

Richmond Art and Writing Region of the
Scholastic Art & Writing Awards
Silver Key Recipients in Writing



**Scholastic
Art & Writing
Awards**



Isabel Li, *Maladaptive Daydream*, Maggie L Walker Governor's School, Gold Key Recipient, Educator: Ed Coleman

2021



**VISUAL ARTS CENTER
OF RICHMOND**

Averie Abernathy

Age: 13, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Julie Elmore

Category: Short Story

A Saved Breath

A Saved Breath

In South Carolina, six miles south of Chapin, on the coast of Lake Murray, there lived a young man by the name of Pierce. Pierce lived in a petite cabin lit by a cozy fire and surrounded by dense maple wood as walls. Pierce lived in his home all alone with his most prized possession: his Remington. No, this was not the newest gun on the market, nor was it in impeccable condition, it was the only thing left from his Pa, that, and his cabin. He missed Pa terribly and Ma, too. His Ma died when he was only seven, and his Pa died when he was fifteen, but he knew he had to move on and live without them.

On November 6th, 1930, Pierce set out with his Remington in one hand and a pack of ammunition on his back. As he walked down to the lake, he recognized the sound of leaves crunching under his muddy boots, and tree branches rustling in the wind. Once he walked a few steps further, he saw it. A fairly small brown bear stood before him. He said nothing, but he knew of the opportunity to come. Ready his Remington, he took cover behind a tree and aimed. This was no duck, but he thought of all the possibilities to come if he could slay this bear. After one shot the bear began running. He decided it was best to reload and follow it. Two shots, the bear ran even faster, but Pierce chased behind. Three shots, the bear turned and saw him. Four shots, the bear grew angry. Five shots, the bear was down. As soon as he saw the bear lying incapacitated on the ground he smirked. No, he didn't jump for joy or even say anything, he was a man of little words. He never spoke much, not since Pa died.

Once Pierce arrived home he thought it was best to skin the bear, cook the meat, and sell what he couldn't consume. That night he was able to start making a blanket out of the fur while meat roasted on the fireplace. No, bear wasn't the best tasting meat, but it was all he could get at the moment. As he sat down cleaning what was to become a blanket, he started thinking. Thinking about life, what a catch this bear was, and he would be able to make some extra side cash off of it, but he still felt empty. There was this hole in his heart he wasn't able to get rid of. It seemed like nothing could fill it. He ended up falling asleep in that chair. The chair smelled like Ma, it always had. He never knew where the chair came from. It seemed to be there right in front of the fire ever since he was born, but it always held the strong fragrance of Ma.

Pierce awoke to sunlight pouring into the cabin. As he was readying himself for another day of hunting smelt a strong odor. "*Something must have gone bad*", he thought. He looked around the house and noticed it was the half cleaned blanket from last night. There he decided the best course of action was to go out, wash the blanket, and hang it near the fire. He decided not to bring his Remington because it would just weigh him down, and he was only making a quick trip down to the lake. While he was at the lake he noticed a group of ducks on the lake. "*Oh dang*," he thought. What a missed opportunity that was. Though he was upset, he was not the type of person to sulk or beat around the bush, so he set off back home. On the way home, his mind was a swirl. He kept contemplating what would happen if he'd just brought his Remington. Maybe he would have so much extra cash, he could buy a new house closer to town, and he wouldn't have to rely on his hunter lifestyle to support himself if he was close enough to town. When he got home though, he snapped his mind back down to earth and prepared himself to go out again, this time with his Remington by his side.

When he set out again, it was 11:00. Three hours had passed since his first trek to the lake. His plan for the rest of the day was to wander around the woods until dusk, then at dark, he would make his way to town and try to sell his findings. He only had 10 bullets left in his pack, but he was determined to make the most of them. While he was walking along the shore he noticed a gaggle of ducks sitting along the shore. He knew he could only get one or two shots off because the loud fire of the gun would spook the rest, but he was determined to make the most of this chance. After he missed his first shot, he quickly reloaded and fired again. He had missed both shots, and the gaggle of duck had flown away. A bit down about his loss, he ambled down the shoreline in search of other waterfowl he could hunt. A while down the shore, he found a buck grazing on the grass. Thinking this kill could make up for the

lost ones he readied his gun and fired. After the first shot, the buck ran away. He was able to hit it a second time, but the bullet bounced off the antlers, so he was out of luck. Pierce tried sprinting after the buck and even quickly firing two more shots, but in the end, the buck was able to outrun him, so it escaped. Being down about his missed chances, and the money he wasted missing shots, he decided it was only beneficial to roam the woods an hour longer.

Over that past hour, he was able to kill 2 ducks, but in doing so he had no ammunition left and desperately needed to sell his ducks and bear, so he could buy another pack of ammunition. It was now 10 minutes until dark, and he was just about to set out of his cabin with his Remington swung over his back and two ducks and a bit of bear draped over his arm. While he was walking to Chapin, all he could think about was what a waste he was. He was a hunter and he couldn't aim properly. *"What was the point of doing something if you aren't even good at it,"* he thought. About two miles into his walk he saw a terribly frightening sight. A ginormous brown bear stood in front of him. This bear didn't look too happy, in fact, it looked enraged. Right then, Pierce punched the bear right in the snout. As the bear and he made eye contact, he saw around twenty sharp yellowy-white teeth coming at him. Pierce quickly jumped back, but the bear was quick. The bear kept snapping at him, and eventually, he decided it was best to just run for his life. While he was running, he thought to himself, *"Why am I so dumb? I could have just not missed most of my shots, and I would be in the predicament right now."* Though Pierce was fast, the bear was faster. After two minutes of running the bear was able to corner Pierce. While he was cornered, the bear snapped and tried to claw him. Pierce was beginning to get burnt out. He grew tired and more tired. Soon he thought of just giving up and becoming bear food until he heard a bark. Suddenly, the barks were getting louder, and soon enough, a little brown dog was standing in front of him.

This dog wasn't big, nor scary looking, but with all the barking, screaming and utter commotion, the bear became distracted. Pierce immediately took this opportunity and ran for his life. Although he almost died, all that was on his mind was, *"Is that little dog ok?"* To his surprise, he heard leaves crunching behind him and he saw the little brown dog running toward him. Pierce stopped and sat on a rock and said, "Well look at you, a Boykin Spaniel all alone in the woods. That's not a sight you see every day." The Boykin and he made eye contact. While they gazed into each other eyes he saw something, loneliness. "I don't know if you escaped, if you were abandoned, or if you got lost, but all I know is you're now part of my pack!" Pierce said with a smirk. Pierce wanted the best for this little dog though he knew nothing about it. As they were walking to town, Pierce was oblivious to the fact that this little dog was so attached to him. Eventually, Pierce made it to Chapin.

"Hey, how much for these two ducks and this bear skin?" Pierce asked a vendor.

"I don't know man. Times are rough 'round these parts. I'll try and see if anyone is interested in your products, but again I don't know," replied the vendor.

"Times are rough for me too, man, but thanks for your help anyway." Pierce walked through town for a while until he decided to pay the bank teller a visit; he didn't know when this bank would shut down so he thought it was best to go immediately. "Hey man, I would like to take out a deposit."

"Really Pierce, you have been saving ever since your father died, what's the occasion?"

"You know, ever since Pa died, I've felt empty. I've been saving for a new Remington for years, I thought that would make me happy, but I've realized something..."

The bank teller smiled and said, "I knew you would eventually." The bank teller and Pierce smiled and looked at the Boykin who had been sniffing the shop ever since they arrived. "It's for him, right?"

"Yes," Pierce replied.

After that, Pierce took out a small sum of money and used it to get a few necessities for the dog. After a while, he decided to name the dog Oak, after where he first met the dog. Over the past couple of years, Pierce was as happy as ever, and their bond between man and dog would overcome any crisis they faced.

Adachi Amaram

Age: 17, Grade: 12

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

Educator: Gail Giewont

Category: Poetry

Colors He Painted With My Skin

I. Purple

It coiled up my leg
and hid between
my quivering thighs.
It laughed in the soft spot
between my inflamed ribs,
snuggled onto my breasts
when he whispered
*I don't want to leave a mark
on your pretty face.*

II. White

My screamed "stops"
fell flat on his arrogant ears
and as white noise upon mine.
Behind sewn shut eyes
as he spewed his white,
was the comfortable white
lulling me to black.

III. Grey

It was the grey in my mum
mouth. The grey in the afterhours.
It was the grey in the knife
pressed against my throat.
The grey in my nightmares.
The grey in my soiled black skin.
The grey in my betraying voice,
hoarse on the spilt words
No, it never happened.

Adachi Amaram

Age: 17, Grade: 12

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

Educator: Cindy Cunningham

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

The Girl on the Other Side of the Cafeteria

The Girl on the Other Side of the Cafeteria

I had a serious beef with crayons. The standard 24-pack Crayola crayons failed to understand that the golden flecks that kissed the yellow undertones of my caramel brown skin could never translate to their only two “inclusive” shades; the mocha brown, and void-filled black crayons. I wanted a caramel crayon. Yet, I understood those colors were meant for me. I saw the “peach” label on the crayon that all my friends used for their self-portraits. Peach seemed warm, and inviting, it seemed real, and not harsh. I didn’t exactly know what “race” was, or the importance of the word “Black” in my life, I just knew that my classmates with their fair skin, and silky, multi-colored hair, were peach people.

I never understood why my mom got so mad when I told her what Abbey from my kindergarten class told me when she discovered Zachary and I liked each other. Zachary Hunter was a peach boy with natural ginger hair that glittered in the sun. His pale face was sprinkled with light brown freckles, and his eyes resembled liquid gold. I liked Zachary; everyone liked Zachary. Abbey was the “IT” girl of our class except she was the only one who knew it.

Abbey was a short, spiteful girl with limp, oak-colored hair that reached her mid-shoulders. She had dark brows and uninteresting brown eyes. Abbey wasn’t a very interesting person, so I assume that’s why she always made it her business to stay in everyone else’s business. Everyone knew that Zachary and I were pretty buddy-buddy, but when he moved his mat to sleep next to me at nap time, that sealed the deal.

One day during class, Abbey sidled up to me and snarkily said, “You know, brown girls can’t be with peach boys.” I didn’t think much of it, or at least I told myself that I didn’t. I thought she was just mad because the two girls that Zachary ever paid attention to were me and my friend Jordan, who was the only other Black (well “brown” as I labeled myself back then), girl in the class (because of this, both Jordan and I claimed that Obama was our cousin on multiple occasions, particularly to spite Abbey). After Abbey’s trifling comment, I looked at her lackluster face, and said something along the lines of “You’re just mad because he doesn’t like you. Go back to the imagination station before I tell my mom to call Obama.”

For the rest of class I looked at the social dynamic between myself and my peers and wondered if there was some truth to what Abbey said. Was I really so different from the rest of my class that there are certain things that are forbidden for me to do with them, and if so, what are those things, and why? I became even more confused later that night when I told my mom what took place at school. As soon as I told my mother what Abbey said, she scrunched up her face, the natural brown of her eyes peered at me from behind her blue contacts, and I think she said some things that I’m not allowed to repeat. Her freshly relaxed umber hair swished down her back as she stormed off to my parent’s bedroom, where she argued with my dad for the rest of the night. Later, when my private school, kindergarten teacher asked the class to draw a picture of ourselves with our friends, I sat back in my chair, and watched as my peach classmates jumped out of their seats, and raced each other to the crayons. I knew that there was no need for me to rush, regardless of which box I looked in, the two crayons that were meant for me, but couldn’t transcribe me, would be left for me in that desolate box. I watched, and realized that it wasn’t just the 24-pack Crayola box that didn’t have a label for me; but I also didn’t fit into any of the labels in my class.

For the rest of the year, I took comfort in finding familiarity in Jordan. We would come to school with matching

beaded braids (these were not planned). We argued about who was actually related to Obama. Our parents became friends. Well they were actually friendly acquaintances, but my mom got Jordan's dad to fix our sink one time, and both of our parents used to sit together and talk at our plays, so I took that as our parents being friends. Jordan and I considered each other best friends, we ganged up on Abbey when she tried to act out of line, and we only fought about our individual relationships with Zachary. When we weren't feuding over Zachary, it was us against the world. Unfortunately, between the loads of money my parents were paying for me to attend the school, and the Abbey comment, my parents decided that I needed a change. That was my last year at the school. As you might guess, it's difficult for six-year-olds to stay in contact with each other, so Jordan and I lost touch over the summer of that year. I just figured I'd find another Jordan at my new school. A child's naivety should be classified as a serious disease.

I believe I first realized racism existed when I was in first grade. I mean I did not know the exact word "racism." I didn't know what that meant; however, the concept showed itself to me pretty quickly when I started my new school. I traipsed into the school with high hopes the first day, and trudged out strongly disliking the school. For one thing, the school had way too many people, well that's how my brain perceived way too many as it transitioned from my comfy private school mindset. The people were not very nice, I got unapologetically jostled and bumped into by fifth-graders on the first day, and despite all those kids, there were only three Black kids in the entire school not including myself, and two of them were in my particular class.

One of the Black kids in my class, Noah, was biracial, he had more Caucasian features such as hazel eyes, and smooth, curly hair, so he wasn't bullied. In fact, he was actually quite popular. He was a big jokester, and loved to entertain. Noah was also quite cute, everyone loved to be around him. He ended up moving at the beginning of the year, so that left me with the only other Black kid in the class--Layla. Layla was a darker caramel shade, she had small almond-shaped eyes that somehow grew bigger when she smiled, and brown hair that was always blown out so it reached the middle-end of her back. She used to be best friends with the most popular girl in our class--Katie.

One day during the second quarter of the school year, Layla and Katie had some sort of falling out. Life at school changed for Layla; everyone started bullying her pretty harshly. She wouldn't talk at school anymore; she usually kept her head down during class. She would try to keep herself from crying every day, I could tell because I was doing the same. The girls in our class would make sly comments about our hair; I got it worse because my hair was natural while Layla always had her hair straightened. They talked to us as if we were their pets. I felt for Layla because Katie and her crew were extra harsh since she was shunned. It got so bad that when her parents eventually found out what was happening, they had to pull her out of the school. Then it was just me, and the only other Black student in the school.

The Black girl that sat on the other side of the cafeteria during lunch. I would occasionally see her in the hallway in the morning, but it would be for that brief second before the sea of students would swell and crash unforgettingly through the halls. But every day I had the guarantee that I'd see her at lunch, and every day I did.

She would sit in the same spot on the bench every day at the table assigned to her class. She had espresso-brown skin, and small, dark, sideways, ovals for eyes. Her hair was always in some type of braided style, but box braids that flowed to the middle of her back seemed to be her go-to style. I didn't know her name, I never talked to her, but we never needed to talk. I would look across the rowdy cafeteria and lock eyes with her when my classmates made fun of my beaded braids, or when they'd run their hands through my hair like I was an animal at a petting zoo, and ask me why my hair looked so "wild." When my classmates would call me names because they were jealous that I was sitting in on higher-level classes because my teacher said I was too advanced for her class, my eyes would search the cafeteria for the girl that looked like me. When the racist boy in my class who had been talking to me like a dog all year threatened to stab me with his Swiss Army pocket knife and I brushed it off, it was the girl on the other side of the cafeteria my eyes frantically searched for when I saw the glint of the blade in his hand.

Looking back, I probably believed that that girl was my Jordan. But she wasn't my Jordan, she showed me that in a school full of Abbeys, I didn't need a Jordan. I took comfort from the resilience in the eyes of the girl on the other side of the cafeteria, they were steady, yet they seemed to whisper proverbs of perseverance. There was a deafening ring of strength in her silence, and I craved it. I craved it for years when I walked into rooms and immediately looked for the girl on the other side of the cafeteria, someone who looked like me, yet they weren't there. I craved it when I went to conventions, meetings, events where I was engulfed in a sea of peach Abbeys, and I realized that I could not fit their labels. I craved it until it was clear that no one could satiate my craving. It was clear that no one was going to give me my caramel crayon, I understood that I will always have to give myself my caramel crayon, I

will always be my own Jordan, and I have no choice but to be the girl on the other side of the cafeteria.

Adachi Amaram

Age: 17, Grade: 12

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

Educators: Cindy Cunningham, Gail Giewont

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Can I Paint What I'm Not Allowed to Say?

Can I Paint What I'm Not Allowed to Say?

I was six when I realized my dad was an artist. He made vibrant reds bloom from my mother's toffee-colored face, his favorite canvas. His knuckles were bristles splitting her skin into ravines of flowing paint. His watercolors, rich in indigo and maroon hugged the skin around my mother's swollen eyes. The day after a white Christmas my dad yanked my mom outside, and painted the snow with her frail body while my sisters and I watched in terror from my window. He mastered the art of pottery, as his fists chiseled obedience into my mother's face. He hammered away until the ground caught her unconscious body. His foot carved submission into her ribs until the powder-white snow, choked red on her spilled paint. When my dad entered the house and saw my tears, he decided that I was a blank canvas in need of his artistic touch. He carefully placed his manilla hands—his tools, around my copper neck—his clay, and squeezed. I understood that he was shaping his vessel; he was hoping to mold a silent one.

I was nine when my mom used up all of her savings going back and forth in court with my dad. Before this, we fled to a different state because my dad was breaking into our house to harass us after my mom finally divorced him. We were isolated in this new state with no support system, and no home. We moved to different homeless shelters for the next couple of years. I knew that the cramped bedroom I shared with my mother and my three little sisters at the shelter was not ideal compared to the large, two-story house we once owned, but I knew it was my castle. It was my palace. When my mother would go to the car to pretend like she wasn't crying, I held my sisters and told them we were princesses. I showed them that the stained walls were our fortress against the evil that lay beyond. The twin bed I shared with my three-year-old sister was our throne, our thin scratchy blanket was our royal robe. When my sisters screamed about the roaches wandering the building, I introduced them as members of our royal guard. Their spindly legs crawled under the door at night to stand guard for their princesses. They stood guard on the ceiling, in our shoes, and on us.

It was the shelter that cultivated my fascination with stories. I heard stories that wrenched my heart from my chest and disintegrated it. I wondered why I never heard anyone tell their stories, but as I listened, I understood. For some people, it's the content they don't want to hear, such as the struggles of domestic violence, and homelessness. For others, it's the storyteller they'd rather ignore. In my society, they'd rather my woman, and my melanin blend into the white of this paper. This is why I have to write their stories. This is why I write mine.

I write to tell the stories of the ignored. I write for the lifeless eyes that stared back at me in Sandra Bland's mugshot, for the voice of Oluwatoyin Salau's broken Black body, and for the bed that became an eternal grave when eight bullets entered Breonna Taylor's body. I write because the story of my Black mother having an obsession with makeup and scarves is better than the story of her blackened eye and bloodied, balloon lips. I write because I am now an artist. I mold the world in my hand while I paint the stories it plugs its ears to. I chisel away the vessel my dad tried to shape, remove his hands from my throat, and open my mouth in a scream as the stories spill from me like marbles. They demand to be heard, and I refuse to be silent.

Adachi Amaram

Age: 17, Grade: 12

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

Educators: Cindy Cunningham, Gail Giewont

Category: Poetry

Barefoot Queen

Barefoot Queen
Silver and blue shine
atop her regal head.
She wraps cocoa-buttered
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's 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: 17, Grade: 12

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

Educator: Gail Giewont

Category: Poetry

Brutus is to Caesar As Bleach is to Black

Brutus Is to Caesar as Bleach Is to Black

Stark fluorescent lights
illuminate plaster tiles
gradually dotted with red
a white sink blemished
with a bloom of crimson
Bright bulbs reveal
a face besmirched
with unwashable Black

She gazes at fragmented pieces
the cracked mirror reflects
the *crack* of the whip
on a Black Toby's back
or was it Kunta Kinte

Her countenance whispers
identity crisis
through glass implanted
in her 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
Black that bleeds
births and blesses
Black that bleach
can't wash away

Black she contorts and rebukes
Black the masses
want to hot comb straight

She wants the same
She breathes *Et, tu Brute*.

Serenity Bassett

Age: 15, Grade: 10

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

Educator: Patty Smith

Category: Poetry

Word Bender

Word Bender

I've always fancied myself
a bender of words.
I've decided
to call it my craft.
Therefore, each letter
should float and land gracefully
with the click of a key.
Each character should,
of its own desire,
form a work of art.

If I'm a word bender
this *thing* called a writer,
why don't the words
spill effortlessly forth,
as they seemed to do
so often in the past?
Why don't torrents
of black text
Appear simply from my desire
to write?

I just want to create something.

I want to paint you
a beautiful picture.
I want to show you something
as you've shown me so many things.
I want to take you
to a dirt road
in a moonlit forest.
I want to take you to the
pulsing depths
of my heart.

I want to build something that you would be proud of.

So take my outstretched hand.
Inspire me to find the words.
Guide me to them.
Encourage me to ask

for their help.

And together we'll make something glorious.

Nora Brakman

Age: 14, Grade: 8

School Name: Sabot at Stony Point, Richmond, VA

Educator: Sarah Lile

Category: Novel Writing

Claws of the Forest

Brief summary:

The story begins as Darren Denmoore is dragged away into the Blackclaw Forest by his bullies. He is rescued by a supernatural "Blackclaw" (forest dwelling clawed humanoid) named Sal'shiva, and he is determined to thank them for rescuing him. He returns to the forest (excerpt takes place here) and seeks out the Blackclaw, who finds him as he tries to run. The two of them learn that they can communicate in a strange mental language. Darren continues to return to the forest to visit Sal'shiva, where he meets other Blackclaws; Oe'rik, Deer-face, and Aeror. But his midnight visits are slowly ruining his diurnal life. Darren has to explain his disappearances to his friends and family, which he soon discovers will be his greatest challenge so far. He barely manages to convince him that he has not indeed been sneaking out to visit strange forest creatures. The story comes to a close as Darren is admitted into the Blackclaws' clan, deeming himself a "half-claw". Over the course of the story, Darren learned to conquer his necrophobia, balance his human and blackclaw friends, and learn the ways of the forest. This novel is about conquering fears and discovering new life.

Excerpt:

(Excerpt has been slightly changed to provide context)

Before I can have any second thoughts, I begin my hike into the dark and aptly named Blackclaw Woods. Just like it had last night, a faint fog distorts the moonlight and makes shadows look deeper than the Mariana trench. A creeping fear manifests deep within me, the kind that you simply can't shake. I focus on the ground, hoping to keep my eyes distracted with the endless kaleidoscope pattern of fallen leaves, but I find no comfort in the ghastly sight.

Is that... blood? A trail of dark red smears is dragged forward through the foliage as if something with a maimed foot tried to get away from here, and fast. I'm nearly scared to the point of tears, close to turning back without discovering anything but my unrelenting fear for this place. But I have to know. And so, I walk on. I follow the blood trail to an empty clearing, ground chopped up and beaten as if a fight broke out. I step over the slashed earth and pause for a moment to breathe and gather my shaken senses.

Panting, I stand in the pitch dark, nearly jumping out of my skin when the haunting sound of creaking branches grazes my ears. My heart hammers in my chest so loud that I fear every nocturnal beast in these woods can hear it. It almost sounds like the wind is calling my name, crying, "*Darren... Daaaarren...*" in a ghostly voice.

"Ah-" I gasp out of dread, before covering my mouth with my hand.

I take a deep breath and look around the clearing. It's hard to see- terror runs through my blood thicker than stone.

