coming. Tick. Nothing can stop it now. Tick. Nothing will ever stop it. Tick. The clock will continue, the clock will stay, the clock will not stop. Tick. I cannot help. I cannot stop the clock. I look over at the boy. He begs. Tick. He prays. Tick. He wishes. Tick. Nothing, I look back at the clock. It is still going. It will always go. Tick.
I was two months old and being thrown in a dog crate to see how long I could last as an infant all on my own. My parents had just given me up to a facility called the Factory. I was starving and cold, and it wasn’t until two days later that they finally came to check on me. The people, wolf hybrids, reached in with their filthy wolf hands and scooped me out of the cage. They put me on a table and injected me with some fluid to knock me out cold. When I woke up I was back in the cage. I hadn’t known what they had done to me until I got to experience it myself. They ran me on exercises over and over until my body ached and I couldn’t walk anymore. They ran me on treadmills, hamster wheels, ladders, and mazes for seven years. I didn’t understand what the hard work was for until they brought me out to the roof of the building one day.

"Jump!" they shouted at me. “Show us how well you can fly, you mutant freak!”

I was scared as they morphed into full werewolf and slowly inched toward me, pushing me backwards until I was right on the edge of the rooftop. I looked behind me and saw only concrete below. If I fall, I am dead. Those are the only words I remember thinking as a Hybrid snarled and lashed out at me with his forepaws, leaving three deep lines on the right side of my face. It only stung a little, and I could feel that the healing process had already begun. That scared me. That scared me more than being on the edge of a rooftop about to plummet to my death. It scared me more than the fact that I had lived for seven years in this horrid place. I remember the Hybrids smiling when they saw that my face was almost completely healed in about thirty seconds. The one who scratched me, Natari, howled and leaped forward shoving me off of the roof, sending me to my death. I was falling from the Facility rooftop fifty feet high. I managed to spin myself around so that my stomach was facing the ground. About a fourth of the way to the ground I started to feel weird, tingly, and my bones started to ache. I screamed in agony as my bones extended and shrunk and became non-human. I didn’t know what had happened until I hit the ground, on four legs. I gasped and looked around. Everything was in black and white except for a few greens and blues. I looked down at my hands and saw that they were paws. Puma. I shrieked, emitting a loud, echoing roar. I heard a loud thud and turned to see that all of the Hybrids on the roof had jumped down to “greet” me at the bottom.

I snarled, and Natari growled back, “You didn’t fly, little one; now you’ll have to pay for not listening to instructions.”

I felt my jaw drop. He was insane! How did he expect me to know what I was doing? I’m only seven, I thought to myself.

“Don’t look so hurt, kitty,” Natari teased.

That ticked me off. I snarled and bunched my muscles, ready to pounce and slice him to shreds. As I was about to leap for Natari’s jugular another Hybrid yelled from the top of the roof, “Natari! That is enough! I thought you had brains in that wolf head of yours!”

I saw a Hybrid I didn’t recognize. I cocked my head to the left, and the Hybrid looked at me with caring eyes. Natari’s vicious snarl snapped me back to him. “I’ll get you next time, mutant.”

I firmly planted my bottom on the ground and tried not to look offended by Natari’s harsh word, mutant. How dare he? He’s a freak too, I thought. I saw the Hybrid come out the door to my left. I stood immediately and braced myself for attack. My hackles rose; I felt a menacing growl rise in my throat.

“You don’t need to be afraid of me,” he started, “I’m here to get you out of this place. I didn’t want them to inject you with animal DNA, but they did it anyway.”
I didn't believe a word of what he said until he told me he knew how to get me out of this place. He had said he would take me to a school where I could meet new people and make friends and learn. *Aren't I too old to start learning at school?* I thought to myself. Surprisingly he spoke back to my thought, “Yes, but I would take you to a safe place and teach you everything you needed to know about your kind, enough to be able to catch up in school.”

I thought about what he had said and my mind wouldn't leave the words, *your kind*, alone. If I'm different, then *what am I*?

He sighed and walked towards me. I didn't quite trust him enough to come near me, so I started to slowly back away.

“It's okay,” he said. “I'm just going to show you how to turn back to human. This will be painful,” he warned, “so what you do is you just think about yourself, as human, and you'll turn.”

I raised my eyebrows and did what he said. I thought about myself and felt my bones twist and become more human. I groaned, and then I'm on the ground with a blanket over me cringing from the pain. I was scooped up by the Hybrid who said he would get me out of here. We walked into the Factory, and every Hybrid in the building stared and growled as we walked by.

“Enough. I'm taking her to the faculty room.”

The Hybrids laughed, and I buried my face in the blanket. We walked the rest of the way to in silence. Once we got there, he put me on the floor and unwrapped the blanket. I was surprised to see I was wearing clothing as I figured I wouldn't be.

“He's the plan,” he said, “we are going to go through that door and bolt. Are you fit enough to turn into something large enough and fast enough to carry me?”

“I guess,” I said wearily.

“Good. Oh, and I guess I should introduce myself. I’m Jet Wing.”

“What's my name?” I asked.

He looked back at me as he crawled through the door that led outside, into the desert.

“Well, I don't guess you have one. You can pick a name for yourself if you want.”

“I already have one picked out,” I said, “I want to be called Sapphyre, with a y.”

“Pretty name.”

We stopped outside the door and were standing in what looked like death. It was complete desert. The sand was dry and cracked and looked as if it hadn't gotten a good rain in about a hundred years.

“You ready?” Jet asked.

I shrugged, “I guess. I mean, I don't really know what I'm doing, but I'll try.”

I thought of a beautiful black Clydesdale with a long white mane, tail, and “feathers.”

I felt myself changing, and Jet backed up a few feet to give me some room. My face extended and so did my whole body. In about ten seconds, I was a new species. Jet stared in awe. I trotted around him and showed off my beautiful night black coat and snow white accents. He smiled and hopped aboard. He clicked at me, and I started a steady trot. He clicked louder, and I broke into a sprint, going at least seventy miles an hour. I could feel that Jet was struggling to hold on, so I slowed down a little allowing him to get a better grip on my mane.

“Thanks.”

I neighed, and we continued to race on for days, heading from California to Virginia. About six days later we arrived at a huge house in the middle of nowhere, no people, no cars, and best of all, no Hybrids, except Jet.

“Okay, were here.”

He opened the garage, and I trotted in and changed back to human.
I ran out of the garage and stood in the beautiful, cut grass. The house had white siding and green shutters. The yard was well tended, and flowers of all sorts sprouted in the flower beds along the front of the house.

“This place is wonderful.”

“Yeah,” Jet agreed, standing next to me, admiring the place as well. He sighed and turned to me. “Alright. Let's get you inside and washed up. I need to get you ready for a new, wonderful, danger-free life.”

I smiled up at him and the words, *new, wonderful, life*, rang in my head as we walked inside and prepared for that new life.
There’s something tugging on my leg—a cold, pulsing, gelatinous creature, sort of an overgrown, half-frozen blood clot. It’s covered in rows and rows of little wormlike feelers that it keeps jamming into the cracks in my bones, forcing them to open wider. Oddly enough, it doesn’t really hurt, but it itches like crazy. I had no idea that your bones could itch. Maybe it’s just mine. I think I might finally be losing it. How long have I been down here, anyway?

If I’ve learned two things from life as an immortal, the first is that the consequences of hooking up with that girl with the neck tattoo in the Denny’s parking lot will in fact last several lifetimes, and the second is that “immortal” doesn’t necessarily mean “nothing terrible could possibly ever happen to me.” How did I come to be blessed with this superhuman power, you ask? Was I conceived inside a nuclear power plant? Did my mother have a brief fling with an incubus? Did my alien parents abandon me on Earth as an infant? The truth is, I have absolutely no idea, but this story isn’t really about the “why” aspect. It’s about the “unimaginable terror” aspect. So without further ado, gather ’round, children, and listen as I tell my tale of woe.

I’ve always been accident-prone. By seventeen, I’d already been hit by two cars, fallen down a grand total of nine flights of stairs, and been attacked by no less than twelve wild animals. Strangely, I never seemed to suffer any permanent injuries, so I just considered myself the luckiest unlucky person on the planet and went about my normal business. But one night, when I was eighteen, it finally dawned on me that something was out of the ordinary. I’d fallen asleep on the living room couch watching B-movies, as I did most Friday evenings, but I soon found myself awakened by a heat fiercer than Satan’s butthole, a burning rafter bonking me on the head, and somebody elsewhere in the house screeching like a spider monkey in heat crammed into a food processor. I tried to open my eyes, but there was something hot and sticky cementing them shut and running down my face. I started to put the pieces together, and upon realizing that I was on fire and the sticky substance was my liquefying eyeballs. I reacted as anyone would have; I panicked, flailed around, crashed into a wall, and pissed myself before blacking out again. Fortunately, that wasn’t the end of me, but unfortunately, I woke up naked in a drawer, which was pretty unsettling for someone who’s not used to that kind of thing.

I’ll spare you the details, mainly because they involve me punching out some poor, terrified woman and slinking around an unfamiliar hospital in XXL Garfield-print scrubs. The important part is that I slipped out of the hospital, collided with a kid on his paper route as I was walking down the street, and noticed a rather upsetting headline as I was dusting myself off:

FOUR DEAD IN TRAGIC ELK HILLS FIRE
FAST-MOVING BLAZE CONSUMED HOUSE IN A MATTER OF MINUTES

A single-story home on Cedar Street burned to the ground early Thursday morning, killing homeowner Terri Larson, 41, her boyfriend Robert Green, 37, and Larson’s two children, Rebecca, 12, and James, 18. Larson and her children were pronounced dead on the scene, and Green was taken to Elk Hills General Hospital in critical condition and later died of his injuries. The cause the house fire is still under investigation.

In case you can’t make an educated guess, my name is James Larson, and I believe the rest of this little origin story is fairly self-explanatory.

Over the course of the next 200-odd years, I lived life exactly as you’d expect an indestructible man-child to. I traveled the world, had unlikely adventures with unlikely companions, loved various exotic women in various exotic locales, and abused every substance and power tool under the sun. I
never did figure out why I can’t die, but I was perfectly happy goofing around and enjoying my unlimited time. I retained my uncanny ability to get myself gruesomely injured in any and all situations, but that didn’t matter much to me because my wounds healed so quickly—I can recover from a decapitation in less than ten minutes and regenerate all four limbs in under an hour. The possibilities are endless. But sadly, I came to find that immortality isn’t all unreasonable doses of cough syrup and driving motorcycles over cliffs, which brings us back to the unimaginable terror I mentioned earlier.

On April 2nd, 2234, I was sailing between Fiji and Australia. I was alone, but it was no big deal; I was a fairly experienced sailor at that point, and I obviously didn’t have to worry about running out of rations or anything. But alas, this is me we’re talking about, and at the time I was long overdue for one thing or another going horribly, horribly wrong. About one day out, on a perfectly clear morning, this almost unrealistically huge storm popped up out of nowhere and hit me smack in the face, obliterating my shitty little boat and leaving me floating in the middle of the open ocean. At this point, I wasn’t terribly scared. I had a bit of rubble to cling to and, as long and tiring as it would be, I could manage to swim until I hit land. That’s what I thought, but I was forgetting that Mother Nature is filled with a passionate hatred for me and all that I stand for. About ten minutes later, I got struck by lightning (for the fifth time in my life) and was knocked out cold.

When I came to, my world was pitch black, and I couldn’t tell which direction was up. I knew I was underwater, because my lungs were about to explode and my eyes felt all salty. I tried to swim, but I wasn’t even sure I was moving, so I drifted there, terrified, trying in vain to get my bearings. I was surrounded by invisible creatures, brushing past me, swimming by and disturbing the water, but for a long time, I didn’t catch anybody’s attention. I was just starting to calm down and collect myself when it started. I felt something touch my left arm, gently at first, but then it tightened its grip and twined its way up around my shoulder and neck, digging into my skin with surprisingly sharp little suction cups. Another long, rubbery arm wrapped itself around me and another, until I was hopelessly tangled up in the thing. I thrashed, clawed, and silently screamed myself bloody, but this particular cephalopod was way stronger than anything without a backbone should ever be. It pulled me towards it, and I felt something razor-sharp rip into my side, tearing away a big hunk of flesh from between my lowest rib and my hipbone. I was punching and tearing, desperately searching for a weak point, and finally, my hand made contact with something big, smooth, and soft. I dug my fingernails in and pulled, leaving deep ravines on the surface of what must’ve been the eye. The thing yanked away from me, peeled off its appendages, and pushed away in the opposite direction as I tried to not think about the thick gobs of squid eye goo that were embedded under my fingernails.

After that, it was all downhill. I still wasn’t clear on which way was which, but I got the sense that I was sinking because I could feel the pressure starting to increase. As I descended, the entire population of the Pacific Ocean decided to meet and greet with me. A jellyfish approximately the size of a grand piano floated past at one point, running its tentacles over me until I felt like I’d just crawled out of an industrial bug zapper. Something with more teeth than I thought necessary bit down and chomped me in half like I was made of butter. A massive school of tiny monsters with mouthfuls of needles swarmed me and stripped off most of what was left behind. This cycle repeated itself countless times as my bones reappeared and my flesh knitted itself back over them faster than the creatures could eat it. I don’t know how long this ordeal lasted, but it was hell. As if that weren’t enough, it wasn’t long before I started to feel the effects of the pressure. The sea was weighing down on me, threatening to crush me, and then sure enough, there was a sudden, painful pop, a wet implosion, like a moldy floorboard giving in. As I felt my forehead dig through my fish-nibbled brain and scrape the back of my skull, I finally understood just how much trouble I was in. Crammed and crunched into an unrecognizable shape, I began to fall faster.

When at last I hit the bottom, I was almost relieved. Sure, I was in constant agony and trapped in an unfathomably horrible situation with no chance of escape or rescue, but at least now I had some
sense of direction. As the sea floor settled around me, I noticed that it was in motion. Sharp things, squirming things, gooey things, burrowing things, all having a massive undersea rave beneath the twisted pain bundle that used to be my back, and somehow, even in the state I was in, I felt a familiar lump rise in the back of my throat and realized that I was still ticklish. I was fairly sure that most of the tendons in my right arm were intact at the moment, so to distract myself from said tickle, I tried to lift my fingers, to move a little just to see if I could, but it was no use. I was completely pinned. The tiny creatures were now crawling over, under, and in me.

Of course, there's no way for me to keep track of time, but I think by now I've been down here longer than I was up there. That's a pretty awful thought, isn't it? I've now spent most of my life in utter darkness, crushed into a warped meatwad by several miles' worth of seawater, getting eaten alive over and over again by invisible things that probably look like they came from outside our solar system. I suppose that, with my luck, I would get trapped in some nasty situation eventually, but sweet Jesus, I never dreamed of this. Oddly enough, the experience has actually caused me to believe in some kind of higher power, because there is no way that nature alone could be so ugly towards one guy. I must've been a mass-murderer who ate puppies for breakfast in a past life to deserve this. At this point, I'm praying for mercy in the form of some kind of catastrophic cosmic event that will blast the planet to smithereens, or better yet, just dry up all its bodies of water. It's going to happen at some point, right? There's no way that this stupid little puddle on this insignificant space rock can exist for all eternity, and I'd much rather be the last man on Earth than the only man at the bottom of the sea.

Remember the squishy clot-beast? Well, it's attached itself to me. God only knows what it's trying to accomplish. It might just be my imagination, but I think it's getting bigger. I can feel it, cold, slimy, and pulsing, covering most of my lower half now. There are more of those strange little feelers, too, worming around the cracks and spaces in my bones and in between the layers of what little skin and muscle I have left at the moment. I suppose it might not be the one original clot. Perhaps it attracted more of its kind because for whatever reason, my mangled body stood out as a fantastic place to live, or feed, or mate, or whatever it is these things do. Or alternatively, maybe it grows at an alarming rate when obtaining nutrients from the human femur. Whatever the case, I don't like it.

It's covering me completely now. I think it's only been a few hours since it first appeared. Before, I could occasionally feel the water rush by as something swam above me, but now the cold thing is smothering me, and all I can feel is a steady pulse and those slippery little feelers moving in and out and in and out. I've been trying to will myself to lose my mind, thinking that maybe if I try hard enough I can make myself believe that I'm in some other reality, one where I'm in one piece on dry land and there isn't a single drop of water in sight for miles around, but it just isn't happening. I'm too sane for my own good, and I'm at the bottom of the ocean, squished like a fly, enveloped in living, growing sea goop.

It's kind of funny, really. I spent all those years blindly charging headfirst into whatever danger presented itself because I knew I was invincible, and look where it's gotten me now. I guess that's what I get for being cocky. At the very least, I suppose this may serve as a lesson to any fellow immortals out there: be careful, okay? For the most part, try to live like a normal human. Avoid unnecessary risks. Don't jump into canyons, don't build do-it-yourself space crafts, and absolutely do not go sailing by yourself in an area devoid of humanity. Please, learn from my mistakes.

Sweet merciful baby Jesus crying in the manger, we're moving now. The mega-blob has taken control of my body and is driving me around like a toy car. I can feel us scraping along the sea floor, even through the layers of jelly covering me. James, we are most certainly not in Kansas anymore.

I've lost track of the remains of my body. As far as I can tell, I am the blob now. I can still feel the cold, though.

I want my mom. It's so cold down here.

I caught a fish with my feelers today. It struggled, but I won. I'm not cold anymore.
A leaf, shriveled with autumn, speared across his eyes. He plucked it into his palm and stared at it, watched it disintegrate like crumbs falling from dry bread; a heat gathered between his fingers, and the leaf began smoking. He clenched his fist. Ashes sprinkled to the floor.

“Fire,” he said, “is a dangerous thing.”

“My lord. My lord!” The innkeeper was shaking him. “You cannot stay, my lord. The Night King comes as we speak. The heavens curdle with smoke!” He kept glancing at the door, eyes wide. He was a skinny man, faintly mustached, with a head like an oval.

Selavin cocked his head. “Rest assured, good host. There’s nothing to fear. Have you my bow?”

“No, but—”

“Bring it here.”

The man’s eyes bulged, but he fled into a backroom, emerging with a worn-looking hunter’s bow. “My lord,” he whispered. “You cannot fight the Night King with this—”

Selavin hissed seven words. The Mirage fell from the bow as he took it, exposing silver wood, a wicked-black string.

The innkeeper cried out, stumbling backwards. “No,” he said. “You cannot—this isn’t—” He fell against the back wall, chairs tumbling out around him. “Falconsflight?” he whispered.

Selavin smiled. “Call me Sel.” With that, he was gone from the inn.

The innkeeper was right: darkness smothered the heavens. He swore softly to himself. It would be no use calling the Birds here; all that ash would blind them. With one leap—a technique learned from the Silith’reen—he glided backwards onto the roof, drawing his bow, the charmed arrows appearing out of nothing, notched and ready. Black clouds rolled forth, unnatural as a necromancer’s curse, and beneath it he could see the Night King’s armies: a churning sea of armored slimes, mutated, glistening things with faces, each with three, or four, or five arms. A midnight chariot rose from the center, the Night King’s armor so black it was like he wore shadows. Selavin’s lips tightened. Fire, indeed, was dangerous. He pulled back on his bow, aimed carefully, stilled his breath as the Silith’reen had taught him, felt heat gather in a deadly aura around him, focused it into the tip of the arrow, which ignited in white flames.

“Die,” he whispered, letting go…

“—ven! Steven! The hell is this—”

He could not move. Sensations tumbled into his awareness. Something was lifted, pouring in painful light, as if he was in a coffin and the lid was being removed. A woman’s voice.

“Steven! Steven!” Angry, and—sobbing? “I’ve been looking—looking—looking for—”

A mechanical beep. Soft, warm air stroked his cheeks, summoning forth sudden nostalgia—the Windplain, he thought, but realized he did not know what that was. He blinked. His arms were laden with weariness. They were released, the box he’d been in lifted, dumping him out in a sprawling heap on the floor. He tried to stand but couldn’t. Something acrid tinged the air, making his nose twitch and his eyes water. The woman appeared out of a blur, grabbing his cheeks, nearly in hysterics, throwing her arms around his neck and squeezing tight.

“Damn that Dreamware!” she said, choking against him, crying into his neck. “Damn them to hell! Damn them!”
“Dreamware . . . ?” he mumbled. Strength dripped back into him. He pushed her off and stood. “Who are . . .” he began, and his eyes widened. “Jamie—!”

The image of a maiden in blue dress invaded, her hair glimmering moonlight, her palms cupped around a flower with a spell on her lips. It was gone and new thoughts, new perceptions overflowed his mind.

“How long was I—?” he said.
Jamie looked at him, eyes glistening. “Four years,” she whispered.

A horror fell in him.

“Four . . .” he said. “Four . . . years?”

Jamie had fallen to the floor, arms raised in desperate prayer. “Thank God I found you,” she said, “thank God, thank God—at least we can have this—this last moment together—”

“What?” said Steve. “This last—what are you saying, Jamie?”

She looked at him, her mouth opening. Her eyes were red, and tears snaked down her cheeks.

“It’s the Andercross!” she said. “Oh Steven, Steven—they took over when you left. They’re . . .” she tried to say more but burst into sobs, burying her face in her arms. Her voice became muffled and high-pitched. “We didn’t know—where you were! Not even me! Or Jeffrey!”

