

Richmond Art and Writing Region of the  
Scholastic Art & Writing Awards  
**Award Recipients - Writing**

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Scholastic  
Art & Writing  
Awards



VISUAL ARTS CENTER  
OF RICHMOND

**Amira Allen**

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Manchester High School, Midlothian, VA

Educator: Rebecca Lynch

Category: Poetry

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## **The Middle Ground**

The Middle Ground

“You don’t really look like you’re from here,” they say.  
My hooked nose sells me out.  
I’m not from here,  
But I am from rusty dog crates.  
From broken computers  
and that one skateboard trick.  
I am from the apartment whose rent isn’t getting paid,  
With too many noise complaints to count.  
I am from the record shop on Cary Street  
That held my hand as I flipped through plastic sleeves  
Natural melodies and hard riffs constantly echoed.  
I’m from snips, snails, and puppy dog tails,  
Because sugar just isn’t my cup of tea.  
from Vivian  
Who always forgets the lyrics, but sings anyway.  
But also Elizabeth Ann.  
I still have questions for her,  
but I don’t think I’ll ever get my answers.

So, When you ask “But where are you *actually* from?”  
I might say that I’m from  
failed attempts to fly  
and a prick from a spinning wheel  
I’m from the right to run far away  
But that doesn’t mean there won’t be hurdles  
I’m from Henrico, but I’m also from Egypt  
The middle ground of indifference  
Where grape leaves and bologna sandwiches  
can be digested in peace.

From the bridges my grandpa built  
the rules my sister broke  
On top of an old bookshelf  
In a Winnie the Pooh box that’s older than me,  
I am from those around me, and their dreams.

And that’s okay.

**Adachi Amaram**

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Gail Giewont

Category: Poetry

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**Barefoot Queen**

## Barefoot Queen

Silver and blue shine  
atop her regal head.  
She wraps her cocoa-battered  
arms around me—  
scents of curry powder  
and cayenne pepper  
waft from her. I know  
she's made my favorite, Jollof rice.  
As she releases me, her face glows  
as if sun and moon are fighting  
to both illuminate and radiate  
her mahogany skin

Her exquisite countenance  
provokes even Snow White to jealousy.  
The fine fabrics of her  
handcrafted dress—red, black, and green—kiss the floor,  
embroidered by her sister-in-law,  
her brother, the man she calls father  
following the poisoning of her own father,  
when she was a little girl.

She doesn't talk about that.

She asks how I'm doing, her thick accent  
reminiscent of cocoa yams, egusi soup, and fufu.  
Her brown eyes smile at me.  
I'm keenly aware of my accentless voice,  
"Americanized clothing," and Victoria Secret perfume  
She has told me many times to act a little  
more *cultured* to appease her husband,  
the Chief, the King,  
my Grandfather.

*An Igbo princess  
cannot be one  
who lacks culture.*  
I must be able to mimic  
the mastery of the spice  
in her voice,  
the palm trees and  
warm Niger breeze  
in her presence,  
the Naira in her smile,  
the bronze in her skin,  
and the Africa in her heart.

After I've answered her,  
I watch her glide away,  
her feet bare.  
She once told me  
that's the only part of Africa  
she's allowed to keep.  
I must become her—  
angelic, celestial, divine,  
a barefoot Nwaanyi.

**Adachi Amaram**

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Gail Giewont

Category: Poetry

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## **Brutus Is to Caesar as Bleach Is to Black**

Brutus Is to Caesar as Bleach Is to Black

Stark fluorescent lights  
illuminate red checkered  
tiles gradually dotted with red  
a white sink blemished  
with crimson

Bright bulbs reveal a  
face besmirched with  
unwashable Black  
I gaze at fragmented pieces  
the cracked mirror reflects  
the *crack* of the whip  
on a Black Toby's back  
or was it Kunta Kinte

My countenance whispers  
*identity crisis*  
through glass implanted  
in my sliced hand  
like the limp one  
that held Skittles  
and iced tea

betraying fingers tremble at  
screenshots of web searches  
key terms: antonyms of Black  
the same Black that bleeds  
that births and blesses  
the Black that bleach

can't wash away  
the Black I contort and rebuke  
the Black the masses want  
to hot comb straight  
I want the same  
I breathe *Et, tu Brute*.

**Amanda Campbell**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Manchester High School, Midlothian, VA

Educator: Rebecca Lynch

Category: Short Story

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## **Black Santa**

I walk from my house to the corner store to buy me a Coke. Staten Island be so hot in the summer. As always, my little cousin Derek with me. He about five, I think; I'm seventeen. Every store window he pass, he want something. I'm tired of explaining to him that I don't make much at McDonald's, but he swear I'm rich cause I bring home toys from the Happy Meals for him.

He's basically my brother cause I live with him and Auntie Trina. Auntie Trina can't pay the bills sometimes, so Derek don't get many toys. But I tell him, "Don't cry, Der. I'ma go to college soon, and when I graduate and get a job, I'ma buy you all the toys you could ever dream of. I'll get us out the projects. Don't worry."

When I say this, he looks up at me with dem big brown eyes of his. "For real?" he says, and I always tell him yes. It makes him happy, but sometimes I don't even believe what I'm saying. I'm always trying to help everybody else, but ain't no one there to help me. Ain't nobody there when I'm sad, when I'm scared, when I'm lonely.

We keep walking, and Derek sees Mr. Garner. He's chilling outside the store selling cigarettes on the low, as usual. He's a heavy set man, looks just over forty. He don't have much of a beard, but we call him Black Santa. "White Santa never visits us because ain't no chimneys in the projects" is Derek's explanation to Christmases without gifts and hamburger helper dinners. Last Christmas Auntie Trina wasn't able to buy us presents for Christmas because the hair salon she worked at was shutdown. Someone bought the building or something. My heart broke for Derek. Christmas for the kids. My childhood's basically over; I don't need gifts. It really surprises me that a little kid can be so understanding, though.

"Mr. Garner, Mr. Garner!" he yells skipping flinging his arms at his sides.

His laugh's the type that make me laugh, all loud and happy.

"What's up, lil man?" he says.

I'm grateful for Mr. Garner. Der's daddy left Auntie when he was born, so Mr. Garner tries his best to fill in. He slips a dollar into the Derek's hand and smiles.

"Hey Ms. Keishaaaaa," he says jokingly. I wave He asks me if I'm still making all A's. I tell him that I am. Sometimes he calls me Keishaaaaa with all those A's cause I make all A's.

"See, lil man? Your cousin, Keisha, studies and does well in school, and one day she gonna have a better life for it. You can do it, too, lil man."

I pat Derek on the shoulder, and we head in the store. Nothing feels as good in the summer as when the A.C. hits you in the face when you open the door to a convenience store. I pay a dollar fifty, snap open the can, and take that first sip. Ah. So good. I offer Derek a sip. He starts chugging my soda.

"Hey!" I say, snatching away my Coke away from him. Derek giggles and smiles hard to show of, staring up at me with those big brown eyes of his, full of wonder. I pray he never lose that, never. Shoot, I stay fighting not to lose my wonder. There's a way out: college. I get all A's and take advanced classes; I just got to apply for scholarships. I try to show him that school matter; it matter so much. I tell him that if Auntie had gone to college we wouldn't be struggling like we do. I tell him that white folk go to college, and that's why they're rich. They live in Manhattan and take trips to the Bahamas. Every Saturday I bring him to the library with me. There, all the librarians know our names, and I see Derek escape from his reality to the pages of adventure that are books.

We start towards home but stop when we hear Mr. Garner,

“Please, officer. Just leave me alone.”

My heart drops. Derek seems upset, but I don’t know how to comfort him.

“What about the park, huh?” I ask in a shaky voice. This can’t be good. Ain’t ever good. Not here. Not in my hood.

“No,” he says. “I wanna make sure he ok, first.”

“I don’t know,” I say softly. “Ok fine.”

I turn away, for what seems like a second, and Mr. Garner’s on the ground. The officer’s arm is around his neck. They squeeze tighter and tighter.

“I can’t breathe,” he pants.

“No! Don’t hurt him! That’s Black Santa!” Derek yells.

“Derek, shush fore they hurt him more,” I say quietly, swallowing my tears so he won’t hear me cry, so he won’t know I’m terrified, too. Mr. Garner squirms. I draw Derek in. My left hand is on his shoulder. In my right hand is my Coke. I don’t even care that it’s gonna get flat.

“I can’t breathe,” he wheezes. The officer has him in a choke hold. I can see the life draining out of Mr. Garner and the innocence draining out my little cousin. Someone has their phone out recording. Derek looks up at me; this time he has tears in his eyes.

“They gonna kill him, Keisha,” he whimpers.

I give him a tight hug. He buries his head into my stomach, wetting my shirt with tears. My own run of my face onto his head, no pretending to be strong now. I can’t stop crying. I can’t control it. It’s too much. I turn my head away from Mr. Garner. I can’t see this.

“Can’t breathe, brea...,” he gasps in desperation for what feels like the millionth time.

Why won’t they listen to him? Then, I don’t hear him no more. I feel Derek squirm in my arms. He turns to see why we don’t hear Black Santa anymore. He taps my arm.

“Keisha. Keisha. Is he okay?” Derek says softly. “Hey, is he okay?” he yells ripping out of my arms, starting towards the scene.

I tug Derek’s arm dropping my Coke, “Don’t you dare.”

I hold his hand tighter than I did just ten minutes ago. I don’t ever want to lose him. He gives me the strength I need to keep going ‘cause life here for us be tough. It be so hard. Just struggling. Derek looks up to me, with tears in his eyes. I tell him not to worry.

“We leaving,” I say.

**Amanda Campbell**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Manchester High School, Midlothian, VA

Educator: Rebecca Lynch

Category: Poetry

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**We the People, Too**

At Auntie Sharon's place  
food is arrayed around the kitchen,  
buffet-style  
There is chicken roti and stew fish, mac n cheese and burgers,  
reflecting who we are, black, of Caribbean heritage, and Americans  
red, white, and blue is ubiquitous  
*We the people, too*

Adults are jittering with anticipation around the TV  
Young children are running around, horseplaying,  
oblivious to the significance of this night,  
whether he wins or loses  
especially to the people here that can remember,  
drinking from the colored water fountains,  
going to subpar elementary schools,  
protesting for basic freedoms,  
one of which they exercised today

I am only seven,  
but I understand that this is a big deal  
My mother actually believes *yes, we can*  
She, from a tiny island in the Lesser Antilles  
so small, seems like the waves could overtake it,  
washed up on the shore of America,  
became a citizen, at 15, of this vast country  
currently being swept over by a tsunami of hope  
Hope of change  
My father,  
seems less convinced  
seems prepared for disappointment  
*Too good to be true*, he sighs  
My mom shakes her head and turns back to the TV

*The results are coming in; we can call it soon.*  
Everyone is huddled quietly around the TV now,  
even the kids this time  
A red and blue map of the fifty states and a bunch of numbers are on the screen  
I don't understand what it means  
*President-Elect Barack Obama?*  
"He won, sweetheart," someone tells me.  
A young man jumps up off the couch and yells a victory chant, pumping his fists in the air,  
My aunt is cries,  
The optimist and the pessimist share a kiss,  
And I am at a loss for words...

We cut the vanilla-iced, chocolate cake  
that has the American flag printed in the center  
And it says "*Congratulations, President Obama!*"  
And tonight we actually feel like *We the People, Too*.

**Amanda Campbell**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Manchester High School, Midlothian, VA

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Category: Poetry

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### **Cancer's Gift**

She gazes in the mirror  
a beautiful, strong woman,  
but a warrior with battle scars  
stretch marks from having her daughter,  
an old leg scar from falling off her bike,  
an unfortunate tiger tattoo she got when she was 16

She smiles and caresses her smooth head  
leaning in the mirror to look at her eyes  
how had she never noticed how beautiful her eyes were  
until now,  
the beauty of now

Now, she knows the bills she can't pay,  
the person that cuts her off on the highway  
are miniscule  
and distant  
time doesn't permit her to lament the past,  
tomorrow's theoretical,  
but time gifts her today, this very day  
to enjoy her daughter's terrible twos  
to go dancing with friends  
and to cherish  
every  
murmuring  
moment

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“Can’t breathe, brea...,” he gasps in desperation for what feels like the millionth time.

Why won’t they listen to him? Then, I don’t hear him no more. I feel Derek squirm in my arms. He turns to see why we don’t hear Black Santa anymore. He taps my arm.

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“We leaving,” I say.

**Amanda Campbell**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Manchester High School, Midlothian, VA

Educator: Rebecca Lynch

Category: Poetry

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## **Drifting**

She's right there  
sitting across from me  
I can see her with my own eyes  
hunched over her laptop, busy, stressed  
hear her feet tapping the floor tiles  
to the staccato of the second hand on the wall clock  
I can smell her perfume,  
flowery, familiar

Just can't feel a thing, though  
she's there, but she's not here  
my hands are reaching out to pull her back in  
here, to Earth, to the good times  
but her hand gently pushes mine away

And I wonder if this is how friendship dies  
but I don't want to let it die  
I'm mourning its death, as it seems

She's right there floating out of my reach  
to another realm and  
for now, we revolve around the same sun  
of advanced classes, all-nighters, and tardy bells  
but soon, I fear we'll be

floating

in our own

separate

galaxies

**Amanda Campbell**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Manchester High School, Midlothian, VA

Educator: Rebecca Lynch

Category: Poetry

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### **At His Feet**

Tall, middle-aged black woman in her Sunday best  
swaying somber to a melodically humming choir accompanied by instrumentals  
cries out to God in an orgasm of praise  
Thank you, God! You've been all that I needed, Father God!

It's hard to know if her tears are joyful for real  
but if you look hard enough, you can see her pain  
you can see her demons,  
the demons ignored by a community  
that believes God is the cure-all of all that ails  
the body and soul

*Lay it at Jesus' feet  
Pray away your depression,  
pray away that good-for-nothing man,  
pray away those bills that are due next month*

She pledges her allegiance to the man she loves  
out of love and unhealthy fear of him  
not knowing where their union stands  
but feeling all alone she stands  
*Oh Lord Jesus, how long, how long?*  
How long before she breaks?