"H-hello?" My voice echoes through the bare space in the trees, "Anyone? I'm looking for somebody.."

Nothing.

Every fiber of my being tells me to run, and to stay in these daunting woods I'm actively fighting my own "flight" instinct. I'll call again, and if nothing answers I'll hightail it out of here faster than the other boys on the track team can sprint.

"HEY!" I shout, my voice in the desolate clearing much louder than I had expected.

...

Deep within the shelter of the dense foliage, the Blackclaw's head snapped towards the direction of the sound. A yelp, undeniably human... Another one?? It thought, head slanted forward inquisitively as it slowly stepped from its cover.

...

I snap my hands to my mouth, clasp them hard around my trembling lips. My voice echoes through the grove over and over again, the distant sound almost mocking me. My heartbeat throbs in my ears, and I turn back towards the entrance. Never have I sprinted faster in my life.

Clink.

My keys fall on the ground, and I turn around to pick them up.

I reach down and grab them, stand up, and fall back down again. Directly in front of my face are a pair of piercing, glowing green eyes.

As the mystic being from last night stares down at me, I'm struck with a crushing fear that pulls at me from the inside out, my soul trying in vain to leave my body. How could I let it end up like this?

"NO NO- HOW- I-" I scream, jumping to my feet and leaping backwards as fast as I can.

The creature follows me with a calm gait, stepping into a shaft of moonlight that illuminates each of its features.

There's no way I'm dreaming again. This looks far too real to be an illusion. It stands at least seven feet tall, with a lean and muscular build, razor-sharp black claws affixed to each finger and toe.

Its neck, adorned with a strand of fangs and teeth, leads to a strange animal-esqe skull that either **is** or is covering up its face. The skull, as with every part of the creature, looks left to nature, shades of pale green and yellow blended with bone-white. Ironically, my necrophobia has never felt so... alive. I quiver at the sight of 5-inch long fangs protruding from what used to be its mouth, accenting the large ram-like horns that curve towards its forest green eyes as they shine through the sunken darkness of its eye sockets.

Silently, it continues to advance towards me, and all I can do is stand semi-paralyzed like a deer in the headlights and hope that it decides not to use those formidable claws. The being stops about five feet from me and tips its fearsome head up towards the moon for a second. I don't know where to start. I came here thinking, hoping even, that this creature wouldn't be here and I could put aside this strange mystery of a "dream" that's hounded my mind every waking moment. And now it's real.

Katrin Brinkman

Age: 17, Grade: 11

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

Educators: Gail Giewont, Patty Smith

Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy

In Too Deep

Lynnette's supposed to be closing the cafe for the night. Her coursework calls from the upstairs apartment, and every minute down here is a minute stolen from ramen and required readings. Rico's hanging around to help her, though, and it's been weeks since they've had a proper conversation.

"It's not my fault I keep getting into all of that," Lynnette says, sweeping too slowly.

"But it is." Rico counts the cash register's contents, ones and fives and twenties in neat stacks. "This is 389 dollars."

"Write it down," she says. "And it's not. Mrs. Garamound had a kelpie in her pool, and I know the iron spells. I was just helping out."

Rico flips the light switches, and one by one the lights blink out. Lynnette's periphery goes green as her eyes adjust. The cafe in the gloom feels like an old shoe—soothing in its familiarity, but possibly containing venomous spiders. "Hate to break it to you," he says, "but if you want out, you—" He freezes. "Door."

Lynnette follows his look. The door is locked, blinds down, sign flipped. Something sharp raps on the glass. She glances at Rico. His senses are better than hers, and his nose flares. "Demon."

Demon. Crap. Well, at least it's not an elf. "We're closed," she whispers. "Should I?"

"Your head, not mine," he says, heartless but accurate. "It's strong, though."

Aunt Pamela would say no. The demon knocks again, more urgent. Maybe it wants a coffee. Maybe it can't read English. Maybe it's got an entire elf squadron along, mounted on those slimy red horse-things.

Lynnette unlocks the door.

The demon's disappointing, compared to some Lynnette's seen—a slim female figure, every feature done in the same midbrown, in jeans too low on her hips and a shirt fashioned out of a pillowcase. No elves in sight, thank all lucky stars.

"We're closed," Lynnette says. "You can come back tomorrow if you want coffee."

This close, the demon's scent runs over everything, boxwood bitter and sharp. Her eyes dart past Lynnette to Rico, lounging against the counter. "Here is Talla?" she asks. She has the rounded, slurred speech of a newcomer to this plane, and her teeth flash pink in the streetlights.

Lynnette swears in her head. "Rico, can you finish closing up? Tell Pam I'm going."

Rico comes to her shoulder. The demon backs up almost into the street. "What does the homeless demon want?" he says. She can hear the growl in his throat, but she doesn't think it's directed at her.

Lynnette tries to think of an explanation that he'll accept, but he'll catch any fibbing and there's nowhere near enough time for the blood-oath and dragon story. She stuffs the keys into his hand. "Long story, but I'll owe you."

"I thought you wanted to stay out of that," he says. Lynnette winces.

"He stays?" The demon points at Rico.

"He's not coming," Lynnette says, choosing to answer her and not Rico. "And he is *not* following us." She pulls her hair tie out of her braid and shakes like a dog, hair unravelling around her face.

"But—"

"Talla must come now," the demon says. She gives Rico a challenging look, scared but stubborn. "Now."

Lynnette steps out next to the demon, so close her skin prickles. "I'll be fine," she tells him. "See you tomorrow." Probably. Two days, for sure.

"Follow," the demon says, and turns left on the sidewalk. This is probably going to be worse than elves. Lynnette really needs to stop promising things to supernatural beings.

Andrew Brown

Age: 17, Grade: 12

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

Educator: Stuart Ferguson

Category: Critical Essay

A Bad Idea

In-Person Classes After Thanksgiving Break: A Risky Idea

Saint Christopher's School is one of the few schools in Richmond to have resumed in-person classes in the fall. When I first heard that we would be on-campus, I was shocked. I had no faith that we would be open for more than a few weeks. To my surprise, we have almost made it to six-week grades with only one major disruption. While having in-person classes during a pandemic has worked so far, for the safety of St. Christopher's students and families, in-person learning can only continue until Thanksgiving Break. Classes should then transfer to online for the remainder of the semester. There are three reasons for this decision: students will travel during the break; flu season will begin to pick up; and the current projections for COVID-19 predict bad things to come.

While Saint Christopher's has yet to specifically state a plan for Thanksgiving break, it will not be safe to open after the break. After only two weeks of classes, a party took place on a weekend. Since then, the school has stated more specific rules for gatherings, but when given a full week off from school, there is no reasonable way the school can make sure there are no more large gatherings. Students will inevitably get bored in their homes and want to hang out. Another problem is that families will travel, visit relatives, and break the "bubble" that St. Christopher's is hoping to form. Once a student steps foot in an airport, they are putting every student and teacher at school at risk. If a large number of students travel over the break, the risk of spreading cases is extremely high. As the CDC states in its travel guidelines, "You and your travel companions (including children) may spread COVID-19 to other people including your family, friends, and community for 14 days after you were exposed to the virus" (Travel). A possible solution to this would be for the school to have distance classes for two weeks after the break and then resume in-person classes for exams. This, however, brings up the problem of controlling students outside of classes. Regardless of how long Thanksgiving Break is, people will likely socialize and travel, increasing the risk of a student bringing COVID-19 into the school. Therefore, it is best that we do not come back after the break.

A second complication with continuing in-person school into November and December is the flu. As Edward Belongia, Senior Epidemiologist of the Marshfield Clinic Research Institute, puts it, COVID-19 and the flu will result in "a perfect storm" (Belongia). There are several factors about the two viruses that will make things complicated in the future, especially at Saint Christopher's. As a preliminary matter, COVID-19 and the flu share several symptoms, making it virtually impossible to self-diagnose. Another complication along these same lines is that 33% of flu cases are asymptomatic (Carrat). Students could come into school, pass the morning health check, and then continue on with their school day, while still having and spreading the flu. Americans have also never before been told to quarantine because they got the flu. This could potentially lead to some people getting a positive flu test and continue going out in public. This year, the CDC recommends staying home for four to five days if you receive a positive flu test (Stay). Finally, treating a patient for COVID-19, when they actually have flu, wastes resources and could be dangerous. The drug corticosteroid dexamethasone has been found to lower the mortality rates of COVID-19. For the flu, however, it can raise the mortality rate (Rubin). Once students at Saint Christopher's begin to show flu systems, it will be difficult to determine whether or not someone has COVID-19 or the flu. If a flu outbreak occurs, like it has in the past years, it could force swaths of students to distance learning.

A counterargument to this is that the preventative measures that Saint Christopher's has taken to combat COVID-19 will also work against the flu. While this is true, it is extremely easy for the two viruses to spread during lunch time. Students are sitting in close proximity, talking, and without masks on for up to forty-five minutes. It is also common for students to not wear their masks fully on their face when talking to others. While it will be difficult

for the flu to spread, the problems that arise from having flu cases and COVID-19 cases at the same are too great for the school to be able to sort out.

Though St. Christopher's has been very safe with its reopening guidelines, risks remain. As time goes on, rules about mask wearing and social distancing will become tiresome, and students might stop following them as diligently. I already have noticed some students ignoring the one-way hallways and talking without their masks on in classrooms. I am an extremely cautious person about wearing my mask, but I even catch myself forgetting to put it back on after finishing lunch or drinking water during class. St. Christopher's could try to enforce mask rules and social distancing more strictly, but there will always be students who are not diligent about it. This makes coming back to school after Thanksgiving even more dangerous. Students coming back from a week off may have forgotten about the importance of wearing masks correctly, leading to a more dangerous environment.

Finally, St. Christopher's should go online after Thanksgiving because of the grim projections. In September, Virginia was hitting low numbers in daily deaths and cases, however, those numbers are expected to climb. As of October tenth, there are 25.12 daily deaths in the state. Based on projections from the University of Washington, that number is expected to nearly quadruple by Thanksgiving day. If mandates continue to become more relaxed, that number will increase exponentially through December, reaching its peak at 384 deaths per day (COVID). As for daily infections, the VDH reports the 7-day moving average for October eleventh to be 978 infections. On October 8th, Virginia had its second-worst day of infections since the start of COVID-19, at 1,844 new cases (Virginia). These numbers are not nearly as bad as other states in the United States, but are bad enough to warrant a change in policy, especially after Thanksgiving Break.

One reason I feel so strongly about this topic is that exams are scheduled only a few weeks after the end of Thanksgiving Break. In the best of situations, this is already an extremely stressful time for the students. If we are required to come back on to campus after break, the stress will be compounded by us having to be more concerned about the risk of exposure to COVID-19. I have a brother who is high risk because of asthma and a heart condition. I would rather not have to worry about the possibility of me bringing home a potentially fatal disease to him. Also, if students get sick during the preparation and exam period, this will be extremely disruptive to both the teachers and the students. This can best be prevented by keeping both at home and finding a reasonable and honorable way to give exams at home.

I am thankful that Saint Christopher's has been able to have in person classes for over a month now. We have been lucky that cases and deaths have been on the decline all throughout the Fall in Virginia. However, as we get further into October and November, students may tire of the COVID-19 rules, such as mask wearing and washing their hands, making them less likely to follow them as diligently. Once Thanksgiving Break comes, with students travelling, flu season, and the current projections, it will be too dangerous for Saint Christopher's to resume in-person classes. The safest course would be to shut down between Thanksgiving and Christmas and then evaluate the situation in early January. After the holidays, people will hopefully be less likely to travel, meaning it might be safer to open again.

Tessa Brown

Age: 13, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Julie Elmore

Category: Short Story

Silence

Silence

Nevertheless, our lives should be perfect. Living in an accomplished environment, we got the opportunity to work for The Society. But, we were practically forced to. Each day was the same exact routine. Wake up, go to school, go to work, repeat. And, Miles and I absolutely hated it.

“Joshua!” Miles yelled as he ran up to me.

“What?” I asked skeptically.

“Can we ditch today? I don’t want to ever show up at school again,” he pleaded.

“I wish. But we have The Guideline Test coming up and we can’t risk making any more mistakes than we already have. You know how they feel about us.”

The Guideline Test. Every kid at age fifteen has to take the infamous test that proves you fit The Society’s “standards.” It acted as a simulation and each person reacted to different scenarios that are made specifically for them. The test proved that you venerate The Society, as opposed to thinking of it as a harsh environment with demands and little reward. That couldn’t be so hard, right? Wrong. Ever since we were little, Miles and I haven’t had the best record. We’ve goofed off and made more mistakes than I could imagine. Others think The Society was the best thing that happened to humanity. Most people can’t ignore these thoughts, as if they were wired into their brains. But, Miles and I have disregarded the perfect reputation they have been shoving down our throats for fifteen years. Leading The Society to keep a close eye on us for a long time. So, Miles and I worked to keep each other in line.

Miles looked up at me, his eyes longing for something better to do.

“Yeah. I guess you’re right,” he sighed. “We don’t want to end up modified.”

Each kid strives to pass the test without the consequences of failing. But, not everyone passed the test as they’d hoped. No one knows what happened to them, but if someone failed, they returned visibly changed. We call these people “modified.”

“Exactly. So let’s avoid The Society’s consequences and focus on the test. We don’t know how hard it will be, or how much harder it will be for us. Especially because we think differently,” I reassured.

It was a short walk to school, but enough time to take time to realize the place we were living in. Flawless and impeccable, everything was always in its perfect place, aside from me and Miles. The Society had always been bleak, uncertain, and even mysterious. Each person lived by the rules and followed orders, secretly fearing what was to come. No one ever said anything about the concept of our lifestyle, which was another reason why Miles and I are unwanted among the rest.

We arrived at school only a few minutes late, thankfully not enough time to be penalized. Miles and I parted to go to our first period, nervous to go to class without one other.

“Today we will be going over what to expect for the upcoming Guideline Test,” my teacher informed. “Please keep in mind we are strictly not allowed to give specifics as it is a violation of our Society’s laws. During this test, remember to choose whichever decision seems most fitting for the situation. Keep one goal in mind: make the right choice,” she reinforced.

After what had seemed to last a lifetime, I met back up with Miles when school ended.

“I’m so stressed about the test,” I complained nervously.

“But, of course, we can’t say anything. Anything we say will cause us to be suspected even more than we are. I was yelled at for asking too specific of a question, today. It could have ended badly,” Miles replied.

“We have to remember to focus and try not to make it too obvious how clueless we are. The Guideline test is in two days and there isn’t anything we can to prepare for it. Now, all we can do is hope,” I answered.

The next day went by before I could stop to realize what had happened. It was mainly filled with anxious and

apprehensive behavior. Before I knew it I was lying in bed. My legs were numb, dreading what was about to happen. I slowly forced myself to get ready, deliberately getting things done at a gradual pace.

When I met with Miles to walk to school, almost nothing was said, our eyes doing most of the talking. As we arrived, we both felt like we were going to throw up. Parting to go to first period, neither of us knew if we would come back to each other the same.

I sat down in class, blended in with others who looked just as nervous. But, no one else really needed to be scared because they were raised the way The Society strives to raise their children; flawless.

"When I call your name, please go down to science lab thirteen to take The Guideline Test. Ariana Davis, Mathew Gibson, James Griffin, and Joshua Hughes," my teacher called out.

A lump in my throat formed as I dragged myself with the others. I had never been more fearful of something in my life.

As I approached the door, it towered over me, casting a shadow bigger than the group. I opened the door, quaking in each step, and walked to the screen with my name on it. I sat down and looked at the Procter. I knew she could see into my soul, reading my thoughts, and pinpointing my weaknesses. She strapped a large helmet on my head with wires leading to a machine that projected what I could see.

"Choose the best choice. You will be scored on how well the choices you make affect The Society. Close your eyes. You may feel a slight shock, but that is natural. Open them and you will be inside the simulation," the Procter instructed.

My eyes were as heavy as weights, refusing to open. But when I did, I was left outside my house, the exact place I normally met Miles to walk to school. Everything was exactly the same, aside from a weird haze, leading me to know what was happening. Each movement felt so real, I couldn't tell whether I was in The Guideline Test, or on an average day. When I saw Miles approach me, this was when I knew I was going to forget my main goal of staying focused. As Miles talked to me, I could almost tell he wasn't himself, but not in an obvious way. He tried to provoke me into talking about The Society, but I tried my best to avoid those questions. But, I didn't know if that made it distinct that I was veering away from The Society, or if I was vague enough to cross between the guidelines.

"I hate The Society," Miles would say. I had to quickly come up with a response without seeming obvious.

"It isn't entirely bad, but--"

Before I could say anything else, I was immediately woken up.

"You are dismissed," the Procter told me abruptly.

"But I wasn't--"

"No. I have seen enough," the Procter said before I could finish.

My heart dropped. What did that mean? Did I do as horribly as I'd dreaded or was I finished with the test? Everything from that point forward was a blur of emotions.

Later that day, I was caught off guard by a sudden pounding at my front door. At first, I didn't realize what was happening, but everything changed when I saw two men wearing Society uniforms.

"Joshua Hughes, you have scored a sixty three percent on your recent Guideline Test. To pass, you would have needed to score in the seventy to one hundred percentile. You will be escorted to The Society's headquarters, along with us. If you refuse, your punishment will only get worse," two Society Officials threatened.

The whole world stopped. My heart was pounding inside my chest. The silence between me and the officials made it easily inferable that I wasn't getting out of this mistake. The fear of what was to come was greater than I imagine, especially based on what The Society was capable of. I stepped into their car, thick, metal cuffs held me in place. As we drove by The Society, I noticed its horrific beauty, one last time. Its mysterious, but perfect presence was comforting, knowing I may never see it the same again.

We arrived at the discrete headquarters soon after. The bright and luminous building was full of high tech equipment and countless floors. There were thousands of rooms, each with a different purpose of "fixing" any outcasts of The Society. I reluctantly walked, still in silence, to a room labeled, "*Modifying Lab 21*." Although it was anticipated, I was still not prepared for what was to come. One of the officials typed in a passcode and used his thumbprint to open the capsule-like door. Both officials put on a protective pair of glasses and instructed me to lie down. Forcing me into the operation chair, they pinned me down, putting my hands and ankles in cuffs. Soon after, two doctors with a cart full of sharp, metal tools walked in. Still, there was silence. They attached wires to my head and connected them to a large machine. Then, one of the doctors brought out a syringe with a clear liquid inside. Poking the needle in my left arm, I fell asleep almost instantly. But, this was different from sleep. My eyes were closed and I couldn't move, but I could hear everything, without feeling pain.

"That should keep him knocked out until after the surgery," said one of the doctors.

What surgery were they talking about? Was this how people were modified?

"Good. This kid is worse than the others. I've never seen anything like it. He may take longer to fix," the other doctor explained astonishingly. His voice was shocked and unknowing of how bad things could get.

"I don't understand. Each year, more and more kids need to be modified. Mainly, none of them are as bad as this one, but it is still getting worse," the first doctor said.

After a few extensive hours, they had finally finished. Both doctors seemed to be satisfied and at ease that they had finished, although I was unharmed. Later, I had woken up to both doctors still near me. But, by their friendly presence, I could tell how I was supposed to act.

"Hi, Joshua. Do you remember us?" asked one first doctor.

"No, what happened?" I lied.

"I am Dr. Garcia. When you came home from school, you had fallen and hit your head. We had to do a few tests to fix your injuries, but you should be back to normal," explained the first doctor.

"Oh no! Am I ok?" I questioned.

"You may have some slight head pain and a hard time remembering some things, but other than that, you are perfectly healthy," he reassured.

"I am so glad," I said. I didn't know how long I was going to keep the lie up. Lying to the doctors was easy, but if they were going to be closely watching me to make sure their modification worked, how could I not tell anyone?

As we drove home, I looked out the window, thankful that I was not affected by their surgery. This was the first time I was happy to see The Society's frustratingly perfect presence. When I got home, I went straight to bed after my long day.

As the morning came, I met Miles in our normal spot right before school.

"Where were you? I didn't see you a lot yesterday. And more importantly, did you pass?" Miles asked.

I didn't know if I should tell him. On one side, he was my best friend, and he should know. But on the other side, if I told him, The Society could find out. But after everything we've been through together, Miles deserved to know the truth.

"Miles, before I say this, keep in mind I am not supposed to know myself, let alone tell you. So, don't tell anyone," I reinforced.

"Ok... what is it?" he asked.

"I got modified yesterday," I blurted out.

"Seriously? How do you know?"

"I don't know what happened, exactly. But, when I was in the modification surgery, I could hear everything that was being said and I was unaffected by whatever they were doing," I explained.

"That's crazy. Did you feel anything?" he asked.

"No, which is even weirder. I don't feel anything now," I said.

As we walked to school, I gave him more details as he listened in awe. By the time we got there, he was still shocked.

Like normal, we left to go to our separate first periods. About halfway through our class, our teacher got a random call from the office asking for me. Doing what I was told, I walked to the front office and saw Miles standing there with another Society official.

Oh no. What could that be for? Did they already find out I told him? Do they know my secret? Butterflies fluttered in my stomach as my palms started to sweat and a queasy feeling arose. The buff man escorted the two of us outside to "talk in private." At that point, I was sweating greatly with fear.

"Joshua and Miles, are either of you aware of what happened last night?" he questioned.

"What do you mean?" I asked, trying my best to play along.

"Don't act stupid around me, Joshua. I don't know how you figured out what happened at the headquarters yesterday, but somehow, you know. I also know that you told your friend. That was probably the biggest mistake you could have made," he confronted.

I gulped, the lump in my throat growing by the second. I was clueless.

"Now, we are going back to headquarters, and you both are going to tell me everything you know," he demanded.

We both agreed, trying to cause as little extra damage as possible. As we got in the futuristic car, there was, again, nothing but silence. Miles had turned bright red. The guilt of bringing him into this situation was more powerful than I could have thought. If I never told him, he would have been safe.

When we arrived, we were put in a set of handcuffs and escorted to an interrogation room. Here, there were cameras and microphones planted all throughout the room. We had to be careful about what was said.

"Alright Joshua and Miles, tell me everything you know," he commanded.

I looked at Miles, then the official. His eyes staring straight at me, he knew I knew a lot.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I acted.

"Liar! Tell me what you know or things will escalate quickly!" he screamed.

"I said, I don't know what you're talking about," I responded.

"Fine, if you are going to waste my time, I will just do things the difficult way," he angrily responded.

We stood up, Miles shook with fear. He was still quiet. Without Miles, I was brought to a room with a large electrical machine. He directed me to sit in the chair and then locked me in with metal cuffs around my wrists and ankles. Then he attached wires to my arms, legs, and torso. He set the machine on a low setting and stepped back holding a remote.

"Joshua, tell me what you know about yesterday," the official barked sternly.

"I have no idea!" I said.

Suddenly, he clicked a large button on his remote. It sent large amounts of electricity throughout my whole body.

"Ouch!" I shrieked in pain.

"Don't lie to me! I am sick and tired of the endless resistance I have had to put up with today. If you tell me what you know, this could all be over.," he tried to persuade.

The door to the room swung open. Dr. Garcia, from the surgery, eagerly barged in the room.

"Wait, Official Driscoll, I need to show you something," he anxiously told the official.

"I may have found why Joshua was unaffected by the surgery," Dr. Garcia explained.

"How?" Official Driscoll questioned.