Steven stood and walked slowly to the door. “The Andercross,” he whispered. He pushed it open, stepping into warm daylight. Bright green hills rolled down and up, down and up; the occasional tree stood with the wind sifting its leaves. Dreamware huts, he remembered, were always tossed in the middle of nowhere. Wind flowed generously over his skin. The Andercross, enemies of the Jona—his people. He shuddered. What a king he was, leaving his people like that. A wave of sickening nausea rolled over him, bringing him to his knees in the supple dirt. “We were falling anyways,” he whispered. It had been too much. He’d needed escape. But four years . . . ?

The wind came again, only this time it lashed at him, singeing him with ash. He yelped. He looked up and for the first time saw an overcast of smoke closing in, a blackened sky tinged with red like a blacksmith’s forge. Andercross laserplanes darted in and out of the flames that rose from the earth. His eyes widened in horror. That acrid smell returned, stronger. Smoke. A wasteland lay before him, black and charred, rivers glistening with pollution, trees burning, and behind him, a utopia that was soon to be no more.

The wind let down, drawing with it a leaf, crumbling and burning, from the blackened land. His hand opened of its own accord.

The leaf glided onto his palm.
And the Geek Shall Inherit the Earth: Or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Comic-con
William Gentry
Bode Middle School
Humor
Josie Clark

In my experience as an investigative reporter, I have been to a wide variety of dangerous locales. My exposé of Kenyan bush-meat poaching had me shot at by corrupt government officials, stranded in the Quatari desert without food or water, and curled up inside the corpse of a deceased warthog for warmth in the cold Quatari nights. (It would have won a Pulitzer too, if those half-senile old men weren’t more concerned with “Professionalism” and “Credibility” and “Not making up fake adventures in fake deserts in a vain attempt at winning a Pulitzer” instead of the quality journalism you expect the Pulitzer to recognize.) But none of my adventures have prepared me for the horrors that would wait as close to home as San Diego.

ComicCon: the Mecca of every geek, nerd, and socially awkward teen to walk the Earth. Within the confines of the San Diego Convention Center lay 615,700 square feet of superheroes, science fiction, and more twenty-sided dice than I’m comfortable envisioning. It was founded in 1970 by Shel Dorf (I can easily imagine the playground taunts of “Smell Dork” that would push him to establish such an event), presumably because loneliness loves company. Since then, it has become the most popular convention of geekery in the world, with 130,000 people attending in 2010. That is 130,000 more people than I would imagine should attend a comic book expo.

My association with this hive of heroes and hobgoblins began innocently enough: After my return from “Kenya” (the Associated Press now requires me to put all my previous exploits in quotation marks), my “boss” (as if journalistic geniuses like myself could be said to have bosses), Eugene Dumble, came to me and asked, “Okay, the Pulitzer Commission has rightfully denied you an award. What do you do now?” Well, I hadn’t really thought about it. I had spent most of my short time trying to use my “bush-meat” stories to try and pick up women on the Lower East Side (let me just say: Manhattan women are harder to win than Pulitzers). Seeing my hesitation, he suggested San Diego. It’s at this point, you, dear reader, must understand one thing: Dumble is a boring, boring man, which makes it very easy to zone out when he is speaking to you, to not listen to what he’s really saying, to fantasize about the sandy beaches of San Diego (this may, incidentally, be how I ended up in “Kenya” when I was actually supposed to be covering a traffic jam on 5th Avenue). Well, it wasn’t until halfway through the flight that I fully realized that I was reporting on ComicCon. I can only assume it’s the same feeling a spider feels when he sees a copy of last month’s Good Housekeeping is hurtling towards his soft body: utter and complete panic, followed by accepting one’s fate, followed by a strong craving for airline peanuts—although the latter may be just me.

I had at least two things going for me: a hotel room and a press pass, both obtained by Mr. Dumble. Most hotels in San Diego were packed for the convention, and tickets were entirely sold out. I saw people living out of their cars those four days, a nest of soiled costumes and empty Ramen packages. I would pity them, but they’re the ones who chose to drive umpteen miles to live in geeky squalor.

My adventure began Thursday the eighteenth. The traffic jam was prolific, with license plates from every state, including District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and Alabama. I feel sorry for the poor San Diego citizen trying to get to work through this molasses of wheels and geeky bumper stickers (“My other car is the Enterprise”, “Honk for Alderaan”, “Will brake for Wonder Woman”, etc.). At its worst, the jam slowed to a crawl only comparable to a quadriplegic baby.

It was when I finally arrived at the convention center, however, that my breath was taken away. The place was packed. You couldn’t point to something cool without hitting one of the costumed
convention-goers. And speaking of the convention goers: they were in a Justice League of their own. Most, if not all, of the visitors had a... I'll call it a “unique” costume on. I would later learn that this was called cosplay (stemming, I assume, from nerds' love of both playing and the cosine trigonometric function). Occasionally I would see a fellow reporter, as bamboozled as I was by the bunches of Bilbos and Batmen. I would try to make contact, but we were rapidly swept away by the tide of sweaty geeklings moving to the next booth. When I was finally able to get next to a fellow immigrant to this strange land, he looked me in the eyes, said “Tell my wife...” before getting pushed headfirst into a booth of Green Lantern power rings. And so went day one.

The next day, Friday, Dumble had booked me tickets to an entire afternoon of panels. Panels at ComicCon are meetings in which a group of experts discuss a particular topic of geekdom. I didn’t know what to expect, but it wasn’t this. The first panel was titled “Hats in Science Fiction: A Retrospective” and discussed (as the name would suggest) hats in science fiction. Most people spend their Fridays going out with friends, or finishing up extra work, or going to parties; I spend mine listening to a group of supernerds arguing over the role of fezzes in modern fandoms. I don’t think I took anything away from this, except that the Doctor Who Christmas special “Sayonara Sombrero” was critically acclaimed for its depiction of ethnic holiday traditions. Whatever that means. The rest of my morning was this, over and over again, only with different topics, each more time-consuming and tedious than the last.

Saturday was the first day I could actually do something press-exclusive: a press conference with Shel Dorf. I suppose the best thing about this interview would be that I could finally meet other press members, whom up to this point I had only seen trampled or crushed into Green Lantern displays. Naturally, we all shared stories before Dorf arrived. One woman (I believe from the Picayune Times, or maybe the Albuquerque Lampshade... something along those lines) was accidentally locked inside the women’s restroom. It was five hours before anyone found her. Once the conference was underway, most of the questions were along the lines of “Why would you make this squalid hellhole?” or “What’s in store for this squalid hellhole?” I, being the intrepid bastion of the fifth estate I am, naturally asked the only unique question: “Were you ever referred to as ‘Smell Dork’?” At this, Dorf got a misty, faraway look in his eyes, as a most polite security guard led me out of the room. This wouldn’t be my last encounter with nerd law.

Sunday was the day you, dear reader, probably know most about, as it was plastered across media outlets under the headline “Reporter goes berserk at ComicCon!” First off, I did not “go berserk;” I simply threw a couple chairs and screamed a few choice words before being put under arrest and checked for drugs. If you, dear reader, will imagine the absolute stress of ComicCon, as you go to yet another panel, or see yet another exhibit, then it becomes quite clear how one could run wildly around, tearing off masks and yelling “GET A LIFE” into the faces of panicked nerds as they ran off, or, in one instance, attempted to fire their blasters as me. Additionally, it becomes reasonable to envision someone could stand atop a podium, pushing aside its current occupant, in order to rally my fellow bedraggled reporters to strike down the geek establishment that permeates modern society. It was at this point I believe I began alluding to some sort of ComicCon-Freemason conspiracy and accused former President Bill Clinton of being a lizard person. I want to make clear: I was severely sleep deprived, and I had taken my very first sip of energy drink just that morning. Long story short, I soon began hunting for gasoline in a vain attempt of cleansing the building with a baptism of fire.

On the bright side, I’m certainly not covering ComicCon ever again.
Waking up

She woke early once,
as rain thrummed and
the softly open window breathed
faded velvet light
on the two of them.
Lay and watched
her friend’s pale face
stripped ivory-bare by sleep,
framed by the avalanching sheets.

They tilted
through the rain-soaked roof
into the translucent clouds,
wet light dimly pooling
in every angle.

Innocent
as two girls asleep,
spinning slowly under the arms
of the blue ceiling fan.

I see you, Anorexic.

Alley-cat ribs,
jutting hips,

gaunt bones grind,
you’re caving in.
Loose leggings fold like
hanging skin
and one insect hand
gestures as you grin--

a ghastly,
death-skull snarl.
Turn your sunken face
on me as
slouching, you pace past,
loose-jointed muscles
devoured,
cannibalized.
Your cat-eyes
smile slantwise.

You stopped feeling hungry
long ago.

My sister

My sister wears a golden necklace—
a delicately engraved coin
strung on a slender chain.

She found it the other day,
lying where she’d dropped it nine years back
in an old box she forgot about
and says she now remembers
a relative from far away
—China perhaps—
who knew the meaning of the pendant’s faint inscriptions
and wrote them for us.

But the meaning is lost,
and the soft-gold characters are blurred and faded
like oft-recalled memories.

My sister wears a chain of Chinese gold around her neck.
It leaps curving upwards from her throat,
twisting and flickering
reflecting myriad points of light from the winter sun
as we run and laugh,
chasing the wild geese.
Lost Memories
Haley Green
Bode Middle School
Poetry
Josie Clark

We sing for the lost memories.

Remembering all of the laughter that lit up the world with smiles,
and the tears that would flood our minds,
drowning us.

In the warmth of the air,
the flowers peek from their hidden shells.
Those were the ones that always had the best scent.
Oh, the sweet perfume,
We would dance in the field, along with the aroma of those flowers.

I envy their perfection,
as did you.

The warmth of the summer sun kissed our skin,
Crisping us to a soft caramel shade,
 warming our bodies
 until refreshed by the cool chemical reduced pool water,
and the tangy lemonade.

Soon enough the air gets colder.
Cold enough to make the trees sad,
they turn their leaves from the spunky jade,
to the oranges and yellows of their sadness.

The trees can no longer keep their leaves,
shedding them onto the floor below them.
It’s sad,
yet so beautiful at the same time.

In a split second, we will be dancing with the fallen leaves of that past year,
Making memories that fill our lives with joy.

But in the blink of an eye,
the leaves are hidden under their blanket of ivory,
the skies are heavy, shedding new flakes of white onto our skin,
losing it’s caramel shade.

You fall asleep that afternoon,
When you wake up,
the flowers are back.
Dancing with the wind,
I call your name to join me with the flowers.
And we sing for the new memories.
“You have five minutes,” she told the class. Heads bobbed and responses were shushed with a finger raised to the lips. The class scattered throughout the library. Sydney Reynolds immediately raced towards the fiction section in the corner. Her feet thudded against the carpet, and her hair swished behind her as she scanned over the bolded letters painted on the shelves. A-B, C-E...

She darted between the C-E and the F-G shelves and power slid down onto her knees. Dragging herself forward with her hands, she took in a whiff of the crisp aroma of paper mixed with the rustic scent of wood and ink. Her hands began to paw a row of books as she knelt in front of the shelf. She cocked her head in surprise as a dim light began to show between the books.

Gently she shoved a few books onto the carpet beside her. She barely glanced at their covers as she squatted down and stared between the books. The dim light rapidly grew as bright as the afternoon sun. It glared in her eyes and cast sunspots across her hazy vision. Sydney winced and instantly pulled back. She sat, blinking her eyes before returning to get a glimpse of the world behind the books. Flattening her chest against the floor and prepping herself with deep breaths, she slowly pulled herself under the shelf.

The light continued to expand like a solar flare before diminishing with a sharp crack. Left in its glowing wake was a world of white and a single piece of paper. Words were scrawled across it in bolded, black letters. Sydney scanned the paper, making out a word here and there until they intertwined to form a single sentence. “And the fairy,” she whispered, “leapt into the air and burst into a shining star.”

The paper began to curl and fold, shrinking and expanding like invisible hands were yanking on it this way and that. And then, such as an origami creation finally reveals itself on the final fold, the paper whirled itself around to let the young girl view its magnificence. It began to flutter and dart up into the air, resembling a pair of tiny fairy wings.

They danced and fluttered this way and that until they were just an untraceable dot on the skyline. Sydney smiled and ducked back into the library. Darkness fell around her, and the quiet clicking of keys could once again be heard. Sydney glanced around before hungrily grabbing a book off a shelf and shoving it into the glowing void. She eagerly stuck her head back underneath the shelf to watch the transformation begin.

The book had landed on its back. Pages were rapidly flipping until it froze, as if enchanted by a sorcerer’s spell. A sentence printed in bold letters was in the center of the page. “And as the sand swirled around the cloaked rider, he wondered if he could make it any further,” Sydney read.

The page tore itself free of its binds and wriggled in the searing light. The edges shredded to form tiny scraps of paper, which churned, resembling a wind storm, as the leftover piece of paper in the middle curled into a camel. A paper rider materialized out of the sand and climbed atop the camel’s back. Together they slowly rode underneath the burning sun until they were just a dot on the horizon. The sand cleared away, leaving a blank slate.

“Wow!” With a smile pressed onto her beaming face, she scooted back from underneath the shelf. The dim lighting of the library once again took over the atmosphere, but Sydney hardly noticed. She snatched a book from the pile beside her and flipped it open. Any warning in her mind had hushed itself, and all of her conscious watched in agony as her fingers ripped a chunk of pages from the book’s spine. The book groaned as Sydney tossed it aside and flung the pages into the void.

Although she was already eager to see the transformation, the words on the pages only deepened her awe. “The princess gracefully bowed to the prince before running out of the ball room.”
Her eyes darted to the next piece of paper as the first page began to take shape. “He followed the sound of her footsteps until he came to a set of stairs leading down to a vast stretch of carriages.” The second paper began to metamorphosize. Sydney’s sky blue irises dancing, she read aloud the next message. “The princess’s glittering gown was no longer shining; in fact it was a cloth of rags, and a beautiful slipper was left behind as she tore down the stairs.” The next page. “She arrived at the home of her notorious step-sisters ten minutes short of midnight.” And the final sentence. “The prince inquired at every home in the kingdom until his search was complete, reuniting with his love.”

A delicate paper princess with a sparkling gown of ink bowed to an equally becoming prince formed of words. They stared intently into each other before joining hands and waltzing in the light like a pair of playful butterflies. The third paper morphed into a carriage, watching as the princess tumbled from the sky. Along her descent, a tiny slipper tore itself free. The paper princess crinkled as she hesitantly glanced back at it before surging towards the carriage. The prince stood observing the calamitous scene, his regal mouth agape as the carriage rolled out of sight. The fourth page stretched itself as high as it could reach before bending forward into a small cottage, complete with monochromatic shutters and a door formed out of differently sized words.

The fifth divided into two hideous step-sisters and the princess’s ghastly stepmother. Sydney cast a sympathetic sigh at the princess trapped high in her bedroom. Her shoulders shook, and her head hung despairingly in her hands. The princess could hear the familiar, comforting sound of the prince’s graceful footsteps downstairs as he watched the two step-sisters try on the slipper. The princess’s shoulders began to shake even harder, and she walked around her room in no apparent direction, banging into walls and sobbing all the more. All those downstairs froze. After a moment, the prince’s arm folded and a finger protruded from his hand. It pointed upstairs, and the prince began to climb up to the princess’s bedroom. His hand grazed across her door, and her head shot up. The only sound was that of crinkling paper as the prince cautiously turned the door knob and entered the princess’s bed chamber.

She stared up into his eyes, not even daring to speak a word. The prince held his hands behind his back. Watching. Waiting.

The princess stood. The prince tilted his head and revealed his hand’s contents. A shining, darling paper glass slipper. He knelt down and slid it onto the princess’s dainty foot. His hands froze in shock, and slowly, he met the princess’s gaze.

The scene began to fold in on itself. The house and the step-sisters and the lovely princess grew smaller and smaller until there was only a bulging, tiny square of paper remaining in the light. It ripped itself into shreds and continued to divide until all that was left was empty air.

Sydney scooted back from underneath the shelf. Her eyes were wide, and she sat in silent awe as the light behind the bookcase slowly faded away.

“What a mess you’ve made!” She heard her teacher scold.

“I didn’t mean to make a mess!” Sydney protested. “Honest! I just wanted to see the magic!”

The teacher’s pointy foot tapped impatiently against the ground. “What magic?”

“The library’s magic!” Sydney flung down her hands in exasperation. “Can I check out a book now? Please?”

The librarian, who was standing next to the teacher, chuckled to herself. “My, my... I haven’t heard a child call this library ‘magic’ since before the TV.” The librarian turned to Sydney’s teacher. “Let her check out a book.” The teacher sighed, and Sydney graciously smiled up at them.

“Can I check out Cinderella?”
Contradictions: Exposing the Raw Character
Samantha Huffman
Raymore-Peculiar Senior High School
Persuasive Writing
Jeannie Frazier

In every era of human life the raw character of every person, of friends, leaders, even celebrities, has remained an unyielding illusion. This uncertain grasp of relative character induces difficulty in capturing a definite state of mind along with an individual’s true, and often unstated, values. These values, actions, words, and interactions, though reviewed and recorded by the surrounding public, only engender another level of confusion in that they fail to complement each other. It is in these contradictions that the true character of an individual can be found. The only fashion to know the full heart of an individual is to see the dark corners where conflict and selfishness arise. People’s true desires and beliefs are printed plain and clear in the way their words contradict their actions, in the way their values struggle under the smallest of stress factors, and simply through the treatment of relationships said to be held dear.

Words, in the realm of theater, are nothing more than symbols on a page directing the actor or actress in speech and basic robotic movement, thus, providing that it is the acting style and emotion that adds emphatic meaning to the words and creates a unique scenario. The same is true for everyday reality where actions stand above anything that could be said in the whim of a fleeting moment. When vocalization does not fall into step with the adjacent activity, a small voice can be heard yelling from the pure desire of the speaker’s existence, working desperately to achieve its personal goals rather than uphold the acceptable image. History provides an illustration through the Spanish conquering of the South American indigenous tribes. Their words stated the religious goals, opportunities, and power while their actions portrayed the guiltless greed that led to brutal hostility. Though an extreme example, this piece of history shows the human nature in one crude aspect in that what is said, spreading faith and building opportunities in this case, does not align with what was done, stealing and killing for riches. The Spanish conquistadors contradicted themselves by stunting their religious example with want of earthly treasures. Human nature is normally selfish in its attempts to set itself up for success riddled with longevity, thus allowing opportunities to contradict ourselves on a frequent basis. This occurrence leads to the compromise of the outward shield we use to hide our delicate reality on the inside.

In modern American society stress is a normal whirlwind of emotion involved in completing mundane tasks. Deadlines barrel closer with increasing speed, making it likely for corners to be cut on morals and fine lines of acceptable judgment smudged to uphold the outward appearance of independence and outstanding ability in accomplishment. This induces questioning of the morals and values of those who cheat to finish their work to simply appear self-sufficient; herein resides the contradiction between what is believed and what is compromised. The brain is undoubtedly affected by stress, and the brain houses our behavior control center and acts as an opening for the reality inside to shine through. The tension of these trials helps to peel away part of the mask to reveal what pure instincts lie beneath that persistently beg to be given voice. Survival is a key instinct but the character quality lies in the actions taken to achieve this survival in society more commonly than survival in life threatening situations. When actions are taken sloppily and without thought, there is an easy way to catch a partial glimpse of genuine character. This true character affects every aspect of life and reveals itself by means of interactions with situations and people in proximity.

Love is a prominent aspect of every relationship, simply existing in the smallest of doses to help grow lasting bonds between people. These relationships experience contradiction in the form of how the involved companions continually conduct themselves towards each other in relation to emotions held within the camaraderie. A person’s character is far more vulnerable in this state than in actions,
words, or stressed values due to the watchful individual on the other end of the bond who notes every action, or lack of taken in the relationship and who hears every spoken thought, committing it to memory. They have a direct link with information on the thoughts feelings, and any actions that their pals employ to reveal themselves piece by piece. Many love stories exist in which one individual commits an act of betrayal towards the other in order to achieve a given factor relevant to the story, and the attitude and desires are immediately made known to the betrayed friend. A statement of love remains a statement until proven with sincere choices or disproven through a contradicting choice. The shallowness of an individual’s heart is exposed in these conflicts, revealing true colors of ambition, integrity, or the lack thereof.

In a society where being yourself is praised as the key to ultimate freedom, the truth is often hidden, buried in costumes of smiling faces and colorful arrangements of well-to-do characters who flaunt the ability to succeed. Freedom lies in discovering character, whether it is within yourself or the undisguised character of those around you. Once the desires of our deepest most secret thoughts are made known, then there is no hiding; there are no secrets, and our characters are laid out in their simple imperfection. The only reasonable way to trace the edges of the existing character is to assess and closely examine the ridges of contradiction in the flawless disguises worn as protection. Contradictions identify one being from the next, and, though the situations surrounding these contradictions often resemble unsightly conflicts, they assemble in the form of individual beauty, the inner beauty defined as disposition.

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How We Heal

1

The light bounced off the cherry casket
And split each broken face in two.
Speeches floated through their ears.
The air took on a murky hue.

That night, through tears, she’d drawn a flower
Upon her wrist in bold black lines.
But one day’s sweat and touch had smeared
Away all of the small design.

And so, atop the cloudy blotches
She sketched the petals out once more.
Same spot, color, lines, dots and shading
Exactly as it was before.

And when it wiped away with time
She felt guilty of a great crime.
Each time it stained, she gave it life
Marking herself with constant strife.

2

The clock struck midnight, he walked out
And down the path he’d known for years.
Towards the tunnel and through the muck
To glaring lights and screeching gears.

The speaker blared, wind flew out,
The station filled with a soft thrum.
He sat upon a rusted bench
And let his heart pound like a drum.