Black woman in a nation under God  
refusing to acknowledge her disappointment in Him,  
too afraid to lose her last semblance of hope  
praying that God would slow down enough that she could reach him  
to lay her burdens  
at his feet

**Amanda Campbell**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Manchester High School, Midlothian, VA

Educator: Rebecca Lynch

Category: Poetry

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### **After the Bull**

In the kitchen of the house she's lived in for over 30 years,  
that he built  
the wind chimes make an eerie tune in the gentle, Caribbean breeze,  
the kind that comes after the rain  
Grandma, on the cool, intricately designed floor tiles,  
She stands in netted house slippers,  
looks at me and smiles  
Her face wears time with elegance  
Her wrinkled hands lift the top of the pot to check on the rice and peas  
She reminds me not to stir it just yet, let it simmer

Bubbly and sweet, she is one who never stirred things up,  
something she was never to do, just let it simmer  
Simmer in your emotions, your feelings, your pain  
She is one of the kindest and strongest people that I am privileged to know,  
Yet she is the china shop; Grandpa was the bull

She reaches out to embrace me  
I see the relief in her eyes  
feel the lightness in her hug  
My grandpa,  
her husband of over 50 years, a pastor,  
died just two weeks ago,  
but his destruction lives on

She knows she has more time behind her, now, than ahead  
but it's still time, and it keeps marching on,  
even though she can't run to catch up to it anymore  
A plate at the edge of the counter falls, shattering  
I offer to help her, but she doesn't want me to get cut  
She sweeps up the shards of china,  
lost dreams, lost time, all while humming a hymn  
Religion had been her backbone and her crutch in life,  
the reason she had hope for the future,  
but sadly, the reason she stayed

**Amanda Campbell**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Manchester High School, Midlothian, VA

Educator: Rebecca Lynch

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

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## **Pleasure, Pain, Poetry**

Poetry is to me as the paintbrush is to Picasso, as the chisel is to Michelangelo. It is an intricate art form where my words are brushstrokes, and my canvas is a Google Doc with a blinking cursor. With my words, I can paint a sunny childhood memory, but the challenge is to do so effectively. I want the reader to feel the sun on their back, see the ice cream running down their chin, hear the belly laughter. I don't just want to write any kind of poetry; I want to write amazing poetry, the type of poetry that allows the reader to experience a brief moment in time with all of their senses.

My junior year of high school, I took creative writing. It was the class that led me to my "poetic awakening." Of all the genres of writing, poetry was my favorite. I yearned to write beautiful, meaningful things, but, of course, it wasn't as simple as I thought. It was painstaking work that involved deep thought, my hands frozen in place on the keyboard, and many revision appointments with Mrs. Lynch, my unbelievably patient creative writing teacher.

That year, to my surprise, I won a national gold medal from Scholastics Arts and Writing for a poem I wrote. The poem was about the night Barack Obama was elected President of the United States in 2008 as etched into my then seven year-old memory. That night was special to me and the people that were there with me for that historic moment. I wanted to share the significance of that election night from my perspective as a black girl with an immigrant mom and illustrate the multi-faceted experience of blackness in America and the joy and hope for the future that we felt. Writing an award-winning poem is gratifying, but the process of writing one is mentally taxing.

It all started with a journal entry that I wrote for class about that groundbreaking election night. Next, I had an assignment to deconstruct that journal entry and create a poem from it. I broke up my writing and played with my words, moved lines around, and added more detail. Then, I had my first of many meetings with Mrs. Lynch to get suggestions and find the stanzas that stood out and those that fell flat. From there, I would sit in the library after school and add words to the poem and remove others. Sometimes, with my hands on my head, struggling to find the words to paint my special picture, I would stare in silence at the blinking cursor on the screen. There was so much joy connected with that memory. I just had to find the words. When I became frustrated with the poem, I stepped back and didn't touch it for a couple of days. The poem rested, and so did I.

After several revision cycles, I had my final poem. When I learned that I won the national gold medal, I was humbled because I thought of all the time I put into the piece and the support I received from Mrs. Lynch and my peers. I realized that it was possible to write amazing poetry even if the words didn't come quickly and, perhaps, because they didn't come quickly.

Although the process of writing a meaningful poem can be a challenge, it's worth it if I can share my joy with others, no matter how long it takes me to find the words. I continue to carry the hope I felt that election night. I was inspired to continue to share my joy with more people, so I've found even more words, becoming fluent in Spanish. Now, seeking higher education, I see an opportunity to share happiness with others and one day, help others share their own bliss.

**Amanda Campbell**

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### **My Little Star**

In a perfect world,  
your blackness would never be binding  
but I know better than to hold you to this world  
so I crown you the ruler of the galaxies  
the Titan of the seas,  
the apple of my eye

Child, I dare you to fly

Black baby, I dare you to dream  
dream the grandest of dreams  
because only the universe is your limit  
I dare you to dance; let not your spirit be stifled  
this world will try its stomp it out  
you gotta two-step on through life

Black baby, I dare you to sing  
even when no one wants to hear you  
whether it's a joyous tune or one of sadness,  
bellow from the depths of your soul  
your black voice matters  
it's your thunder

But most of all, black baby  
I dare you to love  
even when it feels easier to hate  
when it feels like the world hates you  
Because, you, my love,  
are a shooting star  
born to soar through the heavens

**Clair Dickinson**

Age: 15, Grade: 9

School Name: Maggie L Walker Governor's School, Richmond, VA

Educators: Ed Coleman, Kerry Sheppard

Category: Flash Fiction

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**Aviation**

I swung my legs out of the car, relishing the crunch of gravel beneath my hiking boots. The sky was sullen, a blanket of passively angry, grey clouds. It fit the purpose of the day. I walked around to the back of the car, where Mark was already opening the trunk.

"You sure you can do this?" he asked warily. I nodded.

"I used to hike this all the time with her. She never got tired of the view."

"I just meant that-well- you and she had a real rocky time after y'all broke it off. I was just wondering if this would-ya know- bring back painful memories."

"I need closure," I said firmly. He sighed, mumbled something under his breath, and hoisted his pack onto his back.

We started down the path in silence. The smell of pine, moss, and damp leaves soon filled my nose, indeed bringing back "painful memories."

*"C'mon, Rich, you slowpoke!" She is in front of me on the trail, her wavy brown hair waterfaling over her strong shoulders. She is already atop the boulder that I have yet to climb,*

*"Coming, my dear speed demon!" I tease back.*

*When I reach the top, she is sitting with her feet dangling over the edge of the enormous rock.*

*"You know," she said, "you may be the slowest hiker I've ever met, but you're also the most persistent. It took you eight tries to climb this fellow here-" she lovingly pats the rock. "-but you never even wavered. Things like this are why I'll always love you."*

I shake off her ghostlike presence as if it is an insect pest. Mark is ahead of me, making marks in his field guide while he walks. When he works like that, I know not to disturb him. The trail is rocky in this section, so I have to focus entirely on not falling and busting my face open. When we reach a more even uphill stretch, I look about for new subjects of thought. There are the trees, covered in orange and yellow and red. Red. I certainly saw red when she broke up with me.

*Her puffy pink eyes and tangled hair do not convince me of her distress or sorrow. All I can feel is numb, angry betrayal as she tells me she won't be with me any more.*

*"I'm sorry, Rich. I really am. It's not that I don't love you, or that you aren't good enough for me. It's just that after I was..."-she pauses to release a shuddery breath- "what happened, I can't look at men in the same way."*

I feel silver line my eyes. What happened to her...I only regret that I couldn't have been there for her.

We get to the small clearing just before the summit. Mark and I have been hiking for hours, but I somehow find the strength to run up the last few hundred yards of trail. I reach the summit, and all my memories of her come rushing back at once.

I look out at the colorful, misty landscape. There is a river snaking around the mountain that stands directly in my line of vision. The quaint little town on the westernmost side looks about as real as a child's playset from here. I look out at the landscape that is as colorful as she was. She was beautiful, and her name was Ava. Her name meant bird, but she didn't need wings to fly. How I miss her.

Mark comes up behind me.

"Dude. Here they are. I mean, whenever you're ready."

I remember the day I heard she had been found hanging from the ceiling fan. I had been doing laundry and feeling sorry for myself because I no longer had her. I knew that it was because she had had no living family but me. I knew I had let this happen, and felt sorry for myself in the process. They gave me her ashes, and I decided where to spread them.

I reach to hold the urn. It is so cold, so unlike the spirited woman I remember. I hold it to my face to give her one last kiss, and realize my face is wet.

Hoarsely, I whisper: "To Ava. May you never get tired of the view."

Then, I let her go.

**Rory Dickinson**

Age: 16, Grade: 10

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educators: Cindy Cunningham, Gail Giewont

Category: Poetry

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**Erode**

**Erode**

Relics

Statues wither and crack, chiseled by the desert winds.  
Ancient empires fall beneath the dunes.  
A sunken city, submerged by a great blue sea.  
Harboring new life beneath the waves.  
Stones soak and erode under torrential downpours.  
Water pools in carvings etched long ago.  
People's glory stands, grasping for the sun's light, consumed by time.

Land and Sea

The sea is adventurous,  
She sweeps across the globe,  
Glimpsing at the land through the eye of a hurricane.  
The tides are rugged, yet beautiful.  
Mysterious and intriguing in the eyes of the shore.  
The land is a wall,  
silent and still.  
He wants to be one with the sea,  
To feel her cool breeze,  
To fall into her deep embrace.  
He is too rigid to crumble to the water's edge.  
The sea is like a deer wandering out of a forest,  
Its hooves click as it canters along the rocky coast.  
The land with his stone face watches from afar,  
As its grip weakens with every prance.  
The land is unbroken,  
but softens with every wave.

**Hannah Dobrick**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educators: Cindy Cunningham, Gail Giewont, Patricia Smith

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

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## To Mister Bear

Sitting at my school desk, I heard you snicker from across the room. Ms. Rush, the seventh grade Pre-algebra teacher, ignored the chattering within the classroom and didn't notice or didn't care about my snarky remark to the girl sitting across from me. I smiled at you, triumphant that someone had recognized the masterful burn I'd dealt.

At lunch a few weeks later, you shuffled over from the packed-lunch kids to where I was with my ragtag group of friends. We were the largest table, known for some reason as the "Gaggle of Geeks." We all welcomed you with flashed smiles and waves, and I motioned for you to sit next to me on the round, blue chairs. I hunched over, too confined by people; I made us switch seats, put me on the end.

Each day I stood in line for food, almost a head taller than you. Your brown bowl-cut hair made me laugh, but your wit compensated for the physical presence your slim body couldn't pull off. We talked in line, rambling about books we had found in the library—you carried them around as often as I did, one book to my three. I threw jabs at the *Percy Jackson* movies, while you defended the sanctity of the books. I'd never noticed that you had packed your lunch, didn't buy anything when I got my two cheese-sticks and pint of chocolate milk.

We spoke about the state of the artificial economy in our history class, the way our classmates acted out *The Diary of Anne Frank* in English, discussed the books in the school library, and sat together in quiet, awkward companionship. The year passed, and into eighth grade we went. We shared a few classes, continued on the way we had before, both shy with people we didn't know well—shy with each other. The teachers announced a meeting for a specialized high school with majors. You didn't attend the session in the library; my best friend, Alyssa, dragged me to it.

I applied to the high school, after being poked and prodded by Alyssa daily. She wanted to apply for technology, and wanted me to go to the school with her. We cherished the idea of going to a fancy school with majors built in, but I never thought to talk your ear off about it. You never talked much to me about it, either.

Months passed, and I'd all but forgotten about applying; I never thought I stood a chance. When all of the applicants started to buzz with energy days before the letters came, my nerves built. I waited with my tiny Tracfone at the front door of my home on the day the letters were to arrive, the spit in my mouth hard to swallow, even though I seemed calm to my mother cooking dinner in the room over. I dropped to the floor and cried, a ridiculous reaction, when I read the word, "Congratulations." I texted every number in my phone, wanting to celebrate. I didn't have yours, though I wanted to tell you, too.

At school the next day, everyone gossiped with their friends, trying to figure out who the three people that got into the school were. I'd done almost all of the sharing I'd wanted to by then; I only wanted to know if Alyssa had gotten in. When she told me she didn't, I hugged her, not mentioning that I had. I didn't think to tell you after that. I didn't want to celebrate while my friend mourned.

The rumors spread and the three winners of acceptance into the elite school were congratulated and sent dirty side-eyes by some whenever we looked away. You congratulated me, asked questions about what I would do—if I would go or stay. I confided in you, not willing to hurt Alyssa by rubbing it in her face. You spoke to me more at lunch, whenever Alyssa drew away from our table, absorbed by her crush on one of the lunch-packing boys. I sat on the edge of my seat, away from you, rear end half hung off the blue disk, not willing to be clumsy so close to you. You made me nervous, in a way that strangers didn't. I didn't want to leave you, but I couldn't be calm.

We were pulled out of class, you and I, taken to the front of the school building to have our picture taken together—we had been nominated by the teachers to win the superlative of, "Most likely to be caught with a book in hand." Clouds covered the sun, and the cold morning made goosebumps rise on my arms. The cameraman said, "Stand closer together; act like you like each other!" You shuffled sideways, closer to me, and I did as well—close enough now to feel your body heat on my arms. I was glad to be outside with you; it would have been uncomfortable to stand so close to someone else, even though you still made my hair stand on the back of my neck. We smiled with the perfunctory "cheese," and hurried back to our shared English class.

My mind filled with thoughts of anticipation and sadness as the year drew to a close, not ready to leave my friends, both ready and not ready to learn more, to have a focus. I spoke less at lunch, falling into a protective form of solipsism. You continued to be near me, to hold polite conversations. Your wit improved, sarcasm more notable than in all the time I'd known you before. I sobbed on the last day of school, consumed by the fact that I wasn't coming back, that I wouldn't be seeing any of my friends again in school. I don't remember saying goodbye to you.

I ate lunch alone every other day, leaning against a yellow wall in the hallway next to the cafeteria. I spent my time reading and writing and worrying about making friends from scratch. Everyone seemed to be friends already. I missed everyone. I missed Alyssa. I missed you.

Freshman year passed. Alyssa sent me an outside guest form to attend the homecoming; I filled it out, bought a dress, excited to see everyone. You were there in your steel-gray suit. Alyssa, always the extrovert, chose to dance the night away on the gym floor with the moves

she had learned from watching K-pop music videos. I saw you, gravitated to you; we were both too awkward to dance. You impressed me in your suit, and you'd cut your hair, lost the iconic bowl-cut, and most notably, grown an entire foot. You towered over me now, and we ragged on each other the entire night, school-appropriate pop music blaring too loud in the background.

More time passed. I would text Alyssa, now that she had acquired a phone; I asked her how you were doing when I could. She told me you had gone through surgery and troubles, been down-for-the-count for a while. I worried, but I didn't know how to contact you. I told her to wish you well for me.

Someone must have given you my phone number. We texted each other every once in a long while, having hours-long conversations about useless tidbits and meaningful topics. One time you called me a unicorn—"Perky and colorful and fluffy-haired," you said—, and then claimed you were a bear, hibernating and always eating. I changed your contact name to "Mister Bear." It's still that to this day.

We stopped talking. Well, I stopped talking to you. I wasn't allowed to. *He* wouldn't let me. That cockroach who'd hounded me at church until I agreed to be his girlfriend. He wouldn't let me leave his side, wouldn't let me talk to people, to hug them, text them. He wouldn't leave me alone, even during school hours. He would argue every point I made, belittle me, force me, use my kindness against me—claim his depression, and use his suicidal thoughts to keep me captured. I missed you, but I wasn't allowed to think about you. I couldn't even think about *me*.

I turned sixteen; my mother allowed me to invite boys to my party. I had invited pals from school and friends from my home city weeks in advance; they were all girls, all *he* would allow me to invite at the time. He harassed me after I forcefully cut ties mere days before my birthday, used our mutual friends to try and convince me I was making a mistake. I realized I could invite you during my birthday party; I texted you, after months of silence, and asked if you would like to come. You surprised me; an hour after I texted you, you knocked on my front door. You stayed the rest of the time. There were unspoken words between us; we were awkward that day, but we always were.