"In almost every Society member, there is a specific gene that we have changed in the past for our reputation. It has been passed from generation to generation. Others who need to be modified have a specific variation of the gene, but not specific enough to be seen as "perfect." So in the modification process, we connect the abnormal kids to a machine that changes the way they think and "rewires" their brains. But, when we tried to do the same with Joshua, it was unsuccessful. So I looked into it and found he had a completely different gene that wasn't remotely close to what was normal. With our technology, I found that it was a result of two variations of the original gene, coming from his parents," Dr. Garcia stated.

"How do we fix it?" Official Driscoll asked.

"Sadly, we can't," Dr. Garcia confessed.

"Are there any other options?"

"I am afraid it is too late, if we don't dispose of him soon, our whole Society could fall apart."

"I see."

Official Driscoll walked over to me. I was confused, scared, and uncertain, but I understood the outcome would not end well for me.

"I am sorry, Joshua. But, there isn't another way," Official Driscoll apologized.

I could tell he was not sorry. But, in a way, I was glad it was finally over. As I finally let go, he turned the machine to full capacity and clicked the remote.

Then, there was nothing but darkness and silence.

Maria Clark

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Manchester High School, Midlothian, VA

Educator: Rebecca Lynch

Category: Flash Fiction

Una Familia Rota

Una Familia Rota (A Broken Family)

There was a full moon high in the sky when Child Protective Services arrived at the home.

The house was a one-story, leaning more towards junky and tacky than cute and modest. Vines twisted around the broken mailbox and kept it together like glue. Instead of a paved driveway, gravel lay in its place with misshapen rocks that got stuck in your shoes. The lawn was untamed and weeds stuck out like cowlicks all over the front yard. The plants bordering the house were dead and bare and numerous cobwebs trapped within the windows could be seen from outside. The curtains were shut in every window, cutting the small family off from the world.

At the moment the CPS vehicle crunched on the gravel and came to an abrupt stop, the mother was sitting cross-legged in the kitchen, cigarette between her fingers and glazed eyes pinned at a stain on the wall. The mother's eyes were ringed with dark circles, contrasting with an unnaturally pale face. Her daughter, a little brown girl with dark, tight curls sat at her mom's feet, tossing a half-empty pill bottle between her chubby hands.

Occasionally, she peered up at her mother and said, "Mama?" like a question, but never got a response.

She continued playing with the items on the floor around her. She knew now to avoid the shards of glass littered across the house, but she loved shaking the pill-bottles. The sound of their collision within the bottle was music to her ears in the deafening silence of her home. Despite these attempts to get even the slightest reaction from her mother, her mom remained motionless unless she was blowing smoke out of her mouth.

Her daughter didn't even cough from the smoke anymore. The only time her mother paid the slightest attention to her was when her daughter said *comida* or *agua*. At these words, the single mom glided like a ghost to the kitchen and presented her daughter with either a glass of water or some food.

Even at four, the little girl realized this and said these words even when she wasn't *hambre* or *sedienta*. Her hunger or thirst for her mother far outweighed that for food and water. She wanted her mother's eyes on her, but they never swayed from that spot on the wall. Her daughter never stopped trying to get her attention, up until the last second.

Unbeknownst to the small family, the doorbell had already been rung multiple times. When CPS didn't get a response, they broke in and started calling out, "Miss Villaneuva? Miss Villaneuva?"

The little girl looked up at her mom, who remained stone still. Her daughter sucked on her chubby fingers, eyes trained on the kitchen entrance. A woman in a pantsuit strode in, her eyes searching the room until they land on the child. The woman was tall, with hair slicked back in a low bun and bright red lipstick. She knelt down to the child's level and smiled kindly.

"We're gonna take you somewhere fun, okay?" she whispered to the girl, who scowled up at the stranger.

The little girl's mom inhaled more smoke, as though she could drown out the pain of past and current events in her mind and ears. Like somehow the smoke would make it to her brain, or her heart, and fog up her already twisted version of reality.

Blowing puffs of smoke out of her mouth, she remained transfixed on the stain on the wall. She could almost see and hear him again, yelling incoherently and eventually throwing his beer at the wall. Her daughter hadn't even been born yet. The sound of the door slamming, his continued ranting, and the rattle of the screen door then collided with the now; the soft-speaking woman and her daughter, glaring at the stranger with her arms crossed.

The child shook her head adamantly and narrowed her eyes at the woman, an expression unlike any other four-year old's face that woman had ever seen. She continued to murmur sweetly, but the girl wouldn't budge. The mother remained silent, eyes on the stain.

The CPS woman glanced briefly at the emotionless mother and an all too familiar feeling of fury swirled within her: Why did parents let their children see them like this?

The small child, still wary of this intruder, looked up at her mother, for an explanation, a solution, anything really.
Mama, ayuda? (Mom, help?)

The girl's mom couldn't strip her gaze from the wall *What did I do to deserve this, why did he leave? I'm always the one who gets left behind.*

Finally, the woman said, more sternly, "Elena, we're going to take you to a better place." At this, Elena and her mother looked at the woman. The CPS woman almost stumbled from the shock at the mother's mere glance. Until that moment, her unwavering gaze had been fixed at the wall's stain. Elena's mother sighed, and her daughter was shocked at her response, her acknowledgement to this stranger, more than she'd ever really gotten. Finally, the woman had had enough of the silence from the mother and crouched down to pick the girl up.

Elena began screeching and shaking the pill bottle violently, "NO! Mama, no!!" Her mother didn't look at her, or comfort her. She simply returned to staring at the wall, her glossy eyes wet with tears that would never fall.

Turner Clark

Age: 14, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Julie Elmore

Category: Short Story

Inferior

Inferior

Living in a shadow is like looking in a broken mirror. You see yourself but shattered into little pieces. Pieces that should fit perfectly together but don't. Pieces of a life that's not actually yours. A life that has been idolized by your parents, peers, and teachers, a life fed to you on a silver spoon. When I was younger I ate their lies up. "Once you have A's you'll be like your sister,"; "Don't worry you'll grow into your nose soon." Now I see their true intentions. They don't want me, they want her.

My sister and I used to be the best of friends. Only two years apart, we would splash around in our backyard pool for hours. Not a care in the world. Now looking from my bedroom window, I see the pool...the edges yellowed from age and leaves falling from our big maple getting lapped up into the water. The memories flood my brain. Playing pretend with the mermaid tales Dad surprised us with. Learning to swim with our tails shimmering and glistening. Getting pushed in the water and looking up at Ashlan, my older sister, while squirming in my purple mermaid tail. The elastic band feeling tighter and tighter. Trying to swim, failing. Her face peering down at me through the rippling waters. "Don't drown, Becca. Learn to swim, Becca." Her words echo in my brain. A silent tear falls down my cheek. My shaking hands wipe my face. I tear my eyes from the window. I have been distracted long enough. It's a Saturday afternoon, and I have no plans but to write my letters. The letters I started writing when my sister and I grew apart. Now some Ivy League school holds her heart, with a beautiful campus in pristine condition and white picket fencing. I guess she got tired of the chain-link fence surrounding our highschool. My letters say all the things I don't have the confidence to say. Each letter written to my sister, explaining the pain her legacy has brought me. The letters say why I'm not like her, and how I wish I could be. They explain the pressure that's been weighing me down since middle school. From the teachers who pressure me to take courses I am not prepared for. The coaches that beg me to take interest in sports my sister excelled in, some of which I don't even know the name of. My peers who have compared me head to toe to my stunning sister naming me rather dull and behind her bright light. Lastly and most importantly, my parents, who never support me in my own endeavours but feed all my insecurities. I have no intention of sending these letters. Though I address and stamp every single one, I write them for myself; the letters help me cope. As I am finishing up a letter, I sense my mom standing at the doorway. Her distinct "disappointed" face previously burned into my mind resurfaces. I don't have to turn around to know she's doing it. I finish the last line of the letter and take a deep breath, preparing myself for her toxic remarks. I slowly turn around to find nothing, only the smell of perfume still lingering in the doorway. I walk to the door and peer around. She is no longer in the hallway either. I creep down the stairs meticulously watching every step in an attempt to miss the creaking boards of my childhood home. I come to a halt as I start to hear them, and I know they are talking about me.

My dad's booming voice comes to a whisper, "Ashlan's grades never dropped, why is Becca having such a hard time? The Ivy Leagues are not going to want her for her grades, but she's got nothing to offer. Her teachers were expecting another exemplary student, modeling after Ashlan."

I hear my mom respond, "What did you expect? We thought Becca would improve in highschool, but it has been three years now, and it only has seemed to be detrimental. It is just disappointing."

I flee to my room, in an effort to avoid confrontation with my parents. Cautious steps turn into cacophonous cries. I whip the door shut, slide down the wall onto the ground, and collapse letting the floor and me become one. I put my hand over my mouth in an attempt to quiet the hiccuping pain that keeps jabbing me in the side. Their words sizzle on my tongue and brand my skin. "*She's got nothing to offer.*" A loud sob rocks my body. I know what I'm going to do. I grab my years and years of letters and stumble down the stairs in delusional glory and a new sense of freedom. I haphazardly stuff the mailbox with a glut of my emotions sealed in envelopes ready for my sister's reaction. From the corner of my eye I see the mail truck heading toward my house. A rash smile covers my face. My

thoughts imploding my brain. "I am leaving," I whisper to myself, my words evoking eruptions of emotion previously built up inside of me over the years. Sometimes after years of feeling nothing at all, it's nice to know you are not completely numb.

Back in my room, I start to pace, the excitement washing away. I sent the letters. I promised myself nobody would ever see those letters. Soon Ashlan would receive them in all their glory. The patriotic stamp, the smudged pen...worst of all, she would read them. The next day she will be desperate to reach me, wondering why I never said anything. By then I will have nothing to say at all. Little would she know she was reading my last words. Even if they weren't written for that purpose. The truth is Ashlan's never done anything to hurt me. Her good grades aren't any fault of hers but her intelligence. The pain jabbed at me again, My head began to buzz like little bees stinging me occasionally too. Sharp, imaginary, self-inflicted pain. I curl up into a fetal position rocking back and forth.

Night falls but I don't really notice until I see a light flicker in the backyard. The pool light. I pull my head out from in between my legs and start to stare again at the pool...the yellowed edges, the leaves of all different lovely fall colors illuminated by the bright pool light. My eyes grow glossy. Small tears slip from the corner of my eye onto the hardwood making a barely audible noise. The pool was where I last felt truly happy. Swimming, splashing, laughing, loving. Nobody knew the prodigy Ashlan would become. I was just Becca, young, happy, and free. When did Ashlan leave? It seemed as if we were always together until the end. I stand up, my body sending pins and needles up my spine. I turn to my closet and throw on my favorite wool sweater and a heavy winter coat. I leave my room behind walking quickly, my winter coat rubbing against my legs is the only noise. I reach my parents' room. I start to rummage through the drawers trying to find my mom's sleep medicine. I discover the little orange bottle hidden behind a silk sleep mask. Hastily, I grab for the bottle taking a handful of the tiny little pills. I swallow them dry, feeling the little pills traveling down my throat. Clumsily, I throw the bottle back into the drawer and slam it shut, shaking the whole nightstand. I continue my journey down the stairs and through the screen porch doors.

Outside I stare down into the pool. My reflection looking right back at me. I look tired, years older than I should. Trembling, I grab at the zipper. I zip the jacket up all the way to my neck, slightly suffocating me. The sedatives start to kick in. I suck in a deep breath of the cold air and stick my right foot into the pool. The cold instantly causes goosebumps. I shiver as I dunk my left foot. Now the water is lapping at the end of my coat. I calmly lie back into the pool. After a few seconds, the water engulfs me, my coat filling, getting heavier and heavier. I slip under. My coat pulling me further and further down. I grow sleepy. As I start to shut my eyes, I see her. Ashlan. Standing over me. Suddenly I'm embarrassed, my blushing cheeks radiating from the pool. She says, "Don't drown Becca. Learn to swim, Becca." I flail my arms grabbing at the water trying desperately to swim for Ashlan, memories flashing before my eyes. Ashlan teaching me how to blow water out of a pool noodle. The two of us cracking up when I inhaled the water. Sharing our deepest thoughts sworn to secrecy by pinky promises. Making friendship bracelets to show our sisterly bond. I start to feel alive again. *She was proud of me. She is proud of me.* A smile spreads across my face. I realize I want to live. Now as I'm dying, I want to live. My thoughts parading around in my brain. *This is exactly what they expected of you. Live to prove them wrong. Swim please swim.* I scream but the water muffles the sound and causes me to choke. I hit the bottom of the pool. Looking up I see Ashlan fade. I try to push myself up. I rise and fall. I push up again but I am so tired. I shut my eyes to rest for just one moment.

Andrew Eastep

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Collegiate School, Richmond, VA

Educators: Mil Norman-Risch, Z. Thornton

Category: Dramatic Script

Untitled Restaurant Sitcom

‘Untitled Restaurant Sitcom’ Ep. 1

INT. A police station holding cell.

Cold Open: The main cast is sitting in the cell together. HARRY and BERNARD are sitting across from each other. HARRY is giving a death stare to BERNARD. BERNARD is attempting to replicate it, but is having a hard time keeping his attention on HARRY. MIRANDA is lying on the cell floor staring up at the ceiling, not putting much attention in anyone’s direction. GEORGE and MARY are sitting next to each other on BERNARD’s side, holding each other’s hand. PHIL is in the middle of the cell looking extremely worried. HARRY is alone on his side. The cell is silent.

(Two cops, OFFICER WILSON and OFFICER PERRI, enter the room)

OFFICER WILSON

What do we have here?

OFFICER PERRI

A disorderly conduct charge. Apparently a fight broke out in *Lorraine’s*.

OFFICER WILSON

Oh! I used to love that place. They made the best apple pie. Are any of them confessing to anything?

OFFICER PERRI

Nobody’s spoken since we locked them in here.

OFFICER WILSON

Great. Now we’re gonna have to run interviews. Let’s grab one of ‘em and start.

(The officers approach the cell and open the door. OFFICER PERRI looks at a clipboard while speaking.)

OFFICER PERRI

Can Harry Lawson please come with us? We’d like to ask you a few questions.

(HARRY walks out of the cell with the officers. He continues to give BERNARD the death stare as he leaves.)

OFFICER PERRI (cont’d)

You really think *Lorraine’s* has the best apple pie? You’re nuts. *Gertie’s Diner* is best.

OFFICER WILSON

Are you stupid?

OFFICER PERRI

Gertie’s is an American institution! What are you thinking?

(The audio of the officers fades out while HARRY is brought to the interrogation room.)

CUT TO BLACK

INT. Police Station interrogation room.

HARRY is shown facing OFFICER WILSON and OFFICER PERRY. The camera will cut between a two shot of all three and a one shot of whichever character is being interviewed.

OFFICER PERRRI

Okay. Let’s start from the top. Explain how the situation started.

CUT TO: INT. *Lorraine's* restaurant

(HARRY enters the restaurant wearing a zip up hoodie and jeans. He is holding a 'help wanted' ad for a waiter position. After waiting a minute he begins looking at his phone.)

HARRY (V.O.)

Well, I've been finishing up my business major, right? I've been finding that money has been pretty tight, so I decided to apply for a job. Something easy, like a waiter.

(PHIL approaches HARRY and notices the 'help wanted' ad.)

PHIL

Harry Lawson, right?

(HARRY looks up.)

HARRY

Yeah, that's right.

PHIL

Nice to meet you. I'm the owner, Phil Harmon.

HARRY

Huh. With a name like *Lorraine's* I would've figured that you'd be, you know-

PHIL

Lorraine? I get that a lot. No, Lorraine was my aunt. She started the business. Come on. I'll give you the tour.

CUT TO: INT. Interrogation room

(PHIL is being questioned)

OFFICER WILSON

So, Mr. Harmon, what do you think of Harry?

PHIL

Oh, well... he seems smart enough. He certainly knows what he's doing.

CUT TO: INT. Interrogation room

(MIRANDA is being questioned)

MIRANDA

Oh, Harry's an asshole. No doubt.

OFFICER WILSON

What makes you say that?

CUT TO: INT. *Lorraine's* restaurant, bar.

MIRANDA (V.O.)

Well...

PHIL

This, here, is our bartender Miranda Johnson.

(HARRY looks at MIRANDA and is immediately impressed by her appearance. He pushes his hair out of his face and clears his throat.

HARRY

(In the most suave voice possible) Hey.

(MIRANDA is slightly appalled by his attempts to hit on her.)

MIRANDA

Hi. (pause) Do you have a name?

HARRY

Oh yeah. Can't believe I haven't mentioned it yet. I'm Harry Lawson. I'm the new waiter here.

PHIL

He's *applying* to be the new waiter here.

HARRY

(Whispering somewhat seductively) I'm the new waiter here.

MIRANDA

Well, it's nice to meet you. Now I'm sure you've got a *lot* more of your tour left to go, so we'll talk later.

HARRY

I'll see to it.

(PHIL begins pushing HARRY out away from the bar.)

CUT TO: INT. Interrogation room

(HARRY is being questioned.)

OFFICER WILSON

After you met Ms. Johnson, can you explain what happened?

HARRY

Well, I was taken to Phil's office to talk about how the position would work.

CUT TO: INT. *Lorraine's* restaurant, PHIL's office

(HARRY sits down across from PHIL sitting at his desk. There is a contract sitting in front of him. PHIL's office is primarily dark and kind of dusty. It's obvious that he just moved in here and hasn't done much housekeeping.)

HARRY

So, I just sign here and I'm on?

PHIL

That's right.

HARRY

You know you misspelled signature on the contract, right?

PHIL

Oh shoot. We did?

HARRY

Also, you know that 'legalus maximus' isn't a legal term? Or even real Latin either.

PHIL

You're not a cop, right?

HARRY

I'm a business major, actually. I think this can be a pretty good gig until I can finish school.

CUT TO: INT. Interrogation room

(HARRY is being questioned)

HARRY

Later that day, I started my first shift.

CUT TO: INT. Interrogation room

(GEORGE and MARY are being questioned.)

OFFICER WILSON

George and Mary Wood, could you please tell us about your first interaction with Mr. Lawson?

GEORGE

Who?

OFFICER WILSON

Mr. Lawson? The waiter.

GEORGE

Oh. That Mr. Lawson. I know so many it's hard to keep track.

MARY

He doesn't know anybody else with the last name Lawson.

GEORGE

What? Sure I do. There's-

(GEORGE pauses and tries to remember anybody else with the last name Lawson.)

MARY

I'll just go ahead and explain what happened.

CUT TO: INT. *Lorraine's* restaurant, dining room.

(HARRY approaches GEORGE and MARY's table. He is now wearing a purple satin vest and matching tie with black pants.)

HARRY

Have you decided on what you'll be having tonight?

GEORGE

We'll have our usual, Jerry.

(GEORGE proceeds to look at HARRY and realize that he is not, in fact, Jerry.)

GEORGE (cont'd)

You're not Jerry.

HARRY

(with fake enthusiasm) I'm not Jerry.

MARY

No, George. Remember? Jerry got arrested last week for being a pedophile.

GEORGE

Oh yeah. He did. Well then...

(GEORGE reads HARRY's nametag.)

GEORGE (cont'd)

Herring, my wife Mary and I will take two sirloin steaks and an order of cherries jubilee for desert.

HARRY

Great. I'll be right back with that.

CUT TO: Interrogation room

(GEORGE and MARY are being questioned.)

MARY

And that's how it happened.

(The room is silent.)

GEORGE

Garry! Garry Lawson! That's who I was thinking of.

CUT TO: Interrogation room.

(Bernard is being questioned. He is very obviously drunk)

OFFICER PERRI

Do we even want to do this?

OFFICER WISLON

I don't think he even knows where he is.

BERNARD

I can still hear, you know. I'm don't think it's right that you don't think my opinion is good enough. I will let you know that I am not whatsoever anebri- enibri- drunk.

OFFICER PERRI

(sighs) Okay. Bernard Mallard. Can you please explain how you first met Mr. Lawson?

CUT TO: INT. *Lorraine's* restaurant, bar

(MIRANDA is bartending. BERNARD is sitting at the bar, very drunk. All dialogue in this scene will be dubbed over by Bernard's voiceover and all actions will be performed as Bernard says.)

BERNARD (V.O.)

So, like, I was sitting with the bartender, Miranda, right? And in struts this waiter guy thinking he looks like hot shit or whatever. And he comes over and he says, "yo girl. You're like, looking all fine and shit. Come over here, I want to get in your pants." And then she said, "Like, no way man. I don't like your stupid little... vest and crap. Get your life together." But, like he keeps trying to get her to like him and stuff, which is when I say, "hey man, leave the lady alone." And he was all upset. He said "Like, back off, or whatever. How much have you even had to drink tonight?" Which is when I say, "it's dollar shot night. I can do what I want." And he stormed off in a bit a huff and I- (MIRANDA belches in BERNARD's voice.)

CUT TO: Interrogation room.

(BERNARD is being questioned. He has paused.)

OFFICER WILSON

Mr. Mallard?

CUT TO: INT. *Lorraine's* restaurant, bar

BERNARD (V.O.)

And then I go back to drinking and she's like "what's his deal?" And I say "girl, you don't even know."

CUT TO: Interrogation room.

(BERNARD is being questioned. OFFICER WILSON and PERRI are waiting for him to finish. He is now smiling happily.)

BERNARD

I'm done.

CUT TO: Interrogation room.

(HARRY is being questioned.)

OFFICER PERRI

Mr. Lawson, did you attempt to seduce Ms. Johnson while you were on the job?

HARRY

I don't see what that has to do with anything.

OFFICER WILSON

Are you aware that Ms. Johnson is a lesbian?

HARRY

Wait, she's a- but I thought... Oh boy. I could've sworn that...

(HARRY pauses.)

HARRY (cont'd)

Well, it's her fault. She kept serving that guy after I told her he was hammered.

CUT TO: Interrogation room

(MIRANDA is being questioned.)

OFFICER PERRI

Ms. Johnson, did you continue to serve Mr. Mallard after he was showing signs of intoxication?

MIRANDA

(sheepishly) Well...

CUT TO: INT. *Lorraine's* restaurant, bar

(MIRANDA is bartending. BERNARD is alone at the bar.)

MIRANDA

Can you believe that guy? Honestly. What a douche.

BERNARD

You have no idea. Just keep telling me. (pause) Another round?

(MIRANDA pours him another shot.)

CUT TO: INT. Interrogation room.

(MIRANDA is being questioned.)

MIRANDA

And besides, it helps him.

(MIRANDA leans in close and starts whispering.)

MIRANDA (cont'd)

(whisper) You know his wife just left him. (normal voice) I figure that whatever I'm doing is helping him. I am a trained psychologist, you know.

OFFICER WILSON

It says here that you dropped out of college as a sophomore.

(Pause)

MIRANDA

It's Phil's fault! He thought it would be a good idea to have dollar shot night!

CUT TO: Interrogation room.

(PHIL is being questioned.)

PHIL

Okay, sure I had a few concerns about dollar shot night, but it brought in a crowd, so I thought it was a good idea.

OFFICER WILSON

Just tell us what else happened that night.

CUT TO: INT. *Lorraine's* restaurant, dining room
(HARRY walks by GEORGE and MARY.)

MARY

Excuse me, Harry, I don't mean to be rude, but we ordered almost thirty minutes ago. Did our order get lost or something?

HARRY

No, it wasn't.

(HARRY walks over. PHIL catches him as he continues walking over to the bar.)

PHIL

Hey, Harry, you know you can't treat customers like that, right?