One kid stepped out, on the platform
Drunk, broken and out of place.
He passed the old man, looking down.
The old man barely saw his face.
He shook his head, and closed his eyes.
He whispered to himself, “next time.”
The speaker blared, he sat up straight
And settled in the bench to wait.

3

Big bright lights and smiling faces
Flowers, beeps, white coats, walls, clipboards.
Rushing, talking, whispering fast.
Beside her bed a mass of cords.

They wheeled her through the tiled halls
To air and grass and soft green trees
They barked at her, and she sat smiling,
And then they dragged her back with ease.

She hid a leaf inside her pocket,
And that night stuck it to her wall.
When no one thought to take it back,
She knew that she could take them all.

With each old leaf that dried and crumbled
Into browns and blacks that tumbled
Down to the tiled floor with grace,
A beaming green one took its place.

4

He sat in the chair placed furthest back,
Twisting an object in his hands.
His dark gray suit crinkled all over
Dusted with mud and specks of sand.

A piece of plastic, a small capsule
That once carried a children’s toy.
It scratched and fogged and smudged all over,
With cracks that threatened to destroy.

A piece of plastic, nothing better
Hidden with him every day
Empty, useless, the small reminder
Of all the things that did not stay.

He turned it left, he turned it right.
He took in each new gleam of light.
He opened it and looked inside
To nothing. Empty. Open wide.
Chance Encounters

A rushing stream and rocky shore
A man they’d never seen before
A twinkle in his light blue eye
A brief hello, a first goodbye.
A dark hallway, a darker face
A woman wearing too much lace
A laugh, a touch, a fleeting look
An ode to that which he just took.
A child running through the trees
A light drizzle, a gentle breeze
A bottle crashing at his feet
A fat man yelling on the street
A little face, a smaller hand
A reach up to a bright blond strand
A squeaking laugh, a closed-eyed smile
A moment to make life worthwhile

A woman with a tired gaze
A world fogged over in a haze.
A beaming grin and squinting eyes
A first look at the sunny skies.
A pounding throb inside his head
A quick insult, a look of dread
A chase, a toss, a booming yell
A musty, old, and ugly smell.

A man wearing a suit, a price
A smart, sly glance, a heart of ice
A night lost in a world too dark
A life trapped in a world too stark.

A group of kids across the stream
A hatching of another scheme
A moment where he wondered why
A brief hello, a last goodbye.

An Essay

I wrote an essay about the time my friend tried to kill herself.
When she sliced her wrists to rubble
With a rusty old razorblade,
Torn from its plastic pink handle.
A brand called Majesty that cleans up every corner
And leaves you smooth as silk.
I wrote about her lying there
Submerged in salmon water
That grew to something darker.
To the red smeared on the porcelain,
Dripped onto the tiles,
Brushed against the curtain,
Seeping out her broken skin and fading
Forever lost into the lukewarm pool she lay in.
I wrote about her, cold and naked,
Withering out of existence
Alone with the buzz of one fluorescent light bulb
Until her brother burst in screaming.
I wrote about her sleeping in the hospital,
Wires poked through every orifice,
Fed with tubes and always watched.
With her wrists patched back together,
But hidden by her sheets.
I wrote about how it hurt to see her.
I wrote about what I could have done.
I wrote about how I felt, and I wrote about how I changed,
And I gave it to my English teacher.
And my English teacher gave me an A.
Author’s Statement

I can’t remember a time when I didn’t write. One of my earliest memories is of me sitting at a picnic table on my family’s property, pen and notebook in hand. I write to myself, about my day and my future. I write to teachers, in essays and assignments. I write to fandoms, in fanfiction. I find creative writing the most enjoyable because I can control what happens and what doesn’t happen. The world is easier for me to understand when I write; writing is one of the few things that I can control, especially with adulthood, a wide gaping abyss, in my very near future.

I hope that when people read my writing, they continue the story in their minds. One of my favorite things to do with my favorite stories and authors is to go beyond what the author writes. My favorite part of being a fan of a story is “headcanons,” where fans dream up their own input to a story, and that’s what I want people to do with mine. I want readers to be walking to class or driving home and thinking about a character that I created, to understand my characters and feel for them, to love and cherish them.

I chose the works that I submitted because the characters are developed and have storylines that can be continued. I think that the stories I chose can make a reader think about a character and want to read more and learn about a character’s life, their past and future.

Poetry

The Day I Lost My Mind

The day I lost my mind
was the day she lost her breath.

The time we went to the beach
shortly after she was diagnosed.
She lost the hearty laughter in her throat
and the warmth of her suntanned skin.

The time I introduced her to my parents
a month before I proposed.
She lost the steady handshake to my father
and the soft hug to my mother.

The time her hair started to fall out
and Locks of Love came around.
She lost the first vibrant smile in weeks
and the brightening of her paled eyes when she looked in the mirror.

The time I sat down on one knee
three months before she was diagnosed.
She lost the slow tears streaking down her cheeks and the shaking of her hand when I slid the ring down her thin finger.

The time her Make a Wish came true and we went to see her favorite band in Chicago. She lost the swing of her hips and the stomp of her feet and the clap of her hands.

The day she lost her breath was the day I lost my mind.

The time she wanted to go to the beach and I jumped in the car in seconds. I lost the sight of her toes sinking in the hot sand next to mine and the taste of her salty lips against my own.

The time she met my parents and she was approved in minutes. I lost the feel of her hip jutting into mine and her tough hand in a celebratory high five.

The time she was getting better, slowly, and then suddenly her hair was gone. I lost my fingers sliding through her dark tresses and pulling curlers loose.

The time I felt the ring box beating a heavy kick drum against my thigh through three weeks and twelve dinners and four movies and six walks on the beach. I lost the whispered “yes, yes, of course” and the new, cool metal on her finger like ice against my sweaty hand.

The time Make a Wish took us to Chicago and she didn’t think about the cancer during the weekend. I lost the squeak of her voice, hoarse from singing, and the nervous tap of her fingers before the concert.

The day I lost my mind was the day we lost our breath.

Flash Fiction

Coffin

Sunlight shines into the abandoned house’s windows, dust sprinkles littering the golden streaks. The house is an old, classic Victorian, but it doesn’t show its years. The windows are large and cleaned of ages of dust and the soft white paint is freshly dried against the dimmed sun of the morning. Surrounding the Victorian is a forest, just as charming as the house, filled with decrepit oak and
evergreen trees where birds croon carols and squirrels chip away at their nuts. The forest is full of life, blooming and thriving in the sweet spring.

The house is full of death.

One lone room is occupied, four boxes lined against the wall, each large enough for a body. It’s as if there are four thin beds ready for a good night’s rest. The boxes are centuries old, but just as the house, they look nearly new. Streaks of sunlight beam across the thick oak of the boxes, but here there is no dust muddling the stale air.

He calls them boxes, but they’re coffins, really. Expensive, well taken care of coffins that have never lain underneath even a centimeter of dirt in centuries past.

Coffin number one: Mother. Witch.
Coffin number two: Oldest brother. Traitor.
Coffin number three: Middle brother. Collateral damage.
Coffin number four: Youngest brother. Blockhead.

Number three is particularly cleaner than the others. The oak is a tad shinier and free of scratches and smudges that slightly cheapen the others.

Inside the third coffin, the middle brother lays in his finest suit, colored dark charcoal grey, paired with a striped tie. There’s not a dark hair out of place, nor a blemish on his regal face. His hands lay crossed at his wrists, exquisite cufflinks gleaming at the ends of his sleeves. Except for the daggered part he is ready to woo his beloved.

The dagger sticks firmly inside the middle of his chest, only the hand guard protruding. There’s no blood nor a stench wafting from his wound. His other brothers and mother’s daggers are stuck crudely through their hearts, dipped in one of their few weaknesses. They feel the sluggish flames lick through their bodies, even in desiccation. But this brother, no, towards this brother he shows mercy.

If he was not impaled, the brother would feel the soft confines of the coffin, the cloudy silk lining the sides, and the small pillow cradling his neck. He wouldn’t feel the pain of his wound but for a minute before it would heal.

If he was not impaled, the collateral damage would feel his brother’s guilt radiating off of him, a black spot on a pirate’s hand, as he enters the room.

The undead brother holds in one hand a soft blood bag. He tosses it slowly from hand to hand, his feet treading lightly on the pristine oak floors under the coffin with wolfish grace. One last time, he weighs his options and rests a hand on the coffin. His palm is directly above the dagger under the closed coffin.

Before he can convince himself otherwise, the brother sighs roughly and brings his free hand to finger the leather necklace hanging off of his collarbone. Clenching his strong jaw, he shoves the top of the oak coffin to the floor with one smooth hand.

He wraps his hand around the unpolished silver handle of the dagger and pulls it out smoothly with practiced ease. The clasp of the blood bag is broken easily and he pushes it against his brother’s thin lips, tipping his head back and forcing the blood into his veins.

The brother slumps to the ground next to the coffin, pushing his hands into the pockets of his worn leather jacket. He waits, birds singing and leaves dragging across the porch. It’s only minutes before the telltale sound of a gasping breath, unneeded for all of eternity, emerges from the coffin.

He jumps to his feet nimbly, and clear blue orbs meet darkened-by-thirst brown ones.

They stare at each other before the resurrected brother parts his pale mouth.

“Hello, brother.”
The slap of the rubber, the pinch of the needle, the sigh of relief.
Logan leans back in his patrol car, the heroin seeping through his veins. His eyes closed, he tips his blonde head against the headrest. The rush of blood in his head clouds the noisy house before him, the children causing havoc as their mother yells after them.
The fix calms his need, and fingers shaking and left leg jiggling, Logan exits his patrol car and enters the disarrayed house.
His wife, Meredith, has a basket of dirty socks against one hip and the baby resting on the other. A wide smile graces her pink lips, and she visibly sighs. The laundry drops to the hardwood floor with a thunk, and Meredith engulfs Logan in a tight hug, the baby cooing happily at the sight of her father.
“Finally. Scott and Avery been a handful today; can you play that insufferable game with them? I’m about to start dinner,” she says, pulling Anna’s legs through a high chair.
Logan nods slowly and pulls off his work belt; he doesn’t check if the safety is on when he slides his 9mm out of the holster, and he leaves the gun on the kitchen counter. The twin boys are playing some football videogame, Scott playing with a green and yellow team, and Avery using an orange and blue team. Slouching into the leather couch, Logan grabs the extra controller. He joins Scott’s team.
“Hey, Dad,” Avery says, bouncing on the balls of his feet. “Did you hear about Peyton? I can’t wait until the game; we’re going to kick some serious butt!”
Logan nods along and agrees, though he hasn’t read about the quarterback and doesn’t know who’s playing on Sunday. Or is the game on Monday?
“Dad, Dad, Dad, guess what?” Scott’s paused the game, and he’s standing in front of Logan, eyes wide and smile bright.
“What?”
“Today I got an A on my science test! You know how I’m sorta bad at it? Mom helped me study!”
From the kitchen, Meredith says, “You’re welcome, Scottie! I told you you could do it.”
“Thanks, Mom. And today,” Scott pauses to wipe his nose on his sleeve. “Today we learned long di . . . Um, what was it called, Mom?”
“Long division, baby. Di-vi-sion.”
“Yeah, division! And Mrs. Pickerson said that I was the bestest at it!”
“That’s great, buddy.”
Scott grins softly, and Avery stands, pushing his brother out of the way.
“It’s just best, stupid. That’s why I’m the best at spelling, and you’re the dumbest!”
“Boys!” their mother yells at them. Logan rubs the side of his head.
The boys finish their game, and their mother announces dinner. The twins rush to the sink, washing their hands quickly; Logan sighs and stands slowly, shuffling his feet to the kitchen table. Dinner is a quick affair. In between conversation with their mother, the twins shovel hamburger into their mouths. The baby coos and smashes the puréed mush of carrots in her hands. Logan doesn’t pay much attention to his family; his fingers shake, and his left leg jiggles while he eats small bites of green beans.
He and Meredith put the kids to bed just as timely as dinner, and the couple finds themselves in bed before nine. Meredith falls to sleep when she pulls the duvet over her shoulders, exhausted from playing mother. Logan finds himself trapped by her arm, her right laid across his shoulders. Logan rubs
the side of his head and heaves a breath. His wife stirs but doesn't wake, and Logan slides out from underneath her arm.

The slap of the rubber, the pinch of the needle, the sigh of relief.
Logan slumps in his patrol car and leans his head against the headrest. He looks into the house and imagines his wife and children dreaming.
The slap of the rubber, the pinch of the needle, the sigh of relief.
Logan's thumb presses against the needle. His fingers shake, and his left leg jiggles.
The first time I heard the name, Michael Renwick, floating up from a nearby conversation, I was too overwhelmed with Juicy Couture, homework, and the impossible seventh-grade goal of pleasing everyone.

Then, when I became a new member of the National Junior Honor Society, I was drawn into the skeptical conversations of the conceited literati, who often moved in packs. Someone with a pitchy voice chirped from behind, “You know, Michael got elected as president of NJHS.”

I could feel the shifty eyes and the uncomfortable silence around me. They were all waiting for the alpha to speak. She was a girl with chestnut hair and a protruding nose, dressed in a prim, robin’s egg blue sweater and a pearl necklace. “He only got chosen ‘cuz everyone feels bad for him.”

I remained silent. Who was Michael Renwick? What was wrong with him?

In an effort to please my parents, I had signed up for a video journalism class, one credit of the necessary three to graduate middle school. We spent hours and hours dissecting articles and sat through presentations on Edward R. Morrow and Diane Sawyer that droned on and on.

When eighth grade rolled around, I found myself in yet another video journalism class, a level up from the previous one. Mrs. Freese had coaxed me into enrolling by promising more “hands-on” activities.

One day, as part of our interview unit, she passed around a small wicker basket, full of little, folded-up pieces of paper. “I have here the names of possible interviewees. Each pair will choose one.” She paused. “No looking.”

The basket circulated around the room. I watched as my partner Ally, a big-boned girl with long brown hair, rooted around for the name of someone charming and attractive, her hand finally emerging with a small slip. Her perpetually tired eyes bulged as she unfolded the paper. She looked at me and mouthed the name: Michael Renwick.

It wasn’t until a couple days before the interview that I realized the urgent need to prepare questions. After talking to a few of his classmates, I was amazed at what I had learned. Michael was an honor student, often lauded for his work ethic. He was also a talented clarinetist and singer, having performed in many school musicals. The most striking thing was that he had already touched the lives of many with his frequent fundraisers for hospitalized children. Michael was the perfect kid.

I had caught a few glimpses of him before in the hallways between classes, but I didn’t recall seeing him at school recently. He had been a faint image that flitted in my thoughts, often obscured by other brighter, clearer images. I remembered hearing a teacher say once that there was something wrong with his blood. Not understanding what this meant, I searched online and was shocked with a devastating piece of information about Michael.

The afternoon of the interview was balmy and warm. Ally and I had the classroom to ourselves, shivering in the air-conditioned space. I shuffled through my sheets of questions. Ally was pacing and spinning the Flip Camcorder around her wrist.

A soft whoosh and a clacking across the threshold signaled his entrance. I didn’t even recognize him. The Michael I had seen in the halls had dark brown hair, rosy cheeks, and a round, baby face. The thin boy who came in had an ashly complexion, sparse hair, and was panting from the exertion of maneuvering his wheelchair. There was a bald patch in his left eyebrow that hadn’t been there before. Only a year had passed since I last saw him, yet he seemed to have aged decades.
“I believe I’m here for an interview?” He was breathing heavily, but a smile stretched across his face. The corners of his eyes crinkled behind his rectangular-framed glasses.

Ally slid into position until she stood directly in front of us, adjusting the video camera. “Right you are,” she said from behind the Camcorder. A red light blinked on, accompanied by a click!

I began reading off questions about favorite teachers, school lunches, and academics, while more bubbled up inside me. He was one of the most easygoing people I had ever talked to, and soon enough, we were conversing like long lost friends. Melted by his warmth, I popped an unscripted question. “Is it hard to navigate with a wheelchair?”

He gave the left wheel a spin. “Not really… it’s only hard when I start getting tired. I don’t exactly have a lot of upper body strength.” His hazel eyes sparkled and small dimples appeared at the corners of his mouth. He looked so small and vulnerable, yet confident in the bulky, black chair.

The next question didn’t come as easily as the last. “How has this… disease affected your life?”

There was a moment’s pause as he tilted his head and squinted.

“I have leukemia. And it’s a disease of the whole family… Everyone is affected.” He rubbed his hands on his thighs and stared distantly out the window. I imagined he was thinking about his family. In my mind, I saw my own family—my protective father, my hard-working mother, my understanding brother.

He turned back to look at me with dimmed eyes. His voice was quieter now. “As for me, leukemia has had some positive impacts.” I was taken aback. He must’ve sensed my surprise, as a small, sad smile played across his lips.

“It has taught me to look on the bright side of everything. It has shown me the true value of family and friends. It has taught me fearlessness and hope.” His eyes sparkled as he spoke, and he clenched the sides of the chair. In the reflection of his glasses, I saw myself as a timid girl who constantly sought to please others, oppressed by the fear of judgment.

His voice dropped to a whisper, barely audible. “Most importantly, I’ve realized that the greatest gift is life itself.”

No one was prepared for the announcement that Michael had died.

The room was silent. All around me, heads lowered respectfully. Mrs. Freese slowly brought a hand up to cover her mouth.

A few seconds passed before I was able to grasp what was going on. Had he really just ceased to exist? Disappeared? Gone? I had shaken his warm, soft hands and had talked to him. He was real, goddammit! I was angry at the intercom for daring to say otherwise. I was angry at the people sitting around me, pretending to feel sorry for someone they didn’t even know. Lastly, I was angry that he had been robbed so early of his greatest gift. Why did he have any less right to life than I did? I could feel the pulse in my wrist, the beating of my heart, the life in my veins more than ever before.

I looked out the window. Rain softly pelted the glass. I watched as a drop slid and fell down the smooth surface, like the tears I hadn’t known I was holding.
I would compare my early childhood to a sunny day at the pool with friends. I splash around, deaf to the complaints of the disgruntled adults surrounding me. I race my friend around the slippery concrete of the pool, blind to the big red signs or the lifeguard waving his arms and warning me to slow down, of the danger ahead. Oblivious to all this, I focus only on my friend and her booming voice urging me to climb higher, to dive off the scarier boards. Even after I dive into the somewhat murky neighborhood-pool water, I giggle at the amount of water that rises as I land, unaware of the smaller ripples that slap the pool walls.

Lightning struck on March 3, 2010, and I was forced to climb out of the pool.

The storm began to brew the night my dad came into my room to tell me that Pop, as we called my grandpa, had passed away. He quickly reassured me that grandpa no longer suffered, hoping to prevent the tears that were not going to fall. Almost robotically, I creaked to my feet and shuffled down the hall to Megan's room where she sat up in bed, crying. I bent over, stiff at the waist, to put my arms around her as she sobbed on my shoulder. Feeling my tense posture, Megan pulled back.

"'Caitie, you're very young and probably don't remember Pop in his prime, but it's okay to cry.'"

Internally, I pondered her reassurance: Why would I cry? Why does everyone expect me to cry?
I went to bed that night with this confusion prevalent on my mind.

Four days later, I sat in the cold wooden pews of my grandma’s strict Catholic church, wearing itchy tights and wondering how much longer I could sit still without turning to stone. I glanced around; strangers clustered around an open box like the imposing tiers of a fortress. My mother stood alongside her seven siblings, towering over my five-foot grandmother who still managed to radiate strength. Every once in a while, one of the strangers gathered around the box would detach from the rest and speak for a moment with my grandmother, often crying as hard as I had seen my mother do. I marveled at this mystery. Every once in a while, I caught snippets of the words they exchanged:

"...a maverick in the medical field...saved so many children’s lives...my inspiration."

I was intrigued. Although I heard little of what was said at the time, I recognized undisguised sincerity and emotion playing across their faces. A crowd of nearly 200 non-family members lined up to pay their respects to a small wooden box and simple wooden slat that read, “Martin Randolph, MD.” I contemplated: How could so many people care so much about a man who drooled on himself?

My 11-year old mind knew Martin Randolph, MD as “Pop,” the old man I kissed every Christmas, Thanksgiving, and Easter. The mostly non-verbal “Pop” who wore endless tracksuits of varying shades of gray, who needed help going up the stairs, showering, using the bathroom, dressing himself... living. And finally, who, most curiously, demanded, with as much insistence as can be shown by grunts and smiles, to eat his salad before his entrée. I found it interesting, that among all my critical views of him, something as trivial as his dietary habits struck me. It was the undeniable happiness in these ordinary routines that he displayed which compensated for his baldhead, sunspots, and velvet tracksuits. He projected an aura of such passion even in the smallest objects that 200 people were able to overlook the stained golfing shirts and spittle. He did not allow his feeble body to restrain him; his soul still managed to shine through his few smiles and winks. In addition, his ability to communicate his defiance to life’s restrictions seemed to inspire the people around me. Even in the last years of his life, suffering two strokes on his left side, he served as a role model in not allowing life’s impediments to restrict one’s happiness. Was I missing something? Suddenly, this new side of Pop that was so apparent to everyone else showed itself to me.
“Dr. Martin Randolph of 917 Deer hill Avenue, Danbury, pushed for the introduction of vaccines to his small Connecticut town in 1948 when the common cure for an infection was holding an onion to a wound” echoed in the papers. His uncommon professional dedication was explored. His 10-person family was touched-on. Finally, his continuous impact on his patients’ and others’ lives was brought to the forefront. When his body was strong and able, he touched lives, and as I saw that day at the funeral, in his deteriorated form and even his death, his touch is still felt.