My mother, who had knee surgery two weeks before my party, had a staph infection. She went in for surgery again, her right leg on the line. All of the worry I felt for her turned into fits of crying and vomiting into the toilet every night after doing hours of homework, unable to breathe with the collective force of it all, unable to have sweet dreams after, if any at all. I told you about her. You understood; you'd had a staph infection yourself, had the end of your left index finger fall off in a nurse's hand—you told me how thankful you were that it was able to be reattached. I was thankful you knew how to make me calm, even while telling an awful story.

We texted each other a few times a week; you kept me calm, and you said I "kept it interesting" whenever I mentioned the random details I noticed throughout the day. My mother's situation kept me on edge—I had no room to talk more, not with all of her surgeries and school and *him* badgering me nonstop about being together again, being friends, hanging out. I was oblivious.

In December, about three months after my party, you invited me over to your house. You said your mother told you, "It's to repay the favor of her inviting you over for her birthday." I accepted, thinking nothing of the social conventions at play—my mother agreed when I'd called her over the phone. She thought I needed to enjoy myself, needed to stop stressing over her condition and the third surgery that had landed her in the hospital once again.

It was awkward as usual. You and your family had moved into the house a few months before, and the vaulted ceiling with an open floor plan slapped me in the face, having grown up in rental houses and my grandfather's home built in the late '60s. I didn't want to ruin anything, to be clumsy and harm that grand sanctuary of yours. We stayed in the kitchen area the whole time, always standing a few feet apart. I met your mother; she rambled on and on about how she was so glad I could come over and they could make it even between us. I barely got a word in, and you remained all but silent. We baked s'mores cookies from a recipe, gooey chocolate chip ones, and even a batch of fudgy brownies. You invited me to stay and watch a movie with your family, too.

I'm still sad that I had to leave early. My sister came and got me two hours before the time we'd agreed on. You and your mother sent me home with a green tupperware container the size of two textbooks stacked together, filled with sweets, and swore up and down that I didn't need to return it. I thanked you and your mom, and waved goodbye before I climbed in my sister's silver car. She mocked me on the ride home. "Was that your boyfriend?" she asked with extended "o"s. I said no, that this was just a fun social obligation, whether I believed that or not.

Christmas and the new year came and went. My mother was still struggling, still getting surgeries, and school just piled on more and more. We talked, more and more each day. You made me feel strange; you made me uneasy. I denied it, buried the bloom under suspicion and fear. There's no way I could like you, no way I could stomach it—not with *him* still lingering, his threat looming above my head, the guillotine's blade still pulled taught and poised to drop, to slice me one final time. Why would I want to like you like *that*? Why so soon, after being harassed, forced, used, assaulted by *him*?

January came, and I ignored each flirtatious dart you threw, smacked them down before they could hit my no-longer-oblivious conscious. I didn't like myself, felt my assault tainted me; I couldn't like you, wouldn't dare like you—you still had black-tinged edges, my fear transposed on you like a vignette on an old picture. You couldn't *really* be flirting with me, wouldn't after five years.

In February, you suggested we meet at *Los Bandidos*, in the square next to the Burlington. I agreed to a "business meeting," not wanting to call it a date. If I had, I wouldn't have had the spine to show up. I don't think I ever told you that I brought home a gang of friends from school, to make sure I wore the right clothes, put on the make-up I rarely touched properly. I went so far as to put panty liners on the inner underarms of my sweater, to make sure my nerves were unapparent to you.

Our business meeting, the evening of February 23rd. You cleared your entire plate; I didn't make it through half of the massive burrito on mine. We both had sweet tea with lemon, but you finished yours early, dropped the lemon in the cup. Your straw stuck into the wedge without you noticing; you sucked up a sip of pure juice. You gagged and coughed and I saw your face redden with embarrassment afterward. I laughed so hard that I didn't care how anxious the crowded, colorful restaurant made me, how anxious messing up in front of you made me. We said good night after three hours, but didn't hug. I wish we had.

The first time we made-out, I forced us to stop. Our teeth banged once or twice; it was awkward yet sweet. But I couldn't breathe, couldn't swallow; my eyes shook, the room vibrated, changed colors in my head. I went somewhere else, somewhere I refuse to recount. You stopped when I said to, didn't question it. You held me, cuddled with me and calmed me down for an hour. You respected me, but didn't drop me; you just kept holding me, stroking my hair until I could breathe again.

I still wonder why you like me, months into this. I struggle to look you in your eye, to accept that you won't hurt me, won't force me, won't use me—that you protect me instead. You treat me how someone should be, don't clip my wings and shove me in a cage. You call me "Short Stuff;" only to tease, to remind me that things have changed—that we've both grown. You make me want to touch, to cuddle, to hear your heartbeat, to smile and laugh. I want to sit on a porch with you, hold hands, watch our kid sprint around the yard and pluck up grass, squeal as the dog chases them.

Today, I wanted to say thank you.

Sincerely,  
Short Stuff

**Alys Goodwin**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Maggie L Walker Governor's School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Lisa Williams

Category: Flash Fiction

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## **Gaurdless**

### Guardless

I've been wondering the streets aimlessly since the sun was high and the air soft and warm. Now the sun is gone and the air stern and cool. My shadow passes under each fluorescent beam, and I'm lulled by my Chucks scratching the pavement. These streets are etched into my mind, yet they feel foreign now. Maybe it's because I used to walk these streets to somewhere. I walked these streets to the brick building with the dead daisies and the yellow door. Behind that yellow door was my scratched up headboard, with my name carved amongst Emma's, and Lydia's, and Alex's, and Tyson's, and Jorge's, and Monica's, and Shana's. Maybe they walked the way I do now. Maybe it's a rite of passage. Maybe after they blew out their 18 candles, listened to the mandatory sympathies, and had that yellow door closed in their face, they hoisted their duffle bag over their shoulders and embarked on their journey, past the mural of Lady Liberty with duct tape covering her mouth, past the playground covered in lead and ashes, past the old sugar factory dusted with a new fine, white substance. I wonder if, like me, they didn't know what to do next. Am I supposed to sleep on a park bench, then show up to school the next day with my essay on the Crimean War fresh off the printer? Am I supposed to walk the halls, in the same church-donated sweatshirt and jeans everyday, hair in tangles for lack of a brush? No. The answer is No. The moment that yellow door closed in my face, my lifeline was severed, and I'm losing blood. Fast. That's when he drives up. Maybe he sees the trail of red in my wake, or maybe he sees my crumbling innocence, and a chance to pick up the pieces and keep them for himself. Regardless, I slip into the seat and fake a smile for him. My heart is threatening to shatter under the weight of suppressed tears and screams. But this seems fair enough. A body for a bandage.

Ally Gravgaard

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educators: Cindy Cunningham, Patricia Smith

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

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## Night in the Kitchen

Sticky summer air fills the kitchen, creating a thick layer of steam. A cool ocean breeze from the Cape coast rushes through open windows. Gigi is running around in the backyard with my dad and our dogs. Her shrill screams fly in through the windows and echo throughout the house.

I am in the kitchen with Papa, getting ready to cook fish for dinner. He pulls out two bowls from the cabinet: one for eggs and the other for flour. I pull over a chair from the dining room table so I can get two plates, one for the raw fish and one to catch the grease after it's cooked.

This is my first real cooking experience with Papa; working together to make this meal brings us closer, pulling warm bubbly feelings to my chest and heart. He doesn't tell me what to do step by step, just leads me towards what needs to be done. I like being able to help after watching for so many years. I feel important.

I watch my grandfather pick out the spices he needs to season the flour: rosemary, salt, pepper, lemon pepper, thyme, oregano, and bay leaves. He asks me to pour the flour into one of the bowls and cracks two eggs into the other one. After years of this continued watching, I know all that goes into making Papa's special dish.

I skip over to the drawer between the sink and oven to grab a fork. When I get back to the counter, Papa is cutting the fish into fillets. He continues to cut fillets with the utmost precision; my heart races while I whisk the eggs together, fearing the sharp edge of the knife so close to his hand. Papa adds the spices into the flour mixture. I mix them together.

He lifts up a piece of cod and dips it into the eggs and the excess slowly drips back into the bowl. I am mesmerized by the egg dripping from the fish. The light shines through it and almost twinkles. The pinks, oranges, and reds of the setting sun swirl together in the whites, like a sunset reflecting off the ocean. As Papa breads the fish, I bring over a plate.

He shows me how to dip the fish into the egg and make sure all the fish is covered. He reminds me to be quick when I bring the egg over to the flour and spices, so nothing drips on the counter. Once I lay the fish in the flour, Papa shows me how to pat the flour onto the fish, making sure both sides are evenly coated. I continue coating the fish while he pulls a pan out and begins to heat it up. He dips into the refrigerator to grab the butter. Once he has the butter, he grabs the olive oil from the pantry. Both the olive oil and butter in the pan to make the fish extra crispy.

When I finish breading the fish, I bring it over to Papa. Putting in the tip of a fillet, he checks to make sure the oil is hot enough. The surrounding oil sizzles and he puts the rest of the piece into the pan and adds more until there is no room left, leaving a sputtering hissing sound ringing in my ears. Butter sits in the pan, browning with every second heat is on it. The nutty aroma becomes entangled with the steam in the kitchen and every pop makes me want to cook more. Papa goes to get a spatula. I watch with a fascination as he flips the fish to reveal a golden brown side coated in melted butter.

I am given the spatula so that I can flip one of the fillets. This proves to be the most difficult task of cooking the fish. I can't get the spatula under the fish and become frustrated. Papa gets a fork and shows me how to slide the fish onto the spatula using the fork. He tells me to press the fork against the fish while I flip it to keep the fish on the spatula and in place. I manage to flip the piece over, but I drop it too hard into the oil and it splatters. A drop of oils lands on my arm. I pull my arm back and shake it off. Papa rushes me over to the sink and runs cold water on the burn. The water eases the pain of the burn. He gives me an ice pack wrapped in a cloth towel to place over the burn. I sit at the table while Papa finishes cooking the fish.

While sitting at the table, I take in all the smells coming from the kitchen. The butter releases a sweet, yet salty scent and it pierces my nose. The spices mixing with the butter makes it seem like our kitchen is outdoors and surrounded by an herb garden. Stomach growling, the smells force me to understand how hungry I am.

As Papa brings the food to the table I run outside and call my dad and sister in for dinner. Filled with contentedness, I sit as everyone gathers together eating dinner. People keep complimenting me and Papa for how wonderful the fish is. I feel satisfied knowing that I spent time with my grandpa, learning how to cook, making new memories.

**Minah Harmon**

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Clover Hill High School, Midlothian, VA

Educator: Barbara Bingham

Category: Humor

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## Canine Eyes

### *"Canine Eyes"*

*I am all-powerful. All humans do my bidding. For I am Frenchie, Queen and Dictator of the Humans.*

I lay proudly upon my pillowy perch, seated upon the highest point of the couch cushion. All that exists, belongs to I. I enjoy the quiet and the solitude... Before the door slams open and the peace is broken. A flock of pre-teen girls swarm into the room. Ah, the youngest human must have invited her underlings over once again. I can tell that they're her underlings because of how they do everything she asks of them without question (excluding the occasional defiant whine). I hear the older humans refer to her as "Stacey," a weird and unusual name. I cannot understand why the humans decide to call each other such names. Where can you go wrong with simple yet exquisite names like "Spot" and "Spike?"

Upon the sight of me, the girls swarm around me. "Aw, he's so cute~!" The multiple, high-pitched and squeaky voices annoy me tremendously. I roll my tiny, black, beady eyes. What an idiotic mistake. I am female, not a he. And I am most definitely, **not** cute. I growl at them, ordering them to leave me alone. At first, they're hesitant to leave beautiful me alone, but after a few snaps of my jaw, they leave. Leaving me be to my preferred solitude.

Several hours later, the older female human arrives home. She seems to know of my plots to murder her and her family, and she quite enjoys taunting me with delicious food from the human realm. Upon seeing me, she breaks out into a smile. She must've finally bowed down to my control. Either that, or she had a good day. She skipped her way into the food room, and I hear her open the cold box. I hear the crinkle of plastic, and my ears perk up at the sound. Could it be...? Cheese...?

"Frenchie~! Would you like some... Cheeeeeeeese~?"

Foolish, pathetic human. I don't need nor want your praise! ... But yes, I would like some cheese.

I hop off my spot and stretch, before heading into the kitchen. The tall, lanky human awes and giggles before me, taking out a slice of that golden, heavenly delicacy: cheese. I growl at them, ordering them to place it down before me. But they simply giggle and fawn over me, before finally placing the delectable square on the floor.

As I gobble down my meal, the pathetic human attempts to pet my perfect, curly, black fur. But I growl and snap viciously at their outstretched fingertips. "Begone!" I growl, ordering them to leave me be. Instead of cowering in fear like the little ones do, she giggles once more. "Aw, you're such a grumpy butt~!" She utters cheerfully, before heading off to do something. Likely my bidding.

A couple of hours later, the oldest male human arrives, opening the door and calling for his children. I bark at him, he's the most annoying of them all. Once he lays his eyes upon me, he laughs and starts to imitate me! The nerve! In retaliation, I growl and bark at him more. But it doesn't seem to faze him, as he continues to laugh and mimic me. This insufferable human!

Later on, the eldest female human arrives home. I have a soft spot for this human. She is the sweetest of them all, and the most beautiful. I love her to death. She is my favorite slave. Upon entering the lazy room, she completely ignores her children and heads straight towards me, fawning over me with a passion as I wag my tail in approval. Yes, yes, I will spare this human, while I **kill** the rest!

*Ah, the life of a canine is a wondrous thing... Too bad the humans don't seem to realize our power over them.*

**Helenor Harris-Evans**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Maggie L Walker Governor's School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Ed Coleman

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

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### As It Goes

Stacking books in the library goes something like this:

Step 1. Pick up the books. Organize them so you're only taking the fiction books, or books with a code 300-500, or just the 700s that are in a different section. Resist the temptation to take all of them at once because it's more efficient. You will drop them.

Step 2. Hold them in your arms. Notice which ones slide around. Look at the library. Who is sitting at which table? Route your path so that it intersects with the least number of people, but also avoids anyone you might have to talk to.

Step 3. Follow the route. Feel inordinately accomplished when nothing goes wrong.

Step 4. Prepare to start shelving. Shift the books to your right arm without dropping them (you have about a 60% success rate), and stare at the labels. They read as follows:

FIC	FIC	FIC	920.5	FIC
KEV	POR	LEV	XAN	PRI

Step 5. Squint. Figure out which one is first in the alphabet- you really should know this by now. A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, J, K, L—

Step 6. Is that a number? Damn, need to put that back on the to-be-stacked shelf. It messes with your system, carefully curated.

Step 7. Back to the fiction shelves. A, B, C, D, F, G, K, H, I— did you miss a letter? Why can't you focus on this?