HARRY

Oh, yeah. Sorry. I'll try to do better.

(HARRY keeps walking.)

PHIL

Now, Harry, hang on a second. We can't run a restaurant like this. You need to pay attention to your customers. You can't spend all your time over by the bar talking to Miranda, right?

HARRY

What do you know about running a restaurant anyways?

PHIL

Excuse me?

HARRY

You heard me. You don't know how to run a restaurant. Look at this.

(He points at Bernard.)

HARRY (cont'd)

Dollar shot night? Are you stupid or something?

PHIL

It brings in customers, all right?

HARRY

Jesus Christ, look at that man. He's blasted. She's still serving- Christ, she's still serving him.

(HARRY walks over to the bar and tries to grab the bottle of gin from MIRANDA as she tries to pour.)

MIRANDA

What are you doing?

HARRY

Can't you tell he's drunk? You can't give him any more!

BERNARD

The gin's gone?

MIRANDA

No, it's not gone. Harry, let go. I know what I'm doing.

PHIL

Harry, would you let go of the bottle already?

HARRY

No. You need to learn how to run things around here. And that means no more dollar shot night!

(PHIL, HARRY, and MIRANDA fight for control of the gin bottle. BERNARD is following their movements with his shot glass. Suddenly they throw the bottle and the glass smashes against the floor and alcohol spills on the carpet. At that time, a man in a chef outfit comes out with a plate of cherries jubilee which is served flaming.)

GEORGE

Cherries jubilee!

(The chef, shocked by the fight going on in front of him drops the plate on the ground and the flames spill over to the alcohol which bursts into flames. The fire alarm starts ringing and everybody starts panicking.)

HARRY

Aw shit.

CUT TO: INT. A police station holding cell.

(Everybody is in their starting positions as they were in the start of the episode except for PHIL, who enters the cell as the officers bring him in and lock the cell.)

OFFICER PERRI

We'll leave you in here until we post bail. It might give you an opportunity to figure out if you want to press charges. (The cops leave.)

BERNARD

Oh, you bet I'm pressing charges.

HARRY

That makes two of us, asshole.

(Pause.)

PHIL

This is all my fault. I don't know how to run a restaurant. At this rate, we might as well just sell the place and turn it into a Chili's or something.

MIRANDA

No, Phil. We'll figure this out.

MARY

Yes Phillip. We'll help you out in whatever way you need.

(GEORGE doesn't respond. Mary jabs him in the arm with her shoulder.)

GEORGE

What is it?

MARY

In whatever way they need, right?

GEORGE

Wait, why?

MARY

Cherries jubilee?

GEORGE

Whatever way you need.

BERNARD

I second that.

PHIL

Guys, I appreciate that, but money can't help me. I just don't know how to run a business.

(HARRY looks at the rest of the group. He reflects on his actions and thinks about what he's about to do. He stands up and clears his throat.)

HARRY

Look, this is kind of new to me, so you'll have to excuse me. I'm sorry for how I acted tonight. You asked for my help as a waiter and I tried to fix problems that weren't mine to fix. But, I think I might be able to help in running this place.

(Everybody pauses and seem to consider the idea.)

MIRANDA

Do you really think that we're just gonna forget about everything that happened tonight?

HARRY

Excuse me?

MIRANDA

You heard me. This is your fault, you know. You have no respect for any of us. You think you know better than us, and now we're gonna let you just run this business? Phil's business? Tough luck.

BERNARD

Yeah. What she said.

(GEORGE and MARY nod in agreement.)

HARRY

Fine. You don't want me. You don't need me. I have school to go back to anyways.

(OFFICER PERRI enters and unlocks the cell.)

OFFICER PERRI

Lawson? You've been bailed out.

HARRY

Great. I didn't need to be here anyways.

(HARRY and OFFICER PERRI exit. The rest of the cast is left alone.)

CUT TO: INT. *Lorraine's* restaurant.

(MIRANDA is bartending with BERNARD. GEORGE and MARY are at their usual table. PHIL is waiting tables. The restaurant is quiet. HARRY enters.)

MIRANDA

Oh, you've got to be kidding me.

BERNARD

What are you doing here?

HARRY

Would you give me a second to explain myself. I just-

(MIRANDA tries to push HARRY out of the restaurant, but PHIL cuts between the two.)

PHIL

I called him here. Tell them what you told me when you called me last night.

HARRY

Look, you're right. I haven't respected you. Trust me, I need to work on that. But the truth is, I don't have anywhere else to turn to. I'm not a business major anymore. I got expelled for plagiarism on my final. I really need this job.

PHIL

I've decided that Harry is going to keep working here, as long he promises to run a tight ship. In exchange, he's going to help me run this place better. I'm afraid that might mean the end of things like dollar shot night, but I think it's really going to turn this place around.

(HARRY turns his attention to MIRANDA.)

HARRY

I really am sorry.

(He turns his attention to the whole group.)

HARRY

I'm sorry to everyone. I want to be able to fix this. If that's okay with you, that is.

(The restaurant gives him their attention, then goes back to their usual routine without giving him much more thought.

HARRY approaches PHIL.)

PHIL

Well, that went better than I expected.

HARRY

Much better. Now, where do we start?

INT. Board room.

(The board room is shrouded in darkness. Three figures are shrouded in darkness.)

SHADOWY FIGURE 1

Have you seen the papers?

SHADOWY FIGURE 2

No? What's going on?

(SHADOWY FIGURE 1 tosses newspaper to SHADOWY FIGURE 2 and SHADOWY FIGURE 3. On it is an article that reads 'Meet the New Staff of *Lorraine's* Restaurant.')

SHADOWY FIGURE 3

What's the problem?

(SHADOWY FIGURE 1 turns around and slams their fists on the table.)

SHADOWY FIGURE 1

The problem is that *Lorraine's* is back on their feet. That location is prime restaurant real estate. We need to get a hold of it. Only then can we dominate the Northern Omaha restaurant scene.

(The camera pans up and reveals the Chili's logo on the wall behind SHADOWY FIGURE 1.)

SHADOWY FIGURE 1 (cont'd)

And after that, Chili's will dominate the world.

(SHADOWY FIGURE 1 begins laughing maniacally. They notice that SHADOWY FIGURE 2 and SHADOWY FIGURE 3 aren't laughing. They give them a death stare and SHADOWY FIGURE 2 and SHADOWY FIGURE

3 begin laughing. SHADOWY FIGURE 1 joins them.)

Jane Edmunds

Age: 13, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Julie Elmore

Category: Short Story

Mirrors

Mirrors

It was January 5th, 2018. Clara had been with her boyfriend, Dex, for years now. She knew she couldn't take the relationship anymore for countless reasons, she just didn't know how to end it. She knew the breakup would destroy Dex, and that he was extremely sensitive. She wondered for nights about what to do, about what Dex would do to her after she broke up with him.

One night, Clara brought up the idea of a dinner with Dex. She would take him to their favorite local restaurant, as if to end the relationship on a happy note. Dex thought nothing of it, and if anything enjoyed the beautiful night with Clara.

"We should do this more often," Dex said, "I love spending time with you, you know." Clara felt her hands get sweaty, a winter breeze blew behind her. A part of her felt regretful, like maybe she didn't want to break up with Dex, but she knew she needed to.

"Dex," Clara said hesitantly, "there's something I've been meaning to tell you." There was a long pause. Dex closed his eyes for a long time. He knew Clara well enough to know that something was wrong, that the happy night had taken a turn.

"Clara, you're really going to do this? Right now? After our beautiful night over dinner, you're going to break up with me?"

"Dex, I never said that!" she replied. Dex stormed out of the restaurant, people staring. Clara felt it unnecessary to chase after him. She waited for what seemed like years, but eventually, she went out to the car. There she found Dex, sitting in the driver's seat, completely still. "Dex, I'm not sorry about what I did. We both know our relationship wouldn't work out. I thought it would be better to end it sooner rather than later."

"Please get out of my car," Dex said, stopping between words.

Clara did what she was told. The restaurant was close enough to her house that she could walk home anyway. In her bed, she thought about the night. She hoped that Dex could forgive her eventually.

~ ~ ~

The next day, Clara's mother walked into her daughter's room, the saddest look on her face. "Honey, I'm so sorry. I know how close you two were," she said slowly. Clara hadn't told her about the previous night, but it wasn't unlikely that she had heard from her older brother.

"It's ok. He'll get over it eventually." Clara replied.

"What? Clara, did you hear about what happened?" Her mother looked concerned now, and Clara started to get worried. She hadn't heard anything about Dex since the night they broke up. "Honey, Dex passed away. . ." There was a pause. Clara was in shock. Thoughts raced in her head. *Who did this? What happened? Was it my fault?* Clara's mother left the room, letting her daughter process the information. Clara sat in silence, thinking about the fact that the last time she saw Dex, they were angry, they hated each other. There was nothing she could do now.

Like anyone would, Clara blamed herself. *Dex did seem really angry last night. . . was it suicide?* Clara's mother didn't know anything about the death, and Clara couldn't find it in herself to contact his family, so she was trapped with her own thoughts. Her head hurt, her stomach ached. She walked around her house, trying to distract herself. She stumbled to her mirror, seeing how much of a mess she was.

Suddenly, without warning, Clara saw something in the mirror. She saw Dex, standing behind her, his eyes a bright white. She stood in the mirror in shock for seconds. She looked behind her. Nothing was there. Feeling like a vulnerable child, Clara sprinted downstairs to her mom. She found her sitting on the couch and ran to be next to her.

"Hey, hey, what's wrong?" Clara's mother was concerned, for she had never seen Clara in this sort of state. Clara was breathing heavily, not only from running down the stairs but also from shock, from fear. She pictured Dex's glowing white eyes, his strong and terrifying stance, her instant instinct to run. Clara remembered at this

moment her mother's extreme fear of ghosts, spirits, anything of that nature. Although all she wanted was her mother's comfort, she thought it best to keep this experience a secret.

"Nothing, I- I was thinking about Dex that's all." Just saying his name made Clara feel nauseous. She suddenly felt stupid. *Why did I run to my mom? I don't need my mom* She went back to her room, remembering the homework she needed to catch up on.

~ ~ ~

Clara lived the next few days feeling off. She never saw Dex in the mirror again, although she was too haunted by her memories to even check. It wasn't until the next week that she saw him for a second time. She was going on a walk through the old woods behind her house. It was a beautiful winter day, and Clara felt almost comforted by the roof of snow-covered leaves above her, the sun's light warmth on her back, the tall army of trees surrounding her. It was in realizing how happy she was that she saw Dex, standing next to a tree far in front of her. This time she couldn't even stop in shock. She ran all the way home, too scared to look back. Thoughts filled her head. *Is he chasing me? What do I do? Am I trapped?* She continued running and finally got to her house. This time she told her mother what had happened. "I saw Dex in the woods," Clara said, breathing heavily.

Her mother looked extremely confused, wondering if her daughter was okay. Trying to keep calm, she said, "Baby, you couldn't have seen Dex. It was just your brain playing tricks on you. How about you go take a nap." Clara, eyes wide open, staring straight ahead, walked slowly up to her room. She was scared. She was confused, she couldn't take it anymore. There was nothing she could do to stop it, though. *Dex is dead. Dex is dead* she told herself. *It's just your mind*

Clara continued walking slowly to her bedroom. Her mind was blank, her vision blurred. She didn't know what was going on, but she knew who was doing it to her. As she walked into her room, she felt herself being pulled towards the mirror. As she looked at her reflection, she saw him. Clara turned around. She felt Dex's cold, stiff arms pull her into a hug.

She screamed.

Olivia Fairlamb

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Collegiate School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Pete Follansbee

Category: Poetry

Self-Discovery

Self-Discovery

Apparently, Persephone was innocent
and joyous and had a different name before she,
as we have been told, was abducted,
dragged away by an Evil force.
What other reason could there be?
Who would volunteer to live in Hell?

But perhaps Hades was tender,
and Persephone relished the descent into the chasm
even though Demeter had said to be wary of love,
to take it a morsel at a time,
never more than a nibble.

They tell us she ate only three seeds, or perhaps six; she was starving after all,
but the truth grew so ripe she feared it would
burst and splatter, drowning clean ears.
Instead, she cut it off at the stem and gave it to me.
She told me of the pomegranate,
how she bit right through the peel.
She forgot moderation,
she let the seeds chip her teeth and the juice stain her skirt.
The hunger was within her before she ever knew the name of the fruit.
Her mother had been wrong about love.

Greyson Fisher

Age: 16, Grade: 11

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

Educator: Gail Giewont

Category: Poetry

Such is the Code of Life

Such is the code Life.

The root is at the top of the tree
A parent may kill its children if the task
 assigned to them is no longer needed
Such is the code life, you cannot argue,
Those are the rules.

A parent may kill its children if the task
 assigned to them is no longer needed
but you must put them down nicely
those are the rules
You cannot argue.

But you must put them down nicely
lay them down in a bed
drag the mouse over their body
and wipe them from the screen.

You must lay them down in bed
cover their body in sheets
wipe them from your screen
and make sure a hand doesn't stick out.

Cover the body with sheets
close the door quietly
and make sure a hand doesn't protrude
as to not wake the dead.

Close the door quietly
take a moment to reflect
remember not to wake the dead
there will be more.

Take a moment to reflect
standing in your hallway,
 remember
there will be more
The dead don't rest forever.

Stand in your hallway
 remembering
hours plugged into a desk

the dead didn't sleep forever
try to fall asleep.

Hours plugged into a desk
you are tired
try to fall asleep
let them tuck you in.

You are tired
The root is at the top of the tree
let them tuck you in
such is the code life, you cannot argue.

Greyson Fisher

Age: 16, Grade: 11

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

Educator: Gail Giewont

Category: Poetry

Lobster, Jellyfish, and Menhaden

Lobster

It doesn't hurt

dunk us under water

let the steam and butter silence

your hungry stomachs - open mouths

so that we may see what we become.

JellyFish

Water, man water is

wet

Sunlight, sunlight is

yeah

Where are we going

oh yeah, somewhere else.

Menhaden

We have no minds

for we are squashed on the floor

stomped by feet into a white deck.

We are packed into a holding cell

to be grabbed one at a time.

We want to run home, hop from the cell

over the dead bodies of brothers

and into the cold swish of the bay.

But we cannot.

We are chained here by one another

and so, to face the bay again,

we must face the hook.

Matilda Frantz

Age: 14, Grade: 8

School Name: Sabot at Stony Point, Richmond, VA

Educator: Sarah Lile

Category: Short Story

Alice

When I first heard that she had died, back in July, I honestly didn't feel much. Maybe not as much as I should have, considering how close we had been.

Alice Stone and I had "dated" for a few months back in sophomore year, if you call spending way too much money at the diner near our school and coughing up a lung trying to smoke her dad's cigarettes dating. From the few things I remember, I think we had a pretty great time, but it didn't end up working out. She got involved with a group of friends I wasn't too fond of, I got grounded a few too many times for my dropping grades, and we spent less and less time together at the diner, until we finally broke up over text.

So when my mom sent me a screenshot of a post, written by Alice's mother, announcing that Alice had passed away from complications relating to a work-place accident, I didn't know what to think. Honestly, it felt like I *couldn't* know what to think. It bothered me a little how little emotion I had felt after hearing the news, but I chalked it up to being because I hadn't spoken to her in a few years. I also hadn't really known anyone in her family, except for maybe her older sister, who was a senior at the time we were together, and occasionally drove us around in her run down car. I decided that I would feel weird offering any condolences to her, considering the only words I'd ever spoken to her were 'hi', 'bye', and 'thanks for the ride', so I decided to keep my mouth shut, as it really wasn't my place. Maybe I should've said something. Maybe that could've saved them.

I really should stop thinking like this.

As I said, it felt like I couldn't know what to think, so I made the executive decision to not think about it at all. This simple yet effective strategy had worked for me on a number of difficult occasions, and it would've worked just as well this time around if it weren't for the constant daydreams. At first they started fairly tame, just imaginings of her weeping family, broken over the death of their beloved sister and daughter. My brain never bothered to create the faces of the people I had never met though, so their cries of despair came from blurry, faceless figures. It only got worse from there. My stupid brain thought it would be a good idea to move on to imagining my ex-girlfriend's death in brutal detail, but, of course, Alice's cause of death had never been specified, so I had to get creative with it. As I lay in bed each night, my mind would switch from one terrifying fantasy to the next, and the worst part was that it was all from her point of view. I witnessed her legs being crushed, her skin melting off in a burning building, her limbs being chopped off by some faulty machinery, and they got progressively weirder from there, until I was watching her skin being plucked off by evil factory robots with glowing red eyes.

I had my ways to cope though. I found ways to distract myself - most of them being from my childhood. I couldn't tell you how many episodes of this show called Wild Critters I watched during the weeks after her death, it got genuinely concerning. As time passed though, the imaginings became less and less frequent, and it wasn't long before I was able to fall asleep without two guys talking to a tiger playing in the background. Everything was good for a few months. I went on a beach trip with some friends, entered another year of college, and called my brother often. It was nice. It wasn't until December that the days became neverending again, the daydreams returned, somehow worse and worse each day. I started watching Wild Critters before bed again. It was 12:43 AM on December 10th when I put on that one episode with the chickens and that giant egg for the fiftieth time, and closed my eyes. I'm not sure how long it was, but it was still dark outside when I was awoken by a rustling in my room. I groggily looked over to where I heard the noise, before jolting up.

There is only one thing more terrifying than seeing a figure in your dark bedroom, and that is seeing the dark figure of someone you thought to be dead. I almost screamed, but no noise would come out, so I just stared instead. There stood Alice, almost drowning clothes that looked straight out of a dumpster, looking exhausted, pale, and worst of all, rotten, but it was her. I prayed that I was dreaming as I sat in my bed and stared at her, and she stared back. What bothered me most were her cheeks. They had always been one of my favorite parts about her when we had been dating, soft and fun to squish. Now they had lost their shine. They looked rotten, hollow and dead. On one

side, I almost thought I saw a bit of exposed bone near her eye, while on the other side, her skin drooped slightly, as if it was about to fall off. My first thought was of a human sized ice cream cone, slowly melting, seconds away from dripping onto the beige carpet. "You've got to help me here, Soph", she said, wrenching me from my strange daydream. "...please." Her voice was nothing but a strained whisper. I couldn't respond.

She looked over to the right side of my bed and squinted. "Is that... Wild Critters?" I hadn't realized that my computer was on autoplay from last night, and was still playing episodes. I slammed my laptop shut with a bit too much force. The room was now silent as I gawked at her, flabbergasted by her composure, acting as if she wasn't a living corpse, just casually rotting in my apartment. I remember looking down at my hands in the dark, trying to collect myself.

"Ok, so, what the fuck? How? What- what even happened to you?"

Ignoring my confusion, Alice shuffled over to my window and tried to open it, though her pale, cracked fingers kept on slipping off the edge. "I'm gonna need a hand here." she said matter of factly, standing in the moonlight.

My courtesy got the better of me, and I crawled out of bed to open it, despite my burning desire to know what the hell was going on. If I had hoped that fulfilling her request would get her to talk to me, I was sorely mistaken. As soon as I had turned the latch and pulled the window open, letting in a cold chill, she jumped right out of it, as if that was the only logical thing to do. My apartment was only on the second floor, so I knew she wouldn't take too much damage, but my heart still beat out of my chest as I looked out and saw her standing there, on the pavement, looking at me expectantly. She motioned for me to come towards her, expecting me to jump out of the window just as gracefully as she had. Frustration bubbled up in my chest alongside the fear, but there was also something else there - curiosity. So, despite all logic, I hastily put on a coat and some slippers and rushed out of my apartment, the door slamming shut behind me. I remember running down the stairs and confronting her on the cold sidewalk, yelling at her to answer my questions with cold ankles and shaking hands.

But after that, my memory starts to go. Now, after mulling over it in my head hundreds of times, the things I do remember feel strange, like disconnected dream fragments that have no emotion, or really anything else, attached to them. I'm honestly still not sure if the whole thing was a dream, or how much of it was one. Apart from a few glimpses I remember of running down different streets and alleyways, there are three main fragments.

The first is of the home improvement store a few miles away from my apartment. I can remember us standing outside, shivering in the cold and looking at the Christmas trees. Alice had put on a face mask to hide her cheeks, but between her ragged clothes and bare feet, and my slippers, we were still getting some weird looks. I remember not caring about this at all though - I guess I must've had bigger things on the mind. Alice was holding a white plastic bag in her left hand, the store's orange logo warped slightly by whatever bulky, sharp object we had just bought, and in the other, she held a fistful of gummy worms. Looking back, this obviously doesn't make sense, but at the time, I remember hearing my heart beating out of my chest, a feeling of exhilaration warming my face, fingers tingling with anticipation, but not once did I second-guess the gummies. I remember us talking together, laughing together, conversing just like we had in high school, but my head hurts whenever I try to remember what it was we were talking about.

The second memory is blurrier than the first, but the feeling of excitement was just as strong. This time it was tainted though, tainted with something like dread, or regret, or something else of the sort, but I could still feel a wide smile spreading on my face, childish joy bubbling up inside me. We were standing in front of a house, and though my memory is foggy, I can still recognize it now as Alice's old home. Next to me, I heard her crying quietly, wiping her nose on her hoodie sleeve. I remember not understanding why she could possibly be sad, for we had never been more free, the wind biting at our skin and swaying the tall trees, urging us to enter the house with every cold gust. I remember walking up the stone pathway, my slippers soft on the cold rock, Alice hesitantly following. Then it goes dark again.

And the third is just... red. Just red. As if I was in a small bubble, submerged in a sea of blood, I watched it rush by, making my head spin. It was a vibrant red, almost cheerful, but something about it felt menacing, like it longed to hurt something or someone. I can remember hearing faint, far away screams coming from Alice, though some of them echoed back to me in such a way that it seemed like they were mine. I could've sworn I heard the voices of strangers too, yelling out messes of words I couldn't understand, but that very well could've been my drugged up or dreaming brain coming up with something. That's one of the worse things about this whole thing - the fact that I just don't know, and will probably never find out.

What I do know is that my mother sent me another screenshot a week later, of a news article reporting that Zoey and Sabrina Stone, Alice's mother and sister, had been found dead in their home, bleeding out on the cold floor. What I do know, deep down, beneath all the lies I've been telling myself about how it was just a dream and everything's fine, is that I had something to do with it.

Alexander Gatewood

Age: 14, Grade: 8

School Name: Sabot at Stony Point, Richmond, VA

Educator: Sarah Lile

Category: Humor

The Proper Way to Hydrate

In 2017, nearly 5,200 people died from choking. Before drinking a glass of water, make sure to read this piece and make sure you have it under control.

To start, select the best water glass for your situation. Using your eyes, scan the glasses and decide which one you would personally like to quench your thirst with. Once you've decided, prepare your hand to move towards the glass. Ready? Now, move your hand towards the glass and clasp your fingers around one side of the glass. On the other side, clasp your thumb around it, but not too hard. If you clasp it too hard, it could result in the shattering of the glass, which could result in death. Make sure to clasp it at a reasonable level. Not too hard as to shatter the it, but not too little as to drop the it and allow it to hit the floor, which will result in the shattering of the glass, and which will inevitably result in death or a lecture from your parents about how to hold a glass correctly.