Instead of the tears that so many expected, I felt a smile warm my cheeks. I saw again Pop in his wheelchair, weakly retrieving an illicit dog treat from his shirt pocket and stealthily feeding it to the slightly overweight German Shepherd that waited expectantly at his feet. I saw Pop helped by my frail grandmother into his chair at the dinner table. I saw him grin as my grandmother placed his salad bowl just out of his reach. I saw a line of saliva slowly slide from his thin lips. But more importantly, I saw my grandmother wipe the insignificant smudge away with such love, tenderness, and steadfast care that I easily forgot the fact that Pop had no control over his own body in his final days, and instead remembered the devotion his unwavering humor and tenacity inspired in others.

Now I saw less the wave that resulted from the brute power of my dive, and more the delicate ripples that still managed to overturn kickboards and rock lane ropes. I realized that the power in Pop’s legacy was more a combination of his personal strength and his generation-spanning impact on people around him.
My father’s eyes were cold as I stared at him, defiantly. He silently forbade me from walking away, but I refused to take orders from him. I turned on my heel and, in my first act of teenage rebellion, strutted down the hall.

How could he do this? Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things. Love never fails. His sure did. As a child, you assume that your parents will always be together, but in reality, that doesn’t happen every time. The odds of finding true love are slim to none in this day and age. He cheated on my mother. Flat out lied to our family. Poor Caleb, at a mere three years, not having any idea why Mommy and Daddy aren’t on speaking terms.

I passed baggage claim and made my way through the door of the terminal. My mother sat in the idling Volkswagen, and I kept my jaw set. She had been crying for days and looked as though she might break down again. We drove through the exit of Logan International Airport, and I stared at my feet. My father was on a plane, flying to Los Angeles to meet up with his girlfriend, and I couldn’t even work up the courage to speak. A copy of his boarding pass lay in the floorboard, and I read the letters as my eyes swam with tears. United Airlines flight 175 from Boston to LA.

I sat in my algebra class, my mind filled with too many thoughts. Exponents, divorce, y=mx+b, new girlfriend, inequalities, lies. I couldn’t keep my head on the math I was supposed to be working on. I was in a daze and suddenly I heard Ms. Jacobs gasp. The phone fell from her hand with a clatter as we all turned to look at the commotion. Her hand clamped over her mouth as she rushed to turn on the classroom television.

A Fox News reporter screamed frantically into the microphone as a terrifying scene played out behind her. The World Trade Center, burning and crumbling. First responders rushed into the blaze, as men and women in business attire ran out. We sat in horrified silence as we watched the building fall. This couldn’t be happening. My entire classroom collectively held our breath. Just then, another plane zoomed into the camera’s field of vision and struck the second tower as if it was a horror film. I had to remind myself that this was real life. My thoughts were drawn completely away from my parents, as I watched the chaotic scene unfold. Our nation was falling, and we could do nothing to stop the foundation from giving out.

One plane could be an understandable tragedy, but two planes were obviously not an accident. Terrorism. To think that someone could feel such deep hatred toward a country that they would kill innocent civilians is almost beyond comprehension.

The reporter’s voice boomed from the newscast. “This just in. The two aircrafts were commercial airliners, believed to be taken over by passengers on the planes. The flights were American Airlines flight 11 and United Airlines flight 175 out of Boston.”

United Airlines flight 175. My father’s boarding pass flashed through my mind. Flight 175. My memories of that morning began to swirl in my head, and the words of the reporter were lost in the sea of terrified cries. Staring at my father’s pained face. Deliberately walking away from him. The boarding pass on the floorboard. United Airlines flight 175. The fiery image of the World Trade Center on the television. Terrorism. My father was on that plane, and just like the North and South Towers, my world was quickly falling apart.

My little brother, Caleb, and I walked through halls of the church hand in hand. He was far too young to understand the calamity that had occurred, and I wanted so badly to let him cry on my shoulder. Though, as far as he was concerned, it was a normal trip to church. We slowly made our way
down the center aisle, and I imagined following the same path on my wedding day. Who would be there to give me away to the groom? Would I walk to my future alone?

My thoughts were interrupted by my youth pastor enveloping me in a bone crushing hug. I choked back a sob, and embraced him tightly.

“Be strong, darling. Remember the great times you had with your father before he had to leave,” he said, with a strong pat on my shoulder.

I did remember. I remembered sitting on his lap as he read me bedtime stories. I remembered being blamed for his thunderous burps. He had called me his little longshoreman. I remembered laughing at his terrible jokes, and playing on Dad the human jungle-gym. I remembered the treehouse he built by hand for me, and sleeping in his bed when I had nightmares. I remembered his rough morning kisses before he shaved, and his countless nicknames for me. I remembered his hurt face, as I screamed at him in the middle of the airport.

“How could you?” I shouted. “Adultery is a sin. Lying is a sin. You cheated on Mom and never told us! How do you call yourself a Christian?”

My father looked down at his feet. “I never meant to hurt you sweetheart. Things between your mother and I were going downhill quickly. I should have told you. I am terribly sorry, sweetie.”

“You actually think sorry is going to fix everything? ‘Sorry’ won’t get my parents back together. ‘Sorry’ won’t dry Mom’s tears. ‘Sorry’ won’t give Caleb a happy family. You’ve ruined everything. I hate you!” I screamed with a shaking voice.

My father’s eyes were cold as I stared at him defiantly. He silently forbade me from walking away, but I refused to take orders from him. I turned on my heel and, in my first act of teenage rebellion, strutted down the hall.

Little did I know, that less than two hours later, I would never see him again. He would be lost among the thousands of people innocently killed that fateful September 11th. Why did my very last words to him have to be, “I hate you”? As hard as it is to forgive him for his indiscretions, I’ll never be able to forgive myself. Please God, let him hear this: “I do love you, Dad.”
Where I’m From
Colby Matthys
Platte City Middle School
Poetry
Kelly Miller

I am from dusty, white-rock roads
From a wood stock double-barrel with beautiful carvings
An ‘ole black dually that comes out to hunt
I am from chipping white paint
The three midnight howls
The consistent quack in the winter

I am from July fish fry’s and BIG ideas
From Ralph and Uncle Ronnie
I am from the backwoods ways and the sweet doughy glaze in the early dawn
From “Cut ‘em” and “Get out of the way”
I am from rare church visits and filling the kiddie seat at Sunday school

I am from Pete and Donna
From fried squirrel and potato soup
From coon traps in the dense forest
From moonshine makers and call lanyards overflowed with leg bands
From tow truck drivers and derby cars
From shallow pockets and heavy machines

In an old ornate cabinet drawer dust- filled albums are carefully placed
Memories of the past frozen in time
Still
Small Penny Memories
Candice McCoy
Park Hill High School
Personal Essay/Memoir
Sara Capra

FAME
I race across the boardwalk snatching up pennies as my grandfather follows closely behind, his deep chuckle echoing across the dunes. My small steps race across the ground searching for the small coins. I’m laughing as the ocean rolls in.

I’m gonna live
A picture sits on top of my white dresser. I’m sitting with another little girl. I’m five and live in a place called Missouri. Between the two little girls sits a pile of small copper coins that the girls intently count. In the distance stands a white truck with bright pictures on the side of Tweety Bird ice cream pops. The girls’ eyebrows are scrunched together on their small tan faces. The moment forever caught in time.

Forever
The boardwalk stretches on forever into the distance as I race towards the waves. My little hands are filling with small brown coins as I race across the rickety warped boards. My grandfather points out into the distance where you can see the end of the pier. There at the very end are huge waves crashing. He tells me that every wave comes from something small building even farther out from what we can see. I just nod my head, not really understanding.

I’m gonna learn
I nod my head once again as my mom lectures me on why I shouldn’t lie. I think to myself that stories are just so much fun to tell. I’m a year older not a year calmer. I just want to go to school and learn as much as I possibly can. I sit there and think; if I’m going to tell stories, I need to make them more convincing. After all, it all comes down to the small truths with tall tales. While I think of another story to let fly across unbelieving ears, my mom waits.

How to fly
Flying across the water my grandfather watches as the waves barely hit my knees. My legs pump fast as I race towards where the pier and sand meet. He calls my name, and I stop, almost falling into the water that is receding quickly from where I’ve just run. My hair flies around my face, its shiny copper color shimmering as the rays of the sunset reflect. He smiles at me and tells me the smaller steps you take the more you enjoy the journey. I give a quick nod of my head, and then I’m moving again, my legs pumping across the blue tide as I race towards the man ahead of me. I stop once again almost falling as warm hands grip my shoulders to stop my descent.

HIGH
I look down, down, down to the dark brown ground that rests below me. The edge of the platform is just a small step away. I’m scared; all it will take is just one small step, and I’ll be off and flying through the trees. I’m up in the tree tops on the edge of a zip line platform. I know that whatever I choose I’m high enough. Inchng slowly towards the edge, one more small step and I’m flying. I love it. The wind is whipping my hair around as I feel the end coming.

I feel it coming together
I feel the tide coming in. The wave curls under me. The board wobbles. I feel myself start to fall as warm hands pull me into a hug before I can go under. I look up and smile as the sun creates dark brown brush strokes across his face like my watercolor books. I hope we can always stay like this, together. The sun sinks farther into the ocean, like a small but bright copper penny as I continue to see the tide roll in.

People will see me
I’m sitting with my dad watching TV after I come home from a tiring day of fifth grade. The commercial of Tiger Woods comes on. I know I want to be just like him someday with all those people watching me. I look up at my dad and ask if I can do what the man on the screen just did. He promises someday he’ll teach me to play golf if I still want to. I agree and nod my head up and down vigorously.

And cry
My cry of joy echoes up and down the coast as I jump into a wave that reaches above my small head. My grandfather laughs at me as I stand back up and rush towards him. I skip next to him as my feet reach the coppery sand. I can see my small sandals in the distance. He reminds me if you get pushed down you always have to get back up. “If you give up,” he says, “you get covered up.” I nod my head seriously; my eyes scrunch together, as I try to remember this piece of advice. I know I’ll never want to leave the water. I just want to swim.

FAME
The whistle blew. It was the last lap of the 500 yard swim. My legs felt like lead weights. I wanted to stop. I could see the black T up ahead and dug just a little bit deeper to find that last small shred of adrenaline. I stretched my arm as far as it would go. That last small inch toward the wall. I feel cool stone. I let my head break the water. I heard the cheers of the crowd and felt like a star - famous.

I’m gonna make it to heaven
“Grandpa, are you always going to be here with me?” I ask looking up into his familiar face. “Well, young’n, I’ll be here forever and a day. That is at least until the good Lord calls me on up to heaven to join him.” I stand there with my small hand firmly clasped in his as I wonder where we will be when I am a big girl. I look out across the blue sea and sky.

Light up the sky
The fireworks explode outside the kitchen window as bright embers of gold and brown rain down from the sky. The sky is alight with colors. I cry at the look in my father’s eyes as we shout at each other. I run from the room. The only noise, the clink of metal from my pocket. I think how wrong it is; I’m a teenager and still treated like a small girl. I know I’ll never lose my fiery temper.

Like a flame
We reach the end of the boardwalk. Night is slowly starting to roll in like a heavy fog filling the sky. In the distance, where dusk has started to settle, the small flickers from ship lights spark the horizon. The bright copper lighthouse encircled by red and white shines a bright flame out into the setting sea.

FAME
We stand on the last putting green of the day. It’s my turn. I reach down to pick up my penny mark. The other fancy markers are scattered around, but mine represents more than just a piece of metal. I know mine is a promise made by my dad and memories made with my granddad. I send the last hit of the day, gliding the ball towards and into the hole. That day of sitting with my dad comes back to me, and I realize it’s the small moments that add up forever.
I'm gonna live forever
I walk forever along the old sun bleached boards as we head toward the end of the pier. The fishermen are packing up their catch for the day as well as their rods and reels. I think this is the place to be. They all smile as we pass them, chuckling, as I strain against the hand my grandfather holds. I dodge the brass hooks that have been scattered from the catches of the day, and I try to reach the end looming in sight before the last ray of light hits the ocean. He reminds me, you will go farther if you take small steps to your destination.

Baby remember my name
I'm only a sophomore in high school, and the counselors want me to tell them exactly what I want to do and where I want to go to college. I don't know that yet! All the advice others have told me always comes back to taking small steps and breaking down a decision into small parts. Not this idea of choosing everything at once. I don't know what I'm going to do. I sigh and remember, whatever it comes down to, I'm still me. I sign my name on the bottom of the plan of study knowing that things may change.

Remember
We reach the end of the pier. Darkness has enveloped everything. Small lights of yellow, red, and green shine in the distance. I stand hand-in-hand with my grandfather as we look at the last fading rays of copper light sink into the sea. “I’m always going to remember picking up pennies with you.” I say this with all the seriousness my three year old self can muster. He simply laughs.

Remember
We sit eating cake after dinner with the old scrapbooks spread out on the dingy brown carpet around us. I’m seventeen now and proud of it. “I don’t know where this one was taken,” my grandmother says. I lean over to take the picture from her as a smile creeps across my face. I lean back against the worn burgundy couch, remembering. “That was after one of our penny walks. We ended up at the pier. I can still remember pennies, waves, and the sunsets.” I look up to the person sitting in the seat I am leaning against. “Do you remember, Grandpa?”

Remember
“Dear, this old man may not remember much, but I will remember picking up pennies with you. In fact there will always be a jar full of them in the corner no matter where I live. Those small memories are some of the things I will always hold the most dearly,” he says seriously as he looks down into my bright green and copper three-year-old eyes.

Remember
I walk through the door and almost trip over an old green jar that sits near the corner. I smile because now it’s only a two hour drive down to my grandpa’s house near the lake where he now lives. There is nothing like walking through the door and seeing that old jar of pennies still standing full. I look at the man in the burgundy chair and smile. I think how like pennies, small and worthless by themselves, memories are: small, shining, and alone. However, when you take the time to find and gather them, they create something whole and meaningful. Something worth a million dollars: you.

Work Cited
The flash burned my eyes. I blinked them over and over, but there was still brightness around the edges of my vision. The woman who had taken my picture came over to me, extremely excited for no apparent reason. “Miss Katya, you look so pretty!” she exclaimed, placing the portrait in my hands. I took it, staring blankly at it. Was this girl truly me? I thought wearing my performing outfit would make a memory, but it just made me look rich, as if I wore this type of outfit all day. Some people would be excited that their portrait made them look lavish, but I wasn’t. Well, I was a little, only because I looked like the Visayan I was supposed to be. Not the primitive people we’re being portrayed as in this nightmare of a fair.

“KATYA!” I heard that rotten Warden’s voice call my name from the crowd around the Gerhard sisters’ booth. “What are you doing outside the enclosure?” he asked as he grabbed my shoulder. My eyes narrowed at his word choice. Enclosure. How dare he say we live in an enclosure? That’s where animals live. The Visayans are the upper-class Filipino people. We’re as far from animals you can get in the Philippines. But the Warden didn’t care. He was a no-good liar, after all. I almost allowed myself to be dragged back to the “enclosure.” However, I thought better of that decision. Now was my time to make Isabel proud. I broke free of the Warden’s grip and ran through the fair, throwing in as many zigzags I could to not get caught. Ha-Ha, Warden, I thought, now that I’m free, good luck finding me until the fair’s over.

I sat in my stupid room staring at the wall. It was stupid for a lot of reasons. Reason 1: It was way too small. Reason 2: It was made of mud bricks and random types of wood. Reason 3: It was basically my prison. I wanted to leave so bad, just for a little. If I could leave, I’d run straight over to the Gerhard Sisters’ booth to get my picture taken. I wanted one positive memory from this awful World’s Fair. Sadly, that wasn’t meant to be.

“Psst, Katya!” I heard a voice coming from my door. I heard some grunting as I turned toward it, likely from a small figure’s attempt to free the door from the wooden block that jammed it shut. The Warden was the only one strong enough to dislodge it easily. Most of the men would probably be able to get through, too, but none were willing to try. The Warden’s real name was Mr. Healy, but my best friend and I preferred to call him The Warden, because that’s what he was.

My thoughts were interrupted by the door finally opening to reveal Isabel, my best friend. “Isa!” I exclaimed, both happy to see her but completely puzzled as to how she got out of her room and into mine without being caught. “How did you—“

Isabel held up a hand to stop my voice. “I’ll explain later,” she said. “Right now, let’s go get you a picture at the Gerhard booth!”

I shook my head. “Isa, we have to perform in an hour. We can’t go out.”

Isa’s mouth twitched at the corners. I knew that meant that she knew she was beat. “Right you are, Katya, right you are.” She paused. “I have an idea!”

“What?”

“After we perform, we mix into the group and then—“

Now it was my turn to hold up a hand. “Isabel, no. We can’t do that. If we do, we’ll be caught, and then who knows what will happen to us?” She pushed a strand of ebony colored hair out of her face.

“I know,” she mumbled. “I just want to break out of here so bad.” I put a hand on her shoulder. Isa was 10, a year younger than I, so I always felt obligated to be her protector and moral compass.
“Isa, I know. Don’t you think I want to break out of here too?” Isabel stomped her foot. “Yes. We all want to break out!” She walked into my room. “I don’t care what The Warden thinks! This is the World’s Fair, and we’re part of the world. But no one will ever see our culture, and we’ll never see anyone else’s, because that idiot keeps us locked up in here all day!”

I put a hand on Isa’s shoulder in an effort to calm her, but she shook me off and walked out of my room, mumbling about how she had to get dressed. I knew she just said that as an excuse to leave, but we did have to get ready. I pulled on my white, lacy dress and put on the many types of jewelry we were required to wear. I pulled back my hair into the up-do we always wear and put on my white headband with a bow on top. By the time I was completely ready, it was time to perform.

We were led to the stage by The Warden and one of his clerks. We all got in line backstage, and a man introduced us. “Now, ladies and gentleman, we have a performance from the Visayan people! The Visayans are upper class Filipinos, and will be giving us a rendition of our National Anthem, with special soloist, Katya Lopez. The Visayans, everyone.”

The man walked off the stage as we walked on. We got in our formation and began singing The Star Spangled Banner. It sounded beautiful, as always. Then came my solo. I sang “And the rocket’s red glare, the bombs bursting in air, gave proof through the night that our flag was still there!” as loudly and clearly as possible. People clapped after I sang, and I smiled as big as possible as I continued to sing. At the end of our performance, two children ran out with the American flag and the Louisiana Purchase Exposition flag.

Everyone stood up and clapped for us, and for one moment, I really had fun. One moment in this whole Fair travesty, I enjoyed myself. Then, we were ushered off the stage, and just like that, the joy was gone. The next group prepared to perform, and we were forgotten.

As I walked back to our prison, I heard The Warden yelling. I walked in the direction of his angry voice, and saw him yelling at Isabel. “What’s wrong with you?” he was yelling.

“I—I just wanted to see my friend, and—“ she shakily said.

“Isadora, I’m just about done with all these antics of yours,” The Warden said.

“My name is Isabel...” Isa said quietly. “Do you really think I care?”

That’s when he shoved her.

Right in the way of an oncoming cart.

“NO!” I yelled, but it was too late. The cart struck Isabel hard, and she fell to the ground. I ran to her aid but quickly saw that there was nothing I could do. She had blood all over her head, probably from the fall to the ground, and she had blood on her stomach from the sharp edge of the cart. The spot of blood was spreading rapidly. “Isa, you’re going to be fine, okay?” I said in as reassuring a tone as I could muster. She looked at me, and the corners of her mouth twitched, so I knew she knew she was beat.

“Katya,” she said in barely a whisper. “You have to escape.” With each word, her voice grew fainter. “Do it for me... I love you....”

And then she was gone.

***

I sat on a bench, staring at my picture. The lady was right. I did look pretty. But I didn’t care. Isa should’ve been there too, looking pretty right beside me, but because of The Warden, she was gone. Dead. I would never see my best friend again, thanks to him. A police officer came up to me. “Excuse me, miss, have you seen a man named Michael Healy?” he said.

“Why?” I asked. “He’s wanted for involuntary manslaughter of a girl named Isabel Martinez.” He looked deep into my eyes. “I need to find this man. Please, can you help me?”

I looked around. “He’s either out and about looking for... someone, or he’s in the Visayan exhibit.” The officer nodded a thank-you to me and walked away.
I smiled to myself and looked down at the portrait again. My smile faded. I didn’t want this if Isa wasn’t in it with me. I made my way back to the Gerhard Sisters’ booth and returned it. “Are you sure?” asked the woman. “Your dress and dark hair look so pretty and—“

I pushed the portrait into her hands. “Take it,” I said. “It’ll only bring me bad memories.” The women nodded and took the portrait. I walked away and tried to enjoy the fair as much as I could without Isa. I would never forget Isa, and I would always hate The Warden and never forgive him. We only had a week left. I could make it that long alone. Then, at the end, I would go back home and tell Isa’s family the horrible news. But, until the end of the fair, I would stay away from the Visayan exhibit, just like I promised Isa.