Step 8. Check the books again. Are there two KEVs? No, the second one is— Why is there a PRI? It reminds you of— don't think about that. Do not think about that.

Step 9. A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, pIr. You were reading it wrong. PRI is PIR. Stare blankly at the letters shimmering for five minutes. Remember it.

Her

3000 milligrams

Shaking

Taken at 5AM that morning

Vomiting

No I did not know

Screaming

Yes it was intentional

Crying

*Imouto*, her starry eyes

Gone gone

Step 10. It's been thirty minutes. You haven't shelved a single book. "Are you okay?" Goddamn it. Goddamn it. Goddamn it.



Some days are better than others.

On good days, I'll wake up and remember nothing. The intrusive thoughts, the memories, pass through quickly and quietly. On the good days, they really are just bad memories.

On worse days, the thoughts will pound at the door, demand attention. Apology. It'll be like I'm there, for hours and hours and hours and she's still gone. Basic tasks are work. Not just school— showering. Eating. Sleeping. I'll avoid closing my eyes for hours and days and the circles under my eyes will draw thicker and darker until I sway and fall at 11AM on a Thursday in the library.

There's less obvious things too, the little odds and ends. The normal light of a classroom is sun reflecting off snow. Noises I didn't even notice before, like the school commons or living room TV, are fire alarms going off next to my ear. On some days, just running the shower and a faucet at the same time is completely overwhelming.

On bad days, the memories grow and combine and infect every part of my mind, every other bad thought and experience I've ever had compounds on each other until it's impossible to pin down where one ends and the other begins— shouting voices in my head, an itch in my hand fidgets, scratches at my own skin until it bleeds, the blurry dissociative fog that slurs my words and makes hours pass while I *stare*, in bed horizontal and slack-jawed. A sick creep of butterflies in my stomach if I turn over to get up. Guilt, guilt when I eat, guilt when I don't— an impulsive rush when I finally stop caring, the craving it satisfies, the disappointment when it all tastes like paper anyway. Paranoia. The feeling of wasting away. The hollowness of chasing distractions so I'm not just stuck in my own damn head, the feeling of absolute loneliness when they're used up and gone, the feeling of isolation when I'm around my friends and the thoughts just won't fucking leave, an escapism in exercising for hours, music up, adrenaline up, sore and muscles burning and face sweaty and clothes drenched and out of breath. Then not showering for four days because I can't get out of bed. Guilt. Ignored texts. Ignored calls. Ignored homework. Ignored grades. Ignored dinner. Ignored hunger. Ignored pets. Ignored invitations. Ignored friends. Ignored life.

When I do sleep, it's bright. Flashing colors, sounds, the remnants of dreams not fully formed. One of them comes into focus— school. In the auditorium. Practicing something, not entirely sure what. Nine faces out of ten. I ask who's missing. Their smiles fall, and they shuffle with music absent, and I'm told one of them has died. I know how. I see it again. I can't hear. I can't think. I can't breathe. I sink, sink, sink into the dark floor.

I wake up clammy and gasping. It's the second time that night.

■

Lily, the new psychologist, clasps her hands together and stands up. She smiles bracingly, in a way she hopes is comforting, and opens the door for me. She briefly touches my shoulder, and I feel hesitation through the cloying herbal perfume that permeates her entire office. "She'll be back from the hospital soon. It's not your fault. Remember that, okay?"

I can barely hear her over the cacophony of air conditioning and nausea. The warm, lavender smell that floats through the office makes me think of the t-shirt she wore when her neck snapped back like she was possessed and all I want to do is I want to forget, all of it, all of the filmy details and the pain and the drip and the beeping and the vomit and the way she stopped in the middle and touched my arm so lightly I could have sworn she was a ghost already and thanked me for being there and she was so sorry for putting me through this, like it was her fault, like she should be sorry, like the fear and the guilt and regret and screaming to turn her on her side and having to face her parents knowing I should have done better were things she needed to feel, and I just want to forget. I want to forget.

■

Things come into focus. The books are scattered like leaves around me. Some fell face first and their pages will fold unevenly now, marred. "Are you okay?" The fog comes back, wraps around my skull like wool blanketing. I can't remember why I fell. I balance. It's a perfect system. Forgetting makes it all harder when I remember but remembering makes me forget it all again. A perfect system. Numbers and letters on a shelf, memories filed away for another time. Someone will check one out again. It might be someone else, it might be me. As it goes.

**Anna Homer**

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educators: Cindy Cunningham, Gail Giewont

Category: Poetry

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**dreaming of the unborn**

I never know how to think of you. I imagine you  
floating in a familiar watery darkness, delicate limbs  
contorted to sharp angles, curled in the fetal position.  
I dream of you as a pale bat,  
dusky eyes rolling in their translucent sockets,  
small, claw-like hands stretching out  
into our shared microcosm, our home before memory.

**Anisa Isaac**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Cindy Cunningham

Category: Poetry

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## **Blinded By Color**

### Blinded by Color

#### Home

*-In memoriam, Botham Jean 1992-2018*

It only took two shots in the dark  
for you to drop to the ground.  
Bullets moved through the night  
like quicksilver, searching for a home  
inside your chest. How does it feel  
to be evicted from your own body?

Guyger is the one who took your body  
from you while it was still dark  
—dark enough for you to feel  
scared of your own shadow on the ground  
or that someone would follow you home  
and take you. She is a thief in the night.

There was something about that night  
that made your black body  
seem like an intruder in your own home.  
When does the night become too dark?  
Is it when you can hear the ground  
rumbling with the feeling

of buzzing anxiety, that feeling  
that keeps you up at night?  
When your head hit the ground,  
did it want your body?  
To put you six feet under someplace dark  
—a place you could finally call home?

You could make yourself a home.  
Break your bones down until you feel  
that your cartilage walls can withstand the dark.  
Tuck yourself in to sleep at night  
inside your skeleton, your own body,  
and blanket yourself with the ground.

Tell me that it was only the ground's  
murmuring tectonics and not your home  
being invaded, that it wasn't your body's  
thud on the floor that made me feel  
my heartbeat drum for the rest of the night.  
Tell me I'm just afraid of the dark.

I don't want another face as dark

as yours to get lost into the night  
and feel what you felt.

#### A Message to Kanye

Kanye,

In your house, surrounded  
by white walls and white women.  
You lounge in Boco do Lobo loveseats,  
not even loving yourself  
or your love handles.

Free thought is not without cost.  
Most pay with their lives;  
words exchanged for bullets.  
But a businessman like you has no business there.  
You'd rather spend your money  
on rendezvouses at the White House.

You fiend for attention like a drug.  
Pushing boundaries until  
you don't realize which lines you've crossed:  
a back turned on your brothers and  
spit splattered in the face of your sisters.  
We want to know if the old Kanye will ever  
come back or if he was even real in the first place.

You have a choice to use your voice  
unlike your ancestors, whose lips  
were sewn shut by society.  
You choose to drown them with delusions.

I wish I could take your hand,  
intertwine your fingers into mine,  
pull you from the sunken place,  
and wipe away those white tears.

#### Wannabe White Girl

Purify me of this melanin.  
Take steel wool to skin and scrub  
until you've found the alabaster of bone.  
Teach me how to strip colors to white,  
to bleach blonde my culture.

Strip my lips of Sambo  
and make them look like Sadie.  
Snatch the ebonics from my mouth  
and fill it with Proper English.  
Leave the Briana;  
call me Becky.

Rip the curls from my scalp.  
Tame and relax this lion's mane.  
Let chemicals penetrate the coils  
until they fall bone straight.

Walk across the bridge  
of my nose, take septum  
between fingertips, and crush cartilage.  
Slide the scalpel to and fro  
until you cut out the afro.

Rinse the racism. Put the diaspora  
on tumble dry. Wring out the African then pin  
me up on the clothesline. I wait  
to be cleansed again, waiting until  
the sun has faded my color.

**Yasmeen Jaaber**

Age: 16, Grade: 10

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Patricia Smith

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

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**After School Routine**

The emo kids walked out of the middle school right after me, yelling about their favorite alternative-rock singers. An array of dyed hair and rainbow Hot Topic pins shifted within the stampede of angsty teenagers. It was odd how the emo kids stayed so quiet during the school day, but when they came outside to get picked up, it seemed like they were all on a sugar rush; swinging from trees, playing tag, sometimes even fighting. Even though it was all really obnoxious to me (I've always preferred peace and quiet), I had to give them their props for making a part of the school their own. They made up the majority of the schools *out* LGBT+ population. And as a very lonely, very closeted lesbian, large parts of me ached for their sense of community and pride.

Sometimes while I waited for my mom, I'd pretend to know what they were talking about. I'd laugh at unfamiliar words like "twink" and "pillow princess" and wonder if gay people were allowed to say faggot. My eyes would scan the girls with bright blue hair and wonder if my mom would ever let me leave the house like that. Other days I'd sit silently and just exist in a way that I felt was authentic. And I didn't come out to the school that year, but those afternoons of silent existence in the parking lot felt a lot like it.

When my mom's car pulled into the parking lot, my mind stopped breaking down what I'd heard about the ins and outs of gay sex that afternoon. Listening to the emo's stories about girls kissing girls and guys kissing guys and people kissing people felt something like progress, but when I got into the car with my mom, I was immediately pressed against the very back wall of the closet.

"Assalamualaikum," My mom said. She was giving me one of her shimmery smiles that made her gums push out and her teeth look extra perfect. It's weird how whenever she'd pick me up, she was on some type of "getting my daughter from a seedy middle school," high. It's like she missed me and I don't know why, but I found her missing me to be annoying. Every day after school I was irritated by the way her perfect smiles formed, her chipper *salams* mocked me, and the way she examined me as if she was trying to peel back all the layers of my discomfort and force me into happiness.

"Walaikunsalam." I mumbled. I closed my eyes, and leaned my head against the window. My mom poked me in my side.

"How was school?" she said. I kept my eyes closed and grunted. I didn't mind school as much as I minded her endless prying. It seemed like whenever I didn't want to talk, my mom took my silence as a sign to keep bothering me.

"It was alright," I said. I never liked to talk about my school days. Talking about them made my life seem a lot more pathetic than just living through it. I knew my mom wouldn't be happy to hear that I had hid in a moldy bathroom stall for half an hour that morning. Or that the highlight of my day was watching a group I ached to be a part of. Or that during lunch, I went outside and walked around the dusty baseball fields to avoid sitting at a table with people I didn't want to like. Seventh grade was just weird like that. I attracted the kind of people who I didn't have anything in common with except for being having nowhere else to belong. If I'd told my mom any of this she would've laughed. She'd've said I had plenty of friends. She'd've said it until she had made herself believe it.

"What's wrong?" my mom said, poking me in my side again. I jumped, and squeezed my eyelids even closer together, as if it was a good substitute for an answer. My mom jabbed me again. I sighed.

"*Nothing!*" As soon as the word left my mouth, I knew she wasn't going to leave me alone. The annoyance I was feeling had slipped through my lips. She went silent for a few minutes.

"Something happen at school today?" she asked. I was too tired to explain that nothing *ever* happens at school. It was an impossible task forming the words "I feel like my life has no purpose," so I muttered a soft "no" and the car ride was quiet.

I glanced over at my mom, to see her jaw working. Not in an angry way, just a way that meant she was thinking. She was crying. My mom is one of the few people who can cry and still look beautiful. I closed my eyes again.

My mom has always been emotional. Every word she hears goes right through her ears and is absorbed into her heart. I saw my mother cry almost weekly, and it was always "nothing" with her. She'd go quiet at the dinner table seconds after laughing, and suddenly everyone had done something wrong. Some imaginary problem had arisen and my siblings and I were all on trial for a crime we hadn't even known about.

The van's wheels crunched over the gravel driveway. I opened my eyes again, grabbed my bag and opened the car door after we parked. My house was large, daunting, but comforting. Regardless of the season, it seemed to always be buried underneath layers of crispy leaves. I looked at my mom, guilt brushing against the raised hairs on my arms. If it was the first time this had happened, the guilt would've already dug a hole in my stomach.

I think a lot about those afternoons spent in the school parking lot. Those moments of silent existence, silent listening, grounded me. Those were the only times I wasn't actively hiding anything about myself. If one of the emos had asked me if I was gay, there would've been nothing stopping me from telling the truth. But they never asked, and the silent existence stayed silent. My mom's van pulling into the lot was always the abrupt end to my authenticity. This created a barrier between my mom and me that has really only gotten bigger. The relationship is still strained and I have been anxiously waiting for its ultimate ruin. My after school routine has consisted of the same muffled salams and brittle conversation. In the heavy silence of car rides home, my mom has plotted a million different ways to get me to open up, and I have imagined a million different ways to come out to her.

Lillian Josefiak

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: George H Moody Middle School, Henrico, VA

Educator: Patricia Walker

Category: Short Story

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## Discord

### Discord

She wiped her sweaty palms on her long, black dress. Her heart was pounding, running, it seemed like, and no matter how many deep breaths she took she could not slow it. Her lungs were pumping air in shallow bursts. Leaning against a wall, she closed her eyes. *You can do this*, she whispered to herself. *You've been through much worse before*. Taking a deep breath, she went over and hid in the sea of velvety curtains, straining her ears, listening for her name to be announced. The name that didn't quite fit, like too-tight pants or an itchy sweater.

There it was. Amid squeaky microphone feedback. It seemed like random scribbles on a label plastered to her forehead.

She tried to remember what had led her here, to this moment, but even new memories these days wriggled out of her grasp. All except for the music. It was the only fragment of a fleeting dream she could recall. But she knew about the accident. Yes, there was no way she could forget that.

The white walls of the hospital had been blinding. No windows. There had been too many voices, echoing like a gong in her head. Her whole body ached.

They asked her if she remembered *it*. What was *it*? She shook her head. It hurt. Her brain rattled.

They asked her if she remembered her name. She shook her head again.

They asked her if she could speak. This time, she nodded. She *thought* she could.

They asked her if she *would* speak. Another head shake. Not now. Not to these people. Not to these strangers.

The doctors moved her to a room with a window. The girl decided not to look out. She was scared. The hospital was all she knew. They said she had been in a car crash.

So had her brother. He wasn't so lucky.

When she tried to remember who her brother was, what he had looked like, she could think of nothing. He was only a character invented by the various doctors and nurses who buzzed in and out of the room like insects.

The insects showed her a mirror. They said that maybe the sight of herself would bring back her memories. She saw confused brown eyes, dark skin, darker hair cut in a short bob that framed her face, and a scar. A scar that stretched from the corner of her eye to her cheek, no more than a thin pale line, drawn on her face.

She remembered nothing. Her mind remained a deep, endless void where memories were sucked in and never returned.

A nurse with a sickening smile told her to wait. The memories would return in time. She thought that was unlikely. They wouldn't just float back into her mind, like they had been there all along.

Then the doctors gave her a fancy diagnosis that got stuck on her tongue. Amnesia.

After a few days, the nurse brought a woman in, tears ripping her face in two. She said the woman was her mother.

The woman was a stranger.

They made her go outside. It was strange there. Cold. Her short dark hair whipped around her face. The sky was bleached white, snowflakes invisible against the clouds but stinging against the skin. A car was waiting.