Now that we've mastered the ability to handle a glass, we'll move on to making your way to the sink. Slowly, turn your body with your arm outstretched and glass in hand. Position yourself to face the sink. Carefully, move your right leg upwards and then forwards a short distance. Hold this position for a second, before lowering your right leg and placing your right foot on the floor. If you feel that you may lose your balance, outstretch your other arm and reach for objects to grab onto. A countertop or table works fine. There are some exceptions to what you can grab onto, such as: a hot stove, a knife, air, the floor, or yourself. If there are no objects in sight, move the arm with the glass inwards to your chest and hug the glass close, while still making sure to maintain the proper grasp on the glass. As you fall, protect the glass. Although this may result in a concussion, broken arm, or death, the glass will be safe and you will avoid a lecture from your parents about having a proper grasp on the glass.

If you've managed to maintain balance this far, you're doing great! Try and repeat the same motion with your left leg as you did with your right. Continue this grueling process until you reach the sink. Once reached, position the glass underneath the faucet. With the other arm, move your hand towards the faucet and turn it on. This is where it gets extremely dangerous. Make sure to turn the faucet to the right. If you fail to turn it to the right, the water will not reach your glass, and if you turn the faucet to the left, a bunch of scalding hot water will pour out of the faucet and melt the very glass you're holding. This could result in third degree burns, death, or a warmer glass. If the faucet is turned to the right as instructed, water will pour out of the faucet at a consistent rate and should fall directly into your glass, depending on whether or not you positioned your glass correctly. Once the water has reached the glass, it will slowly begin to rise to the top of it. You must attempt to turn off the faucet at the correct time as to not overflow your glass. If the glass overflows, your arm could be in serious danger. If this happens, use an emergency paper towel immediately or it could result in a wet sleeve or major drippage across the floor.

Once the glass has been filled up to the correct height, you may turn off the faucet and turn away from the sink. Here comes the fun part. Bring the glass closer to your face, but before you drink, take your other hand and dunk it into the water to ensure it is the right temperature. IF the water is hot, do not drink it as it could result in third degree burns, death, or a bad aftertaste in your mouth. If you are one hundred percent sure the water is cold, you may bring the glass up to your lips and open your mouth slightly to allow water to pass through.

Tilt the glass at the proper angle to allow the water to pass through your lips and into your mouth. Hold the water in your mouth for a few seconds to allow yourself to close your lips and lower the glass. Next, promptly swallow the water. But, make sure you do not breathe during this process or it could result in the water traveling down the wrong pipe and into your lungs causing choking, coughing fits, and possibly death.

Finally, sit down where you're currently standing and let the water digest for around twenty minutes. Once the water is fully digested, you may attempt to drink another sip of water.

After all of these steps have been completed, pat yourself on the back. You are now part of the 100% of people who can drink water normally without a long paper telling them how!

Sophia George

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Deep Run High School, Glen Allen, VA

Educator: Elizabeth Berry

Category: Critical Essay

US State Governments and Their Role in Women's Reproductive Rights

In 2019, more than 400 events across the United States were planned under the moniker, #StopTheBans, to advocate against a new wave of restrictive abortion laws (Wamsley). That same year, the annual March for Life event brought thousands of people to Washington, D.C. to protest for anti-abortion legislation (Stanglin and Miller). In America, people have very impassioned views on the reproductive rights of women. However, should the US state governments decide on women's reproductive rights? The landmark U.S. Supreme Court Case, *Roe v. Wade*, made abortion legal federally (Blackmun, Harry A, and Supreme Court of the United States 113). Nonetheless, this has not stopped state legislatures from trying to make abortion illegal or limit other reproductive rights (Yetter). The US state governments are ill-equipped and should not infringe upon people's rights by deciding on women's reproductive rights. Currently, US state legislatures can't do much about women's reproductive rights, but they should, in most cases, not be given the chance.

The US Constitution makes up the fundamental rights of US citizens. By deciding on women's reproductive rights, US state governments are bypassing the Fourteenth Amendment. The Fourteenth Amendment writes that no states are allowed to "deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law," (US Const. amendment XIV, sec. 1, cl. Due Process). In *Roe v. Wade*, the Fourteenth Amendment recognizes that women have a right to privacy to have abortions (qtd. Knopp 266). This means that *Roe v. Wade*, supported by the US Constitution, gives women in all states bodily autonomy and the right to choose their reproductive rights, such as the choice of an abortion or to use contraceptives. To clarify, the US Supreme Court did write in *Roe v. Wade* that the State can interfere in an abortion case when the fetus can survive on its own, making it viable (qtd. Knopp 266). Since the fetus can live outside of the mother's womb, the State has an interest in protecting its right to life. Before that time is when it is unconstitutional for US state governments to interfere. Nevertheless, states have attempted to ban abortions before a fetus is viable. In Alabama, the Human Life Protection Act attempted to ban all forms of abortions at any time, and several other states have attempted to ban abortions when a heartbeat is detected under the Heartbeat Bill (Rojas and Blinder). These motions have all been blocked because they were deemed unconstitutional under *Roe v. Wade* (Rojas and Blinder). If and only if *Roe v. Wade* is overturned do states have the option of passing legislation banning abortion. This is not likely to occur as the US Constitution protects a woman's right to choose.

Women were given the ability to reproduce, the ability to pass on the gift of life. In combination with that, they were also given the right to decide when and if to have a baby. Women are the ones carrying a child, so they should have first say on women's reproductive rights. Bonnie Stabile's article, "Ethics of Regulating Reproductive Technologies: Women as Child Bearers, Rights Bearers, and Objects of Paternalism," mentions the term, "paternalism" concerning women's reproductive rights (336). "Paternalism" is "understood as an infringement on the personal freedom and autonomy of a person (or class of persons) with a beneficent or protective intent," (Thompson). For example, US state governments can claim that they are helping women by educating them on the risks of abortion. Yet counseling material being given to women considering abortions has been found with claims that are not true medically (qtd. Stabile 338). US state governments are not acting paternalistically by trying to limit abortions, they are valuing the life of the fetus over the woman. In Lawrence B. Finer and others' study, "Reasons U.S. Women Have Abortions: Quantitative and Qualitative Perspectives," the authors found that women have many different reasons for choosing to have abortions (117). The two most frequent motives women had for wanting an abortion were that "a child would interfere with a woman's education, work or ability to care for dependents" and "that she could not afford a baby now," (Finer, et al. 110). As the results show, most women are not deciding to have an abortion on a whim. They have real-life obstacles that would prevent them from being able to care for the child to the best of their ability. Also, many women not wanting to be single mothers motivated their decision to have an abortion (Finer, et al. 110). Laws trying to reduce women's choice in their reproductive rights would force

women to give birth to children while on an intense career track, low on money, or without their partner's help. It would heavily regulate the mother, while not paying attention to the father of the child. US state governments have affirmed that they are interested in protecting the life of the fetus, but by passing anti-choice abortion laws, they are not considering a woman's opinion, which should come first.

As mentioned, women should have an opinion on the discussion of their reproductive rights. However, in US state governments, that is not an applicable option. In 2020, an average of 29.3% of the representatives in each state's legislature are women (CAWP). According to the United States Census website, women make up 50.8% of the population. These two statistics are disproportionate to each other. Since there are not enough women being represented in US state governments in comparison to the total number of women in the United States, state governments should not be able to introduce legislation about women's reproductive rights that disregard their choice. "Sexism" can be referred to as "discrimination or devaluation based on a person's sex or gender, as in restricted job opportunities, especially such discrimination directed against women," (Dictionary.com). Women seem to be restricted in US state legislatures, meaning that US state governments are inherently sexist. If state governments are inherently prejudiced towards women, how can they make vital decisions regarding women's reproductive rights? Until there is a number of women present in US state governments proportionate to their US population, state legislatures are unqualified to make decisions regarding women's reproductive rights.

As a counterargument to the unconstitutionality of heartbeat bills, many state governments are aware that these bills are unconstitutional and are attempting to pass them for just that reason (Yetter). They argue that these bills are being passed just to try to overturn Roe v. Wade. Damon Thayer, Kentucky Senate Republican floor leader said, "It would be the pinnacle of my career," if SB9 (a heartbeat bill) became law and ended up before the U.S. Supreme Court as a means to overturn Roe v. Wade (Yetter). In the United States of America, laws should be attempted to be passed only in complete seriousness. Roe v. Wade is shown to be constitutional so passing bills just to try to overturn it is a waste of the American people's time. Also, laws that restrict women's reproductive rights have never been very effective (Reagan). Before Roe v. Wade was passed, hospitals used to fill up with women needing care after doing failed abortions on their own, like Chicago's Cook County Hospital, which used to take 5,000 patients a year into their abortion ward (Reagan). Constraining women's reproductive laws in today's world will just cause unsafe procedures, like abortions, to happen all over again. Finally, many could argue that since women have not been able to serve in state legislatures as long as men, it would be quite hard for them to be ever fully represented. However, since 1971, the number of women in state legislatures has increased by five times, and in Nevada, 54% of their legislature are women (CAWP). If the trend continues, the divide between men and women in US state legislatures could lower in time. Therefore, sometime in the future, US state governments may be better equipped to reexamine laws concerning women's reproductive rights. Of course, they will still have to follow the US Constitution.

It seems like everyone has an opinion on women's reproductive rights laws. Even so, should the US state governments come to that verdict? US state governments are unqualified and should not violate people's rights by deciding on women's reproductive rights. If US state legislatures were to try to restrict women's reproductive rights, they would be infringing on the US Constitution. Women are the ones carrying and giving birth to children so women should have the first opinion on their own rights. Finally, state governments do not have enough women representation as a whole to even consider trying to pass legislation on women's reproductive rights. With so many opposing views, deciding on women's reproductive rights in America may seem like a herculean task. Fortunately for US state governments, they should not bear that responsibility.

Laurn Giddings

Age: 17, Grade: 12

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

Educator: Patty Smith

Category: Short Story

Hermingham's Toy Shop

A tall man with fair skin and coffee drenched hair stood in the mist under a full moon. To any other human in Braxwell's village, Axel was taking an evening stroll just as he did with his daughter Elora. No one had ever noticed the knives strapped to his arms underneath his plaid, long-sleeve shirt or the newly kissed maroon that smeared off his fingers onto his khakis.

No one questioned the toolbox he brought with him every evening. They trusted Axel Hermingham with all their heart, but he was close to no one or anyone after Elora died. In response, everyone acted as though they still seemed to know the man that was never there to begin with. Never to be within sight or reach, just hearing the blank footsteps dancing down the sidewalk only gave murmurs of *'Hermingham must be out tonight.'* This was said as mothers served their food and husbands read their papers. They had never suspected a word from the stranger as if they had known him.

To me it was quite ironic to know someone so very well who never even knew himself.

A loud rustle ricocheted throughout the pitch black room. The room had white paint that stretched over the walls. Obsidian colored furniture stood on top of mulberry brown hardwood flooring. A simple chandelier hung from the center of the room with diamonds and eye-catching strings draping from it. A white, wired bed sat on the floor against the wall with fluffy, white sheets thrown elegantly over the mattress. A brick fireplace mixed with coral and rustic orange. It was one of the simple but elegant rooms of Axel's empty house.

Axel sat down in front of the fireplace while sliding the tool box beside him. He opened it up revealing equipment that was stained red. Underneath the slightly moist equipment was a photograph of a girl. At the bottom right corner of the photograph it read *Elora* in a spidery scrawl. Elora had brunette curls pulled back into a stunning up-do. She wore a mischievous child grin underneath the fancy white dress that had said otherwise. Axel had always spoiled the child with whatever she pleased for. If she wanted a dress better than Sahara's, she would have it. Not a realistic enough doll? Axel always made them for her because he was the owner of a very successful toy company.

Axel had created dolls for Elora that no one else had. They had real human hair with hand stitched dresses. Their plastic joints moved with ease and their makeup was a beautiful sight. Elora never took what she had for granted, which was what made everyone love her. You see, Elora had a kinder soul in Braxwell's village. Everyone loved the child if she was rich or not. She was spoiled indeed, but far from snobby. Just the thought of Elora being absent in such a place made Axel's heart ache.

The dolls he was creating for her would never be finished for he thought to himself that they would never be good enough for Elora because Elora deserved the best. So Axel disposed of all those dolls, and decided to make a new collection for his dear dead daughter who he dearly wanted to play with. He wanted to hear her voice echo throughout the house as she would do coming home from school. He wanted to teach her the problems on the sheet the teacher had given her and caress her curls from the stress she was given. He longed to play in the dollhouses with her or to take her out to evening plays that starred puppets or classics. It was all just wiped away in a blur leaving Axel fending off his emotions himself.

He moved his hand to the back-pocket of his khakis pulling out a box of matchsticks. Running it against his finger, a flame was born. He placed the picture of Elora into the fireplace and then tossed the flame in. Axel's face was between fear and happiness. I myself couldn't understand what was behind those eyes after all the peculiar ones I've seen over the centuries.

"*Elora?*" Axel whispered to the fire. Abruptly, the fire stood up higher immediately giving off a blazing roar. The heat in the room increased drastically making the man break out into a sweat.

"Daddy!" A laugh bounced off the walls that startled Axel quite much to the point where he knocked over the tool box. Out spilled blood, tools, nails, as well as other little trinkets for building toys or carpentry.

The fire molded into the face of a girl with long curls and a gorgeous smile; it began to wither away leaving the soot and ash as the outline of a young girl. Suddenly, the window in the room burst open allowing wind to brush through. Ash and flakes were blown away one by one revealing pale skin and long brown hair. Bright, golden eyes with an abnormal smile. Elora wore the same dress and hairstyle as the picture. She ran out the fireplace embracing her father into a hug. She felt cold as the winter's blaze but it was the most warmth Axel had felt in a while. He brushed his fingers through her soft hair whispering- *"My little Elora is back to play!"*

I have seen many contact their loved ones through my gate such as Axel had done. But what had startled me was that Elora was able to touch him and hug him just as he did to her; this was no spirit because spirits can't do that. Axel was losing his mind, which all of Braxwell suspected. Everything that is within reach isn't always to be grabbed.

Axel had done just that.

The man turned around and stood up holding what he thought was the spirit of Elora's hand and walked her through their glorious mansion. He opened another door to a room where there were dollhouses that they had built together and dolls dressed better than most humans.

"I have a surprise my dear," Axel leaned close to Elora. "I have made you the best and most realistic doll no one has played with before. I would like for you to have it." He turns around and opens the closet in the room. There in the closet laid a woman with long blonde hair in a satin blue dress. Her legs were bruised and her eyes laid shut. There was no breathing pattern nor were there any shoes on her feet. On her neck was a line that had crusted blood around it as if it was cleaned off. Behind her on her back was a wind-up lever jabbed into her back.

Axel moves the lady around in the closet cursing at her to wake up. The woman's eyes slid open slowly for she was not dead yet. He grabbed her hand and led her in front of Elora who stood there with wide eyes. He went behind the newly created doll, winding it up. The bones cracked as he did so, and the woman let out a scream. Her first walk as a doll was her last.

"The dolls don't last very long my dear, but I will be improving them to make them last longer," he said as he kissed Elora on the forehead.

"You're such a good dollmaker daddy! I can help find more dolls." Elora was stunned but overjoyed to see Axel. It wasn't everyday that anyone could die and then see their loved ones again.

"Oh, it was all for you!" Axel blushed. "You've always deserved the best for your perfect spirit Elora. I just thought you would like what I made for you." Elora's wide eyes flicked into iris that a cat would possess and then changed back before Axel could take notice.

And so it began; The Dollmaker and the Little Girl. The Dollmaker would create dolls to make himself feel closer to his dead daughter, but she would never truly be there. Axel lost the little sanity he had left after Elora's death. He thought he was playing with her as they did when she was alive.

He and Elora would stroll together under the thin slice of moonlight, the clatter of the metal in the toolbox, and the newly kissed maroon smeared across her white dress and his khakis. Little did Axel know that *that* was not his Elora and that his real daughter would always be sitting in the fireplace or mirrors attempting to warn her father consumed in grief that she would never be able to leave. Everything wasn't within her reach, she could not pass the rules. So her father made more dolls and killed more people because he thought he was making his nine-year old daughter happy.

No one in Braxwell thought Axel would be behind these murders that only left behind nails and trinkets as evidence. But when they found out, they burned his mansion to the ground chasing him until he was dressed in nothing but rags. The door was burned into nothing but thick ashes. Axel watched the little girl before him. "Don't worry daddy," her voice sang as her eyes turned into the demonic glare and a sinister grin. "I'll always be with you." He may have managed to escape them, but I can assure you, no one can manage to escape me. Once again, I could not comprehend why such souls were so terrified of me yet so close. It kept me bewildered for all of the millions of years I have not been able to figure out the most simplest question.

What goes on through their heads?

I still cannot pinpoint in such a drastic tale of what made him tick. Every story never has an ending nor a beginning. It is just a long grim tale of the souls on this Earth. And for Elora, who couldn't go any further than the fireplace, had her one door burned to ashes and could never see her father again. Every option in the world isn't always a good one; hopefully Axel has learned this one for the better. Together, The Dollmaker and the Little Girl walked hand in hand through the depths of despair; searching for their next victim to play their dollhouse game.

Lauryn Giddings

Age: 17, Grade: 12

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

Educator: Patty Smith

Category: Novel Writing

Elysian

Brief summary:

Elysian, a novel combining sci-fi and fantasy elements, follows the main character, Queen Cassiopeia, who sets out to protect and warn other galaxies that the Holy Quaternity's sanctions are being threatened. Caelistis, the soul creator and most powerful spiritual entity, created the Holy Quaternity to restore balance and disperse her overwhelming powers into the universe after she banished her brother Apollyon, the god of death, for eternity. In the prologue, we find that Cassiopeia's daughter, Eliza, was prophesied to die in Elysian's war against Tragedy. The war was being fought to protect the Book of Genzüles. In the unmasking of Tragedy's true identity, Cassiopeia realizes that it was her sister, Nerezza, causing the war all along. After Nerezza and Eliza's deaths, Cassiopeia learns that Nerezza's land, the Xersteis Empire, was under attack by an unknown force and that Nerezza had needed the Book of Genzüles for protection. Cassiopeia and Elysian set out to save the Xersteis Empire from the malevolent Iram while protecting one of the universe's most prized possessions. Not only is Cassiopeia fighting a war with the Iram, she is also fighting a war within herself. She struggles with Nerezza's betrayal and Eliza's death, which makes her protective over her son during battles. As the adventure continues, Cassiopeia learns of the Iram's true intentions. After being kidnapped by the leader of the Iram at the end of the novel, Cassiopeia learns that the battles happening in Galaxy 10-9 are only the beginning of a true, universal disaster.

Excerpt:

"My boy is a man now," I smiled sadly down at him. "And you have witnessed more than a man can bear." He plucked the lavender off the ground and rubbed it in between his fingers. We were glued to the ground admiring the wonders around us. For a short moment, it was as if there was no war to be fought. It was as if everything was a sinful nightmare and we lived in a dantiful world filled with flowers and the sun smiling down on us. But, we both knew that this wasn't true, yet, we could pretend. *Just for a little while*, we could pretend and soak up the sun like sponges.

There were light butterflies cruising in the air from flower to flower. The dirt beneath our feet was moist from the morning fog. This was like a dream, and nothing more. A small distraction from reality to see a star that was here before us and would be living long after us.

So we pretended, just a little while longer.

The ISS has arrived; ten to be exact. It was all of the ISS that Elysian had. In addition, there were ten Hummers, 50,000 soldiers and the Nightskyers. Eliza used to be the head of the Nightskyers because she adored the pegasus and it gave her an excuse to include Stardüst, her own pegasus, in her training. I had walked through the pathway, the same one we had gone through just days before to enter the Xersteis Empire, along with Raelynn, Laxen, Dandara and Aldrin. It was overgrown with plants and vines that slithered across the eroding pathway like snakes.

I stopped and admired the large ships with additional soldiers bustling off. The bright light bouncing off of the metal and blinding our sight. I looked down at my phone after being aware of it ringing. I accepted Nester's call and angled my phone so that his hologram looked like he was standing on the ground.

"The ships should've arrived by now," Nester told me, unaware of what was behind him. He glanced over his shoulder at the noise of some soldiers dropping a few bags they were holding. He turned back around, "yeah, they're here."

"Ambrosia says that they attack tomorrow," the glow in Nester's face faltered at my unpleasant news.

"You have all the finest ships in Elysian and we still have more Hummers if you need them, but I doubt that you will."

"We're going to send out the battle plan in a matter of an hour," I said. "I just need Zenith's eyes on my blueprint; he knows this empire better than I do."

Nester nodded his head, turned and greeted the others behind me and smiled weakly at his boy, Laxen. "I wish that I could be there to help," he muttered, feeling useless.

"A good king is always in the midst of a battle ready to pull his blade at any creature that defies his throne. A noble, brilliant king is only where he is needed. Then he can supply the blades and is the eyes his soldiers need." I tried to smile at him. "If everyone in the family is dead, who shall rule? To be a good king you do not have to be on the battlefield every time. Besides, a dead king is worthless to the protection of Elysian and Dalisay." Nester tried to agree with what I said but wrestled with his thoughts. No one ever said that being a royal would be a walk in the park and Nester was constantly being reminded of it with the chance of his family being butchered.

"Raelynn," I looked over to my guardian. "Tell the commanders of the ships that they can camp out in the west wing area outside where the other 200 soldiers are situated until further notice. Boys," I nodded my head at Laxen and Aldrin, "you can help her. There are many ships out here." I whispered to Nester that I loved him and turned off the call; his hologram being sucked into my phone like light being sucked into a black hole.

I left them and wallowed through the pathway once more to find Zenith; I had to speak to him of my plans. I entered the castle and paced through the halls to find the Sertavian. I ran into Calvin who was smoking a cigarette.

"Where's Zenith?"

He ran his fingers through his cloud like hair and pulled the cigarette out of his mouth. Light smoke arose from his lips like a volcano prior to eruption. "He's in the lab with Cadmen," he held up his cigarette. "Had to take a smoke break," his voice was like water rolling over wax. Expecting me to follow him, he walked down to the laboratory room. I could hear conversation between the two. Calvin unlocked the door with his handprint and opened it.

"See they implanted a chip into its temple," Cadmen pulled a small device out of the Vexling's head. It had wires that mimicked veins and it was pulsing still as if it was an organ yet, it was rather mimicking one. He dropped it in a jar and closed the lid and looked at it up close.

"I suppose your theory was correct," Zenith looked into the jar admiring the strange contraption. "Dear gods how have they gotten to this," he paused and looked at Cadmen. "*Classified?*" Cadmen nodded and placed the jar back on the table. "Classified technology!"

"I'm sure it hasn't even been released to the other galaxies in the Confederation," Cadmen muttered something under his breath and I cleared my throat. Both of the men were so engrossed in this creature that they hadn't even taken notice of me. "I'm going to insert it into my temple so that I can access the ships."

"Zenith I need to have a word with you," I pointed out of the door. I bent over to observe the strange intelligence in the jar; I straightened up and my eyes met Cadmen. "It's called a Vexling," I told the Zerockian and he somewhat showed sleight horror in his eyes for the first time yet, it only lasted a matter of a few seconds before he broke our gaze. I knew he would research it; time was precious and I needed all the help I could get. "Good work," I told them all. "Now we can hack into that damn system after all."

I left the lab and walked through Calvin's smoke with Zenith following me behind. Then Calvin crushed the cigarette, tossed it in the trash, and closed the door behind us. "I need to show you the battle plan," I said and looked around for the dining room so that we could sit at a table. "You have lived in this empire and have seen the atrocities of what has taken place with the Iram; I don't want to make the same bad decisions you made." I pulled out the map that they had given me when I first arrived and realized that I had to make a left turn to get to the Dining Hall.