I thought about my portrait every now and then, too. When I thought of that, I thought of the saying, “A picture’s worth a thousand words,” but my portrait wasn’t. Nothing about it said I was held as a prisoner for most of this fair. Nowhere could you see I was forced to live like a primitive person. Not a single thing in the portrait said that my best friend was dead. So, I guess the saying’s wrong. Pictures aren’t always worth a thousand words.
I dug through the dusty boxes of photos and photo albums in my attic. I finally found the one I was looking for in the corner. It was dated 2003, when we were twelve years old. That was nearly ten years ago. I flipped through the pages until I found the one I wanted. It was of me and my twin sister two days after our birthday and one day before a fatal car crash changed our lives forever. We were standing arm in arm, laughing. Little did we know, when we were coming home from volleyball practice the next day, a drunk driver would hit her side of the car head-on, killing her on impact. My mom and I both survived with only a few broken bones, but ever since then I have felt guilty. We both called "shotgun," and I let her have it. If I had ridden in front, she would be alive still. As soon as I was old enough, I moved out of the country to go to college. I couldn't stand being in that tiny house any longer. I turned a page of the photo album and laughed thinking about the day the picture was taken.

Oof. I picked up the loose volleyball my sister had thrown at me. We had been playing catch for the past hour in the park, but I was starting to get distracted. I couldn't help it. The local high school's boys' cross-country team was practicing nearby. "Hey Bella! Head's up!" I tossed the ball up in the air and served it, hard. Bella jumped up and spiked it back to me. I dove into the grass for about the millionth time today to save it. When I stood up I had another grass stain running down the front of my white shirt. Bella walked over to me and threw her arm over my shoulder. Our heads were both tilted back towards the sun when Mom took the picture of us; me in my more green than white shirt, and Bella looking perfect like always, her red hair pulled back in a ponytail.

Setting the album back down, I rummaged through the box again. I shivered, even though it was mid-summer, finding the album labeled 2001, when Bella and I were ten. A lock of my long, curly red hair fell out of its fishtail braid and flopped in front of my face. I pushed it back with one hand while opening the book with the other. About halfway through, I found another picture that made me laugh. Bella was tugging on my guitar strap, and I was playing, ignoring the interruptions from my crabby sister.

The front door slammed shut. Bella had been at soccer practice, and I was in our room, practicing guitar. I messed around with some chords, trying to find the tune that had been stuck in my head all day. Without realizing it, I was singing a song and started to play that. Bella stormed into our shared bedroom, pushed my legs that were hanging over the edge of the bed away, and flopped onto the lower bunk. I looked over the edge of my bed to meet a glare from Bella. She crawled over and climbed up the ladder. I resumed my playing, ignoring the fact that she was watching me. Soon, though, she started tugging on the guitar strap, making her harder to ignore. We both stopped when a bright flash reflected in our mirror. Mom snapped another picture of our bewildered faces as we looked at each other and back at her.

I stood up and stretched. I looked out the tiny window in my attic apartment and saw the sky streaked with pink, purple, and gold. I had sat up in the attic for nearly two hours. Oops. I grabbed the boxes I had been looking through and cautiously backed down the ladder leading to the main area of my apartment. Setting them down on the coffee table, I walked into the kitchen in search of something to eat. I stood on my toes to look in the cabinets. Bella had been a good four inches taller than me, almost the only difference between us. We both had the same curly red hair, big feet, and love of sports. We even had the same freckle above our lip. When we were little, the girls in our family would sing Christmas carols. Bella always would argue with me about songs we would sing; she wanted to sing
“Rudolph” and I would want “Do They Know Its Christmas?” One year we argued so much our uncles didn't let us go caroling.

I didn't find anything good to eat, which made me realize I needed to go shopping. I opened the fridge and settled on eating Nutella and honeydew—which is actually pretty good, despite what you might think. Taking it back into the living room, I proceeded to find old family memories. At the bottom of the box was the 1996 album, meaning we were five. I leafed through the pages laughing and missing those days—when we didn't have a care in the world—and regretting so many things. I slipped a photo from its plastic cover and flipped it over. It read, "October '96, pumpkin picking" in my mom's neat scrawl. I remembered that day clearly.

My little laugh rang out from ahead of Mom. She caught up to me and picked me up. I smiled my toothless smile and wriggled out of her grasp. I ran and ran. The pumpkin patch and the tractor rides flashed by on either side. Stopping at the edge of the field, I pointed up at the gold tinged sky, my puffy blue marshmallow coat keeping me warm as the temperature dropped. My dad appeared with Bella already asleep in his arms. I squeezed my mom's legs tightly before we walked to the car. Curled up in my car seat, I also fell sound asleep on the ride home.

Tears dripped from my eyes onto the picture. I wiped my eyes, angry at myself—for crying, for letting her get in the front seat on that fateful day. I put the picture back in its place, bending it slightly in my haste. There was a knock on the door. On the other side was a delivery man holding a dozen roses. He held out the clipboard for me to sign. I scrawled my name on the line and took the roses from him. I skimmed the note before filling a vase with water and placing the flowers in it. I sat down on the floor and thought. It had been ten years today since Bella died. For ten years I had been doing the exact same thing, going through old pictures on the anniversary. On top of the box was a giant album. It was full of pictures of my life without Bella until I moved out six years later. I opened it up and started looking at it. The first few pictures were fine, until I got to the funeral pictures. There I started sobbing, truly remembering my twin sister—the one I had grown up with, shared everything with. The day of her funeral was the day it truly clicked that she was gone and would never come back. Nobody could console me that day. Half of my life was gone forever, and it was my fault.

For nearly three months I dressed in all black. I quit volleyball, considering the fact that playing had cost my sister her life, indirectly. About halfway through the album something caught my eye, something I had never seen before. It was silver, and I recognized it immediately. It was Bella's old necklace, the one she was wearing the day she died. I pulled it from the page and put it around my neck. Finally, something to connect me with my long lost sister. A few pages later, I found a picture of me, but I wasn't alone. Standing next to me was my date to senior prom. When we were twelve, Bella had told me to ask him out, but I had refused. Little did I know we would end up dating all through high school. I looked closely at the photo. The smile on my face was real, unlike some of the other ones in previous photographs. A few pages later I found yet another photograph my mom had taken without my knowledge. I was at a concert with some of my friends, and we had gotten to go backstage. We had started jumping up and down and screaming. The next one on the page was of me laughing. I resembled Bella so much I almost didn't recognize myself. At that concert I had laughed more than I had in years. So much in fact, I ended up losing my voice the next day.

In that moment, I decided I would never let my twin sister become a memory. She was literally my other half, and ten years later, the only thing keeping me together was knowing I had all these pictures and the memories associated with each one. Long live Bella Taylor, may your memory be kept alive. The very words spoken at her funeral, the very words I had kept like a promise all of these years.
It’s noticing the smile on their face that gets you. *They’re happy* crosses your mind first. Their eyes scream excitement, and their red cheeks show they’ve been flexing in that same position for a long time. They begin to laugh and dance around. You can hear them yell and joke with each other as they try to walk but not to a specific place. Everyone around them stares for a minute and then will roll their eyes and move on to what they were doing. You walk behind them wondering if it’s all fake. It’s obvious their smiling, laughing, and yelling won’t last. You can tell they are trying to have fun, but all they get from that is acting annoying and bothering people around them. They bump into those that are just trying to pass because they don’t watch where they are going, and you watch them carry on joking and talking about how hilarious it was.

You watch a couple walk by and notice their fingers entwined with each other, keeping close as if they don’t want to lose themselves in the mass of other people around them. They give a small smile to each other and flirt while they walk. You hear them talking in a tone that wishes the moment they spend holding hands and staying close were everlasting, but eventually, they’ll need to let go.

Look at the people around you who smile, like an early mother stroking her swollen stomach or little kids playing tag with each other because they are bored, trying to pass time waiting while their parents look around. Eventually that early mother will be home wishing she would have known better, and those little kids playing tag will begin to cry because they have to leave and take a nap. Those obnoxious teenagers bumping into people will go home, wishing they wouldn’t have to hide behind their smile, wishing they could actually be happy instead of pretending for their friends. When we see those smiles, you can’t assume that the person is happy. People can easily hide behind the smiles they show to everyone so no one suspects what they really feel.

Now you’re stuck wondering who is truly happy. You can’t look at someone and know they are happy simply because they smile. The thing is, we don’t know happy. If we can’t tell if someone is happy, how do we know we are happy ourselves? If someone were to ask if you were truly happy, you’d have to stop and think before lying and saying that you are. Or maybe we can be truly happy, but it doesn’t last. We can’t be happy all the time. It’s temporary. But maybe we can be truly happy for a moment. When we hold hands with the person we care about or laugh with our friends to have a good time. For that moment, maybe we do feel happy, but it’s like a child blowing a bubble. For a second, it’s there, but you can’t examine it and know what it really is because, when you try to catch it, it bursts.
I knew that what I had done was wrong before I closed the door. My conscience shattered like the glass under my jackboots as I stepped away from the front porch. I looked down into the broken mirror resting on the ground. I scanned my reflection. From this angle, I could see my boots, scuffed and stuck to aging feet. I allowed my eyes to wander up the mirror. My black pants were bloused and creased. My jacket wrapped around me like Hannelore’s arms used to. She offered a very different kind of warmth than the wool tunic that was issued to me like so many others. My scarf felt like a noose. I met my own eyes and saw the face of a much older man. I began tracing my years with fingers on my skin. My calloused hands did not even seem to be mine anymore. My hands lost their place around hers’ two years ago when I was forced to leave home and join the Wehrmarcht. How I craved to feel her beside me. Instead, I am arrested by the cold German winter.

“Voelgel! Let’s go,” I heard from a distance.
I did not know who was calling, and I did not care. I mustn’t disobey orders. This is not because I felt a calling to protect the Motherland, but because I was afraid of the consequences. During training, I was taught love is the best teacher, but fear has the lowest tuition. I took one last look at the Reissman house on Verschwunden Street and followed the voice. The broken windowpanes littered the streets of Leipzig, and I tried to avoid each piece. I had not wanted this. I did not intend to hurt anyone.

“Voelgel?”
It was closer this time. I recognized the voice as my commanding officer.
“Ja, Leutnant. I am coming.”

“Did you see their faces?”
Laugher erupted from the mess hall as the other soldiers recounted the events from last night.
“The kikes were so afraid! They do not belong in Deutschland. They have no gall,” Soldat Eisel bantered.
“Or brains,” another soldier called out.
An officer entered the hall. All enlisted soldiers snapped to attention. He stared us down for a moment before letting us sit again and resume eating.
“There are reports,” he started, “that state over 1,000 synagogues and 7,500 Jewish businesses were destroyed all over Germany last night. Another report from Berlin said over 30,000 Jewish males have been arrested and are now in the process of being deported to camps such as Dachau, Buchenwald, and Sachsenhausen. Our operation was a success. They are calling it Kristallnacht.”

I unlaced my boots and collapsed on my bed. I pulled out a piece of paper and began writing to Hannelore. I do not know where she is. I can only hope she is safe. She is in hiding somewhere in Leipzig. Our only correspondence in the last six months has been via letters. Her cousin, Gehard, delivers truckloads of food to the army base once a week. I have been lucky enough to convince him to smuggle our letters back and forth. He only does this on the promise that I will take her to the United States after the war. I would give anything to ensure her safety, but I know this is an impossible task. I allow the world to slip away and scrawl over the paper:

Dearest Hannelore,
Today, like every day, I sat and thought with every breath I took of only you. Days go by, and
nights get longer without you. I must confess that in some ways I feel inadequate. My mind questions:
can I match your gentleness? Can I give you feelings as warm and secure as the ones you have given to
me? You have chosen to show me such strong passion combined with sweet affection, that I can only
hope with time you feel a glimpse of the same emotions from me.

When I am with you, the world goes away. I feel, sense, and breathe only you. Being with you is
very special to me. There are only a couple of moments that a man knows will stay with him for the rest
of his life, and you have already given me more than I could ask for.

I miss you, Hannelore. I look to August as the only page on my calendar that is a friend because
that is when I will hopefully be able to wrap my arms around you once more. I can only pray the end of
the war upon us soon. My fellow soldiers seem hopeful. Once the Allies surrender, we can move to
America and start a family. We will put this chaos behind us.

Please forgive my foolish words and childish heart. Please accept them as tokens of the emotions
you create in me. I will wait anxiously to be with you again. Until then, you are in my heart, and in my
mind, and I will ache until my return with a yearning that can only be satisfied by the taste of your lips.

All my love,
Anton

I folded the letter and placed it in an envelope. All the while, I pondered the irony of my reality; I
was a soldier of the Third Reich irrevocably in love with a Jewish girl.

*****

It was Tuesday. I skipped breakfast that day, like every Tuesday, in order to meet up with
Gehard discretely. We exchanged letters, but we did not exchange words. I hurry off to the barracks to
read Hannelore’s letter. I have it tucked in my left breast pocket. I can smell her perfume, the scent of
an apple orchard in full bloom. It intoxicates my nostrils with the cleansing smell of spring.

I pass many soldiers on the way back to the barracks, speaking to none of them and doing my
best not to make eye contact. I am not like the others. I did not volunteer. It is strange to think I am
surrounded by so many men, yet I feel so alone, as if I am stranded in the ocean with no clean water to
drink. I am bombarded by wave upon wave of water, yet my thirst remains. Just as my appetite for
Hannelore cannot be satisfied until we are together.

I reach the barracks and open the letter, careful not to disturb those around me. It reads:

Anton,

3 a.m. strikes the clock as I write this letter. A small candle casts light in this narrow attic.
Everything appears softer. My family surrounds me, and all is well. I am thankful and happy, even as
someone snores, in the confines of hiding. One would not believe that our scared souls could sleep so
well. I know what they all are dreaming about. Papa dreams of his business. Mama dreams of our house
on Verschwunden Street. She loves to tidy up the house and cook more than we need. Though Hans is a
bit harder to decipher, I can only render a guess. He dreams of his car. The one Opa bought for him after
graduation. Lastly, I dream of only one thing: you.

As I’m sure you are aware, Kristallnacht took place a few nights ago. I do not know of your
involvement, but, rest assured, I probably do not care to know. Papa was in hiding with us.
Unfortunately, many other German Jews did not have this cloistered safety. However, I thank God that
Papa is still here. Gehard talked of the demolished glass. He said the synagogue was destroyed. Perhaps
it is better that I am cooped up in this place instead of “free” and able to view the remnants of a city I
used to call home. How can I feel at home in a land where I am alienated? Perhaps home has nothing to
do with geographic location. My home is with you.
Though I have not seen the damage, I am sure it is horrendous. I cannot comprehend why the Germans need the British to drop bombs when it seems they can destroy anything without the help of a foreign power.

Regardless of the disarray, I will wait for you. The war will end soon enough and we can move on. At this moment, I hold the locket you gave me in my hand. I keep rubbing my fingers across the gold to remind myself of the warmth you bring to my life. I know that, even in the darkest of times, I can find happiness if only I light a candle in you.

With you always,
Hannelore

I put down the letter, knowing Hannelore and I have two very different images of her house on Verschwunden Street. Hers is of a home. Mine is of a windowless, bitter shell. I knew that what I had done was wrong before I closed the door. I destroyed the home of the only person who has ever allowed me to be hers. Just as much, I am the enemy that destroys her people. I am the murderer of her heritage. Her genetics crunch under my boots as do the pieces of shattered glass that I try so hard to avoid.
Scene I

[CURTAIN RISES]

Scene I is played out behind a thin white screen. The screen is lit from the back so that when actors move behind it, the shadows that they cast onto the fabric are all that can be seen by the audience.

TALLY SIDERS: (Voice is either pre-recorded or heard from OS and remains this way throughout Scene I.)

Everyone knows the story. Man meets woman. Man and woman fall in love. Then nine months later, wha-la, a baby! It’s as old and unvarying as the progression of time itself.

[As TALLY speaks, the story she depicts is played out behind the screen. MAN enters SL while WOMAN enters SR. After a beat of absent-minded motion they appear to notice each other, and MAN waves to WOMAN. They meet CS and shake hands. Then, as the narration reaches the point where they fall in love, they take one another in their arms and kiss. A beat later, a baby carriage is rolled onstage next to them.]

TALLY: But that’s not always how it works.

[MAN exits SL with the carriage]

TALLY: Sometimes the woman isn’t interested in finding a man in the first place. But – as you can imagine – that makes the baby part more difficult. Rather than give up, however, every now and then, the woman decides to take matters into her own hands.

[Light goes out. Screen goes dark.]

TALLY: With the help of Cryobanks, anonymous sperm donation, and scientific ingenuity, the woman can become the mother she always wished to be without a father ever becoming involved.

[Light comes back on, and the woman’s silhouette has been joined by that of a little girl’s. The two interact while TALLY speaks, hugging, playing patty-cake, or whatever the director desires.]

TALLY: Together, the mother and her daughter make a small, but happy family, and the little girl grows up loved and cared for.

[Light goes out, leaving the screen dark again]

TALLY: But it is the nature of our universe that everything which is made will one day be unmade in its turn.

[Light reappears and a teenage girl stands silhouetted alone as the red and blue strobes of a police car illuminate the screen. (NOTE: girl could be TALLY herself.)]

TALLY: And just as improbably as this small family was made, it is then unmade well before its time.

[The silhouetted girl sinks to her knees, head in hands]

TALLY: Lost and completely alone, the girl is an orphan with no family nor heritage from which to draw. Then, with her 18th birthday comes an opportunity – the chance to meet an unknown father and whatever uncertainty might accompany him. I am that girl, and it’s an opportunity I’m about to take.

Scene II

The screen has been lifted, and this scene is played out where the audience can view the actors on the full stage. Scene II takes place in a bustling airport. Passengers disembarking from their flight enter SL carrying travel bags or wheeling small suitcases. A separate group of people stand SR, holding signs or
merely waiting for their loved ones. TERRY PARMAN is among them. TALLY enters SL carrying a bag and
talking on her cell phone. (NOTE: Scene II is brief and intended to take place in a short period of time.)
TALLY: Yes, the flight was fine; I’m safely in Boston. (BEAT) Yeah, I’ve got all my things. Honestly, it’s fine,
Grandma. (BEAT) Of course I’m nervous! He’s my father, and until a month ago, he didn’t even know
I existed. (BEAT) Speaking of which, I need to look for him; he’s probably waiting. (BEAT) I love you
too, Grandma. Talk to you later.

[Looks around. By now, most of the other actors have exited.]
TERRY: (Calls out) Tally? [Catches TALLY’S attention] Are you Tally Siders? Hi, I’m Terry. I’m Cole’s – I
mean your father’s – sister. Look, I know this isn’t what you expected, but...
TALLY: Where is he?
TERRY: I’m sorry. There was an accident.
TALLY: An accident? What do you mean? Is he alright?
TERRY: He’s still alive, but he was in a head-on collision last night. We’re not sure why he was out there,
but your father was driving in the countryside when another car flew over the top of a hill in the
wrong lane. Cole never even had the chance to swerve. We suspect that the other driver was drunk,
but whoever they were, they managed to flee before someone drove by and called it in. I’m afraid
he’s hurt pretty badly, Tally. He – he hasn’t woken up yet. I’m so sorry.
TALLY: Why am I just finding out now? Why didn’t someone call me?
TERRY: Cole was the only one who had your number, and his phone was destroyed in the crash. Listen,
Tally, I understand –
TALLY: No. (Quietly) I’m sorry, but I don’t think you can.
TERRY: I’m really sorry, but I need to take you back to the house. My fiancé is bringing your younger
brother, Riley, home from the hospital right now. Maybe you two can talk to each other.
TALLY: (Subdued) Alright.
[The two exit SR]

Scene III

Scene III takes place in the living room of the Parman house. Couches and chairs are laid out around a
coffee table CS. A television, potted plants, or end tables may be included. TALLY and TERRY sit on a
couch facing the audience, quietly talking. The sound of a door is heard, and RILEY PARMAN and COLIN
COOPER enter. RILEY is clearly upset, behaving angrily, and flinging his coat onto the floor once it’s
removed. COLIN approaches the couch, moving as if to sit, but seems to change his mind. He stands
stiffly alongside.
TERRY: Did something happen? Is Cole alright?
COLIN: As alright as he can be right now. They’re still concerned about the infection risk for the deeper
cuts, but they’ve finally managed to stop the internal bleeding. He’s in stable condition now.
TERRY: Thank God. He’s so lucky.
RILEY: LUCKY? How can you say he’s lucky? He’s in a coma! He may never wake up again!
TERRY: Riley –
RILEY: No! My dad could be dying right now, and we’re all just sitting here! We still don’t even know why
he was out there!
TERRY: There’s nothing we could possibly do for him right now.
RILEY: Maybe we could be doing something to, I don’t know, try to find the bastard that crashed into
him and left him to die!
TERRY: (Louder than before) You don’t think I care? You don’t think that I care he’s in a coma while the
guy who put him there is probably sitting at home? He’s not just your father, you know; he’s my
brother too.
[Silence]
TALLY: Riley –
RILEY: Stop. [Turning to TALLY] Look, I know you’re sort of his daughter or something, but whatever you think you are to him, you’re wrong. This is a really bad time for you to be here, and my dad and I were doing just fine without you. Maybe you should just go home.
[RILEY exits.]
COLIN: (To TALLY): I’m really sorry. I’ll go talk to him.
[Exits.]
TERRY: Are you okay?
TALLY: (Quietly) I’m fine.
TERRY: Cole wanted you here, I promise.
[No response.]
TERRY: Um, well, I’m not sure exactly what the plan was supposed to be, but you can sleep out here in the living room. [Grabs a blanket from underneath the coffee table.] Here you go. (BEAT) Goodnight.
[Begin to exit, but pauses.]
TERRY: Are you sure you’re all right? [TALLY nods.] I’m sure Riley will come around. He’s just...shaken.
[TERRY exits. TALLY slumps.]
TALLY: He’s not the only one.
Alone in the Shadows
Zachary Scamurra
Bode Middle School
Poetry
Josie Clark

Alone in the shadows,
I wait for him to come and claim the canvas before me,
smothered in ugly dark blotches,
painted with the coarse bristles of an unforgiving brush.