A car.

A car.

Anything but a car.

It leered at her, moaned and groaned and bellowed smoke. The woman told her to get in. The girl dug her feet into the pavement and pulled her new coat tighter around her body. Something in the woman's face softened, and instead of going into the beast, they walked. Down a sidewalk. Across a road filled with the monsters. That took a while. Past a rundown strip mall. Into a neighborhood.

The woman took her to a boxy house on a square-shaped street, where everything had sharp angles and corners. Even the woman's smile. Where the hospital had white, the house had beige.

It took a long time to step through the doorway. She clung to the frame, afraid of the sheer emptiness of the hall, how strange and foreign it seemed.

She took a step forward. One. Foot. After. The. Other. Planks of wooden light fell across the floor. The woman was in front of her, half her head illuminated, the rest in shadow. Tears were still splintering her face. Slowly, the girl crossed the hall, her footsteps tapping out a rhythm on the hollow floorboards.

She was shown to a room. *Her* room. Only it wasn't. Not really. It made her feel uncomfortable. Like the previous occupant had died and now she was only a trespasser. That's what it was. A dead girl's room. A dead girl's mother. A dead girl's house. She was only a

substitute, a weak replacement. . . .

Her brown eyes scanned the space. A patterned teal duvet was draped across the bed with the painted white frame. A lamp cast a soft glow on the pale orange walls. Books stood at attention on sturdy shelves, like soldiers, yet a few slouched, dozing off while on guard.

"Do you remember?" The words floated over and gently brushed her arm. The girl turned. Framed in the doorway was the woman, eyes soft and sad, lost in a waking dream. Slowly, the girl shook her head. She felt like she was doing something wrong. Like by seeing this room, she was supposed to know it.

"Try the photos." Hope was scratched into every letter. The girl walked over to a desk where clusters of framed photographs stood tall and proud. She picked one up, the glass smooth and cool in her sweaty palm. Why was she so nervous? Her eyes darted everywhere, just to avoid looking. The walls, the bed, the shelves, the closet. The photos seemed like the key to unlocking the past. A past she was terrified to examine.

Finally, she forced her eyes lower to the frame she held in her grasp. It was of a man, a man who looked remarkably like the girl, sitting at a piano on a stage with billions of brilliant lights. The girl touched the photo.

"Do you remember now?" It overwhelmed the girl, all the desire that was packed into that sentence. And it disappointed her, that again she had to shake her head.

"He was your father," the woman told her, but looking at the photograph, he was the same mystery as the woman. "That was him, playing at Carnegie Hall." Again, the girl did not speak, but a million questions were in her gaze.

"He's. . . gone now." A strange sadness was in the woman's voice, and the girl seemed to understand as she reached for the next photo.

There were so many of them.

The echoes of another life, hidden behind glass, trapped in a wooden frame.

She did not want to look at them. She did not want to see the dead girl's life unfolding on the dead girl's desk in the dead girl's room. But she had to.

Now the woman turned around. "Come on. I have something to show you. The doctors. . . told me to. They hoped it would bring back your memories."

Cautiously, unsure, the girl trailed after the woman. What was it? Something from the dead girl's life? Her life? Walking through the empty house, she caught glimpses of other rooms, other chapters. When the woman stopped before a closed door, the girl nearly crashed into her.

"It's in here," the woman said. With a creak and a sigh, the door opened.

Before the girl was something familiar and foreign. The word was somewhere inside her. She reached for it.

"A piano."

It was the first time she had spoken since before the accident, and her voice was hoarse but strong.

A smile cracked open the woman's face, making her look a decade younger. "So you remember now," she prodded.

It broke the girl's heart to shake her head, but she had to.

"Do you remember how to play?" The smile slipped off the woman's face while she asked the question.

Play. . . a piano? How did you do *that*?

However, to make the woman happy, she crossed the room and sat down on the bench. In front of her was a book open to a page filled with random squiggles. She shook her head and stood back up.

That night she lay in the strange bed. For once, she longed for the familiar hospital room. The window was open slightly, and a breeze blew around her, fluttering the curtains like butterflies. Somewhere in the house, she could hear a faint sound.

Crying.

Sobbing.

She slipped out of bed and into the hallway, feet silent. A rectangle of golden light shone on the floor. A door was propped open into a room. Inside, the woman sat on a brass framed bed, huddled over a photograph, tears staining the ink. The girl felt like she was seeing something she should not be. Quietly, quieter than a whisper, she left the woman. Left her to her photos and grief and emptiness.

She knew she should go back to the dead girl's bedroom.

Instead, she went to the piano.

This time, she would play. Or at least make a sound. She was determined. The woman would hear the piano, and she would stop sobbing and smile like she had that afternoon. Even if she was a stranger, the woman had been nothing but kind to her.

She pressed down on a key.

And was amazed.

The sound.

The sound was so. . . clear. And perfect.

Next was an adjacent key. Together, they made sense. The girl kept experimenting. All the keys in a row. More than one key at once. Running her hand along the keys. Somewhere, in the midst of the cacophony of noise, there *was* a melody. A song. Somewhere.

And footsteps.

Running down the stairs.

The girl turned around. The woman was poised on the steps, one hand on the banister, the other over her mouth. Her brown eyes were wide. Suddenly, the girl felt like she had been caught doing something wrong. But then the same smile from the afternoon spread over the woman's face like a sunbeam.

“Would you like lessons?” The words were an offering, luring the girl in.

And she fell for them.

After that, her recollections became blurry. They had gone to a music store, and met a man with a shock of gray hair. He had taught her how every mark on the page meant a certain thing, drawing out a map of where to place your hands and which notes to play. The trick was to find the patterns.

First, the girl went once a week. Then twice. Then three times. And before she knew it, she was going everyday except the weekends.

Instead of going to school, the brick fortress down the street, the woman was given permission to homeschool her. The girl especially liked history. She would look at the composer on her newest piece of music, find out when and where they had lived, and request to study the time and place. Soon, every Mozart was played with the elegance of an Austrian court, every Tchaikovsky was played with the bitter cold of a Russian winter, and every Gershwin was played with the energy of the roaring 20s.

A few months after she'd started piano lessons, she asked, at one lesson, how all the famous composers did it. Her teacher asked, “Did what?”

“How did they compose these songs?”

He laughed. “It's easy.”

“Doesn't seem easy.”

“Why don't you try it?”

She did. First, she tried stringing together random notes that complemented each other. But that didn't seem *right*. There was another element to those songs, one she didn't have. She thought of how she played them, with the time and place firmly embedded in the melody.

That was an idea.

She went outside, to the porch. Noise washed over her.

She closed her eyes.

And waited.

The breeze felt cool against her skin. There were birds calling, conversing in a language she didn't know. Briefly, she considered using them, but they weren't a part of her. Just a noise she heard everyday.

She waited some more.

With a roar, a monstrous hunk of metal sped down the quiet street.

The girl's eyes flew open in surprise.

There was the screech of tires against pavement, the steady humming of an engine. Over top of that, she layered screams and the sickening crash of metal on metal, and she had the end of the dead girl's life and the beginning of hers.

Better yet, she had a song.

She rushed back into the house. On a sheet of notebook paper, a song was born, scribbles stretched out and rewritten, a repeating melody and harmony.

Her teacher loved the song. So much, in fact, that he wanted to post a video of her playing it online. She agreed.

The view count grew.

The girl was proud.

The teacher was impressed.

The woman was neither.

When she first heard the song, her face reminded the girl of a newspaper. Creases were formed and words were written, but the girl couldn't read them because the tears blurred the ink. But she knew without asking why she was crying. Out of four, two survived. The girl was the lucky one.

How much weight was the woman carrying on her shoulders? The girl could hardly fault her. And when the invitation came, the woman was as happy as the piano teacher.

Because it was impossible to be as happy as the girl.

She felt like she was soaring somewhere amongst the stars, flying past the sun and moon, breaking free of the atmosphere, of any places where you needed memories. Why did you, anyway, when you had music? When you were playing a song you composed *at Carnegie Hall*?

The next week, they flew on a huge plane to New York. As the girl stepped off the plane, she saw the skyline in the distance; mountains with the pale blue sky reflected in their windows. She was overcome with the same fear she had when she was leaving the hospital for the first time: the shattering of a world.

And now she found herself on the same stage as her father before her.

They had called her name.

It was time.

With a deep breath, she stepped out from the protection of the curtains. The lights shone in her eyes like endless galaxies of brilliant stars. She tried to find the woman somewhere in the crowd, but the sweeping spotlights obscured all the people, watching...waiting for her to make a mistake. Who knew light could be so opaque? She had to remind her feet to move. They were glued to the floor. With small, shuffling steps, she crossed the stage, to the piano that stood alone in a beam of light. It took every ounce of effort to sit down and not run crying off the stage.

As she poised her fingers above the keys, they seemed to be mocking her, those perfect white and black teeth smiling, leering, saying, *You can't do this. You can't even remember your own name.*

The girl took another shaky breath. She knew this song; every note, rest, and phrase was made of *her*. A girl carved from music, imperfect and flawed, but a symphony all the same. She *had* to do this. But she never could unless she started.

With trembling fingers, she played the first chord. That wasn't hard, was it? Her right hand moved up the keys, and started the intricate melody. She transferred the solid black notes on the page to colorful sounds that swirled around the room.

Then disaster struck.

All the girl had wanted was to remember, anything, about her life before the accident, about the dead girl's life. And finally, after months, she did. The gates opened and the walls came crashing down.

As the girl played, a breath of a memory bent down and whispered in her ear.

A flash of recollection.

The metronome in her head skipped a beat. As did her heart. She faltered.

Blinding lights, screams, the shattering of a windshield.

She shivered.

A face swam before her eyes, a young man with warm hazel eyes and stubble on his chin. And she knew it was her brother, the one who she thought was only a figment of other people's imagination.

More memories, cascading before her in a brilliant waterfall. The man in the photograph leaving to fight overseas, then a crisp letter with words hammered fiercely into it, words like "death" and "duty." Two girls by her side, laughing and tossing popcorn in the air, sitting in front of a big screen. The woman cutting into a huge slab of cake, rare smile lighting her face. They were all there, packed into the blank space between each note, squished onto the page.

Her playing faltered.

She needed to get off this stage. She was *someone* now, not just a replacement for a dead girl. Every breath released her secrets.

She played faster. Her desperation fueled the song, driving her to pound the keys as fast as she possibly could.

She wasn't sure when she realized the first tear was rolling down her cheek. The slab of salty water carved a path across her face, cooling her skin as it went. She tasted it on her lips. It fell into her lap. And they kept coming.

As she played the last, desperate crescendo, she sprang to her feet. She didn't bother to bow as she stumbled off the stage, tripping over her long hem. The velvety curtains became a refuge.

Sinking down to the floor, she held her wet, stained face in her hands. Somewhere, in the midst of the swirling memories, there was a name. A name that finally fit.

The girl remembered.

Aria remembered.

**Lillian Josefiak**

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: George H Moody Middle School, Henrico, VA

Educator: Patricia Walker

Category: Science Fiction/Fantasy

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## At the Edge of the Earth

### At the Edge of the Earth

#### **Offense One: Theft of a vessel, seafaring**

The city was crafted out of mist and smoke. The buildings melted away, disappearing into the air. Rectangles, boxes, and a skyscraper with a triangular crown. There was the faint outline of a geometric skyline, traced along the roofs of structures, but it shifted around in the winter wind.

Elle was cold. Her feet were frozen against the metal deck of the ship as she watched the skyline stumble towards her. Someone before her had hung a curtain of silence in the sky, and it stayed there, broken only by the sound of waves lapping against the boat's hull. She had learned that the sky did not swallow you: it became a part of you.

She let her thoughts scatter, flooding her with memories. A house, in flames. People, burning. *We can't go back.*

Someone appeared beside her, and Elle knew the only person it could be, because it was just the two of them, alone here, for miles and miles.

"Agate." Elle grabbed her sister's hand, cold as her own. "You're supposed to be steering."

"But we're here." Agate laughed, and the sound bounced along the deck of the ship until it fell into the sea and sunk somewhere Elle could never imagine. "We're here, Elle, we're here!"

Elle allowed a smile to shiver onto her face. "Can you read it, Agate, please? Please?"

Agate took a worn paperback out of her coat pocket. Elle studied the cover, even though she had seen it many, many times before. A brilliant expanse of blue, with letters in a bright white font that read *At the Edge of the Earth*.

Agate flipped through the pages until she found the one that had been dog-eared and folded down on itself until the corners became smoothed and tattered.

"The city of Mourir," she began.

As she read, the words seemed to fly past Elle, all the way to the city skyline. They pasted themselves onto the buildings, and Elle watched Agate read the horizon.

"The city of Mourir was built long ago, not just by one architect, but by generations of people who all found themselves on the same island. It is made of towering skyscrapers, sturdy brick homes, tiny shops tucked into corners, vast bridges, museums, libraries, palaces, and anything anyone could ever need. It is overseen by the Council, fair leaders who respect their people, and they reside in the Luftschloss. If one can get to Mourir, they are welcome. If *you* can get to Mourir, *you* are welcome. Mourir is a refuge, for all the people trying to escape--"

"Like us," Elle interrupted, echoes still hammering in her head.

"Yes," Agate smiled. "Like us." She continued. "Mourir is a refuge, for all the people trying to escape, and you can find it..." she paused, and Elle read the last words with her.

*"At the edge of the Earth."*

#### **Offense Two: Docking without permit, seafaring**

They fell silent once more, and when they looked up, the skyline had risen to meet them. Buildings rose out of the mist, although it was strange- they didn't look any more substantial than they had from far off.

Right in front of them was a dock, the wood soaked with seawater. A rope was coiled on it, and there was only one other boat tied up: a beaten fishing boat that looked like a whale skeleton.

There were people on the streets, walking amongst the glass coated buildings, but their faces were shrouded in shadow, and Elle couldn't make out any of their features. The city was big, bigger than Elle had ever imagined. Every way she looked, it continued down the waterfront, and she knew it filled the whole island. According to the map in the front of *At the Edge of the Earth*, there was a mainland near, looming next to Mourir, dwarfing it in size. But it wasn't nearly as impressive; there were cities, but they weren't as wild as Mourir. They were a coloring book, neatly filled inside the lines. And after a ship passes Mourir, the city leaping from its shores, there was nothing. Nothing that anyone had found yet, anyway.

"Do we just tie up here?" Elle asked. Agate was already gone, struggling with the massive crank to drop the anchor. Elle ran over and helped her.

Agate: "I guess." The anchor had fallen overboard. The whole ship rocked. "If you can get there, you are welcome, remember?"

Elle ran down to the hold, even though it scared her, with its dripping shadows and clawing hands. She had discovered that fear came

no matter what, that you can't escape from it when it decides to seek you out. With a shiver, and the smell of smoke curling around her, she dragged their trunk up, filled with all their possessions: two wooly sweaters, a change of clothes, and most importantly, a knitted bag full of gold coins.

"Where do we go?"

Agate flipped through their book, back to the chapter on Mourir. "I know a place." Grimly, the words were handed to Elle, and she accepted them.