I slid into a seat and Zenith sat across from me. I laid out the map in front of him showing my scribbles and thought process of what moves we were to do next. "We have ten Elysian Imperial Spaceships, 10 Hummers, 50,200 soldiers, and the Nightskyers at our disposal." I scribbled a compass on the paper. "In the Southwest and Southeast there will be three ISS and one Hummer; one of those ISS won't be launched unless we need them to."

"Your Imperial Spaceships are still quite large; they'll be able to see them miles away despite the thick forest," Zenith pointed out analyzing the plan.

"We scan the surroundings before we land the ships. Then they project a forcefield that keeps them invisible and paints the trees as lively and not crushed." I went on with my explanation. "There's one ISS and one Hummer in the Northwest and Northeast of the empire. Then where the civilians lived in the center, there are 10,050 men scattered to each of its four corners and one group in the center. There's five Hummers to accompany them and the Nightskyers will wait for their commands at the steps of the castle. Then there's an additional two ISS and one Hummer behind the Xerstenian Castle."

"This *could* work," Zenith pressed his long fingers against his lips. "We don't have any ships to add on to your

force; they were all destroyed and we were completely defenseless in our last attack. We had ships not as large as Elysian's nor did we have the forcefield technology as you do. It will catch them off guard," he stopped himself from speaking any further. "We'll see what happens tomorrow." He left it at that and stood up from the table.

"I'm going to send out the plans now," I told him, folding the paper up and slipping it into my pocket. "Then they can get into position tonight."

Later that night, I wandered the halls once more. The night before a war was always intimidating. My throat was parched and I needed a glass of water. My toes led me back to the dining hall where Cadmen sat in the dark only illuminated by his cell phone notifications. He had a glass of water himself and was admiring a small blade under the blue light. He took notice of me but seemed to not care. He only lowered his eyes back down to his blade; beautiful but deadly.

I grabbed a glass of water from the kitchen and made my way back to the dining hall. The young man was still there but no longer admiring his blade. He seemed tormented with his thoughts after all, who wasn't?

"The mind is your most powerful weapon, yet most deceiving, *eh?*" I sat across from him and he looked down at the table.

"A Vexling you said?" It came out as a hushed whisper that was silenced by the darkness around us. I nodded my head at him licking my lips before indulging a sip of water. "Who told you that?"

I sat my glass down at the table watching the ice cubes twirl around like a tornado and then slowly stopping. "Elvira," I looked up at him sharply. "But you mustn't tell anyone! Or we will outstay our welcome." Cadmen nodded in agreement with my command and I relaxed my shoulders a little bit. "What does a Zerockian know about hacking? And why did you leave your job at the White Palace?"

"I saw something I shouldn't have." It was as if he knew I was to question him about his past. "I worked in the White Palace," he placed his words carefully. "The official that I guarded, he had started to act out of character. I didn't think much of it; people don't stay the same forever.

"Then one day, on my lunch break, I had heard a scream in one of the gardens. I seemed to be the only one that heard such barbarity. I've heard many screams in my time as a warrior and guardian, yet none has ever troubled me and took me off guard as this one had. I ran towards it and saw another official on the ground, dead. Something stood over him, morphing into his exact replica.

"He saw me and called me over. We made a deal; I could quit without saying a word, I could be fired and have a bad report on my record, or be killed. I chose the most sensible of them; quit without saying a damn word. I went back to my tribe and would seek out work later. I needed to tell someone of what I had seen because I didn't know if those officials were really who they were perceived to be.

"It had been a few days until the Vexlings attacked. I didn't see them; I was out at the interview to become Eliza's new guardian. When I returned back, everyone was slaughtered except for a few survivors. One of the traumatized Zerockians said that it was a few Vexlings that had come and killed them. There were stories that I heard as a kid of Vexlings coming to eat children who disobeyed their parents; I never had thought much of it. I thought that it was something else. I began to think that the shapeshifting creature was a Vexling that killed the official and probably killed the official I worked for as well. It was a warning written in the death of my people, my family, to keep silent.

"I was weak, terrified so when I worked for Eliza shortly after, I made sure to protect her since I couldn't protect my family." Cadmen showed a great emotion, more than I had ever seen in his cold and introverted nature. He had tears rolling down his face by the gallons. "I should have gone east with her and Prisma, but I listened to her orders. I listened to her tell me what I was going to do just as I had with that creature! I should have trusted my judgement and she died. I never lost someone I guarded before," he wiped the tears from his face. "She's dead because of me. I'm a fool seeking redemption in the deadliest form!"

"Eliza is not dead because of you Cadmen," I placed my hand on his and softly patted him. "Eliza died because of my sister. It was vile what she did and my daughter was a part of a prophecy spoken of long ago. She was already dead when she hired you." The words were needles to the skin and I knew that he wouldn't accept them. It was Nerezza's fault but it felt like part of it was mine.

"The official I worked for," Cadmen cleared his voice. "He began to like me and told me classified information about new technology. He had loose lips," he let out a light chuckle. "He had to tell someone outside the Council his secrets. I learned hacking from him. I told him little stories about myself and gave him my loyalty in exchange for his small excerpts of knowledge. We could've been fired, yet he enjoyed doing it. He was reckless and I suppose I was too."

It made sense now why Cadmen gave up the best job a guardian could have galaxy wide. I didn't think he was a weak man, he was trapped. Was he to denounce the Council by calling out one of the officials for lying about their identity and be put in jail or move on as if nothing had happened? The Council regulates everything in this galaxy. They are the most powerful government in all of 10-9. Cadmen would be dead along with his tribe if he had said

something. But to him, it seemed as though being dead and knowing the truth was much more prideful than being alive and knowing the truth. At least the dead weren't given the option to hide such a tale, but the living? They live with guilt and fear.

"After this all blows over I'm sure I can help you look into this more," I told him warmly. "I believe you, Cadmen." I had remembered hearing about the Zerockian Tribe being slaughtered in the news. Another massacre in an endless world of violence.

"Thank you," he said and drank the rest of his water. He left the room and slipped the blade in his pocket. Today a man realized that the monster that starred in his childhood fables were indeed real. So real, that he had stared into its hollow eyes and its enthralling teeth. He was scared deep down but had hid it from everyone. He was a cold stone killer in his eyes; responsible for every Zerockian death with addition to Prisma's and Eliza's. To me, he was still a strong man yet was a fool for trying to find redemption and acceptance through war; he can only find what he seeks in himself.

Lauryn Giddings

Age: 17, Grade: 12

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

Educator: Patty Smith

Category: Short Story

Distraction

"I saw it, I swear!"

"You must be blind, Allana. It was a natural devastation, our planet is due for a bad fire as this once a millenia."

"No," Allana grimaced, throwing a box of vanilla cake mix into the grocery cart. Her skin, just as the rest of ours, a moss green that shimmered under the long fluorescent lights that levitated in the air. Allana's lips turned downward like a flat tire just above her defined chin. She narrowed her electric blue eyes that zapped out anger and disapproval. "You're the blind one Natalie."

After Ilaria was attacked just a decade ago, our species, the Widoxes, was split in half on what was truly the cause of all of the fire that damaged a large portion of our city. Two of my friends constantly bickered back and forth about it, not as grown women but children. Allana saw what I saw; the goddess of war, Venus. Fire bent into the outline of a woman; her hair shooting up like bullets and her fingers and footsteps turning everything in her path to charred remains. Venus didn't glow a crimson red as the rest of the flames did that tormented Ilaria, but a blinding white that I could only squint at.

People who witnessed what Allana and I saw concluded that this could only be Venus and that there had to be an important reason for her to come to Ilaria. *"The goddess of war physically coming to our city to wreak havoc? She must be pissed!"* I remember Allana telling me just a few days after the fires were under control. Rumors swept through the city with the strength of winds from a hurricane that our leader had stolen Venus' renown bow and arrow. He denied the accusations of course, and many non-religious Widoxes ridiculed some politicians for bringing their religious beliefs into their arguments.

"We need to work on rebuilding Ilaria; blaming a natural devastation on a make believed goddess is preposterous and irresponsible. Half of Ilaria's residents are homeless and the only thing that radicals can do is blame it on a fable we were told as children, instead of actually doing something!" Abhaya Starr was Natalie's favorite politician. She was the embodiment of Abhaya's biggest fan. She listened and watched all of the podcasts, shows, speeches, and appearances Abhaya made. Natalie never missed a moment to challenge Allana's beliefs, who prior to the Great Fire, was non-religious.

I had been religious all of my life. I believed that Caelistis was the most powerful entity out of all the gods and that the Holy Quaternity were religious treasures and not scientific enigmas. Regardless, I usually kept my opinions from people such as Natalie; they wouldn't change their minds until they saw what I saw.

"Come on," I pulled the grocery basket. The glowing lights that allowed the basket to levitate located underneath of it hit up against my skin. "We need to finish getting everything for Aurthur's birthday. He likes Yerkun pie, that's his favorite." I moved to the aisle with whip cream; Allana and Natalie followed me, still debating on who was right. After the Great Fire in 3053, a Dézmeere by the name Gilda sacrificed herself to the god Prometheus in exchange for help and protection from Venus. Some believers of Venus thought that she would still attack Ilaria because of her bow and arrow regardless if Prometheus tried to protect us. She was the goddess of war after all. Others thought that this was all bullshit and that we needed a slice of reality. It was a decade long debate and all I hoped was that Venus wouldn't return to Ilaria again.

Later that night, we threw a large party for my husband. Our daughters, Nerezza and Cassiopeia, who were 12 and 14 years old, were ecstatic to give Arthur his gifts. Natalie sat on our couch that was fuzzy like a peach. She had platinum blonde hair that she had dyed just last week, and had brown eyebrows with two slits on the right side. Compared to me and Allana, she wasn't ready to settle down and have kids. She liked feeling free and traveling throughout our Galaxy and the rest of the Confederation. Natalie still adored children though and loved Nerezza and Cassiopeia with all of her heart. She'd take them to the movies, flower picking, and to go watch spaceship races. She even wanted to take them rock climbing once, which I nicely declined because I thought it was too dangerous. Natalie liked the taste of adventure sparkling on her tongue like Seltzer.

"Stella, it's getting a bit foggy outside," Allana noticed drawing back the curtain's drapes, then did the same to her long, blue curly hair.

"It's just a hot and cold front meeting," I responded, too busy to pay attention to what she was saying. I was too distracted with bringing out Arthur's birthday cake to look out the window. Vanilla batter mixed with strawberries, baked to perfection, and topped with a pastel sapphire fondant and one birthday candle to be polite to my husband's age. We lit Arthur's cake; a smile was plastered on his green face that was brighter than Venus. We sang happy birthday, some of us sounding like dehydrated cats while others had a voice filled with richness and beauty. Arthur blew out his candles and a large explosion happened next door. The smell of smoke assaulted my nose and was becoming more prominent. Before, I thought that it was the birthday candle. We dashed outside, my hands gripping Nerezza and Casseopia's hands.

Fire was spreading everywhere the setting sun had touched. "We need to get out of here, now!" Allana shouted, pulling up her shirt over her nose.

"I'm going back inside to get something to tie over our face!" Arthur yelled as the fire became louder. A thousand tiny screams came from each flame that spread over our house. He ran inside and I shouted at him to come back, but he never listened. Ten seconds felt like ten years. I pulled up Nerezza's shirt over her cute little nose and instructed Cassiopeia to do the same. A few minutes passed by and Arthur still hadn't come out yet.

"Watch over them!" I told Allana and Natalie, and pushed my daughters into their embrace. Other Widoxes were escaping from their homes; the roofs collapsing underneath the fire's snarl. I bolted into the house, looked around, became anxious as the fire crept in our once adobe, and shouted for Arthur. I dashed upstairs to our bedroom; each step claiming three stairs at once. There he was, trying to grab as many things as he could out of the house.

"You're distracted! Leave that stuff alone!" I tried to grab him but he pulled back.

"Have you seen my mother's pendant? I can't leave that!" He gave me the stuff in his hands as if expecting me to leave him behind.

"Come on Arthur! We don't have time for this!"

"No I need it, okay Stella? That's all I have left of her!"

He ran into the closet that was on the other side of the room. Aggressively, he looked through drawers trying to find what he had left of his mother. I ran over to him and pulled him out of the closet. "We're leaving! We need to get Cass and Nerezza to safety!" The flames were making its way upstairs and through the walls. Suddenly, the roof caved in like a smashed pumpkin I pushed Arthur out of the way and he stumbled onto the ground. All of the things in my hands fell to the floor and some into the fire. Arthur's livid eyes stared at my stomach area and I looked down to see why he looked so queasy. A large piece of wood had impaled me. Shock hit me like lightning and I immediately felt pain. It was a wave of unbearable agony and misery that ripped and clawed through my insides. Blood pooled on the floor to Arthur's toes.

His chin became weak and his tongue couldn't form a word. Tears slipped from his eyes out of pure horror. When he was able to muster words underneath the roar of flames, he cried out, "this is all my fault! I was distracted!" He clammered and got to his feet. He grabbed my hands that were losing warmth by the minute. The crisp lines of my 20/20 vision were becoming blurry and ambiguous. I forced a soft smile over my face.

"It's okay," I whispered to him. The last tears I would ever cry dangled from my eyelashes, making them heavy and twisted. "Go to our daughters." He stayed for a few minutes not wanting to go, sobbing into my hands as the flames grew taller. I snatched my hands back, with the little strength I had left. "They need you, Arthur."

He left, warily. The flames had covered such a large portion of the room that Arthur burned his arm while leaving. A few minutes after he left, a bright light poured into the hallway and slipped into the bedroom. A woman, just as the one I had seen a decade before, swayed through the halls by the beat of her own drum. She cocked her head at me, and the blinding white fire that made up her body calmed into a young woman. She had skin clearer than a summer day, glowing golden marks etched into her oval face, eyes catlike, and full, rosebud lips. Her coffee brown hair, that was once fire, elegantly fell to her shoulders as if she was underwater. She brought her finger to her lips, hushing me softly.

As the life gently left my body, slowly and painfully, I concluded that our leader must have taken Venus' bow and arrow. Perhaps a decade was a few hours to a god. Venus had given us the chance to make our leader give back what was rightfully hers. We had done nothing but argued for the last ten years.

"This needed to be done," Venus whispered. Her voice was filled with enchantment, mystery, a hint of anger, and a spark of sadness. Another decade of arguments from the Widoxes of whether Ilaria was burned by Venus or by nature would soon blossom. I knew the truth, I had seen it with my own eyes. Venus erupted back into white flames; just her presence made the flames in the house stronger and brighter. Consciousness slipped from my eyes as white light stole my vision. I knew the truth of what destroyed Ilaria in the second attack in year 3063 yet, my truthful tales would only be sealed in the world where the dead reside.

Laurn Giddings

Age: 17, Grade: 12

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

Educator: Patty Smith

Category: Flash Fiction

Open for Business

"What do you notice now?" The question laid naked in the clinic; the psychiatrist had his legs crossed and his chestnut eyes were filled with bewilderment. "What do you notice now ever since you have contacted Elora? Ever since your neighbors have run you out of town? Since your toyshop has been burned to the ground? Ever since your wife died?"

Axel Hermingham fidgeted with his fingers; his hair was a combination of grease, sweat and unease. "What I notice now," Axel murmured, "is that I get noticed; someone must have put my face in the paper."

There was a long pause in the room as the psychiatrist scribbled onto his notebook. The room had a long yellow, mustard couch and two vintage chairs angled to it. A round coffee table decorated with pink, fluffy flowers that reminded Axel of Elora's favorite treat; cotton candy. Mr. Winchester was going to send Axel Hermingham away for all of his crimes. A mental hospital sounded more poisonous to him than a jail cell. At least then there wouldn't be people pointing a magnifying glass at him trying to understand how he ticked. At least in a prison cell, Axel could rot away in peace.

"What do you feel now?"

"Emptiness," Axel whispered. "Like the one thing that was missing in your life was never there to begin with." Bringing back Elora from the dead had damned Axel because he hadn't known what he had brought back was far more sinister than his pure and perfect little girl. He made toys for all of the good girls and boys and saved the most realistic dolls for his daughter Elora. They only had become more and more realistic as time went on far after her death.

"Do you feel sorry for the victims?"

Axel's lips trembled in confusion. "What is there to be sorry for? I made Elora the finest dolls in all of Braxwell!"

"Axel, do you understand what a victim is?" Axel thrust his head back in annoyance as a response. "Your dolls were people, Mr. Hermingham, and I believe you consciously knew that. I believe when you realized that your daughter was really dead and was never coming back, you decided to not accept your responsibility in your crimes. There would be no purpose if you did; because your daughter is dead. Elora Hermingham is dead, Mr. Hermingham."

"You're a grande liar Mr. Winchester but I assure you, my daughter was there. Dead? Alive? Perhaps something in between."

"You sound like a madman," the psychiatrist said, losing his patience. He had known one of the victims and had an eternal grudge against Axel yet, he attempted to stay professional.

"Only a man is called a madman when he's seen something that others have not yet seen. I made my daughter happy," Axel spat, disheveled at the discussion. "I can live with that."

Mr. Winchester closed his notebook and stood up and left the room. Afterwards, two police officers came into the room to take Axel back to his jail cell.

"I will see you in a matter of two weeks at the court case Mr. Hermingham," the psychiatrist said as two police officers escorted Axel out of the building. A man who never knew himself began to lose what soul was left of him, if you can even call it that. His sanity was buried in his daughter's casket. Deep down Axel knew that his psychiatrist hated him and that many people were pushing for the death penalty; it worried him a bit because he didn't want to be electrocuted. Then Elora caught his eye. The demon he had summoned and believed that it was his daughter was in the parking lot. She vanished in a blink of an eye with giggles that only he could hear. On the ride back to his cell in the police car, he looked over to the right side of the back seat to see Elora. Her chocolate, curly hair shuddering over the uneven road.

"Don't worry daddy," Elora flashed a devious smile. Suddenly, the police officers lost control on a thin strip of road through the woods. The car tumbled down and Axel shouted in horror as the smooth interior of the car became

jagged edges like mountains. When all movement ceased, he crawled out and Elora gave him a hand. “Now we can be together forever.”

Axel walked through the woods with Elora, leaving three carcasses behind in the police car instead of two. All he could notice now was that he was with what he thought to be his daughter. He noticed he was happy, free under the sun’s soft gaze. Axel Herminham finally understood his purpose; to continue making toys for all good little girls and boys. Then making realistic dolls for little girls especially like Elora. Axel Herminham’s toy shop would always be open for business.

Laurn Giddings

Age: 17, Grade: 12

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

Educator: Patty Smith

Category: Short Story

Hermingham's Toy Shop

A tall man with fair skin and coffee drenched hair stood in the mist under a full moon. To any other human in Braxwell's village, Axel was taking an evening stroll just as he did with his daughter Elora. No one had ever noticed the knives strapped to his arms underneath his plaid, long-sleeve shirt or the newly kissed maroon that smeared off his fingers onto his khakis.

No one questioned the toolbox he brought with him every evening. They trusted Axel Hermingham with all their heart, but he was close to no one or anyone after Elora died. In response, everyone acted as though they still seemed to know the man that was never there to begin with. Never to be within sight or reach, just hearing the blank footsteps dancing down the sidewalk only gave murmurs of *'Hermingham must be out tonight.'* This was said as mothers served their food and husbands read their papers. They had never suspected a word from the stranger as if they had known him.

To me it was quite ironic to know someone so very well who never even knew himself.

A loud rustle ricocheted throughout the pitch black room. The room had white paint that stretched over the walls. Obsidian colored furniture stood on top of mulberry brown hardwood flooring. A simple chandelier hung from the center of the room with diamonds and eye-catching strings draping from it. A white, wired bed sat on the floor against the wall with fluffy, white sheets thrown elegantly over the mattress. A brick fireplace mixed with coral and rustic orange. It was one of the simple but elegant rooms of Axel's empty house.

Axel sat down in front of the fireplace while sliding the tool box beside him. He opened it up revealing equipment that was stained red. Underneath the slightly moist equipment was a photograph of a girl. At the bottom right corner of the photograph it read *Elora* in a spidery scrawl. Elora had brunette curls pulled back into a stunning up-do. She wore a mischievous child grin underneath the fancy white dress that had said otherwise. Axel had always spoiled the child with whatever she pleased for. If she wanted a dress better than Sahara's, she would have it. Not a realistic enough doll? Axel always made them for her because he was the owner of a very successful toy company.

Axel had created dolls for Elora that no one else had. They had real human hair with hand stitched dresses. Their plastic joints moved with ease and their makeup was a beautiful sight. Elora never took what she had for granted, which was what made everyone love her. You see, Elora had a kinder soul in Braxwell's village. Everyone loved the child if she was rich or not. She was spoiled indeed, but far from snobby. Just the thought of Elora being absent in such a place made Axel's heart ache.

The dolls he was creating for her would never be finished for he thought to himself that they would never be good enough for Elora because Elora deserved the best. So Axel disposed of all those dolls, and decided to make a new collection for his dear dead daughter who he dearly wanted to play with. He wanted to hear her voice echo throughout the house as she would do coming home from school. He wanted to teach her the problems on the sheet the teacher had given her and caress her curls from the stress she was given. He longed to play in the dollhouses with her or to take her out to evening plays that starred puppets or classics. It was all just wiped away in a blur leaving Axel fending off his emotions himself.

He moved his hand to the back-pocket of his khakis pulling out a box of matchsticks. Running it against his finger, a flame was born. He placed the picture of Elora into the fireplace and then tossed the flame in. Axel's face was between fear and happiness. I myself couldn't understand what was behind those eyes after all the peculiar ones I've seen over the centuries.

"*Elora?*" Axel whispered to the fire. Abruptly, the fire stood up higher immediately giving off a blazing roar. The heat in the room increased drastically making the man break out into a sweat.

"Daddy!" A laugh bounced off the walls that startled Axel quite much to the point where he knocked over the tool box. Out spilled blood, tools, nails, as well as other little trinkets for building toys or carpentry.

The fire molded into the face of a girl with long curls and a gorgeous smile; it began to wither away leaving the soot and ash as the outline of a young girl. Suddenly, the window in the room burst open allowing wind to brush through. Ash and flakes were blown away one by one revealing pale skin and long brown hair. Bright, golden eyes with an abnormal smile. Elora wore the same dress and hairstyle as the picture. She ran out the fireplace embracing her father into a hug. She felt cold as the winter's blaze but it was the most warmth Axel had felt in a while. He brushed his fingers through her soft hair whispering- *"My little Elora is back to play!"*

I have seen many contact their loved ones through my gate such as Axel had done. But what had startled me was that Elora was able to touch him and hug him just as he did to her; this was no spirit because spirits can't do that. Axel was losing his mind, which all of Braxwell suspected. Everything that is within reach isn't always to be grabbed.

Axel had done just that.

The man turned around and stood up holding what he thought was the spirit of Elora's hand and walked her through their glorious mansion. He opened another door to a room where there were dollhouses that they had built together and dolls dressed better than most humans.

"I have a surprise my dear," Axel leaned close to Elora. "I have made you the best and most realistic doll no one has played with before. I would like for you to have it." He turns around and opens the closet in the room. There in the closet laid a woman with long blonde hair in a satin blue dress. Her legs were bruised and her eyes laid shut. There was no breathing pattern nor were there any shoes on her feet. On her neck was a line that had crusted blood around it as if it was cleaned off. Behind her on her back was a wind-up lever jabbed into her back.