My canvas may now be nowhere near finished,
but I’ve given up many years ago
looking for an art collector to get rid of this wretched ripped canvas.
Only now have I taken to drastic measures,
stopping taxis in downtown New York,
trying to get a ride directly to the art collector in the slums and in the ghettos.
No one wants a wretch like me in the backs of their cabs.

When I wave them down they begin to slow,
until they take a second glance, realizing what they’re driving to.
They speed off into the night before I can say but a word,
taunting me.
Those who do stop, ask where I’m headed.
They respond to my request,
“I’m sorry, sir, but I’m afraid I don’t know where this art collector lives.”
I see the GPS on the dashboard, and I know they lie.
I have now resorted to patrolling the dark alleyways,
searching for someone, anyone, to take me to the art collector in the slums and in the ghettos.
I have found only demons to strike deals with,
so I do.

As the black limousine approaches,
I rise from my curb of broken dreams,
torn canvas in hand.
The window rolls down sleekly,
revealing a leather-skinned man
with demon horns and red-glowing eyes.
“Where’d you like to go?”
His voice as thick and rough as his hide.
“Take me to the art collector in the slums and in the ghettos,”
I respond for one last time.
“Hop in,” he speaks curtly.
With not enough room,
I tear one last hole in my canvas and slide my knees through.
I feel the car lurch beneath my feet, as he laughs cruelly,
a sound indescribable in every language other than the fiery tongue of hell itself.
I don’t see it coming.  
I can’t see it coming.  
The windows are tinted such that I can see nothing except for shadows.  
At the darkest point in the blackest night, all I see is shadows.  
Thus, I fail to even notice the looming mass before me,  
much less prepare for the impact.  
Before my brain registers the signals of searing pain,  
I see my broken dreams welded into the my skull.  
I slip into the void between death and consciousness;  
I am gone.  

I stare into the blank insides of my eyelids.  
There is nothing;  
no broken dreams rest there waiting to ambush me mercilessly.  
Yet, I am not dead.  
I raise my eyelids, and my view of darkness is replaced by my ugly-splotched canvas,  
now in tatters,  
no solid form remaining.  
I fail to notice a man clad in a business suit,  
a deep shade of blue.  

He startles me as he speaks.  
“Hello,”  
his voice much more calm and serene and inviting than that of the demon-man.  
“You wish to go to the art collector in the slums and in the ghettos, do you not?”  
It is all I can do to nod at this beautiful physic power of a million warming suns.  
“I am sent by an art collector to retrieve you.”  
Without my telling it to, my body glides through walls,  
out the sliding doors before they can open,  
and into the limousine that awaits.  
The man quickly follows, handing me the now-tattered ugly-splotched canvas.  
The backseat of this limo can fit my tragic canvas,  
almost as if it were designed to transport poor, failed artists.  
A sunroof is open, allowing warming light heat the leather seats,  
a deep shade of blue.  

The limousine glides through the streets of New York,  
but I’ve been through here before.  
I’ve spent years waiting on my curb of broken dreams,  
wandering with my ugly-splotched canvas.  
The car drives away from the slums and the ghettos I am now desperate for.  
Instead, outside of a large studio on Broadway, we park.  
I am about to speak to my driver about our odd stop miles from my apparent destination,  
but my body once again begins to glide against my will,  
clutching the tattered, ugly-splotched canvas.  
I glide through the limousine door and up the elegant staircase leading to the oak double doors,  
heavy but engineered to open with the slightest touch,  
looming, yet inviting,
a deep shade of blue.

I am confronted with a colorful bliss of a room, canvases lining the walls and on racks dotted throughout the beauty. The canvases all contain dark splotches, some nearly all dark-splotches, but painted in such a fashion to represent beauty in its purest form. A man in an impeccably white tuxedo emerges from a doorway at the far end of the calm serenity. His voice is even more soft and silky than the Mercury man who brought me here: “Welcome.” He hands me a spool of fine, silken, white thread and an unscathed ivory needle to sew the many tears. He gives generously beautiful paints and a soft brush to continue my work. He then hands me bread and wine for revival.

It is my turn to speak: “Sir, thank you. For accepting my work when nowhere else was such a thing done except at the art collector in the slums and in the ghettos. And thank you for teaching me to believe that maybe, despite my stormy start, success is still possible. The ugly blotches that currently make up my tattered canvas can be woven in beautifully, leading to even greater contrasts and brighter brights.

For teaching me to dream, to remember unfazed what was, and dream of the beautiful future that is yet to come. Although a perfectly bright canvas, with not one stroke of darkness may be impossible, you’ve taught me to dream.

For inspiring me to continue on with this canvas, to use the silken thread and the ivory needle to sew the tears, to use the soft brush to cover the canvas in spectacular strokes of beautiful paints. Thank you.

I no longer wait alone in the shadows but rather paint with my beautiful paints and soft brush, united with my kin, my fellow artists, in the light.”
Pausing, I glance at the dust motes as they gently dance through the sunlight streaming through the chateau’s oversized windows, daydreaming. In a smooth motion, I briskly tuck the rebellious, light brown hairs back into the long braid that hangs down my back. Pounding steps snap me back to reality as Madame Foss swiftly stomps her way into the room.

Hastily, I methodically push my broom back and forth avoiding her glare and waiting for the storm to break. *Swoosh, swoosh.* Heart pounding, the seconds tick by filling the room with charged silence.

Her bitter, nasally voice brusquely breaks the silence, “Sweeping, good, finally doing as you’re told.”

I just stare at the hem of my dark dress and continue sweeping invisible specks of dirt.

“Be glad I didn’t catch you gazing off into the distance like a loon again,” she retorts.

Refusing to react to her taunts, I set my jaw and determinedly keep my mouth shut, sweeping diligently back and forth.

“But I warn you now, as head servant I have the power to dispatch you.” Loftily, she twirls on her heels and exits the room.

I finally release my pent up breath and look at the large empty room around me. Ever since I started working at Lord Chevalier’s chateau, Madame Foss has tormented me at every opportunity without reason. Maybe it’s the Revolution that’s souring her countenance. Resting and contemplating for a moment longer, I resume cleaning the spotless room.

*Bang.* The stillness is destroyed, and chaos immediately erupts into the once calm afternoon. I race towards the sound, across the ballroom into the foyer, as the Chevaliers burst in. Lady Chevalier and Camille have tears streaming down their faces; Jerome and Lord Chevalier’s usually bright faces are grim.

Filled with concern, I forget my place and blurt, “What has happened?” My cheeks instantly color, and heat courses through my face. The room fills with other servants.

Jerome kindly glances at me and gravely answers, “We have to leave France. The Revolution can’t be stopped, and Father fears the peasants will revolt against us.”

“They will!” Lord Chevalier insists. “Didn’t you see the anger in their eyes on our journey home? Have you forgotten the insubordinate peasants who fought against us when the Revolution began? The feudal system’s gone now, but I’ve heard whispers of discontent still. Pack your things. We’re leaving forthwith!”

“Come, Aurora! You must help me,” Camille wails as she lurches up the stairs. Hurrying, I sprint after her to her chambers to help pack her bags.

I reach her room, panting, expecting to see a frantic Camille, but instead, Camille sits calmly on her bed deep in thought. “I only want the finest of my clothing,” she mumbles. “Aurora, bring out all my blue dresses first.”

Although I attempt to hide my astonishment, I fear I am failing. I slowly shuffle towards her closet unable to shake my bafflement. To me, “leaving now” means quickly packing a bag of essentials, but I seal my lips and tend to the task given to me. My opinion would not be well received; of that, I am certain. I hastily scan her expansive closet and inwardly, groan. Now is definitely a relative term.
Camille chatters away as if the danger was simply another rumor she had overheard. “I don’t see why those peasants are so angry. France is thriving. I just bought three new dresses. Oh no, Aurora not that dress. Marie-Antoinette would not wear something so atrocious.”

“Yes, mademoiselle,” I reply. I bow my head and reach for another dress. I pity Camille’s nearsightedness and wish to explain that the King was forced to sign the new constitution and that France’s debts are mounting higher and higher. Any instruction from me, though, would be taken as an insult, so I leave her in her oblivion.

“They have their representation which King Louis so kindly granted them. Oh, that color is simply hideous. I just don’t understand those common folk what with their fighting and...”

An hour later, Camille’s ready, and I’m covered in sweat. Her five over-stuffed bags seem excessive to me for rapidly leaving the country, but I don’t dare mention that to her. After calling another servant to lug the bags to the carriage, I join Camille and the rest of the family in foyer where an argument’s ensuing.

“I simply must have a servant,” Camille whines. “Who’s going to fix my hair? Or help me with my clothing?”

“Just do it yourself,” Lord Chevalier snaps.

“But, but...”, and I watch as someone two years my junior, fourteen, crumbles into raucous tears.

I cringe as her volume increases, but Jerome finally intervenes, “Let her bring one servant, Father, Aurora, maybe. I doubt she’d dream of hurting a fly, let alone us. She’s been nothing but stalwart since she started here.”

Embarrassed, I train my eyes on the ground, yet I briefly glimpse Lord Chevalier’s suspicious stare and Jerome’s heartening one. My thoughts jumble together as I think of the possibilities and the implications. Leave France, I can’t imagine it. With the Chevaliers no less, while no others are invited. I feel the compliment strike a chord in my chest. Without thinking, I steal a quick glance at Jerome. He’s two years older than me but kind and amiable. I’ve only worked here for a short time, but he’s rapidly found a place in my heart.

It seems like forever and no time at all that Lord Chevalier resigns and declares, "Fine, she may come, but Jerome, she’s your responsibility now, and Camille, I don’t want to hear another word. Come on, we’re departing now."

As I accompany a smiling, skipping Camille out to the waiting carriage, a thousand emotions, fear, joy, doubt, rush through my mind, jostling for my attention. A triumphant grin stretches across Jerome’s face as he walks by my side. His smile is contagious, and I feel the corners of my mouth tug upward as I clamber into the carriage and sit in between the siblings. Nudging me, he teases, "You ready?"

With a smile, I reply, feigning outrage, "Of course."

None of us imagined that traveling would be so trying. Excitement and laughter filled the first days, but as time wears on, the days grow more and more strenuous. In our mad dash to evacuate, I brought no extra clothing with me, and out of fear, Lord Chevalier forced me to purchase a few extra dresses, alone, in a town we passed. Also, being the only servant, besides the carriage drivers, obliges me to satisfy all of the Chevaliers’ demands of me. “Aurora, fetch my fan. Procure my book. Grab my cushion.” I try to stay cheerful, but my patience is wearing thin.

I stare out the window as evening approaches and watch the French countryside roll by and the cloudy sky above as we near our destination, the English Channel. Pondering the Revolution, I find it arduous to envision all those angry peasants in Paris revolting, striking fear into the nobilities’ hearts. Their argument I comprehend but not their methods. In the town where I got my dresses, I overheard two bourgeoisies discussing the imbalanced distribution of power. They sagely insinuated, without blatantly saying, that the nobility and clergy seem to have all the power, ignoring the needs of the lowly
majority, yet paying special attention to their own gain. I don’t believe every upper-classman is that way; the Chevaliers aren’t, but give someone power, and he will likely abuse it in his favor. That all seems as far away as the sun is today, though. The world right in front of me seems to be all that exists.

A thunderous boom rocks the carriage, shattering my thoughts. Camille cries out in fear, and I latch onto the nearest thing to me, Jerome, as the carriage teeters. The horses bray in fear, and the rain pounds down turning the ground instantly into mud. We jerk to an abrupt stop.

Jerome steps out to aid the carriage drivers forcing me to release my grip on his arm. “Shh, shh. Mademoiselle, it’s just a storm. We’re safe inside the carriage,” I murmur and pat her hand reassuringly, masking my own angst behind a calm face.

She gasps, “Where’s Jerome?” with eyes wild.

“He stepped out to dislodge the carriage from the muck alongside the drivers,” I affirm. As I finish saying that, pants covered in mud, Jerome scrambles back in with dismay written on his face. “We’re going to be stuck here until this storm blows over,” he sighs as he plops down next to me. “And it looks like Mother and Father have left us behind.”

Dissolving into tears, Camille curls into a ball and refuses any sort of solace. Dread lurks behind all my thoughts while I attempt to ignore them. Camille eventually nods off, but Jerome and I remain awake.

“What are we going to do?” I mumble, thinking only I could hear myself.

“Keep moving, I guess. What choice do we have? Father surely won’t stop, not while he’s in such a state,” Jerome sighs.

I’m caught off guard, but I quickly regain my composure and say, “We’ll find a way. No need to worry, sir.”

“It’s alright, Aurora. I can see that you’re as worried as I am. And you’re right. Worse come to worst, Camille and I will pretend to be simple farming folk.”

Against my will, a laugh bubbles out of me. I couldn’t help it; imagining Camille working in the dirt is absolutely ridiculous. I shut my mouth instantly, eyes wide with fright. That was utterly daft; one should never laugh at nobility. I yank my head up. He’s chuckling, too. Relief rushes over me, and I allow myself to continue laughing but quietly, hoping he didn’t see my fright.

Jerome jests, “Camille would give us away in less than an hour with all her complaining.”

I’m glad his mind reached a similar conclusion as mine, but feeling bad for laughing at Camille’s expense, I say, “She is a sweet girl, though.”

“But she needs to learn that the world doesn’t revolve around her. I’ve tried to show her that there’s more to life than fashion and her own happiness. I fear I’m not making any progress.”

“With your guidance, I’m positive she could make a perfect farming girl,” I smile.

Our shared laughter disperses some of the darkness closing in on us. I am intrigued that Jerome would relate these feelings to me, seeing as I’m only a servant girl. Still smiling, I lightly lay my head against the intricate carriage wall where sleep soon envelops me in its inky black embrace.

After traveling days without sight or sound of Lord and Lady Chevaliers’ carriage, we begin to despair. The English Channel’s roughly an hour’s ride away which quickly slips by without any sign of the lord and lady. Our fear mounts higher. Camille is terrified of the separation, but her tears have stopped freely flowing.

Every now and then, I catch a glimpse of the English Channel; I’ve never seen such an expansive stretch of water. Curiosity and apprehension clash within me at the thought of riding over such an unknown beast, but for now, I direct my worries on the lord and lady.

We reach the port and receive no news of the two. For another hour, we wait and wander around the busy shipyard until Jerome finally decides that it’s time to board a ship. Walking for bit longer, we stop in front of massive ship bobbing in the grey water. Jerome mutters, “The ship Father talked about,” and hustles aboard to see the captain.
Camille and I stand on the dock, shivering in the cool, salty air. I close my eyes for a moment and take it all in; seagulls scream overhead, waves lap softly against the shore, and men’s gruff voices fill the air with sound. I like it, and for a moment, I’m lost in it, pushing all other thoughts to the back of my mind. I drag my attention back when Camille says, “Do you think we’ll find them?”

I’m saved from replying and revealing my uncertainty by Jerome thumping his way down the gangway.

“Come on. The captain and I have hashed out a deal,” he glumly states. Camille and Jerome board the ship. I follow behind them, but stop at the railing to watch our bags being loaded.

The siblings join me in observing the crowds scurry along. I feel the despair pressing down upon us all. Camille, like me, has never been anywhere but inland France, so her pain hides behind the excitement of a new experience. Jerome, on the other hand, feels it crashing down upon him. His head hangs low. Timidly, I slip my hand into his.

“Uh, Jerome?” Camille asks, and she gives Jerome a sidelong look. “Where are we staying?”

“We’ll be below decks. I’ll show you in a moment.”

Nodding her head, tears shine in her eyes. With his free hand, Jerome brushes a stray lock out of her eyes and says, “Hey, it’s all going to be alright. Father and Mother are on their way to England. I can feel it. We’ll meet them there.”

Together, we behold the sunset blazing across the sky, one of God’s masterpieces. I silently pray for the missing Chevaliers’ safe passage. Somehow, I know they’ll make it. I also bid adieu to France, my home alight with the fires of Revolution. I wish it luck. May it survive the turmoil ensuing, but as for me, I travel somewhere safe, beyond its reach, and hope.
Maybe you earn it. Maybe when they say you asked for it they’re right. Do we ever really earn a beating? I don’t think we do. I think it’s a test to show if you can let it go. Or must you do something? Must you use violence to do something?

It started as just any other ordinary day, we went to school, came home, had dinner, talked to each other, laughed, got upset at one another, and watched TV. Dillon, my brother, went to Target with Erin, my oldest brother’s girlfriend. My mom and dad were talking to Dakota, my oldest brother, while my sister, Lauren, and I were standing in the hallway. Dakota was racing with his friends while Lauren and I were in the car with him, so he was getting his car taken away. Mom went into the kitchen to do dishes while dad and Dakota started arguing like little kids.

Dad started shouting at my brother, and my brother was threatening to do stuff to my dad’s car. Lauren was about to go into the kitchen with my mom when it happened. One moment they were biting each other’s heads off, and then the next they were trying to hit each other. Mom came in the room only when she heard my sister scream. Dad had gotten a chair and was about to hit my brother with it, but Mom forced it out of his hands—not before he hit the TV with it.

I couldn’t see much through all of the tears in my face, but I could see enough. Lauren, I’m sure, was the same way. I remember Lauren and I crying and screaming at my dad to stop. He was on top of Dakota punching him; he bit him once and broke the skin. Mom finally came over and made Lauren and I go downstairs.

“Girls, go downstairs! Now!” I remember her yelling.

“Kat, let’s go!” Lauren had said while pulling me down the stairs.

“When we got downstairs, I was shaking so bad that my sister came over and hugged me.

“It’s gonna be okay,” she said through fits of sobs and hiccups.

I turned to face the stairs. When I started screaming again, Lauren joined me.

“I hate you!” I screamed.

“I hate you, Dad!” we screamed together.

When we calmed down, we went back upstairs, Dad was in the kitchen, Dakota was in the bathroom, and Mom was in her room. Lauren and I ran to my mom and lay on the bed with her. She hugged us as my brother came out of the bathroom. He looked horrible, his face was bruised, his arm was red from where dad had bitten him, and his eyes were red. I remember so clear that he looked straight at my mom with so much anger and hatred, saying, “I hate you.”

Then he walked out, went to his car, and drove off. Mom sat there for a few moments before going to the front door. We followed like lost puppies. Dad was sitting on the sofa when we came out.

Mom got her keys, looked dad in the eyes, and said, “We are getting a divorce.”

With that, we left. We sat in the car in the parking lot of the high school and cried. We didn’t know what to do. Finally Mom started the car again, and we went to Target to get Dillon. We found him in the front of the store. When he got in, he asked what happened to Dakota.

I guess Dakota had gone into the store to get Erin—at least, that’s what Dillon said. We told Dillon all that had happened. He was so shocked he was speechless. We drove around for a few and finally went back home. When we got there, Dad was gone. When we dropped Dillon off at the house, we got a text from Erin: Dakota on way to hospital, did illegal U-turn, police pulled over, saw bruises, asked what happened, D refused to tell but finally cracked.
Mom called Dillon and told him we were coming to the hospital. Dillon said the police had been to our house looking for Dad. When we got to the hospital, Mom texted Dad and asked him where he was. It took a while for him to answer, but he was at a friend’s house. Twenty minutes passed, but it felt like an hour waiting for my brother.

“Are you Mrs. Schooler?” the clerk asked.

“Yes,” Mom replied blankly.

“Your son has arrived, and they’re going to examine him,” the clerk said with a hint of sadness. Mom left to see Dakota and left me and my sister in a scared mess in the corner. It felt like the world was caving in on me in that short time she was gone. I felt so confused and upset, and then I felt lonely and betrayed by my dad. Mom came out shortly and said he had a broken eye vein. Erin came in, and when Dakota was ready, she took him to her parents’ house.

“Is Dakota gonna be okay?” I asked.

“Yeah, sweetie, now let’s go get your dad.” She put her hand on my shoulder and looked me in the eyes; I saw how sad and scared she was.

I sat in the very back of the car on the way to get my dad. Looking out the window gave me some kind of comfort, letting me escape momentarily from a life that was going downhill fast. When Dad got into the car, I didn’t speak or look at him, I kept quiet until we got to the police station. The police asked me and my sister a lot of questions. Finally my dad was put in jail, and Lauren and I got to go home. It felt like I didn’t even sleep that night. I don’t remember going to sleep, but somehow I did. When I woke up, the police had been by to give us a sheet to fill out about the night before. I knew then that I would never forget that night, that I would live it over and over again.
Hammock

I am aware – barely.
I hear the shrill of a bird’s call,
the muffled sound of pots clashing
from the kitchen.
The faint zoom of passing
cars barely makes it through.
The creak of the hammock keeps
me awake.
The rope knots make
indentions along my knotted spine.
I seem to sway with
the warm summer breeze
as it carries me
into the heat of the day.
I am drifting away with
the distinct smell of fresh cut grass,
and I leave behind my worries and troubles.
I feel the faint tug of
sleep pulling down my eyelids
as I slowly wander
into another world.

Sunrise

The light glint of dusk rays
glitters off the icy blue surface,
blinding me as I walk.
The distinct fin of a
dolphin bobs in the waves.
A distant pier
doesn’t seem more than a shadow
against the water-colored sky.
I hear the wind skim
against the water
and the waves
crash at my feet,
throwing water and the ocean’s
deepest secrets at my dispense.
I sense the rough grains
squeeze through
pink glazed toes,
and wisps of thick hair
blow into
dark chocolate eyes.
I smell the salty air
radiating off deep waters
and the perfume of
foreign flowers.
The mugginess of the morning
weighs down on me
like a rock,
like I am being pounded
with copious amounts water
and no air to breathe.
The heat of the day is
upon me.