### **Offense Three: Telling falsehoods, age-related**

The streets were full of strangers, everywhere Elle turned. She and Agate lugged the trunk through the streets of Mourir. Elle loved reading the street signs, with names such as Lune, Torschlusspanik, and Gale. She couldn't believe it was real; her hand kept scraping the side of a brick building, and it took the pain of the cut to ground her, and know she wasn't just wandering through a dream.

"Here it is," Agate said, and set her end of the trunk down before an austere stone building. The purple door opened out to the street, and counting the glazed windows, Elle knew it was five stories high. "Per Aspera Ad Astra Deversorium," she said, reading the words engraved into the stone. "A hotel."

"According to the book, it's one gold coin per night." Agate glanced down at the worn pages.

Inside the building, wood panels hugged the walls. Portraits were hung, detailing people unfamiliar to Elle, but all the same, she knew she had seen them somewhere, maybe within the pages of a history book, long ago. Before it burned. There was a woman behind the check-in desk, stacking papers in huge drifts. When the two girls walked in, she was so surprised she knocked them over.

Agate deposited a handful of coins on the desktop. "Five nights, please? You don't do by the week or anything, do you?"

"Are you from Mourir?" The woman seemed nervous.

"No," Agate answered.

Elle explained. "We're from a country across the sea, but we can't go back."

"Why not?"

Elle and Agate exchanged glances, unsure how much to tell. No one *would* send them back. Would they? "It burned." Short, concise. And true.

"Well. Not many people come to Mourir."

Elle thought of the sole boat in the harbor. That made sense. But then she remembered the words in the book, how it said that everyone was welcome. "That's funny, I would have thought-" Agate elbowed her.

"Nice place," Agate remarked casually.

"Thank you." The woman flushed with pride. "You wouldn't have recognized it if you had seen it the way it was. Apparently, it was a wreck. Matter of fact, you wouldn't have recognized the whole city."

"Why not?"

"Well, you know, this city wasn't always called Mourir. Before the Scorching, it was called something else entirely. . . I forget it, though. Anyway, the Scorching killed this place. Made it into a ghost town. A three hundred square mile ghost town, but abandoned nonetheless. Real sad, you know. Before the Scorching, there were some great things. Those stars at night, the ones that move across the sky? Some people say they're actually huge lumps of metal, called satellites or something, and the people who lived here before the Scorching put them there. Ridiculous, isn't it? Those are the same people who say the earth is round." The woman laughed, and Elle and Agate nervously giggled. "But anyway, there was some great, what's the word? Technology, that's it. Tragedy it was, all that was lost. You don't want to listen to me babble on though, do you? Here's your keys, third floor, third door. Five nights, you said?"

That night, Elle watched the curtains flutter at their open window. The cold air from the winter night washed into their room, but Elle didn't mind.

"Tomorrow," Agate whispered, "I'll find a job."

"A job?" Elle asked. She hadn't really thought about that.

"And if anyone asks, you're twelve and I'm eighteen."

Elle grinned. She had always wanted to be two years older. "Do you think this will last?"

The flecks of silver in Agate's eyes shone brighter than ever before. "It has to, Elle, it has to."

### **Offense Four: Assaulting member(s) of the Council**

Agate's finger was bleeding, and Elle saw the tears in her eyes. They drowned the silver, which had already been fading. It had been a month since Elle stood, shivering, on the deck of their ship. They had gone down to the harbor, but someone had taken it. That was to be expected, Agate had said, but somehow, Elle had always thought everyone in Mourir was to be trusted.

"How did it happen, Agate?" Elle asked softly. Agate had come home from her job, to the room they had rented, clutching her finger in a scrap of fabric.

Agate shook her head. "I'm sorry, Elle, I'm sorry."

"What? Why? Agate?"

"A room costs money," she cried.

"It's fine, it's fine, it's fine," Elle lied, like repetition hammered truth into words, but she had been reading *At the Edge of the Earth*.

A small note in the margins: *Mourir* means to die.

### **Offense Five: Destroying (crumpling) an official Council memo**

The sky was rusty, rotting and tearing at the edges. Elle was a little scared by it, because Mourir's sky had always been filled with mist and mystery. And this sky reminded her of home. Or what had been home: curling smoke and stinging ashes.

She had woken up this morning to a shadow slipping through their room. It was Agate, pulling on her coat and boots. The gloves, too, that had cost two gold coins and that Agate had insisted was a waste. Elle watched Agate pull them on, the blue knitted yarn covering the pale white scar running along Agate's index finger, the same way Mourir's shiny buildings covered the scars scratched across the city.

Agate opened the door, and suddenly, paused. Elle saw her kneel down and scoop something off the hallway floor, something that fluttered in her hand like a bird whose feathers had been clipped off.

Elle slipped off the mattress they had placed on the floor, and wrapping herself in their torn blanket, padded over to Agate. The cement floor was cold and harsh against her bare feet. It stung.

"What is it?" Elle's voice was louder than she had intended, and Agate jumped, surprised, before handing over the piece of paper.

That was what it was. Paper. Elle thought there could hardly be anything bad about paper. She was not a very good reader, but she was practicing. Unfolding it, she read the words handwritten there in a large, loopy cursive script.

But as the letters marched forward and presented themselves to her, she felt everything fading. Phantom words.

"The Council of Mourir re, re...requests," Elle stumbled a little over the words, "your pr...presence at 19:00 tonight, for the..."

"Infraction." Agate: nodding in irony.

"-infraction of four laws of Mourir. Please report to the, the-

"-the Luftschloss." Agate was grim.

"Isn't that where you work? Please report to the Lu-ft-sch-loss on time," Elle finished, pronouncing the word with difficulty.

Elle looked up at Agate and passed the sheet of paper back to her.

Agate took it in her gloved hands and crumpled it. "I have to go."

"But you're going tonight."

Agate shrugged. "Carpe diem. It doesn't matter today or tonight. They don't want us, Elle. They don't want us anywhere."

### **Offense Six: Spreading rumors about and/or insulting member(s) of the Council**

The Luftschloss was like a delicate crane, posed over the other buildings, shining metal feathers glinting in the starlight. It was balanced and it was beautiful, and the triangular crown was the first thing Elle's eye had been drawn to when they had approached Mourir by ship.

Another memo had arrived, clutched in Agate's hand when she arrived back from work: *You are now in violation of five (5) laws of Mourir.*

Standing outside, Elle noticed Agate was still wearing her staff name tag, the one that had her face staring out from underneath her long dark hair, and the words AGATE SPARROW framing it.

"Agate?" Elle asked, a question she had never thought about before rising to her lips. "How did you cut your finger?"

Agate's eyes were filled with disgust. An ocean of it, spilling from her. Suddenly, Elle did not want to go inside the Luftschloss.

"I spilled. Her tea. All over her. "

"What?"

Agate grimaced. It seemed to Elle like she was entangled in the web of the memory, half of her here, the other half still hurrying home in the cold, her finger wrapped in bloody cloth. "One of the...oh, I don't know what the people in the Council are called. I was serving. It was burning. My finger slipped, and she carries around a knife."

Elle's eyes were wide, but after the piece of paper, she was not surprised. "A knife?"

"Elle, Mourir is not what we thought it was."

"I know." And she did. *To die.*

"They have leaders, a dozen, but they're so... corrupt, Elle, corrupt. Succession is down the family, twelve families that lord over--"

"Agate," Elle interrupted. "Where is *At the Edge of the Earth*?" She needed proof. Proof to show her that Mourir was still the city of her dreams, not this mess of skyscrapers and lies they had become caught in.

Agate shrugged. "Under the mattress, where we left it. Why?"

"It wasn't supposed to be this way. I just want to know... how could it be so wrong?"

"Don't believe everything you read." A statement that could never have been imagined a few months ago. And with that, they stepped inside.

### **Offense Seven: Resistance**

They found themselves in a towering, cathedral-like room. Elle craned her neck, looking up, imagining she could fly up and at the ceiling there would not be hard plaster, but clouds or stars or a sunset. When you're at the edge of the Earth, you can either fall off or fly up.

In front of them was a table on a dais, and seated at that were twelve people. Some of them were glaring, but some of them were smiling, and Elle thought that was scariest of all.

*There is a place, far away across the ocean, and I don't know when we'll ever reach it.*

"Miss Agate Sparrow." The woman who addressed Agate was one of the smiling ones, and she seemed fair enough. Her posture was relaxed, her eyes were kind, but then Elle saw the flash of a blade at her side, and Elle's blood flooded with ice. "Miss Elle Sparrow."

*We left the fire, we left the flames, for this misty dream.*

"We're here for the hearing," Agate replied, bravely, Elle thought.

*The world is flat, it's flat, and we're gonna walk off the edge. They were lying, when what they said meant everything to us.*

"Six offenses. Quite a lot. Lucky you don't lose your job."

"Six?" Agate asked. "The memo said--"

"Five, I know." The woman was condescending. Elle was wary. "Complaints about my knife and I, right outside this very building? Offense Six. You should know better. You don't complain about your hosts."

*The city of Mourir was built long ago, not just by one architect, but by generations of people who all found themselves on the same island.*

Elle reached for her sister's hand. Agate's blue gloves were warm, but the air in the room was still caked with fear.

*It is made of towering skyscrapers, sturdy brick homes, tiny shops tucked into corners, vast bridges, museums, libraries, palaces, and anything one could ever need. Except freedom.*

"Six offenses, and we will be fair. Agate Sparrow, you are dismissed from your position here."

"What are our crimes?" Elle asked, timidly, nervously. She wasn't really expecting an answer, though. They'd both had plenty experiences with bad leaders. Ones who burned so bright with power they exploded, causing flickers of flame to run across their nation.

*It is overseen by the Council, fair leaders who respect their people, and they reside in the Luftschloss.*

"For one, you stole a boat," said a man.

Agate: "That wasn't here, that was—"

*Home. A place that doesn't exist anymore. It burned us. Mourir. A place we thought would save us, but is full of flames all the same.*

"Leave." It was another Council member. "You aren't welcome here."

Elle watched the ashes float down. Ashes of their home, and ashes of the dreams never seen. They settled on the floor of the Luftschloss.

"Carpe diem," Agate whispered, the words tiptoeing out of the room.

*If one can get to Mourir, they are welcome. If you can get to Mourir, you are welcome. Mourir is a refuge, for all the people trying to escape.*

No one was there to stop them.

*We can run and run.*

When you go a certain distance, you find it impossible to look back.

*So go forward.*

Past the mainland there is Mourir, and past Mourir there is a precipice. No up or down, not when everything is floating in space. Step off, Elle thought, and meet the stars.

*You can find it at the edge of the earth.*

Elle: What's beyond that?

*I guess we'll find out.*

**Ala Killen**

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: St Catherine's School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Faith Norrell

Category: Short Story

**Filtered**

Filtered

It was mid-spring, the air still holding a faint reminder of the crisp winter wind, as I walked on the shady side of the street. I stared at a long row of shops that stretched beyond sight and watched flickers of cars flash across their windows as they passed. On my side of the street, rusty brick houses stood single file, brick chimneys stretched into the sky like fingers. The gentle breeze ruffled my short hair as I passed an old thrift store. Suddenly, a sharp light caught my eye, a flash in the display of the shop. I blinked hard for a moment, then glared at the window, trying to find the source of the light. It was an old pair of glasses, lenses shining. Curious, I jay-walked across the street. The glasses, vintage Ray Bans, sat on the nose of a dummy, their lightly mirrored lenses glinted against the sun and reflected my face. I stared into the glasses for a moment, shocked at my haircut. Barely three inches long, it was shorter than I had ever had it. My best friends, Amy and Ben, had loved it, after they had gotten over their initial shock. I gave the glasses another glance. I liked the rounded edges and the way the lenses made the world look like it was inside a giant storm. I lay my palm on the door and pushed, hearing a loud creak in argument. All at once, the smell of cat, strong perfume, and old people hit me like a punch to the nose. I stood awkwardly in the doorway for a moment, then walked further into the dimly lit room, stepping over a sleeping cat on my way. I turned to look at the display, wondering if the owners would be okay with me just taking the glasses from the dummy, but they weren't there. I glanced around the window, but the glasses had neither fallen on the floor, nor been on a different dummy. They had just disappeared. Wandering through the store to the back, I allowed my eyes to skim over old nutcrackers standing like soldiers and fragile-looking glass bowls that couldn't possibly be practical. Towers of useless, dusty, trinkets lined the forgotten shelves, casting intricate shadows on the walls. I wound my way through the delicate pottery and came to stand in front of the counter, an elderly lady staring at me all the way.

"Hello, I wa-" I started, but the old woman cut me off.

"I know, I have them here," she pulled out a worn leather glasses case from under the counter.

Incredulously, I asked, "How did you know?"

"When you own a store such as this, see things come and go as long as I have, you come upon a sort of superpower," she winked, "A kind of feeling," she waved her hand in front of my face, "\$3.50."

"What?"

"The glasses? I suppose you would like to buy them? They are \$3.50."

"Oh," I said, blushing slightly, "Yes." I handed her the crumpled money from my back pocket.

"Thank you dear," She said while smiling kindly at me. She put the money away in a little lockbox, handed me the case, then turned around abruptly, scuttling her way into the backroom. I watched her go, then realized that I should probably go as well. I made my way back through the relics, but this time on the way out the cat was awake and I rubbed it's head. I pushed the door open, holding the cat inside with my foot, and stepped out into the cold air. I began to walk, the glasses tucked into my back pocket the whole way home.

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The next day was Monday. The clouds had come and the wind whipped at the front porch of our little, two story house. I woke to the sound of trees swaying and, eyes blinking, I got up, changed into a comfy sweater, and sat back down on the corner of my bed. I stared around my room, glancing from the music posters to the pile of shoes in the corner. Finally, my eyes fell on the crinkled leather of the glasses case, still sitting on the desk where I had put it the night before. I stood up and trundled over to them, opening the case. The glasses fell out onto the table. I picked them up and walked over to my mirror. I hung them on my sweater where they glinted up at me. I decided to bring them to school, in case the sun came out and Mr. Burner didn't close his blinds again. I had him first period, but the sun was always positioned perfectly so that anyone sitting in the back had to squint the entire class, or allow their eyes to be burned out of their sockets. Plus, they looked pretty sweet. I strode away from the mirror, threw on an old jean jacket, and headed downstairs to the smell of burning toast.

□□□

After hollering goodbye to my parents, I shut the door to my house and began to walk down the narrow sidewalk that clung to the sides of everyone's front yards. In about a half mile, I would pass Amy's house, where I would hear her Mom yell at her to hurry up, then see her tripping out of her house with her backpack in hand. Until then, I could simply enjoy watching the trees and listening to the noises of the day. I stared at the baby plants that had found lodge in the narrow cracks of the sidewalk, proud of their accomplishment, and wished, once again, that I knew who I was as much as they did. I sank into an internal debate, a phenomenon that I found myself in quite frequently. It seemed like everyone was always asking what we wanted to be when we grew up, or who we were, but I never knew what to tell them. I would always say 'I don't really know yet,' or 'I am a person named Kate?' but then whoever asked would just look at me sort of disappointedly. How do

we know who we are? Aren't I already me? When do people expect us to know? It is just something about me or is everyone just making it up as they go along? I jolted out of my trance when I heard yelling coming from a few houses down.