Axel moves the lady around in the closet cursing at her to wake up. The woman's eyes slid open slowly for she was not dead yet. He grabbed her hand and led her in front of Elora who stood there with wide eyes. He went behind the newly created doll, winding it up. The bones cracked as he did so, and the woman let out a scream. Her first walk as a doll was her last.

"The dolls don't last very long my dear, but I will be improving them to make them last longer," he said as he kissed Elora on the forehead.

"You're such a good dollmaker daddy! I can help find more dolls." Elora was stunned but overjoyed to see Axel. It wasn't everyday that anyone could die and then see their loved ones again.

"Oh, it was all for you!" Axel blushed. "You've always deserved the best for your perfect spirit Elora. I just thought you would like what I made for you." Elora's wide eyes flicked into iris that a cat would possess and then changed back before Axel could take notice.

And so it began; The Dollmaker and the Little Girl. The Dollmaker would create dolls to make himself feel closer to his dead daughter, but she would never truly be there. Axel lost the little sanity he had left after Elora's death. He thought he was playing with her as they did when she was alive.

He and Elora would stroll together under the thin slice of moonlight, the clatter of the metal in the toolbox, and the newly kissed maroon smeared across her white dress and his khakis. Little did Axel know that *that* was not his Elora and that his real daughter would always be sitting in the fireplace or mirrors attempting to warn her father consumed in grief that she would never be able to leave. Everything wasn't within her reach, she could not pass the rules. So her father made more dolls and killed more people because he thought he was making his nine-year old daughter happy.

No one in Braxwell thought Axel would be behind these murders that only left behind nails and trinkets as evidence. But when they found out, they burned his mansion to the ground chasing him until he was dressed in nothing but rags. The door was burned into nothing but thick ashes. Axel watched the little girl before him. "Don't worry daddy," her voice sang as her eyes turned into the demonic glare and a sinister grin. "I'll always be with you." He may have managed to escape them, but I can assure you, no one can manage to escape me. Once again, I could not comprehend why such souls were so terrified of me yet so close. It kept me bewildered for all of the millions of years I have not been able to figure out the most simplest question.

What goes on through their heads?

I still cannot pinpoint in such a drastic tale of what made him tick. Every story never has an ending nor a beginning. It is just a long grim tale of the souls on this Earth. And for Elora, who couldn't go any further than the fireplace, had her one door burned to ashes and could never see her father again. Every option in the world isn't always a good one; hopefully Axel has learned this one for the better. Together, The Dollmaker and the Little Girl walked hand in hand through the depths of despair; searching for their next victim to play their dollhouse game.

Laurn Giddings

Age: 17, Grade: 12

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

Educator: Patty Smith

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Clumsy Ballerina

Darkness swallowed everything in sight as if it was some sort of creature manifested in the deepest pits of one's mind. Backstage, there would be a swarm of movement like bees from the dancers who had just finished; they bolted to change for their other dances that were back to back or in a matter of three minutes. The most fashionable costumes were never in the class I was in and I secretly envied them all year just as every girl had done. Teachers hissed like snakes for silence and tap shoes were to be soundless statues. The eerie silence of hundreds of people sitting in the auditorium laid before a naked stage.

I'd lie to myself every year that I wasn't nervous to go on stage however, the fear had always dawned on me that if I slipped or made a mistake that I couldn't mask, everyone would notice. It didn't matter if I had mastered the steps for months and could make perfect and clear sounds with my tap shoes; the moment of truth mattered now and that's all the audience would ever see. Not my practice, but my performance. Messing up could throw the rest of the dancers off or our time if it was tap dance. Ballet would be much harder to mask; there would be no sound to roar over one's mistakes like a lion. Dancers would smile with rosy cheeks, improv a little, and pretend that what they did was a solo; *not too noticeable*. It doesn't work in every case though. The music would begin and the lights would pour across the stage like a sunrise. The colossal stage lights wrapped around my body as if I had entered a pool. The warm rays highlighting every pair of judgmental eyes of dance moms to our dance teacher giving us glimpses from the sidelines. The music boomed and we made our entrance.

Forgetting to draw a smile on my face was always the first mistake I made. It would wash away after I had gotten through 1/3rd of the dance. I'd remember to put it back on at the end. I had to mask my thoughts, thinking, counting, remembering to keep my head up, keeping my balance straight, steps, and many other details that accompanied the movements. Sometimes, dancing is like balancing on a tightrope; one wrong move can lead to more wrong moves, and next thing you know you're the star of the show for lying on the floor. Losing your balance is a lot easier than it seems; people always expect dancers to have the greatest posture and to glide amongst the floor like silky wind. Dancers are the clumsiest of all people and it's a known fact amongst us. There would be girls that would sit out in class due to injuries; tour jeté and pirouettes didn't faze their legs, but doing a simple task or slipping did. I found it funny that they would hurt themselves over the smallest things. I never broke a bone before, but I felt like I might break one now.

We swept across the stage like sand to the wind in ballet and made historic beats with the metal of our tap shoes. After being on stage, near the end, anxiety had let go of it's grip around my throat. I felt that the pressure that had been suffocating me like a paper bag around my head had dissolved into sweet success. When I completed the dance perfectly; I glanced at my teacher to make sure that she was seeing what I was doing. I would prove to her that I could dance just like the Delirium dancers, yet I was lying to myself a little. When I messed up on a step, disappointment and anger would rapture my soul for weeks. I would practice those steps and do them correctly in the living room. *What was the difference on stage?*

Delirium is a program at Chesterfield Dance Center where you have to apply to get in. After being accepted, those dancers get to take part in competitions, many other dances, and the opening and closing dances of CDC recitals. Generally, these girls are in over twenty dances and take part in all three recital shows. Most of CDC is made up of Delirium dancers it seems and although they are nice and not snobby like girls in other dance centers, they stay to their cliques. They dance together, travel together, breath together, and go to school together. Their suburban mothers either can afford to drop over twenty grande a year on dance classes or they get a part time job. Moms are littered backstage and help navigate the doors so that they can earn free tickets. Mothers are always working at the front desk of studios to save money on their daughter's classes. I would always feel out of place, and certainly when my friend, Sydney, and I were told to narrow our classes down from three to two when we first came

to CDC.

"I'm taking jazz," Milly said. Deep down I knew that she would choose jazz and I loved it too; I didn't want to give it up. Choosing between classes was pulling a limb off; dancing was one of my passions and I loved jazz class! Yet, I couldn't abandon tap as I was the best at that. My mother was proud of me for making my own decision and not following my friend however, I was upset. Why didn't all the other girls have to choose? They got to do as many as they wanted! They had all the cutest costumes and jaw-dropping dances and I wanted to be like them badly. Over time, I learned to accept that I wasn't going to do more than two classes. After every recital, I became a little sad because I at least wanted to try out two other classes such as hip hop; now that was a distant memory.

I've been dancing since I was five years old and have taken classes at four different companies now: Premier Academy, Latin Ballet, Encore Performing Arts Studio Inc., and Chesterfield Dance Center. Each dance studio was the same in their cliques, girls having an abundant amount of dances, and the stereotypical suburban moms. I've noticed at every studio that I've gone to is that dancers who are not in competition programs are often left out and are excluded from cliques. Dancing with girls that already know each other, that don't make the effort to get to know you, and trying to keep up with them when they are more experienced makes me feel out of place. I focus on mastering the steps rather than making new friends however, when I am to do a solo my nerves spaz out like an unraveling sweater.

I came to Encore when I was around six years old and the teachers had turned their noses up to me in disgust. "*Our dancers*," they snapped like nutcrackers, "*our dancers have been dancing since they were three*." I obviously didn't last long at Encore; they are notoriously infamous for their toxic dance moms and big-headed dancers. At Premier Academy, I loved it there however, comparing myself to everyone else drained the fun out of dance class. I remember when we had Mrs. Jennifer's mean, cranky mother teach our class for the rest of the year. I was ecstatic for the jazz dance because I was the lead. I finally felt like I was getting better at dance and that someone was recognizing me. The lady watched and immediately put another dancer in the center; I had always thought about what she had that I didn't. That was many things in my eyes. Although I had a few friends at Premier and I didn't feel as isolated, the stress of not being good enough started to affect me.

We stared at the mirrors for hours trying to fix what we were doing wrong, fix how we looked, sucked our stomachs in, and made ourselves pretty for the stage. Being too big, not having your splits, or being able to bring your leg up the highest peckered at my thoughts. So me and Milly moved to Chesterfield Dance Center where we found a better dance experience. No matter where we went, it felt like we couldn't escape the bad parts of dance center culture. As I became older, I became more anxious in class about being the first to start tap dancing, dancing at my own pace when we practiced amongst ourselves, and dreaded solos that I once welcomed. My anxiety prohibits my growth in dance now; every wrong step I make is like a deeper wound than the last. My only two friends at CDC have left and now I feel even more isolated around a group of dancers than before.

The familiar creature born from the devil's favorite color would envelope our silhouettes as the crowd gave an ovation. I had never truly felt like they were clapping for me, but for the others. Just a few years ago, I was the star of my class. The most ahead at mastering steps. Now my classes were filled with Delirium dancers, things had changed, and I felt like success was always in front of me but I couldn't grasp it. I truly haven't been proud of my performances, but it's only teaching me to practice harder. It's disappointing when the success doesn't taste the same when you've done the steps perfectly before. Then I have to remind myself that dancers are clumsy people, and clumsy people will make clumsy mistakes.

Laurn Giddings

Age: 17, Grade: 12

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

Educator: Patty Smith

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Vitamins

Noodles with parmesan cheese was my signature meal on spaghetti day at Webster Christain Community School. My peers would have red sauce splattered over the table and their mouths as if they were just involved in murder. My noodles were bare and naked, seasoned with parmesan cheese, in a styrofoam bowl. "Why didn't you get any sauce?" Their curious, feral eyes would question me as chaos ran through the cafeteria like a plaque.

"It has meat," I'd point out, "and I don't eat cows." To me, those children had gotten away with murder. Day after day, I'd question the lunch ladies, "Is that a chicken?"

"Yes," they'd say wryly; their eyebrows propped up in confusion.

"Well no thank you, I don't eat chickens."

I ate my bland noodles with pride at lunch and was addicted to vegetables unlike the rest of the children whose mouths watered in the thought of sweets. I'd occasionally make mooing sounds or clucking sounds in response to "yes this is chicken...yes this is beef." I had loved animals and I suppose I saw eating them as the ultimate betrayal. I watched Animal Planet and the Discovery Channel before I went to school and when I got home, so much that my mom would ban me from watching it time to time. The science channels made me passionate about animals and history however, it also made me highly terrified of spiders. I befriended many animals throughout my years; from wild to tamed. People around me noticed, and my mother especially noticed that I wasn't eating any protein.

When the sun laid against the horizon and my neighbor and I picked caterpillars and put them in my Butterfly Garden Kit, I'd snake my fingers through my dog's hair and show him what I found. Prince was a hyper thing yet, he only listened to me. We were best friends growing up and no soul can ever top him. I'd poke at roly pollies and pick up long, squirming worms creating new abstract dance moves on my dusty palms. The camouflage foxes, or as me and my friends liked to call them "invisible wolves," weren't lurking in the shadows of tall trees or silhouettes of buildings yet. The sun tickled against my skin as cars occasionally entered and exited my old neighborhood with the warm breeze caressing my face; simpler times were written all over the landscape.

My mom did try to get me to eat meat and then relied on vitamins. The only meat that I can remember always eating was McDonald's; a happy meal was like finding the golden egg on an Easter morning. I continued to make connections with nature and befriend more animals after we moved into my current neighborhood. This one has a large lake with swans and turtles sunbathing and strutting through its peaceful tides. A turtle would walk a long ways down the road, climb up the hill and near one of the entrances at my house.

"Look, it's Stacy!" I'd smile pointing at the turtle I began to love. I didn't dare touch the creature; it was a snapping turtle after all and my parents wouldn't let me be that wreckless. Stacy came to the house a few times and then stopped after a while. I never saw the turtle's shell, caked with slimy algae again. Occasionally turtles got run over by cars if they weren't too careful, and I felt like it was Stacy that I had seen lifeless on the gravel one day.

I'd have a swan come up to me, which I named Jimmy. He was one of many swans that floated on top of the lake's current like whimsical creatures every time we passed over the bridge. My friend and I once fed Jimmy bread; a woman came up and scolded us that we were going to give him diarrhea. A red cardinal hitting my glass door for nearly 7-8 years named Brad. Since birds can't see glass, there were many days that I was tempted to leave the door open. The look of shock on Brad's face would have been priceless! The bird was like a scientist, trying to figure out what he had discovered but always budding his head after coming close to the answer. Brad has been a dedicated scientist for nearly a decade and I think he deserves a Nobel Prize.

A stray cat chasing me that I later befriended as Brave; we'd watch movies all night. Her whiskers and my eyes illuminated by my Ipad's screen showing whimsical tales of dragons to the latest DIYs. They called me Dr. Dolittle for a while because the animals always gravitated towards me, but I only thought they did that because I respected them. My dad was never an animal person and I learned that when mom and dad took me and my brother once to

the state fair. We were petting cows and one wrapped its long tongue around my brother's hands like a coiling snake. Disgust crumbled into my father's face and no matter how much hand sanitizer he put on my brother's hands, he was never satisfied. I thought it was priceless, however he begged to differ.

"Here," my mom handed me a chicken wing. We were at a friend's house just a few years before moving into our new house. I held the chicken wing for hours until I finally took a nibble. Both of the women, my mom and her friend, were ecstatic that I finally ate meat even if it was a crumb. My mom is a biologist and would help me study as a kid. One thing she explained to me was photosynthesis.

"So they are alive?" I wondered out loud beginning to regret all of the green beans and brussel sprouts that I had inhaled.

"Yes, it's all living."

I began to believe that I was a monster put onto a planet in an infinite colossal universe to eat or be eaten, kill or be killed. I accepted that I was eating living things no matter what after that and began to eat meat although, to this day, my mother still pesters me about not eating enough protein. Slowly, I began to eat traditional spaghetti rather than my signature meal. I stopped questioning the lunch ladies gradually yet, my brain never stopped telling me that that was indeed a cow. The vitamins slowly vanished yet my love for animals never did.

Before my best friend died, we were sitting in the grass staring into the idiosyncratic woods that engulfed my backyard. Prince was calm for once, resting his head on my lap. There weren't many caterpillars here to watch blossom or invisible wolves to keep an eye out for. What was there was the mystery beyond the neatly planted mulch and green grass my father took pride in. I remembered my signature meal and the breeze that carried the leaves to a graveyard of crumbled dust that was not too cold, yet not too warm. I decided that if I was going to be a monster, like everyone else, I could at least be one of the nicer ones. I could at least give a little respect to the creatures that I grew to love.

Lauryn Giddings

Age: 17, Grade: 12

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

Educator: Patty Smith

Category: Novel Writing

To Kill a Rose

Brief summary:

Inspired by my own unpublished trilogy, this literary piece focuses on a character named Catherine and her experiences as a descendent from an escape slave, black girl, and supernatural in England. At the beginning of this literary piece, Catherine is found running through the woods. Her memories are coming back of how she had killed her parent's murders by using her magical abilities that prior to this incident, was unknown to her. The story goes into the past where Catherine goes on to talk about how her grandmother was a descendent from a slave ship and how she managed to escape off of the ship after it had been damaged and sent back to England for inspection. There, her descendants lived in Normsland where they worked as severely underpaid paid servants for various wealthy households. The Addicott household that Catherine and her mother, Bethsaida, are currently working for treat them horribly. Florence Addicott has four daughters: Amelia, Bronwyn, Marian, and Adeline. Amelia, the youngest out of the Addicotts loves Catherine despite her race. Bronwyn, the oldest, is more racist to Catherine than her mother is. At the end of the story, Florence Addicott calls authorities on Catherine and her family for being illegal immigrants and descendants of a runaway slave. The end of the story brings the reader back to the present where the authorities that killed her parents are slain by Catherine's unorthodox magic. The story ends as Catherine running through the woods, contemplating what she had just done.

Excerpt:

They're dead and it's all because of me.

Anger boiled in my veins as my feet quickly carried me through the woods. My footsteps in the snow were just pointers to where I had escaped from the white men. My breathing shuttered in and out of my lungs as goosebumps coated my arms. I had left without a coat; *it's not like I even had one.* I would never be able to afford a nice coat like the one my grandmother once gifted me.

I would work in the manors of the wealthy from sunrise until it was dark and would barely have enough to eat to feel satisfied. "*Your payment is your existence right here in England, Catherine!*" A woman scolded me as I stood at the door waiting for the few pence that I had earned. I once cleaned her house and washed her four daughters' pleated, ivory skirts and made their long, golden hair into tight curls. "*Just wait till they find out that a slave escaped that ship decades ago! They'll find out if you keep asking for pence!*" I had to survive somehow; nobody would hire a *negro*, *much less a negro woman*. My father was blessed enough to have been hired at a factory where he would work on the lowest floor where no one would notice him. We were undocumented in this country and if one white man had gotten angry at us, they would turn us in.

I had heard of the slavery that had occurred in the Americas and how millions of Africans were torn from their homes to be whipped and worked to death. My grandmother was one of those Africans who had been taken and was boarded on a ship. As the ship was leaving Africa, it had hit something unknown in the water and they had to return to England for a new ship before the damage worsened.

On their arrival, my grandmother was able to escape into England with a few others and lived in a small village where some accepted them. She lived to tell me the tale of our heritage and taught me words from her tribe. She would smile as bright as diamonds and her dark brown eyes had experienced more adventure, love, and despair than most would ever witness.

Thankfully, she had died before my parents did; therefore she wouldn't have had to witness the horrors that we endured. Someone had told the government that some *negroes* were in the village of Normsland and that we were undocumented. The white men had come to take my parents and me away the very evening that we had planned to

leave silently from the village. They snatched the wrist of my mother and father and dragged them along the ground, whispering racial slurs as they resisted.

I'd remember the hot tears and the sweat that dripped down my forehead as I tried to pull my parents away from the white mens' grasp only to be kicked aside and smacked across the face. My mother cried as she begged for them to stop when she saw the glinting revolver one of the men pulled from his pocket. The deafening sound of the bullet shattering their skulls buzzed into my eardrums. My head throbbed and my scream was torn from the repeated throbbing locked in my head. People came to watch the scene as I stood up sobbing and choking on my tears. "I wish you'd just drop dead!" I hollered. As if God himself had heard me, the men had dropped to the ground dead. Darkness began to pour into my sight as I fell to the ground.

I murdered some men.

They're all dead because of me.

Laurn Giddings

Age: 17, Grade: 12

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

Educator: Patty Smith

Category: Novel Writing

Paper Dolls

Brief summary:

Paper Dolls is a literary piece that follows Adinah's realization of who the monsters were in her bedtime stories. Adinah and her sisters are Jewish little girls living in a rural area of Germany. Their mother is Jewish while their father is Aryan. Adinah's father warns them what to do in case a monster comes however, never tells the young girls what the monster actually was. Adinah and her sister's imaginations run wild and believe that the monsters aren't human. When a few Nazi soldiers come to the family house for inspection of Jews, the girls hide in the basement as rehearsed however, their mother does not. Their father plans to attack the Nazis if they find the rest of his family. His wife knows that he will be killed doing this. At the end of this piece after the Nazi soldiers find Adinah's mother, the father sets the gas stove to explode and the girls run off not knowing where to go or what to do. Adinah now knows that the monsters that her father told her are far from what she had imagined; they were human yet she still doesn't understand why the Nazis hate her so much.

Excerpt:

Monsters were always real; my Papa told me so.

He'd come in our rooms every night wishing us whimsical dreams and good slumber. He would tuck my sisters and me in bed like we were in cocoons with ivory throws in our elegant, wired beds. Then he'd warn us occasionally to stick together, protect each other at all cost, and to never *ever* look back. His chestnut hair littered his face and his peculiar, blue eyes. His eyes would always soothe me to sleep from his nightly warnings, however, tonight they were trembling in fear.

"What's wrong Papa?" Gracia questioned as she sat up in bed and pulled her long amber hair behind her ears.

"What story will you tell us tonight?" Miriam pitched in.

He rubbed his tense forehead; eyebrows knitted together as he stood in the doorway. The warm light that poured into our dark room made me feel protected from the tales that I had heard. His thin lips parted and he hesitated to speak, "Papa is not feeling well angels, now go to sleep and remember what I have told you."

"Goodnight Papa!" Miriam shouted to him and he smiled warmly to her. He closed the door and the curtain of light disappeared from our faces.

I sat up and looked over to Gracia, the eldest and the wisest of us. "What's wrong with Papa?" I whispered to her. She looked over at me as she adjusted her blankets on the bed; the small twin frame squeaking as she moved.

"I suppose it's the monsters he was talking about," she mumbled. "He never misses reading us a bedtime story." There was silence between us; the air was so thick it seemed as though you could cut it with a knife. Then Miriam broke the silence like a breaking dam, "what do you think they look like? *I mean*," she hesitated as she pieced her words together like a puzzle. "Do you really think that they look the way Papa has described them to be?"

"I don't see why they wouldn't; Papa has never told a lie or an absurd fable to us before," Gracia spoke.

Papa had said that these monsters were crawling all over the world targeting groups of people; then they would go to another group of people after a while. "*We just gotta wait till our turns over*," he had said; the hope draining in his eyes and we could see it. We had to go to school everyday and the monsters disguised themselves as people that looked like my sisters and I. We could never tell our real names or get too close to the children our age; *they could find out who we were. But*, who was I? A young girl attending school on weekdays and picking wild strawberries on the weekends. Dancing in the warm sun that hugged our skin or making empires out of the mud after a gruesome storm. Cutting out paper dolls and counting the raindrops that raced down the window. What was I that the monsters wanted me so badly for?

I could tell that Gracia couldn't fully understand the whole issue herself even though she was the wisest of us all; we were all stuck in the same place. "*Now listen closely Adinah,*" my father's ocean blue eyes stared back at me before releasing us to school. He seemed drained; his coconut hair sticking to his sweaty forehead like glue and his eyes filled with the horrors that he had seen that I had only heard tales of. He would stare at Miriam and Gracia after staring at me; he always made me anxious. I felt like I had been hit by a truck before I would go out the front door. "When," he paused correcting himself, "*if* they come, you run into those woods and never turn back for me or your mother." He pointed towards the vast woods in our backyard. He straightened his back staring at all of us now, "all of you."

Now there was no more school; Gracia said that the teachers all became Nazis but, we didn't know what a Nazi was. I had imagined them with long and thick slimy tongues, dozens of eyes peering out in the back of their head, and a sinister, twisted smile. I imagined that if they had come, I would hear their long scraping nails running along the halls of the school or underneath my bed; but they never did.

"Goodnight Mariam, Adinah," Gracia said and turned to her side pulling over her eye mask.

"Goodnight," Mariam said and slumped back down in the bed. I never understood why we said goodnight after being reminded of the gruesome demons that were to snatch us from our beds. It was never a good night.

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Category: Short Story

Broken Shadows

We were the kids your mum warned you about.

Bruised knees, busted lips, scolding fathers, and a big slack of penny-pinching personality. I, on the other hand, had something worse than the others that would outgrow their childish and immature ways into young, exceptional men. They would own big and successful businesses and their pockets overflowing with wealth. I had the blood of my father coursing through my veins like a plaque destroying paradise.