**Sunscream**

The smell of artificial bananas
slowly creeps its way
up to my nose
as I lather on layer
after layer
of this white goo.
It begins to filter through me,
energizing me from
either to wrist,
knee to ankle.
It invades, and I welcome the sensation,
making me light and free,
alive and happy,
careless.
Memories of cool waves crashing
and the hot sun thrashing,
the squeak of the springs on my trampoline,
the cool touch of sand beneath my toes
bring moments of summer
to my senses.
The haze lifts,
and I walk slowly
into my scorching
Paradise.
A Life on Walls

An embryo
Gaping fills
Folded fingers
Tissues connect
The creation
A child
Writes to stars
Daily parable
King of the Finches
The pretender
A monster
Or friend that feeds the voids
Ease the shallow mind
The cold split
A lowly sore
Mellows the old mark
To smear over the above
Your last pleasure
The life
On walls and to ever be remembered

Drambuie

In these walls I am delighted, moreover,
Dismayed

As the glass tips and I am the liquid
That runs out of slender lips
Cradling agony

Honey remains lift my tongue away
To remind it of its barriers, but the gold is
Too well to acknowledge
A fence

And the words spill like dew drops
Fictionless, ate the smirk away
But freed myself
The prisoner
To my tongue and flesh and weeps
Ten days to recover the fake
Featureless love
Eleven nights of attempts to
Ease the nerves of

Burnt china

Between our flesh, the burden and the risk
That mended what we saw on the floor
Before us, but you know as well as I
And so the bone porcelain gives

We surrender

To the tile like fallen beasts
And deliver our affections to an unforgiving
End, hoping that the dust carries
Our bitter souls elsewhere to belong
Or to exist without the

Drowning questions

Like lukewarm water that invades
With its only purpose acidic
To wither away or conquer
But this time, the beloved subsist

Paper

A perfect pocket book, a polished novel. I had it. It was written, but it is gone.

Now you are crumpled paper, and I watch you burn. You are beyond words, with your vindictive smiles, but I am no longer your precious varnish. I have disappeared and left you naked—veil melting—your smoldered intentions now in vein. Velvet pushes into something no longer volatile. I watch your edges turn brown with a desire only beguiling me. Bony, I thought. Bony stench. A biting heat besieges you. Buries you. Flame butcher burns every word of you. Brown begins to blacken. I can’t breathe near your folding fumes, crumpling. Cascading down embers. Crunch. I don’t have the courtesy to look away. I don’t cringe. Column by column you collapse. Unsettling how I felt freed at last as you fell inward and into your own finale. Floods of flame embrace, feelings of contempt freshen. Your filth disclosed, my fetters undone. Bravo. I’m not sorry. I picked you off, scab. Your smoke is heavy—look at you—shambles. Shipwrecked into the furnace. A showpiece of sorts, not beautiful. Short lived. Sad your only cradle is Hell. On the plus side, you can light your cigarette. Breathe in some more and tell me how it tastes as it settles in the back of your throat. You always walked around tongue-in-cheek, and I don’t suppose you fancied this your tragedy. It’s too bad. Flames take a train ride through tasteless flesh—devour accordingly.

Burnt paper. Raw, exposed, your malignant rust revealed rot. I’m sorry, you can’t row your way out of this one. Regret? I lost that page of the Dictionary. Retaliation was exactly what you never expected;
ruin was something you couldn’t understand. I needed anything but restoration. Too lovelorn for my own good, proved last in a long list of your attempts to stay in the limelight. Proved too little, too late when it was me guzzled down in your liquor. I think the world is watching, or maybe just waiting to say I was the weakness—I was the wilting Amaryllis. What were you, then? The worst ceased, but left you paralyzed. Plucked like an unwanted impurity. Iron penitentiary holds what is left. With your every pore exposed, prayers mean nothing. Petroleum eyes fuel the phenomenon. Parasite discovered, destroyed. Devoid of dignity—left damned, but not quite deceased. Decaying flakes of your former self drift downward, disintegrate, but can’t escape the demolition. Does watching you make me the desperado? In a sick way, I hope so.

Hardbound to ash. I’m not sure where to go from here. I never considered survival. Too much smother. Scar in my mind. Runs out to sea. Too much soot. Word for word vanished. Smudge it on the walls? Sob into the smoke. Sound the alarms, this sorrow cannot hold what is left standing. Were you the splinter? Sinner? No, this was wrong. I ascend the stairway to my subconscious, staggering. Sanity askew, left adrift upon ashen remains. Approaching anxiety feeds off of dying amusement. Anger adorns my failed façade of apathy. Alone, alone, alone. Measureless emotions seem miniscule next to this disaster. Moment thrown into never. The last go-about on the merry-go-round. Bone marrow taste. Make believe leech sucks it out of my mind. More. Medicates my thoughts before they pass through. The leech says, “Escape while you can.” How could I ever, when it was everlasting, it was every, everybody, everyday, everyone, everything, everywhere. That is where I will go. Nothing left. Existence eradicated. Empty expanse, end.

Singularity

I made no room for you here
There was no more
Ivory paint.
I can’t see the planets swallowing you
From my impetuous star
But I know you’re on the verge of
Slipping into a milky red
Silence.
There is no hope for our
Black matter disguise
So take every molecule of you
To the farthest dusty
Wasteland.
A failed binary system
A burnt orange collapse
A downward spiral into
Nothingness.
“And they lived... happily ever after.” Claps erupted from Ellie’s little pudgy hands. She started giggling with her adorably goofy grin spread across her eight year old face. Soon I couldn’t help but laugh with her, and we laughed until she made me read Beauty and the Beast again, the only fairy tale she would listen to. I’ve offered Cinderella, Snow White, and Rapunzel, but she plugs her ears and refuses to pay attention. After I finish the legendary final sentence, she falls asleep with her little stuffed elephant.

I leave her room, shutting the door softly. I go into my parents’ room to say goodnight and that Ellie is asleep and then head to my room. There, I get ready for bed, brushing my long thick curls. I need a haircut. This is getting out of hand. I crawl into bed and read my book for half an hour, my eyes threatening to shut for eight hours. Finally at 10:30, I put my book away and turn off my lamp. In the morning when I wake, I roll over and look at the sunlight streaming through windows. Not my windows. Not my shutters. I sit up and start to panic.

“Hello! Hello!” I screech. Just then, the bedroom door opens and in comes a woman dressed like a maid. But not a modern maid, more like a maid from the eighteen hundreds. She walks over with a wet rag in her hand and presses it to my forehead.

“Shhh…” she whispers. She is so calm. How can she be calm when a stranger is in her house screaming?

“Why am I here?” I ask.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. You’ve been sleeping right here in this same room since your were just a little girl.” Still calm, yet her eyes are wide and alert.

“What? What are you talking about? I fell asleep in my own bedroom, and when I woke up, I was here.”

“My dear, I have no earthly idea what you mean by this, but you must get up and ready. Today is the big day! You must go to the ball today to meet The Prince.” What prince? I live in 2013, and this lady is making it sound like I live in 1877.

“What prince?” I ask.

“You do not have time to play these games today, Belle!” she responds warily.

“But, how on earth do you know my name?” I don’t understand.

She responds by pulling a gorgeous strapless salmon ball gown out of the surprisingly large closet. She lays two glass slippers on the floor.

“Please hurry, my dear child, for I have much to do with your long luscious curls and flawless skin! Come now.”

I walk over to her. All of the sudden a name pops into my head. Grace. I have more memories. I know this place. I have been here before. An image comes into my head: the maid, rocking me as a newborn. She is soothing me with her soft voice, singing “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star.”

“Grace?” I am not sure where to go from here.

“Yes, my darling?” She looks exasperated.

“Thank you for setting out my things.”

“Of course, dear.” She smiles. “Now, come.”

She lowers the beautiful gown to the tile, allowing me to step into the dress. Then she starts to brush my thick, blonde hair. When she is finished, she takes my chin in her finger and makes me look at her so she can do my make-up. She powders my nose, adds coal underneath my eyes, and adds rose to
my cheeks. Even I admit I look stunning, but there are so many thoughts coursing through my head.

Suddenly another memory. It’s Grace. I am sitting in front of a mirror on a stool. I’m wearing a thin, baby blue night gown, and Grace is brushing my waist length, pale blonde hair.

I watch her confident strokes through the mirror. Her eyes and hands focused on their task. When she finishes brushing, she sets the brush down and runs her fingers through it, searching for the part. When she finds it, she smooths the short strands, stands and walks to the closet, pulling out a dress that is the color of the ocean. Silky and flowing. I cannot be older than eight or nine, but I get off my short stool and walk over, stepping into the dress like I have been doing it since the day I was born. I walk with my shoulders back and my back rigid. *I look like a princess. Am I?*

I come back with Grace still staring into my bright, light, blue eyes.

“Come, my darling! You are gorgeous! Just like every day. But we must not fawn over you now! It is time to meet your future husband, and you must look your best. Better than best! What am I talking about, of you…” She trails off, looking me up and down while still mumbling to herself about what could or couldn’t be fixed. After her eyes travel up once more, as she decides it is time and her work complete.

“What is his name again?” I ask, not wanting to make a fool of myself when I meet this “prince.” “His name is Adam, and he cannot wait to meet you. He has seen a painting of your family and has claimed to have fallen in love with you.” She chuckles like young love is something that cracked a joke.

“Adam,” I whisper to myself, turning the letters over in my mouth turning them, flipping them on my tongue, doing this because the name sounds familiar-- like something that I have heard once or twice. I cannot place it. I am staring off, but Grace’s voice makes reality come true. I must meet this prince. I have to get married, but most of all I need to find out who he is and why his name is so familiar.

“Yes! Now, let us go!” she walks swiftly out of the room, and I follow picking up the front of the dress as to not trip and have to change out of this beautiful dress. She leads me out of the room and down a set of stairs. As we reach the bottom she walks ahead and turns a sharp corner. I see her undress into a nicer and not as tattered gown. She releases her hair out of the clip, and I see beautiful brown curls escape. She walks out of the room, and I once again follow. She leads me to a huge wooden door. There, a man in a black and white suit stands with white gloves and polished shoes. He reaches for the door handle.

“Oh, he must be the butler.”

“Lovely morning to you, Lady Finn.” He gives me a warm smile and curtsies.

“Same to you…” just then a name pops into my mind. “…Vincent.” His smile never falters. “Good morning to you, Grace.” His gaze turns to the woman.

“Good morning, Vincent. How are you this late morning?” She replies.

“Just as fantastic as ever.” I see love in his eyes. Are they together? Married? The forbidden love?

She responds with a smile, and we walk out the door, to see a pearl white carriage with two white Belgium horses, standing alert and at attention. Vincent follows out of the oak doors and walks swiftly to open the carriage door for Grace and me. I climb in first, and with Grace’s help, get my dress inside without crinkling it. Grace climbs inside, and Vincent shuts the door but not before saying, “Good luck, my lady.”

After around fifteen minutes, we arrive to a castle that is even larger than the one we just came from. Outside of the castle on the right side, there are many people who are standing in a straight line. They are all dressed like Vincent, in black and white. As the carriage comes to a stop, a man approaches the carriage from the right side. On the left side I notice there are people standing in a straight line but are dressed like Grace and I. On the end of the line on the left there is a man not older than seventeen, my age. He must be the prince. Then the man approaching the carriage grabs hold of the door handle. He opens the door and offers his hand. Politely, I take it and allow him to help me out of the carriage.
Surprisingly graceful, I step down out of the carriage and wait for Grace to follow. She also gets out, and I walk over to an older man on the left side of the castle. *The King.* Next to him is a woman. I could tell that she was very beautiful when she was younger, and next to the queen is the prince. I catch his gaze, and his jaw drops the slightest bit, which is probably the most he can risk standing here. We keep staring into each other’s eyes, trying to catch a glimpse of our future together.

Grace leads me to the three royals, and I stand in front of the king first. I give a curtsy and a small smile. The manners of a noble coming back to me like I have been practicing since I could walk. I do the same for the queen, and once I stand in front of the prince time stops. He reaches for my hand, and I give it to him. He bows and kisses it. Just as his lips leave my fingers, I look up to meet his eye and realize that I am in my high school hallway, which is bustling with my fellow seniors. As I look down at my hand, my skin remembering the way his soft pink lips felt on my fingers, I see that I am in my regular school clothes and am merely shaking hands with this familiar boy. I know that I know him, but I can’t place it.

“Hello. I’m Adam. I new here, and you are stunning,” he blurts, looking embarrassed. “I saw you walking down the hallway last hour, and I was wondering if you could show me around?”

“Hey Adam, nice to meet you. My name’s Belle, and I’d be happy to.”
I Have No Color
Deja Sterling
Raymore-Peculiar Senior High School
Poetry
Jeannie Frazier

I have no color
My wrists bleed black and white
I am not ashamed

I am true to myself
Because I know that naturally,
I am beautiful
People can judge, and announce my difference
But I will embrace it
‘Cause I know who I am
And I love the skin I’m in

I should not be defined by my pigmentation,
But by the creativeness of my imagination
And the person I am inside despite their augmentation
To make me believe that I am less than a person

The names they throw at me
Pierce my outer covering
But they don’t change who I am
Because words are merely words
They don’t define me

I am the beautiful product
Of a black man and a white woman
A little grey girl with curly hair and dark skin

When you look at me
Do you see what they see?
Or do you see through my skin?

I am different
I am mixed
I am beautiful
I am me
In *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne, Pearl Prynne is not named for the beauty of the spherical mass that forms inside an oyster. Instead, she is named “‘Pearl,’ as being of great price—purchased with all [her mother] had” (84). The true reason for her receiving this name is covered by the physical connection between the beauty of a pearl and the beauty of the child. Through the precocious, impulsive character of Pearl, Hawthorne suggests that people truly are capable of change. Though at first, Pearl seems to lack understanding of human nature and sympathy for those around her, Hawthorne shows the development of Pearl’s ability to show compassion and sincere emotion and what may have hindered it in the first place.

There is a certain depth to Pearl that no one seems to be able to comprehend. Physically, Pearl is lovely, perfect, “worthy to have been brought forth in Eden” (85). This is the first mention of her connection to nature. Her external beauty is equivalent to the allure of the paradisiacal garden, but just like Eden, she is complicated. Eve eats the apple, and a breadth of knowledge is bestowed upon her, including her realization that she and Adam lack clothing. This leads them to hide from God and cover themselves.

Pearl, too, is complicated on the interior. From birth, Pearl’s nature “lacked reference and adaptation” to the world around her. She was born an outcast. The narrator says she was “worthy to have been left [in Eden], to be the plaything of the angels” (85). She was never a part of society, and “nothing was more remarkable than the instinct... with which the child comprehended her loneliness; the destiny that had drawn an inviolable circle about her” (88). Those on the outside see Pearl as a child with no “reverence for authority, no regard for human ordinances or opinions, right or wrong” (126). Even her mother has no choice, but to let her “be swayed by her own impulses” (86). She is, undeniably, a wild spirit, erratic and unpredictable.

The young girl seems content to live within her circle, where she uses her imagination to express her emotions. Pearl invents different characters by varying the tones of her voice and using aspects of the nature she finds around her. Pine trees become the Puritan adults, while the weeds turn into their children. On the surface, her play is not unlike that of any other child; “the singularity lay in the hostile feelings with which the child regarded all these offspring of her own heart and mind.” In her play, she knocks down the elders, uproots the children, clearly indicating her understanding of the animosity present outside her little world. It seems, for this reason, Pearl “never created a friend” (90).

Hester is the closest thing Pearl has to a friend, but even she questions Pearl’s strange behaviors, calling her an “elfish child”, acknowledging her daughter as “an imp of evil, emblem and product of sin” (88). But Hester loves Pearl and knows that there is more to her than meets the eye.

The first instance in which Pearl seems to show sincerity towards others is at the governor’s mansion when the town officials try to take Pearl from Hester. Hester tells them that Pearl is the only thing keeping her alive, that without her child, she will die. But Pearl does not help Hester in convincing the officials that she is a fit mother. When the officials ask who made her, Pearl refuses to reply. Finally, she responds “that she has not been made at all, but had been plucked by her mother off the bush of wild roses that grew by the prison door” (105). The fit answer would have been the church-enforced “the Heavenly Father made me.” She’s a smart child—perhaps too smart for her own good—who understands the circumstances in which she finds herself. She understands that a possible outcome of this meeting could lead to her being separated from her mother. After much pleading and a desperate appeal to Reverend Dimmesdale, Hester wins her case and is allowed to keep custody of Pearl who,
though seemingly unconcerned with the matter at hand, proceeds to approach Dimmesdale. Hawthorne describes the moment by contrasting how Pearl is commonly perceived and how she appears at this moment:

Pearl, that wild and flighty little elf, stole softly towards him, and taking his hand in the grasp of bother of her own, laid her cheek against it; a caress so tender, and withal so unobtrusive, that her mother, who was looking on, asked herself, ‘Is that my Pearl?’ (109)

Even Hester, who bore the child and holds the closest relationship with her, questions the display of affection, the gesture so genuine. But Hester “knew that there was love in the child’s heart, although it mostly revealed itself in passion, and hardly twice in her lifetime had been softened by such gentleness as now” (109). Though infrequent, Pearl does show compassion and appreciation at times. Although she doesn’t always respond to situations in the appropriate manner, Pearl is capable of showing affection and gratitude.

Yet another instance where Pearl appears to be developing a compassionate side to her seemingly thoughtless nature is on the shore while Hester and Chillingworth talk. She is playing by herself and decides to throw rocks at a flock of birds. She seems naughty, satanic even, but when she realizes she’s hit a target, she stops. It pains her to have done harm to a little being that was “as wild as the sea breeze, or as wild as Pearl herself” (168). Here, she acknowledges her free spirit. This moment is yet another example of how Pearl is set apart from the world in which she lives; she feels more of a tie to nature, to the wild, than to the people around her.

And Hawthorne comes right out and says this when Pearl is playing in the forest while Hester and Dimmesdale talk: “She was gentler here” because “mother-forest, and these wild things which it nourishes, all recognize a kindred wildness in the human child” (195). This connection also brings back Hawthorne’s reference to Eden 100 pages earlier. From birth, Pearl has a connection to nature that she’s never experienced with humans.

But then, into the forest, her safe place, comes an intruder: Dimmesdale, who helped to keep her in her mother’s care all those years ago but who had also refused to stand on the scaffold with Pearl and Hester during daylight. When he kisses Pearl in the forest, she immediately washes it off in the brook. When Pearl and Hester are in town, and she sees Dimmesdale on the scaffold, she asks her mother whether he was the one who kissed her before and says, “I could not be sure that it was he... Else I would have run to him, and bid him kiss me now, before all the people” (228). Here, Pearl is willing to accept his affection but only if he will do it for everyone to see.

She is an outcast in her conservative society: wild and free. But on the inside, she has the innate human desire to be accepted and loved. She shows affection to Hester because her mother never abandoned her for a second. Hester always loved her and was never ashamed of her existence. Dimmesdale, however, would only love her from afar, where no one could see; thus, he was not “bold” and “true” and wouldn’t “take [Pearl’s] hand, and [her] Mother’s hand... at noontide” (147). He would not publically accept her like her mother had, so she wants to embrace him out of spite, not love.

Though those two moments do not demonstrate her growth, they are the cause of her growth. Finally, the most significant change is displayed on the scaffold when Reverend Dimmesdale dies. He calls her forward, acknowledging her as his child in public for the first time. He accepts her in front of everyone, not just beneath the cloak of darkness or amidst the trees. She runs to him, wrapping her arms around his knees. As his soul ascends to heaven, she kisses him:

The great scene of grief, in which the wild infant bore a part, had developed all her sympathies; and as her tears fell upon her father’s cheek, they were the pledge that she would grow up amid human joy and sorrow, nor forever do battle with the world, but be a woman in it. (242-243)

Because her father publically acknowledges her, she has a different role in society. This gesture forces the community to acknowledge her, not just as the child of Hester Prynne, wearer of the Scarlet Letter, but also as the child of their beloved minister. This public display of affection is her exit from her
“inviolable circle” (88) and her entrance into womanhood. Because she is openly recognized as something other than a devil-child, she accepts another role in the world. She needs not fight with the world anymore because she has been identified as something other than a spawn of Satan. She is no longer an outcast, a secret love child, but a part of the community around her as she and the people all share a love of her esteemed father. Pearl is not just the daughter of Hester Prynne, the result of sin, a child with an insatiable curiosity and a spirit wilder than the wind. In this aspect, she is like an oyster holding a pearl. From the outside, it is almost impossible to see the growth within.
“Please stop!” I begged, bracing myself for the next hit...

When do you know the difference between “nerd” and “boy”? That is the question on which my 8th grade year has been based. In every school, you have the charming boys, who get all of the girls, the repugnant pigs who think that spilling milk in someone’s locker is fun, and the self-centered jerks who try and make you feel like nothing. I’m more of the quiet, simple type. Somehow, I got on someone’s bad side and am now the entire school’s punching bag. I guess when you get good grades and like to read, you pretty much make yourself a target for the meanest kids in school.

“Jamie!” Mrs. Thompson shouted.