"Hurry up Annabelle!" Amy's mom yelled. Once, when Amy and I did soccer, we were at a game and she yelled down the coach for not letting us get water. We didn't go back the next year.

"Hey Amy!" I shouted.

"Hey Kate!" She replied, "How was your weekend?"

"Let's see... I slept, ate, took a shower, went on a walk, met a wacky old lady in a thrift store, bought some glasses, re-read 'The Hobbit,' went to the grocery store, and that was about it. How was Canada?" Amy's family had a lot of money, and since we lived in Burlington, Vermont and her grandparents lived in Canada, she spent a lot of her weekends there.

"Well, let me tell you..." She launched into a long monologue about this cute guy who moved in next door, this restaurant that only served food on sticks, and how her grandparents let her watch "IT." By the time we made it to school, we were both laughing so hard that we had to compose ourselves before we marched through the doors like troops to an unwinnable battle.

□□□

After homeroom, I walked to my locker, grabbed my history binder, then walked to Ben's locker and grabbed his. I waddled awkwardly with the stuff in my hands to the end of the hallway, looked around, and opened the door for Ben, who was late as usual. Our homeroom teacher never went through roll call, so Ben always showed up late. The only problem was that they locked the doors from the inside after nine, but we had come up with a solution to that.

"Morning, Ben." I said teasingly.

"Morning Kate." He replied, a sheepish grin plastered to his face.

"How are you this blustery morning?" I asked him in a fake British accent.

"Living the dream. Don't wake me."

I laughed and stepped aside to let him in. I gave him his binder and we walked down the hallway to Mr. Burner's classroom. Sitting down in the back, I realized that the sun had indeed come out. I pulled the glasses off of my sweater and put them on my face. Ben looked back at me and smiled. Suddenly, I heard a voice in my head.

*Man. She looks beautiful today.*

What was that!? I didn't have time to think about it though, because just then Mr. Burner walked through the door and the room quieted.

"Alright class. Today we will be taking notes on the Declaration of Independence." His eyes growled at us as they swept across the room. We took notes for the next hour, occasionally pausing when he would ask a question about something he had talked about minutes before.

However, Mr. Burner didn't ask questions for the entire class. He asked people to answer, by name. It was his way of keeping everyone interested, but the only thing it ended up doing was making everyone feel like they were chained to every word he spoke. Suddenly, his eyes were on me, and I realized I had missed his question. Luckily, he had written it on the board. I looked at the board then at Mr. Burner. His eyes bored right through me, but then I heard another voice, different from the first.

*If she says that Despotism means the exercise of absolute power, I'll be shocked. She hasn't been paying any attention. I can't wait for lunch break, these kids are killing me.*

He turned away from me.

"No? Well?"

"Wait! Uhhh, it means the exercise of absolute power over something or someone." I blurted. He turned to look at me, his face a mixture of disbelief and boredom, which seemed like it would be hard to pull off, but Mr. Burner did with flying colors.

"Good." He muttered, and turned back to the board. We continued our notes and I tried to pay attention, but my mind kept wandering to what had just happened, and why.

□□□

It kept happening all day. Every time I looked at someone, every time someone glanced at me, I would hear voices in my head. By the end of the day, I had an idea of what was happening. It was the glasses. They allowed me to hear people's thoughts when I looked into their eyes. The entire day I heard things like *I'm starving, 56+41 is uhhhhhh, Her dress is so bad*, and other things I don't want to add here.

Sometimes, they were even about me. *Ugh, why do I have to be partnered with Kate? or What's up with that hair? She looks like a boy*, or once, when someone invited me to their birthday, *I can't even believe I am doing this but I can't invite Amy without inviting her. Eh.* It seemed like everyone had an opinion. By the time school was over, I started to feel overwhelmed by the sheer amount of opinions, the number of unfiltered thoughts about me and everyone else. I went home in a sort of stupor, unaware of anything around me. I dragged myself straight upstairs and fell into my bed.

□□□

The same thing happened for the next three days. I would wake up, try to not think about the glasses, then put them on, unable to resist the power. It was addictive, being able to guess how a person felt, see what they were thinking. It was fun to actually be the best in class too. I knew all of the answers, even though I only knew them because I looked at someone who did. And I couldn't stop wondering about Ben, whether he had meant what he had thought about me or if that was for someone else. I started to change, wearing nice clothes so that people would stop thinking about how outdated or ugly mine were. I started wearing hats so that they would stop hating my hair. I put on makeup and painted my nails so I would fit in more with the other girls. Amy and Ben began to distance themselves, so I became more clingy and controlling. I cared about what other people thought of me. I didn't realize it at the time though, so I kept on going, even though I felt less and less sure of myself, and people seemed to have an endless supply of negative thoughts for me. On Friday, I woke up feeling awful. At first I thought I was sick, but then I realized that I mostly just felt sad. I made myself get up and, trying to not think about how I felt, I put on the glasses once again, made my way through my morning, and walked to school. I stood at my locker, grabbing my history binder, when I

glasses once again, made my way through my morning, and walked to school. I stood at my locker, grabbing my history book, when I looked into the tiny mirror that was stuck to the back. I almost didn't recognize the person I saw there. She was tired and fake and I hated her. I hated myself.

*I hate you.*

I heard a new voice in my head. My own. I ran into the bathroom, slamming the door behind me. I thought I could get away there, but I had forgotten that another mirror, bigger this time, waited there for me. My heart, a drumbeat in my chest, pounded against my ribs. I couldn't get away. I stared into my own eyes. The glasses made my face look small and childlike and I hated it.

*I hate you.*

*I hate you.*

*I hate you.*

Face curling, trying to hide, I began to cry.

*I hate you.*

I ripped the glasses off of my face and threw them across the room. The voices stopped. I sat there and cried until, some time later, the door opened and Amy walked in. Seeing me curled up on the floor of the bathroom, she immediately dropped her bag and ran over to me, falling on the floor and holding me to her like a doll. I cried there until the crying stopped, then when I felt a little bit better, I began to tell her the entire story. She didn't say a word. When I had finished, Amy helped me stand up, walked me to the mirror, and took my hat off. My hair bounced down, wavy and full of life. Then, she grabbed a handful of paper towels, ran them under the rushing water, and began to wipe the makeup off of my face. As I slowly returned to normal, I couldn't help but feel like a weight was lifting off of me, like a large dark bird was taking flight. By the end of a few minutes, I looked like myself again, and I turned to Amy.

"There," she said, "Much better."

"I am so sorry," I told her, "I acted like a complete fool, and I tried so hard to be what everyone wanted me to be that I lost sight of who I was. Can you forgive me?"

"I don't know," she began and my heart sank, "can I?" We laughed softly at first, but as my laugh turned into a post crying hiccup, we began to laugh harder, until we were both clutching each other to stop our uncontrollable giggles.

"I really am sorry." I gasped when I had regained my breath.

"I know you are. But as long as whoever that was stays away, I think we are going to be just fine." We stood in silence for a moment, staring at each other in the mirror.

"Do you know who you are?" I asked her curiously, "It always seems like you have everything under control, and you always know how to make me laugh." She looked at me incredulously for a few moments before responding, her face making me crack into another grin.

"Are you kidding me? I have no freaking clue!"

"Good," I said, "I guess we can figure it out together?"

"That is the single most bestest plan you have had in a long time." She held out her arms and I took the hug gratefully. We separated and I walked over to the glasses, picked them up, and threw them into my pocket. I walked through the bathroom door once again, but this time I walked out real, alive, and happy to still be searching.

□□□

I still have the glasses. I couldn't bring myself to get rid of them. They sit in the drawer of my dresser, next to the keys and the hair brush, staring up at me, daring me to put them on. I tried to break them, but it seemed like whatever magic gave them their unique ability had also made them shatter proof. So I kept them, afraid that if I let them go into the world that they would cause even more damage than they had caused me. Amy convinced me to tell Ben, but I conveniently skipped over the part where I read his thoughts. She looked at me sharply when I did this, but I thought that if he wanted to tell me, he would do so on his own time. My life returned to normal, and I slowly began to forget about the glasses, but I never forgot about what they made me feel. I am writing this now, not because I plan on showing it to anyone, but because I want to always remember three things. One: I am enough. Two: There will always be people out there who care. Three: The world is filled with negativity. Don't just be another drop.

**Laura Kirby**

Age: 16, Grade: 8

School Name: St Catherine's School, Richmond, VA

Educator: John Morgan

Category: Poetry

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## **Stringed Lights**

Stringed Lights

A Free Verse Poem

Crystal clear lights flicker through the fog,  
Yet a man with a stormy heart sees nothing.

He no longer hears the laughter or the life that explodes from children,  
Or finds beauty in the towering pines, capped with white snow.

The trees in his front yard are pruned and bare.  
His neighbors' trees grasp on to the little leaves they have left.

"When I was young and weak..." he always said,  
"...I had hope during the winter months."

He would continue, "I feel sorry for my cheerful neighbors.  
They are blindsided by this holiday. Every year is the same."

The man pulls out his wallet and fiddles through his wrinkled dollar bills.  
He takes a few icy steps across the frozen pavement.

Still, the stringed Christmas lights are invisible.  
The empty photo sleeve of his wallet is not.

He swings the door open with a haunting gesture  
And there stands a woman with an empty finger.

"Hot cocoa?" The woman asks with a smile.  
Her kindness seemed to shock him.

The woman found someone to cover her shift,  
And spoke to the man for hours in their booth.

She told him of her love for stringed Christmas lights,  
And the overwhelming story they share.

Following that night, all bitterness was lost.  
The man heard laughter, felt love, and could see the stringed lights.

He no longer had an empty photo sleeve in his wallet.  
And no longer did that woman have an empty finger.

**Isabella Newman**

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educators: Jim Cloutier, Gail Giewont

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

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## **American Shootings: An End of Silence**

American Shootings: An End of Silence

### **Ignorance**

*Noun*

1. lack of knowledge or information.

In 2012, Adam Lanza shot twenty elementary school kids and six staff members at Sandy Hook. I was ten years old. That night, I slept in my mom's bed with my brother and step father. We were upset but it all took place in Connecticut, and that was enough for my ten year old brain to justify I was safe. I remember how close it was to Christmas, a vivid memory of a parent breaking down on TV explaining how they already bought their daughter's presents.

A week later, my elementary school put in a buzzer outside for visitors. I was a shy kid. I hated the buzzers. They meant anytime after school when I had to go inside to get water or use the bathroom, I would have to press the grey button and state my case. The school began having lock down drills, which I perceived as just extra practice for a tornado. My classmates and I would whisper and giggle under tables for the five minutes of silence. All of us ignorant to the fact this was practice, a simulation for the possibility the big scary gunman did show up. As a kid, I knew he existed but far away, almost not real. Like the mummies we learned about, that come alive only in the movies.

My elementary school was a sheltered public school. The wood floors were a brown sugar color, every room smelt like kindergarten, the teachers waved hello in the hallways, which were coated in murals and colorful bulletin boards. The word safe flew through the building like the tiny birds that found their way in through the old bricks. This was a fact that didn't change for me until I left.

After 2013 had begun, I had a dream. I was in my elementary school, except it had a ballroom instead of a main office. At first, I was a video game character, who glitched along walls and jumped at the foot of stairs. I was watching myself, who was not myself, from third person, with an aerial view. I had a big animated gun and looked very out of place. I soon switched into my own body which was frantically pacing the halls. The announcements were going off saying to evacuate, and if you made it across the street from the school you were safe. I looked for my brother before running out. I woke up stressed by the dream. I told it to my mother who said something along the lines of "Oh that's scary." No one else I told said anything. As if it had happened, and they were thinking of a way to come across as empathetic. Or maybe, no one said anything because they couldn't dissipate the fear I was expressing.

### **Education**

*/ˌeɪʒəˈkɑːSH(ə)n/*

*Noun*

1. the process of receiving or giving systematic instruction, especially at a school or university.
2. the theory and practice of teaching.
3. a body of knowledge acquired while being educated.

The year before I attended Lucille Brown Middle School, an article came out about a twelve year old boy bringing a handgun into the school. It was not loaded and was handed over on the arrival of police. No one was shot, so no noise was made. Yet a twelve year old boy had access to a gun.

I have attended public schools for the entirety of my life. This means, I know a shocking amount of animal facts, done packets of busy work, had classes that exceed the rooms maximum occupancy, and routinely drilled rules on not letting strangers in the building. You get what you pay for. However, it should be the right of a mother to know her child is coming home from school with nothing more than the stress of homework and relationships. Not bullet holes and PTSD.

Before the 2016 election took place, I was met with the opportunity to see Bill Clinton speak on behalf of Hillary's campaign. As he ran through her policies he reached the notorious and controversial topic: gun control. He said, "...you have a constitutional right to travel. But if you leave here and you get in your car and go home, you'll have seatbelts...and you don't ever hear people griping about car control do you?" The rhetorical question had the entire audience applauding, but those who needed to hear it, were not in attendance.

I know 9/11. Despite being born about a year after it happened, I know it did. I know when I go to an airport I take off my shoes, empty my water bottle, pass through an x-ray. When a bad thing happens people learn. New procedures are put in place, so the probability of it happening again decreases.

*Insecure* ~

*/ˈɪnsəˈkyoʊr/*

*adjective*

1. (of a person) not confident or assured; uncertain and anxious.
- 2.

(of a thing) not firm or set; unsafe.

It was a Monday night in February. I was awake in my Ikea loft bed. I should have been asleep but I was watching a movie. At about 10:30 there was a loud bang. This wasn't uncommon but usually, they sounded more like fireworks and were further away. I texted my neighbor, Eliza, "Gunshot or firework?" we both voted gun shot. I went and sat by the frosty window as large SUV police cars filled the intersection of 29th and Broad. No sirens rang out the cars moved swiftly through the four streets.

I crept down stairs, saw my parents watching out the side window that looked out on to Broad. I asked them what was going on but they knew just as much as I did. They explained that I was safe but a doubt buried itself in my heart and left me restless. I was convinced that the man who fired next to my house was hiding in my back alley and would notice our basement unlocked, and come in.

This did not happen. However, this is how so many kids live, without sleep and a feeling of insecurity. I had responsive police, parents at home and as it turned out—harmless victims. Guns and inner city violence is a huge problem. It is not all big massacres. Rather nightly shots in the street hitting targets and collecting victims—brothers, fathers, neighbors. Neighborhoods becoming statistics and left helpless and impoverished.

I have no doubt it is nice to hold your own life in your own hands. To be independent and protected. To not rely on police who are more than a minute away and who may not show up. There is no doubt that my paranoia would decrease, fear of the dark disappear if I had the ability to defend myself from whatever startled me. But, a gun is more than defense, it can kill, with ease and speed, that is their job.

### **Disappointment**

*/ˌdɪsəˈpɔɪntmənt/*

*Noun*

1. the feeling of sadness or displeasure caused by the non fulfillment of one's hopes or expectations.
2. a person, event, or thing that causes disappointment.

As the Vegas news unraveled I grew more and more upset. So hurt by my nation for allowing a man to legally obtain the power of killing hundreds. Disgusted we could say, "luckily *only* 58 are dead."

When Devin Kelly took 26 lives in a small local church, I had managed to ignore the headlines. I was in a small café drinking earl grey tea and reading the newspaper when I finally faced the details of Sutherland, Texas. I had an hour in between dinner and catching movie with a boy I had met at a party. After reading the small column dedicated to the event, the same dismal feeling came, and went leaving nothing but a few unfinished poems.

An insensitivity has plagued the States. The fact that I can scroll through a list of shootings and glance over the ones with three dead, ten injured is sickening. The fact I have to google the name of the gunman responsible for taking dozens of lives less than six months ago because the dead have become irrelevant is nauseating. When the lack of sympathy first came, so did guilt, but soon that faded too. I had reached the point many politicians had years ago. A mindset they paid for with the millions from the NRA. When I see images of guns, a deep pit opens in my stomach and intense fear floods it. While over half of congress's representatives see dollar signs.

### **Pride**

*/praɪd/*

*Noun*

1. a feeling or deep pleasure or satisfaction derived from one's own achievements, the achievements of those with whom one is closely associated, or from qualities or possessions that are widely admired.

I am an American. On the fourth of July, I watch fireworks get shot off down by the river which settlers came up and created the England extension that became our large proud nation. Despite whether I stand during its recitation, I know every word of the pledge of allegiance. We are a prideful country. Our mountains are tall, valleys wide, rivers long, lakes deep. Lady liberty stands with straight posture reminding us of our roots. However, America is scared to be vulnerable, she is insecure. Her citizens are fearful and addicted to falsehoods pumped into their blood like heroin by political leaders. Drop the pride, stop ignoring facts. Understand we are not a nation of sunny stories that stumbled upon resolution. When the violent death of 17 American kids at the hands of one of their peers is not enough to begin fixing a broken system, then we are more than broken—we are corrupt.

### **Silence**

*/ˈsaɪləns/*

*Verb*

1. cause to become silent; prohibit or prevent from speaking.

In my spanish class, my peers and I watched the Florida news. Our teacher asked us to explain what we could do to make sure this doesn't happen again, brainstorm a solution. The class remained silent. Which is not unusual, it is hard for us to express our thoughts in the language that none of us primarily speak. However, this silence loomed over us heavy, like the low rain clouds that came through Richmond after more details were released. What we should have said is, "*Nosotros necesitamos control de armas.*"

I didn't realize it was wrong to assume the Columbine massacre, 33 shot at Virginia Tech, 28 killed in an elementary school, 58 gunned down at a concert, 26 dead in Sutherland Texas, 17 in a Florida high school wouldn't spark government change, implement control. Our nation is in crisis. This is no longer the responsibility of victims to carry on the vision of reformation, but any student, parent or person who goes in public. There is no prediction for who could be next. And for everything that makes a person different, another ring is painted around the bullseye we

wear on our head. We cannot continue being surprised when the same tragedy takes place and no change has intervened.

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**Rachel Robinson**

Age: 17, Grade: 12

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Educator: Gail Giewont

Category: Poetry

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## **The Modern Ragnarok**

The Modern Ragnarök

### I. A Prophecy of the Seeress

I see destruction and creation  
with my mind's eye  
in the billowing smoke  
of Earth's funeral pyre.

Open your eyes and inhale  
burning prophecies.  
Listen, and hear sirens  
in the crackles of the flame.

### II. An Axe Age

A sun was stolen  
from its cradle in Europe  
and carried overseas  
to a womb of sand.

Men played God  
and built a monster.  
With the sun for his heart,  
he was a child of fire.

Loki only knows destruction.  
He is the first child  
born to these God-Men,  
the first to bring men to their knees.

He fashions a weapon  
and gives it to Hödr,  
the blind pilot who does not know  
the power he now holds.

Hödr drops the mistletoe arrow  
and mortally wounds Baldr,  
his brother, who crumples  
under torii and radiation.

### III. A Wind Age

The God-Men call themselves  
Odin, prepare to face Giants  
made of ice and wind and hate.  
Loki, trickster God, allies to both.

He dances between Giants and Gods,

two different reds, two different worlds.  
He serves superpowers, countries  
too large and forceful for their own good.

Hel, Loki's daughter, is born.  
Half man, half ice, she is perfectly  
irrational, like these men and Giants.  
She unleashes *Fimbulvinter*.

For 45 years, winter descends.  
From Hel's lips she speaks snow,  
paranoia, warns of Loki, who's  
begging for them to pull his trigger.

Together they bring a Cold War.  
People are frozen by Hel's warnings,  
their hands shaking above  
the detonation button.

#### IV. A Wolf Age

The Giants birth Loki's son, Fenrir,  
and bring him to the God-Men's backyard.  
He is snarling, the fur on his back  
standing on end like missiles.

Loki stands by Giants on Naglfar,  
tearing across the sea with their eyes set  
on the God-Men, feebly hiding  
under stars and stripes.

Fenrir opens his mouth,  
the top of his jaw reaches the heavens  
the bottom of his jaw scrapes the earth.  
If he is unleashed, nothing will stop him.

But Fenrir is restrained in chains  
of ice. Hel's fear has paralyzed even him.  
He tears at his restraints,  
shaking Yggdrasil with each pull.

The God-Men find Fenrir,  
and beg the Giants to take him  
far away, lest he break free,  
and Hel's Cold War ends.

#### V. A Sword Age

The end of the Earth was averted  
with Fenrir locked away.  
But he will break his chains,  
melting the ice as Hel is forgotten.

Once he is free he will carry  
his father's wishes, silence  
his sister's deep freeze,  
and he will consume all.

Fenrir will blaze mushroom clouds  
around the Earth. The God-Men  
and Giants will fall, locked in the war  
that almost started three decades ago.

that almost sparked three decades ago.

Fenrir will kill the God-Men,  
and the Giants will fall to the fire  
Loki spreads, angry that his children  
are used as nothing more than weapons.

Yggdrasil, from the Earth's chest,  
succumbs to the fire and fallout.  
Loki, Fenrir, Hel, the God-Men, Giants,  
and the Earth are left ablaze, radiating, dying;

a sun is born again.

**Minnie Zhang**

Age: 16, Grade: 10

School Name: J R Tucker High School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Julia Cuccherini

Category: Poetry

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**yellow**

*Last night I dreamed a dream,  
of floundering hands, criss crossed eyes  
chopsticks and ivory and handfuls of rice  
I dreamed a dream underneath American skies...*

American skies –  
the one that lies,  
above carpets of American corn  
draped like a curtain above prickling golden deserts  
weaving its way through my dreams  
blue, blue,  
American blue,  
but when I open my eyes  
my American skies –  
thunder and rain with a

yellow

it drips  
it trembles  
it scatters into the air like fumes of pesticide,  
soaking into the fabric of my clothes  
the hollow of my throat  
the pads beneath my toes...  
dyeing it all

yellow

marks the onset of jaundice,  
crawling across the skin  
of perfect American babies,  
scarring their American eyes  
and American skin and  
American ease;  
but my jaundice never seemed to  
fade away  
because I grew  
swallowed up and drowning in my

yellow

dribbles, drizzles, drips  
into my mouth,  
my mother's mouth,  
until her lips are overflowing, spilling  
with a

dirty

yellow

slithering into the spaces between her  
words  
my mother's teeth suddenly grow  
too wide for her to speak  
the *wight way*  
verbs become tenses  
become past become present become  
future become progressive and  
I am six again  
cringing and cringing in my kindergarten  
classroom  
listening to my mother read before my  
classmates and their American talk  
while I wonder why  
my mother sounds so

yellow

is the color of egg yolks, scrambled,  
mixed with tomato  
*fanqiechaojidan*  
five stars on a piece of red silk  
fluttering in a homeland foreign to my mind  
the skin on my father  
hands on hands on dying laptop screens  
two am and still typing,  
faster than the white man  
that sits, insipid at his desk,  
still never good enough  
to reach his place  
when my father cries  
the light of his desk lamp is

yellow

like blossoms, like the buds  
of newborn flowers springing from the snow,  
rising like smoke from the roof of my mouth  
some days the sun shines beneath my skin  
some days it rains and drips and seeps from my pores  
some days I am *sick* on my

yellow

is absent from my teenage  
dreams  
tonight my eyes are  
an endless, seamless blue  
the kind that  
splays, that plays, that spills  
across the American skies,  
my eyelids grow hoods and creases  
my hair turns gold  
curls like ivy around pale shoulders  
but when I awake  
I see that my cheeks

I see that my skies —

my American skies  
still drip feverishly,  
(but slightly less so)  
with the sight and scent of

yellow.

**Minnie Zhang**

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Educator: Julia Cuccherini

Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

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## Lights

Once a year, Mama puts up red banners and diamonds up around the house. She tapes them on the backs of doors and the closet underneath the stairs, and if you ever come down during the night you can see them wink at you like slabs of sliced ruby. She cleans the entire house because it is the New Year, and it might be February for the white folks but it is a new, new year for us, because the moon said so and we all came from the moon, anyway. The diamonds say wealth and she turns them upside down, because the Chinese word for *down* sounds like the Chinese word for *to come*, and then the upside down triangles become *wealth to come*, and everyone loves a good fortune.

Once a year, Mama strings up red lanterns that dance like puppets. They hang above my head like fat berries, ripe with fortune and luck and waiting to burst. She teaches me her childhood songs, voice trilling like glimmering lights, about baby sparrows and little apples and girls from the moon, all of them searching for a home.

Once a year, Mama takes us to parades they hold at the Chinese churches, where there are people with the same yellow skin and black eyes. My people dress up in their tasseled pants and paint their faces, clip on long, long beards and put on masks swirling with cherry inks and glossy whites. They dress up like dragons, with fur-lined claws and crimson eyes, but no wings, because our dragons don't need wings to soar. Side to side, they sway, red and green and gold glinting like stars.

Once a year, we sit down neatly on our chairs, all of us with the same hairs and same eyes and same smiles. Men and women pass by us in their dancing costumes, tails skipping behind them, singing. My brother tosses coins at their sparkling tails and they sprinkle to the floor, glowing like a handful of tiny moons.

Once a year, we watch the dragons dance, their tasseled whiskers flinging up and down, bells and bells and whistles jangling. Behind them, boys and girls play their drums, clothed in red tradition, palms falling flat on sheets of pigskin. My little brother watches their legs cross as they dance, watches them toss their arms in the air and beam with joy, because today our new year begins. One by one, they parade by us, their mouths open and wider than the sun.

Once a year, I wake up and underneath my pillows there is money, a couple hundred dollars sealed tight in a red bag for good luck. I get up and cook breakfast for my parents, mouthwatering pans of dumplings and rice as white as snow. At night, we turn on the TV to the mainland networks, and we watch the mainland celebrate. They shoot fireworks so high in the sky, they look like stars. On the mainland, only the littlest of children sleep. Everyone else drinks cups full of red wine and *niangao*, sweet rice noodles that melt in your mouth like candy. Everyone looks at the sky, at the moon that made us and the stars that love us and the old year that left us.

Once a year, I go back to the home that will always want me. There, the stars are bright and the lights are even brighter.

**Minnie Zhang**

Age: 16, Grade: 10

School Name: J R Tucker High School, Richmond, VA

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Category: Personal Essay/Memoir

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## **yesterday, the sky cried**

Yesterday, the sky cried.

It began with a phone call. My old friend Jay, the one you were jealous of, calling to check up. *Breakups suck, you know*, he says. *Yeah, Yeah, I say, they do. Now what do I do.* And Jay says, he orders, *get over him.*

*Find someone new. You'll get over him quick enough, if you get under someone else.* And so I put on my makeup, slopped foundation over my face and smeared on lipstick. Makeup makes my face cakey up close, makes my pores pinched and wide, makes me get wrinkles I didn't know I had, a stupid little girl trying to grow up too soon. You always told me I looked like a clown, but Jay told me I looked better in it. Grown up and sexy and beautiful. Red lips and big eyes and fake skin, limited edition doll prepackaged for use.

If you were a man, then Jay was a little boy trying pretending to be one. A boy high on a hit he had borrowed, probably from his friends, probably from his brother. I could tell Jay was high because he smelled like it; that, and Axe, the cheap kind you get at CVS. His eyes and hands and speech were slow, eyes that lolled and hands that hovered and words that trickled, oozing their way through my mind, as swollen and curdled as day-old milk.

*I'll help you*, he said, on the way over. *Go outside for me. Meet me at our park. You wanna find someone new, right? I'm someone.*

I wished he wasn't. But Jay begs and whines, says *baby, baby, baby*, slow and husky like a broken record. Says I'm unfair and I promised, and I'm not sure if I did or not, but in the end it doesn't really matter because Jay drives all the way to see me, fifteen minutes, and by that time it would be rude to say no. He's already here. And he's probably too high to drive home. *Let's just kiss first*, he said, grabbing my hands. *Your first kiss after your first love. Me, don't you want me?*

No. *Nos* dribbled from my lips like water, fizzling as they hit the air. I didn't want too; I didn't want him to. What I meant to say was no, but my underwear and makeup already said yes for me, and when you're naked and the guy is forty pounds heavier, it's rude to say no.

It's rude to say no when you already promised, sometime last week, even if you don't quite remember and you're not really sure it happened, anyway. It's rude to say no when it won't even matter, but mostly it's just useless to say no when it'll happen anyway.

It started to rain, big fat droplets that slid off my face and dribbled off my lips, and I wondered if my makeup would slide off too. Gush out of my pores, orange and brown, until I was just a naked little girl, helpless and offered. I pictured it sliding down my body, orange and brown like the dirt, like the Earth.

*Let me help you*, he said over and over again. Jay pulled me into his arms, grinning, warm, delighted. He kissed like a fish, wet and sloppy and all over me, fins scraping at my teeth and tongue and lungs. He tells me girls say he's good, says it cockily, boastfully. I didn't know because I had only kissed you before, but I remember wishing he would shave, because I could feel his stubble all over my chin, rubbing and pinching and pressing. The rain came down harder, droplets of water falling fast on the leaves, dripping off the branches, dripping off the leaves and soaking into the Earth.

*Let's go slow, baby*, Jay said, and then started trying to go fast, even though it hurt and I had to hold my breath. The rain came down harder. It sounded like the sky was crying, like the sky got her heart squeezed out of her lungs and eyes and she had to close them both to hold it all back. I bet that after, that after, it hurt to do anything but rain; that after, the rain was tinted red with her blood.

*Rain, rain, go away*, Jay said, smiling, laughing, on top of me and inside me and forever with me. Sky tipping, sky laughing, sky crying. I wished it would thunder. I wished it would wash him away, Jay and his lolling eyes and hovering hands and trickling words; scentless detergent, cheap Axe and prickling stubble, all the places I didn't want him to be. Jay, Jay, Jay; I wished it was you but it was Jay, and when it was all done I wanted the sky to wash me away.