My thoughts drifted back to equations, and reminded me that it was only Monday, which always means homework. Great. As I finished copying down the problem that was hastily written on the board, the bell rang, and I immediately wished I had brought a helmet to school today. Before I could even take two steps, I was pushed and thrown around like bumper cars but from sweaty, hormonal teenagers. Once the path had finally cleared, I gathered my papers—which had somehow flown out of my hands and across the room—and hurried to my locker.

FINALLY! As I walked up to the slim piece of silver metal, I checked my surroundings and looked at the clock. If I was fast enough, I would be able to make it to history before Bryan got to this particular hallway. After I heard the familiar “click,” I shoved my math book inside and slammed it shut. One thing that I learned when walking through the halls of East Dale Middle School is to put my head down and walk briskly. As I continued to make my way through the halls like a fish going upstream, I was suddenly shoved into the wall, making my books fly in different directions like an explosion.

“Hey, Stupid, watch where you’re going!” I heard a familiar, gruff voice screech.

I cringed at the sound of the word that I was often called. It was listed along with Loser, Geek, Dummy, and many others. Everyone gathered around to see the action, and I could hear the quiet whispers of my peers. My head became clouded with hurtful phrases and sentences, and I could feel my fists begin to clench. My chest heaved. This wasn’t the first time Bryan had chosen to take his anger out on me.

“Do you know why you are such a loser? Well, let’s list the reasons. One, because you think that reading is fun. Two, you wear the dorkiest looking glasses on the earth. Do I have to list some more?” he said, while the kids surrounding us snickered and pointed.

My fists clenched, and my heart began to race. I had never felt this kind of emotion before. It was as if I wanted nothing more than let all of my emotions explode out of me. For so long, I had kept everything bottled up inside me. Tears from my wide, moistened eyes streamed unchecked down my cheeks. The tears tasted brackish to my lips, with a significant tint of bitterness in them: bitterness that I felt and directed at Bryan for putting me in such a miserable and pitiful condition. Tears blinded my eyes as a new surge of anger swept me. A muffled moan of grief arose in my throat, and my head throbbed with pain.

“No,” I retorted, my voice weak but with some confidence behind it.

Immediately, silence filled the atmosphere. There were no more voices. No more cries, laughter, jeering, screams, or giggles. I could almost hear the faint heartbeat of everyone in the room. Horizontal
rays of orange-red sunlight shone through the blinds, highlighting the peaceful dust particles which were slowly settling onto the wooden floor. It seemed as though the students were frozen in time.

“For years, you have been pushing me around, calling me names, and making me feel like nothing. It’s taken me too long to realize that what you’re doing needs to stop.” Anger dripped from each syllable.

“And what are you going to do about it, Dork?” he said, curiosity etched into his usually uninterested tone.

I thought about that question. Was I going to resort to violence, as he had always done to me? Would I choose to make him pay for all of the times he made me feel worthless? My mind continued to ramble with fake scenarios of what could actually happen in the next few minutes. As I turned around to see the anxious faces, I began to slowly walk towards Bryan. In return, he began to back up by the lockers but tripped and fell, causing him to scurry against the lockers like a cornered mouse. I bent down so we were level. Bryan’s breath hitched, and everyone was holding their breaths.

What would I say? Maybe I could think up a sarcastic remark about all the times he made me feel worthless. Should I mention his messy hair and body odor, the flaws that he pointed out on everyone else? All of these options would definitely make me feel better and lift the giant weight of low self-esteem off my small shoulders. I would be able to start over, become a new person.

However, the more I thought about the comments I so dearly wanted to deal out to the boy in front of me, the less I really felt like I should. Bullies were supposed to put others down so they can rise up. By saying those things, I wasn’t just exacting my revenge; I was becoming who I despise: a bully.

My gaze locked on Bryan’s form. It was almost ironic how nervous he looked for such a big kid, a reflection of myself every time I got made fun of or picked on. All those times I wished he would stop and understand that I am not who he makes me out to be. What will he learn if I act like him?

I knew exactly what I was going to do, and it didn’t involve violence or harsh words. I was going to show this boy what every person should do in his position.

A smile formed on my face as I looked into Bryan’s eyes.

“I won’t do anything,” I stated plainly, “because I will never put someone down. Even if they have done exactly that to me. It’s not right.”

Confusion was written all over Bryan’s face as I stood up and held out my hand. Wearily, he grasped it, and I pulled him to stand. His furrowed eyebrows started to soften, and his expression turned to one of curiosity. I smiled, picked up my books, and turned to face a whole group of noisy, crowded teenagers.

I walked away, knowing that I had not just spoken up for myself but for every victim of bullying at East Dale Middle School.

There are many who think that the good people are those who take action and give those causing others harm a taste of their own medicine. The truth is you can always bring someone down, but you shouldn’t try to destroy them. Instead, you should try to help them back up and let them learn from their mistakes, for everyone has flaws, whether it be Mrs. Thompson’s lack of organization or Bryan’s low self-esteem. This is what makes us unique.

So, when do you know the difference between “nerd” and “boy”, or “bully” and “target”? The answer to that question is simple.

They are both the same. They have families, hobbies, and feelings. There’s only one thing that establishes the difference between me and everyone else. I have glasses.
"I guess this is what it's like to be a bad kid." I sat in the time-out chair, alone in the hallway. I could hear the other kids in my kindergarten classroom. They sounded like they were having a great time cutting and pasting their construction paper snowmen. I would have done anything to be back in there with them. As if the blue plastic time out chair were the back seat of a police car, I recalled the simple, blissful life I left behind as salty tears rolled into my mouth and I ran my thumb over the choppy ends of my hair.

"Sara, come inside the classroom." I hadn't heard my teacher come to the doorway. My legs shook as I stood, and I wiped my cheek with my slobber covered shirt sleeve. I stared at Ms. Cohn's worn out tennis shoes walking towards the noise of my peers laughing and shrieking. Everyone was sitting on the ground in the area where we frequently listened to stories. She led me to stand beside the empty rocking chair in front of all my classmates like a prisoner being dragged to the gallows.

"Everyone listen," Ms. Cohn announced to the class. "I'm really disappointed." All I wanted was to stop crying in front of my friends, but the tears kept coming, and my sleeve was so wet by this point that wiping my face was worthless. "Today, Sara did something that none of you should ever do. It is very serious."

I couldn't believe it! It had never occurred to me that cutting a few pieces of hair would be considered very serious. I had never been the example of what not to do. Teachers always hung my work on the wall, and I often read aloud to the class. Half of my class looked confused, half nervous. What a goody-two-shoes! Surely Sara didn't do anything wrong.

"Sara cut a lock of her beautiful hair with her craft scissors. You all know better than that! Scissors are for cutting paper only! I want all of you to see how terrible it looks so that you never cut your own hair." She grabbed the butchered chunk of blond hair so that the class could see. "I expected better from you, Sara." I could feel the mac and cheese churning in my stomach. Oh god. What had I done?

The fiasco occurred earlier that day when my classmates and I were cutting out the circles for our snowmen. Piece of cake—arts and crafts were always my favorite parts of the day. After tracing all three of my giant white circles—perfectly, might I add—I found myself scissorless. My table partner, Austin, was taking an absurdly long amount of time cutting out one of his circles.

"I need the scissors now," I said impatiently. "Could you hurry up?"

"Oh, don't be such a baby! Why don't you make me give them to you?" Man, I really hated that kid. All I wanted was to do my work.

"How on earth am I supposed to do that?" Everyone around me was already pasting their circles together! I should have been done by then, but Austin was making me fall behind.

"How about this—if you cut off a piece of your hair with the scissors, you can keep them. I dare you—unless you're too scared."

What a dumb request. Thinking I had gotten off easy on this one, I yanked the scissors from his hand and wrapped a handful of my elbow-length hair around my thumb. With one swift motion, I chopped my beautiful hair and watched the strawberry blond strands fall to my desk. After collecting the pile of hair, I began carefully cutting my circles.

Austin's jaw dropped. The look on his face could only be described as that of a mixture of horror and admiration. "I'm telling! Ms. Cohn, you better come over here!"
Any kid would panic at these words. However, I was not all that worried. After all, I was the perfect student, and Austin was a bad kid. I was definitely not a bad kid, and I had not done anything wrong. I had no reason to worry.

Ms. Cohn was my well put-together 30-something-year-old teacher who always had gray bags under her eyes. She hurried over to the table as I happily continued cutting away.

“Oh my GOD!” she cried when she approached our table and saw the neat pile of hair on my table. Kneeling down to examine my massacred lock of hair, she turned to Austin and shouted, "What did you do?" He smugly pointed a finger at me.

"I cut it because he told me to," I stated, slowly realizing that this was a bigger deal than I originally thought.

My teacher pressed her index fingers to her temples, closed her eyes and calmly said, "Time out."

I could hardly believe it. "But, I was only trying t--"

"Time! Out!" She opened her eyes and pointed to the door of the classroom.

I got up and slowly walked into the hallway and sat in the unfamiliar blue plastic chair. My lip quivered. Time out? I wasn't one of those kids. Where did it all go wrong? I peeked inside the classroom and saw Ms. Cohn on the phone. That sight really induced the panic. She was calling my mom! Oh no. She is going to be so disappointed...I will be in so much trouble, I thought as I tugged on my ugly, jagged piece of hair.

I have never been so ashamed as when I was ridiculed in front of the entire class that day. But that's not what I was thinking about on the bus ride home. I was completely focused on what I was going to say to my mom and how she was going to react. Surely she would disown me or give me some punishment of similar severity, like no desserts for a month. Oh, what I would have given to put things back the way they were!

I dreaded getting off of the bus. With each step towards my house, my heartbeat grew faster and louder, anticipating the lecture that was sure to come. My hands were chapped after rubbing against the inside of my soaked sleeves all day. I clenched them tightly and opened the door to my kitchen.

"Hi, sweety." My mom planted a kiss on my forehead the second I walked through the door. "There are some crackers on the counter for you. How was school?"

I slowly untied my shoes, prolonging the time that I didn't have to look her in the eye. I kept thinking about what a disappointment I was, and I didn't want her to see the tears and snot flowing profusely down my face.

"Sara? What's wrong?" She approached me and lifted my chin so that I had no choice but to look her in the eye. Her motherly gaze was that of concern and affection rather than the glare of disappointment and anger I expected. She quickly realized, as mothers do, that I was a mess. My eyes were red and swollen, my face was wet, my lips bleeding from biting them all day.

"Aren't you mad at me for getting in trouble at school?"

My mom looked around the room for a minute, as if searching her brain to remember what had happened. "That's why you're upset? Oh, honey. Hair grows back. You know that I don't care about silly things like that."

Now I was more confused than scared. "But my teacher yelled at me in front of my whole class. I was in so much trouble."

"Sara, sometimes grown-ups overreact to things when they have a lot to worry about. Your teacher is very busy, and I'm sure she was not as mad as you thought she was."

"Well, it seemed like she was pretty mad..." I was still not sure if I was in the clear or not.
"Everybody can have little mistakes now and then," she said, stroking the ugly part of my hair. "You made a little mistake by cutting your hair, and your teacher made a mistake by embarrassing you. Cutting your hair was a silly thing to do, but it was also silly for your teacher to be so upset about it."

"I only did it because my table partner told me to," I mumbled, resting my head on her soft and welcoming shoulder.

At this, she pulled away and looked me in the eyes. For the first time, I saw a hint of disappointment on her face. Sternly, she said, "Sara, if you're going to do something stupid, I'd much rather it be a stupid decision that you make yourself. I didn't raise you to blindly follow directions, especially those that you know make no sense. I'm not mad. I just don't want to you stop being the brilliant, curious girl who isn't afraid to ask questions."

I considered what she said. It was true: there really was no reason for me to cut my hair that day. It was a stupid decision, but it was even more stupid for me to think that Austin could ever make me do it. He had no power over me.

"Mom, I'm sorry," I pulled her close and squeezed. She was warm and dry and smelled wonderful. "You're always right. How did you ever get to be so smart?"

"Well, Sara, I got smart by asking a lot of questions."

That night, I ate double dessert. I never did get a haircut to fix the hideous job I did on myself, because I really just did not care, and neither did my mom. I still felt terrible about getting in trouble, though. I wanted to be a model student, and I definitely never wanted anybody to be mad at me. Even more than that, though, I wanted to be taken seriously. I wanted to be able to stand up to Austin and say, "Give me one good reason why I should cut my hair for you." I guess they don't really teach you those things in kindergarten. No, there are some things that a kid needs to learn from her mom. Now, whenever I feel threatened, I remember my mother's brave and powerful voice and I know what I need to do: I will never stop being that clever, curious little girl who isn't afraid to ask questions.
“Have you read these?” my aunt asked, turning with a book in her hand. “The Mortal Instruments: City of Bones,” I read aloud as I wrapped my fingers around the spine of the book and flipped it to the back. My eyes skimmed over the summary, and halfway through I shifted my eyes to my aunt.

“Looks kind of stupid,” I mumbled as my eyes returned to the book. “Have you read it?” I asked, finishing the last few words.

“Not all of it, but what I did was pretty good.”

I flipped the book back to the cover and looked it over again. I was about to hand the book back to her when the plea escaped her lips, “Give it a chance.”

I sighed but nodded slightly as I walked over to the recliner in the back of the room. I plopped myself down in that chair and, for the first time, opened the book that would change my life.

I got about 13 pages in that first night because I was not at all interested and very easily distracted. The next day we packed all of our belongings into our car, including the three books my aunt had lent me, and began the two hour journey back to Missouri.

I ignored the books for a few days after we got back. I had better things to do, like sleep and play video games. One day, I was sitting around, doing nothing (as usual) when I remembered the three books sitting on my dresser. I stopped staring at the ceiling and sat up, eyeing the books from across the room.

They called, “SARAH! READ US! READ US!”

I gave into the call and trudged the entire three feet from my bed to my dresser and grasped the first book in my hand. I pulled it away from its brethren and flopped back onto my bed, opening the cover.

I laughed. I cried. I felt like the characters were long lost friends. I realized for the first time it was possible to fall in love with a fictional character. Nine hours later, I flipped the last page and sat in shock. I turned to my clock and realized it was one in the morning.

“That’s fantastic. I have to be at school in six hours.” I turned out the light and closed my eyes. But sleep did not come. I sat bolt upright and stared at the other two books across the room. They beckoned to me, and I could not resist the temptation.

I awoke the next morning with the second book The Mortal Instruments: City of Ashes sprawled across my chest. I didn’t remember falling asleep that night, and I felt like death, but I dragged myself from bed and prepared for school.

The entire day was a series of zone-outs and repeatedly being told to put my book away. I couldn’t stop. I would shut the cover and try to focus on the lesson, but my eyes kept dropping to the book on my desk, and my fingers reached for it without asking permission.

I muttered to myself throughout the day, arguing with my subconscious and the characters, but clearly it was a losing battle.

“Are you talking to yourself?” I was asked repeatedly.

“No, I’m talking to Jace,” I responded with a growl. My eyes never left the page.

Those books were ruining my life. I could do nothing but read them and surf the internet for anything related. When I finally finished the three books, my condition only grew worse. I began having withdrawals, my thoughts constantly clouded with passages from the book and pictures I’d seen on the internet. I hadn’t had a decent night’s sleep in two weeks.
I researched everything about the books, read the fourth in the series, and watched the movie trailer at least 15 times a day. I began confusing the problems of the characters with my own, and reality and fiction began to blur together. I was more involved in the characters’ lives than my own. The movie was finally released, and I saw it immediately. Of course, it was a major disappointment, but there was nothing to do but begin obsessing over that. I read endless fanfictions and argued with strangers on the internet.

Now I am in many other fandoms. My life revolves around the books, bands, movies, and YouTubers. It has turned my life inside-out. I am kept from precious hours of sleep most nights with thoughts of people who don’t even exist. I have endless pictures and quotes on my phone and written across my possessions. I randomly scream at innocent civilians about non-existent problems, and of course they have no idea what I’m ranting about. At times I am so distracted with my fantasy worlds that my school work gets neglected, and luckily my grades have not suffered too harshly.

In truth, the things that ruined my life have also perfected it. I met people with the same interests as me. I picked up new hobbies (which mainly include stalking actors and boy bands on the internet), and I’ve discovered many new things about myself. I don’t have any normal people in my social circle anymore. I’ve met the most amazing people, and we bonded over our strange interests. Most importantly, though, is how I finally found where I was truly meant to be: right along with all the other deranged fangirls.
My boots rubbed on the back of my naked foot. I could feel a blister forming. I had been in such a rush that I forgot to put on socks. I trotted down the hill, swinging my arms joyfully. Ahead of me was the massive tan barn that my father built just a few years before. I came to the fence and bent down, making sure my back didn’t hit the top wire. I stepped through the opening and ran into the field.

Outside the barn, my father waited. Next to him was my donkey, Bea. A layer of dust covered her tan coat. I placed my hand between her ears and rubbed. The sun reflected off of her large brown eyes. I leaned forward and kissed her snout.

“I love you baby,” I whispered.

My family had recently adopted Bea and two other donkeys from a local farm. Although I hadn’t had Bea for very long, I felt comfortable and safe around her. My fingers glided along the dip in her back. A few years ago while she was pregnant, her owners would ride her, causing sway back.

My father’s strong arms grabbed my waist and boosted me up onto her bare body. My legs were too short to mount Bea on my own. Automatically, I felt like a different person. Sitting tall, I scanned the field, absorbing my surroundings. The vast Colorado plains lay before me. Confidence coursed through my veins. I wiggled around in excitement for today’s ride. Although Bea wasn’t fast, something about feeling her strong muscles and tight abdomen made me feel invincible. I began giggling and was overtaken with joy.

“Look, Daddy! I’m a cowgirl!” I laughed.

“You sure are,” my daddy chuckled.

My hands grasped Bea’s mane, and I kicked her side. My body swayed side to side as Bea took slow, awkward steps. I squeezed my thighs into her sides so that I would not fall off. Behind me I could hear Roxy, Bea’s daughter, galloping. I turned my head to the right to see my sister, Emily, stepping into Roxy’s stirrup. Since Emily was four years older than me, her legs were long enough to mount Roxy without any help. Her head whipped around, and we momentarily shared a smile.

I looked up into the sky and could not find one cloud. The day almost seemed too good to be true. Suddenly, I heard a door slam shut behind me. I panicked and tried to turn around, but Bea would not budge. My heart stopped. Dog’s barking filled my ears. I wiggled around; trying to see what all of the commotion was about. I heard my mother yelling and saw small dust clouds rising. For a moment I heard it, the sound of the dirt crunching and the thundering booms of hooves pounding against the earth, and then came darkness.

My eyes opened, and I saw my father running towards me. The earth seemed to have turned ninety degrees on its side. I couldn’t feel anything, and I wasn’t sure what had happened. All I could focus on was the sound of muffled voices, and my father’s worried face. Slowly my body rose. My heart stopped. Dog’s barking filled my ears. I wiggled around; trying to see what all of the commotion was about. I heard my mother yelling and saw small dust clouds rising. For a moment I heard it, the sound of the dirt crunching and the thundering booms of hooves pounding against the earth, and then came darkness.

My eyes opened, and I saw my father running towards me. The earth seemed to have turned ninety degrees on its side. I couldn’t feel anything, and I wasn’t sure what had happened. All I could focus on was the sound of muffled voices, and my father’s worried face. Slowly my body rose. My father’s arms cradled my limp body. The sound of my sister’s cries brought me back to reality. My whole body tensed, and I looked around, searching for the source of the screams. My eyes fell upon Emily on the ground, crying. My mother ran to her aid and lifted her up. Our parents then carried us towards the house. Inside, my parents checked Emily and me for any broken bones. Fortunately all we suffered from was a couple scrapes and bruises.

For the next couple of weeks I was scared to be around my baby. I was terrified that I would get kicked off again, and next time I might not be so lucky. I soon realized that I couldn’t abandon Bea just because of an accident. She was as scared as I was, and I couldn’t hold that against her. I had to give her a second chance because accidents happen. Even though it hurt, the pain was temporary, and my love...
for Bea was eternal. The cowgirl in me decided to get back up and try again. To this day I still have a slight fear of riding, but I remind myself to never give up.
People use the term “walking on eggshells,” but eggshells do not capture the sensation properly for me. I tiptoe on a mosaic of shards, swim in a sea of leaked gas. My footsteps and breathing make no noise, which is difficult to do when the ground is so treacherous and the air so thick. It is a trick I have mastered after many years, and some days I wryly wish for applause, as if I am in a canned sitcom. But that would give my position away, that would defeat the purpose, that would ignite—Sh.

The vase doesn’t spend long on the ground; she is quick to sweep it away, to pick its devious bits off the white marbled tiles with a roll of duct tape and a pair of rubber gloves. She should have let it sit there, I thought, she should have let it burn into your mind and fester in your soul, the way soldiers are tormented by the faces of their victims. Except you are an amnesiac, and when it comes time to throw the next vase, you will not remember this one. Surprisingly no one was visibly hurt except for the yellow roses, crumpled amidst the shards.

Outside the air hurts to breath; I can feel it scraping down my throat, clattering around in my lungs. The cold is dizzying. I wait for things to fracture, expecting my face to crack along an oblique line, the top of the trees to slide off their bases, the iron fences to scream and bend. The car thermometer reports a negative number. Today is the coldest day of this winter. I huddle in my seat, hands shoved deep into my pockets, waiting, waiting, for everything to break into innumerable shards.

The engine, miraculously, starts on the first try. I look around to make sure that everything is still intact. I stomp on the gas pedal—it is solid, deliciously so. I ease the car away from the curb and drive, drive, drive. For all I know or care, the house has crumpled behind me. I would not even return for the pleasure of burning the shards.