We weren't evil, my father would always tell my mother when he defended his work. My mother however, always told me otherwise "*We're something much more vile than evil, my sweet boy.*" Her hazel eyes would soften as her hair, the color of darkness itself, toppled over her shoulders. Small in frame however, strong in independence, she was the light that overshadowed the shadows of father's workers. She always warned me not to let the others see the light in my heart. She had always done the opposite; going against father's plans and angering his cabinet. I never understood what she had meant until I was awoken from my slumber by my father's roars.

I scrambled out of bed; slipping on the grey wooden floor and cracking open the door. "They'll be hung for this!" I heard him slam his fist into the table. "Every last one of em! Every last one damnit!"

I slipped back into bed and glimpsed out the window. Something caught my eyes under the moonlight and I paused. A disfigured shadow of a dead woman lay on top of the lively, green grass that swayed in the wind. A familiar pale hand lifelessly on the ground coming forth from the shadows of trees. Her nails were painted a deep crimson; the only woman known for wearing red nail polish was my mother.

That night, my father and I both lost a part of us. He lost the little good left in his heart and I became lost in a world that didn't exist. Lost as any child that others would warn their own to stay away from. Overtime, my skin would become a field of red and blue roses, the seeds planted by the man I once loved.

"*I'm teaching you to grow Jackson.*" He grunted once; brown hair littering into his sweaty forehead and mad blue eyes. "*You're the next leader after all and matters are becoming quite, interesting.*"

I never truly understood my father's work. All I knew was that it took mum's life; her broken shadow sitting still in the cool breeze. It wouldn't be long until it dawned on me that we weren't a regular people at all however, something much more vile than that.

I'm not the kid your mother warned you about, I'm something much worse.

...

Shadows followed me everywhere.

They loomed at the heels of my father's greased loafers or on his blood-stained vest. Broken, disfigured, souls that he had snatched from this Earth. Mother had dealt with the burden of father's shadows by spreading her light and good-will amongst the our people. Now my mother lingered behind both of ours, forever attached to the ground that she took her last breath on. The traitors who had killed mother justified their actions by saying, "*Lucy was getting in the way of our plans, Will. Going around and saying that supernaturals didn't deserve to be captured and tested! We had to silence her to make sure there wouldn't be an uprising.*" The traitors were hung yet, the permanent furrowed eyebrows on my father's face meant that their execution didn't give a slither of justice that mother deserved. Every morning, I'd splash my face with the bitter water coming forth from the rustic bathroom sink; the muffled voices of my father and his cabinet discussing matters just below the hickory floorboard. Now, my father called me down after mother's death to not only listen to their conversation, but to put my own opinion naked on the table.

"*The damn creatures,*" my father pushed back his brown hair, sticking to his forehead using sweat for a paste. "Nowhere Town, that's where Conall was last seen." A man by the name Warren pushed a ripped photograph, held with the grace of a piece of tape strapped across its face, to my father. Warren pulled out a cigarette and a match stick; the tart taste of tobacco always helped him deal with his shadows and demons. Father never liked Conall. He

was a supernatural that gave him the most problems. I never had an issue with the supernaturals, and mother never did understand father's hatred towards them. Nonetheless, she stayed with him professing her love to him like a blind, old woman. He loved her, but he had a funny way of showing it.

"Boy," father held up the picture towards me. I stood behind him and the photograph tapped me between my eyes. I took the picture from him and glanced at the photo. I had seen many pictures of this man for father hated him. I looked up at my father's cabinet; greased, dirty men dressed in button shirts and blue jeans, with patched holes because we were too poor to afford new ones. Romani, often called Gypsies by locals, were stereotypically known for stealing jewels, clothing, and anything valuable in parts of England and in the outskirts of European areas.

"This gypsy tribe," father had once told me; sweat dripping down his brown beard. *"This gypsy tribe is after something more than your average jewels, boy. We're after power!"*

The cabinet proceeded to look at me; usually my fingers would tremble at their cold glares yet now I had become used to it.

Bram spoke up, "let the boy finish brushing his teeth Will, he's 7."

"Old enough to witness those traitors to dance on that tightrope," father sneered, bearing his teeth for a flash of a moment.

I gave them what they wanted to hear, "Won't be long till we catch him. He's been causing too much trouble now." I gave the picture back to my father and the men resumed their chatter. They pointed at maps of the forest around us, and then an area called Wayward Woods. *The heart of the forest*, we would call it. Filled with the wicked witch of Wayward Woods, evil spirits, and a town where if you ate the picturesque food I'd make you go mad.

Father and his cabinet had been trying to find out where all of the Supernaturals were. Word came out that there was a kingdom and the Roma leader would die to have it. He believed wholeheartedly that somehow they could extract the supernatural abilities from the enhanced creatures and put it in themselves. My father was no scientist; he didn't even have a highschool degree. But when he wanted something, he'd spun a web of lies around it to make him more ambitious to grab it. So he took our clan of Romani people out west and founded the EOSP Inc., "Extermination of Supernatural Persons Incorporation." The Incorporation governed our way of living, created rules out of thin air, and vowed to capture and test all supernaturals.

Years slipped away as the phases of the moon did beyond my window. I was now 17 years old; still a boy in most people's eyes but to my father, I was a man. A decade felt like a century without mother. She was what grounded us and shielded me from father's gruesome work. He thought I was too soft but mother would always argue otherwise. Now she wasn't here to shield me from the leathery belt I flinched at.

Bruises and wounds were never given the chance to heal. When the Roma leader had a bad day? My back would bear his pain. When he came close to or confronted Conall Bennet? My back would bear his anger. When he missed mother, and hid his tears with violence? Tearing apart the chair in the dining room because he couldn't hear her sweet voice again? My back would bear his grief. I bore it all and had the wounds as a receipt, yet could never return them.

Father taught me how to use a gun, pull the trigger on a dummy made of a potato sack stuffed with leaves. That's the only good thing the man had ever done for me. His brains were made up of the tree's fallen hair, splattered onto the ground like scattered marbles. I missed many times, or grazed the stomach of the dummy. *"When I was your age, I taught myself to shoot. I'd shoot right between the eyes when I wasn't paying attention, and through the eyeball's center when I was."* Father would show me his skills; the bullets punctured through the sack and was stopped by a cushion of leaves. It never felt like I was shooting a person and father had noticed.

"Pretend like you're shooting Lucy's killers," he murmured to me. His eyes were as bright as a blazing summer sky. It was harder to miss between the eyes after thinking about that.

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William Moore was far from a good man. I didn't completely hate him, but I didn't love him either. He had my blood and I had his; we were bound that way and there was nothing much more to it. That's what it felt like anyways after mother died. She was the glue that kept us together and she was the love of father's life. Now I was a cruel reminder of her. Although my hair was as dark as her's, the moment father would place his hand on my head he would realize that my hair didn't feel the same as Lucy's. No matter how much I resembled her, I would never be her. There were no more head pats, which were already rare to begin with.

"Will, do you have my revolver?" Bram fiddled in his bags and pockets for his weapon. He had a small vodka bottle in his right pocket; he managed his shadows with alcohol.

Father handed him his revolver that glinted under the moonlight. "You left it on the table last night."

Father took many trips and this one was no exception. If there was no hatred, father's obsession with Conall may have been seen as unholy. The supernatural had many secrets and knew many people. Anytime father attacked a supernatural, Conall was there to defend them. The same happened the other way around. The two seemed to have

an invisible handcuff latched on their wrist, unable to escape one another's paths. They were growing sick of each other and father decided that I was a man now, and it was man's job to defend his kin.

So we set off on foot into the forest towards its wicked heart. The moon was a bucket of white paint, so bright that its pigment touched the petals of wild flowers and green caps of newborn sprouts. It had been nearly an hour. Warren counted the small symbols he left carved in trees or grounded in the soil to indicate where they were exactly. We approached Nowhere Town not too long later. Roofs fell apart like loose sand, walls of houses sloped like weak cardboard, and the chatter and hissing of mad people bounced from one spot to the next.

"We've come here a thousand times Will, these people don't know nothin'," another man in the cabinet said.

"*Oh, they know somethin'*," father sneered. William Moore couldn't take no for an answer; even if his life depended on it. Father led his men into the town. People were hunched over; posture as straight as a beat up stick. He grabbed a woman by the shoulders and slammed her into the wall. "Where are they!"

She hollered and screamed, clawing at his skin. She wasn't a supernatural; she was human. This whole town was a trap to keep wandering humans looking for the supernatural's kingdom out. Once you ate the food, there was never going back. Father thrust the woman into the wall aggressively. She stumbled to the ground, got up and ran.

"The hell are you thinking Will!" Bram thundered at father, despite him being their leader. "I don't have enough silver bullets for all hell you've unleashed now! I said I didn't want to do this again!"

From the sound of the woman's screams, more people, with feral looks, peeked out behind windows and alleys. I looked down at my feet; underneath was filled with unearthly, putrid mud. Bram started unleashing bullets at them, screaming at the people to stay back. We were outnumbered and fled the town like a flock of geese. The wet mud had soiled the bottom of my jeans. I rolled them up after we stopped running.

"I told you to leave." A voice of a man echoed through the forest. Father spun around, looking everywhere for the man. "To never return yet here you are. *Despicable*."

"Show your face boy!" Father shouted, flailing his gun in the air. "I've killed more men and supernaturals worthy of my bullets than you! You'll only be a vexatious smudge in my book." The man only chuckled at my father's poisonous words. "Show yourself!"

I looked up at the trees to only see a barn owl. Its face, a cupid shape of the moon and a long snout that ended in a small beak. Chestnut feathers and eyes that reminded me of my mother's hair; dark and endless. Out of shock, I watched the owl slowly shift into a man. Feathers stretched into skin, a beak into human teeth, eyes turning lighter into a brown, feathers turned into curly, ginger hair, and its cupid shape face turned into a sharp jawline. My feet weighed heavier than iron while I was captivated by the creature's unnatural aroau. Conall Bennet, naked, perched on a tree glared at my father with hatred dripping from his eyes.

He pulled out a gun lying next to him on the branch out of my vision and shot every one of my father's cabinet members. They were now as lifeless as the crisp leaves lying on the Earth's autumn floor. Liquid crimson mixed with soil seeped from their carcasses. Eyes holding untold secrets of the dead men's unspoken tales.

All that was left standing was my father and I. He bolted throughout the woods feeling the adrenaline clog his throat. Conall grabbed his clothes that were perched on the tree, through them on, jumped down from the tree in a grand slam, and dashed after us. I was faster than my father yet, I kept pace with him. I may have hated the man, but I didn't want to see him die. He didn't deserve to die, regardless if he was a bad person! Conall was behind our tail, closing in on the ground between us and death. The supernatural stopped, aimed at my father, and let a bullet with wings it seemed plunge into the back of my father's skull.

My voice was gone from the screams that tore through my throat. The vibrations of my fist hitting the ground cursing at Conall ricoched in the air as I witnessed my father's last breath. I was too engrossed in the life fading away from my father to think about pulling out my gun and shooting Conall. He morphed back into his pathetic owl form and flew off into the night. He left his gun behind; a Bodeo Model 1889. Conall Bennet had spared me and the only reason I could think of was that he still saw me as a kid; I wasn't even 18 years old yet.

"Just you wait!" I hollered as his silhouette vanished in the woods. "I'll kill you and your children with your own gun!" Perhaps father hurt someone he loved or even someone he hated. I didn't care; Conall had no right to kill my father and his cabinet. William Moore, the last person who gave a single shit about me, was dead.

"*Maybe their abilities can bring back Lucy. Maybe*, Will had swallowed his tears. His eyes, as shiny as mother's sterling silver necklace that he gifted her, after he stole it from a pawn shop. He stopped himself and never brought up the conversation again. We both knew that Lucy was dead and there was no way that we would be able to bring her back, even with all the magic in the world. Dead meant dead. The bible said it, the preacher would've said it if we'd gone to church, and mum herself said it.

Shadows seemed to follow me everywhere.

"*What happens after we die Mum?*"

"*I don't know what happens after death sweetie*, Mother had once told me before I went to bed. She wasn't sure of religion herself. If she did, I don't think she would have married my father. She wasn't Romanian

unlike the rest of us. One thing I did know for sure was that the shadows of people never left. They never left my father; he carried them in the forms of scars from fights he won or tears he shed over my mother. Shadows of what the dead did lay in kitchens or heart shaped lockets holding photographs that were falling apart. I was the new leader of the EOSP Inc. and vowed to carry on my father's work. My father's rage was finally unleashed in me like fireworks and vengeance glowed on everything I saw. I finally understood why he hated the Supernaturals so much and I vowed to reap my revenge. All the seeds my father had sown were to guide me to this very moment. I grabbed Conall's handgun and a half empty vodka bottle from Bram's dead body. The moon defined their figures, above the grass that was as still as the night sky.

Now they were nothing but broken shadows of the people that they once were.

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Category: Short Story

Blood and Water

Blood and Water

During the Middle Ages, at the highest point of England, there lied the vast kingdom of Northumbria, and in that kingdom there lived a king and a queen who loved each other dearly. So much that they ended up having two children. They had two twin boys. The eldest, who was born about one minute before the other was named Jaymes, after his great-grandfather. Then the youngest, who was the smallest out of the two, was named Blithe, after a famous warrior who accomplished many great deeds. Jaymes was an open, kind-hearted boy who only wanted what was best for his family, especially Blithe. Blithe, on the other hand, was more to himself and only opened up to Jaymes. In their younger years, the two brothers became practically inseparable.

Neither Blithe nor Jaymes knew who was the eldest while growing up. The king and queen thought that it would be wiser for them not to know so they could both be shielded from the weight of the crown. They knew that one of them was going to become king, and they didn't want to burden them with that at such a young age. Untouched by the weight of the crown, Blithe and Jaymes grew up happily together. They had everything anyone could ever dream of: an exceptional education, gourmet food, and their title, but most importantly they had each other.

Blithe and Jaymes had different definitions for the meaning of their title. Jaymes thought being a prince was the same as placing himself above everyone else. He thought that being a prince wasn't as important as him being himself. Blithe, on the other hand, loved the fact that he was a prince. He took pride in calling himself a prince of Northumbria because all he ever wanted was to be king. Even though the two brothers had different thoughts on this subject, they loved each other unconditionally nonetheless.

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Years later, Jaymes and Blithe grew into well educated young men who both had an undying wish for their country to thrive. They were brought up to be the best princes the kingdom ever had, and they were. They would always go out of the castle grounds, even though they weren't supposed to, just to go see the townspeople and the town in general. Although they were taught to act as proper princes, they were more importantly taught to act as kings even though they still didn't know who would become one.

Eventually, their curiosity got the better of them, and they finally thought that it was time the king and queen told them who would become king. They felt that it was important to know who the future king would be because if something unfortunate were to happen to the king and queen, the kingdom would be without a leader which would cause a panic. So they went to their parents' chambers and asked them who the eldest was. The king and queen took their request under deep consideration, and they came to the conclusion that it was time to tell them. While their parents were in the process of telling them who the future king would be, many thoughts went through the brothers' heads. Jaymes was concerned that if he were the future king, he would let his country down because he wouldn't put his country above all else like he was taught to do. He was more focused on his family and their wellbeing. On the contrary, Blithe had different thoughts. He thought that if he were the future king he would put everything he had into the kingdom. He would make sure the kingdom retained its power and that it was always thriving. To be honest, Blithe thought that he would make a better king than Jaymes even though they both loved each other dearly. The king and queen finally got to the point where they told the boys who the kind would be and when they heard the name Jaymes slip out of their parents' mouths, Blithe went in utter shock. He remembered how when he was younger he would always go up to his parents and tell them how much he wanted to be king in the future. He would go on about it for hours on end and his parents would always listen intently to him. He glanced at his parents and saw them looking at him with pity in their eyes. He felt a sudden rush of anger course through him. The last thing he wanted was for his parents to look at him as though he were a lost puppy. He expected the king and queen, his parents, to be composed and congratulating Jaymes with pride; he didn't want his parents to be

pitying him when they should be supporting Jaymes. So while the king and queen were busy contemplating if they made the right decision or not, Blithe went up to his brother to congratulate and support him, but he couldn't help but look at him with the smallest bit of envy in his eyes.

* * *

Now that the king and queen finally revealed who would be the future king, they immediately set up an arranged marriage with the neighboring kingdom, Mercia. Jaymes would be engaged to the princess of Mercia so the disputes between the two kingdoms could be settled. Jaymes didn't question the king and queen's decision, because he believed that this had to be done for the good of the kingdom. The princess also agreed as she too thought the marriage would benefit her kingdom. While everyone was busy setting up a time for Jaymes and the princess to meet, Blithe was just carrying on with his daily life. He trained, studied, and helped out the townspeople whenever he could. When he heard that his brother was getting married he was happy for him, but he didn't really get involved because he thought it wasn't really any of his business. So when the day came for Jaymes and the princess to meet, Blithe was clueless as to what was happening. He just went about his normal daily routine until he bumped into a girl but not just any girl, the prettiest girl he had ever laid eyes on.

He marveled over how her long brunette hair cascaded in waves down her back and the liveliness in her bright blue eyes. As soon as he saw her, he thought everything about her was perfect and that she was the one he wanted to be with, but little did he know that she was the princess that was to be married to his brother. After he made sure she was alright, he asked her if she would like to accompany him to go to the town. The princess happily obliged, thinking she accidentally bumped into Prince Jaymes for he bore the royal symbol on his chest. So the two went and walked throughout the town getting to know each other, and before they knew it, they were both falling in love.

While the princess was walking throughout the town with Blithe, Jaymes was in the throne room awaiting his fiancée's arrival, not knowing that she had already arrived at the palace and was with Blithe, along with everyone else. At least everyone except for Blithe. Although Jaymes had wondered where his brother was, he didn't mind that his brother wasn't there because he knew that Blithe didn't really like social gatherings. So he waited alongside everyone for the princess's arrival until it was nearly dusk. While waiting on the princess, Jaymes glanced out the window into the courtyard and saw Blithe hand-in-hand with a beautiful woman.

Since it was dusk, he doubted the princess was even coming so he dismissed everyone and went out to see his brother. He was curious to meet the lovely lady that was accompanying him. As soon as he made it outside and greeted his brother, he introduced himself to the lovely lady at his side. As soon as he said his name the lady stared at him in utter disbelief. She thought that she had been with Prince Jaymes all day. She immediately thought that if she wasn't with Prince Jaymes then she had to be with his brother, Prince Blithe.

She had heard that Prince Jaymes had a younger brother but she didn't expect to meet him until she had met Prince Jaymes. Another thought that popped into her head was that even though she had originally come there to marry Prince Jaymes, she couldn't deny her new profound feelings for Prince Blithe. While walking through the town and getting to know each other, Blithe and the princess developed a deep connection that they both felt they had. Though Blithe and the princess knew that they loved each other, they also knew that they couldn't be together. Jaymes and the princess had to be married in order for their countries to settle disputes that had gone on for far too long. Blithe understood this, but he couldn't just let the love of his life go just like that. He made a promise to himself that he would find some way to get around this obstacle, so he could be with the princess hand-in-hand just as they were, walking through the town.

* * *

Jaymes and the princess's wedding was just around the corner and Blithe was still trying to find a way out for the princess and him. He tried to reason with anyone he would listen to him. He made an audience with the king and queen of Mercia but they declined him because they wanted the disputes between their kingdom and Northumbria to end. He also had an audience with his parents, the king and queen of Northumbria, but they also declined him for they also wanted the disputes to end. He realized he had no choice but to go to his brother. He planned to go to his brother three days before the wedding to see if he would at least take pity on him and let him be with the princess. He was even willing to go down on his knees and beg his brother for the princess's hand because he knew he would never find anyone like her again. But before he could even say one word to his brother, the unpredictable happened.

The day started out as a normal day. Everyone was where they should have been and were doing what needed to be done before the wedding. In other words, everything was going smoothly. Then the unpredictable happened just as Blithe was about to go into his brother's office to bring up his argument. Before he even knew what was happening, he heard the sound of a horn vibrate through his ears. He knew immediately what this meant. There was an attack. He quickly sped into action and went to where the attack was happening. As soon as he reached the outskirts of the town, he heard the sounds of swords clashing. He saw his brother fighting the leader of the attack. Before he could even process what was happening he saw his brother get slashed across his chest.

Blithe ran to his brother as fast as he could. When he made it to his brother's side, he realized the attackers had

retreated. He knew that was a sign that the attackers had achieved what they had come to do and that was to kill his brother, the future king. Blithe immediately turned his attention back to his brother and saw that his wound was deep. He knew if he didn't get help soon then his brother would die. He looked over his shoulder and in the distance, he saw the royal shaman that could prevent Jaymes from dying. Just as he was getting ready to shout for the shaman, a single thought came to his mind; one thought that could change everything.

The thought that came to his mind was one that came from the darkest part of himself. He pondered over the possibilities of just staying quiet and letting the shaman pass while he could try and treat his brother knowing that he probably wouldn't survive. If his brother died, he would gain everything he ever wanted: the kingdom and the princess. It would be the perfect crime. He would try to treat his brother knowing that he didn't have the skills to do so and when his brother died, everyone would see him as a hero for trying to save his brother's life while also gaining everything he ever wanted without anything getting in the way.

Blithe also pondered the possibilities of calling the shaman to heal his brother. If his brother lived then he would gain the kingdom which would cause him to marry the princess. There was only one thing that prevented him from gaining everything he ever wanted, and that was his brother. There was no denying that he loved his brother, he really did, but he also loved the princess. He couldn't bear the thought of seeing the love of his life marrying someone else, especially his brother, and having to witness it.

At that, Blithe snapped back into reality and realized he was running out of time. He needed to make a decision. And so, he did.

* * *

Whether Blithe decided to let his brother die for the love of his life, or let him live for the sake of his family and himself is beyond me. Love can be perceived in so many ways.

So I'll leave it up to you: Is blood thicker than water?

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Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy

First Contact

First Contact

It was six orbits since they beamed up the human; they thought they would never do such a thing. But, they brought him up in the ship and that's when it started. Then, one of the crew-mates attempted to learn his language, but it had mostly been them shouting onomatopoeia at each other. From what the translator could understand, he wanted to stay. They couldn't think why he would want to. But, they did find him running away from another one of his kind in the desert; maybe he was just weird.

It did become helpful that he was staying; he shared cultural aspects of his galaxy. The human names to planets were better than numbers.

Now that he was here and could somewhat communicate, he had suggested an exercise for us. At the moment, all the necessary crewmates are in the control-center and are pulling into the atmosphere with the cloaking setting on. The translator and human walked in and I asked "why this?"

They turned to me, "He said something about it being helpful or just fun, I couldn't entirely understand." As we came closer to the trees, I thought about how specific the request was.

"Yes!" he said, pointing to a red building in a field. We slowed the ship down and came to a huddled group of animals. He looks at me excitedly, "Yeah, beam them up!" The faint light landed on a few of the animals, after a pause the head scientist contacted from the research deck.

"Commander, the ... *cows* ... have come on board and are secure."

"Good, we'll return them after testing," I said.

Part II:

We returned to the upper atmosphere, and the crewmates returned to their other tasks. Until I was contacted again by the Head scientist; "Commander, something is wrong. we would like your input."

I quickly respond, "I'm on my way!"

As I went through the corridors, I wondered what could be the problem. The doors to the research deck open and the head scientist turned to me. "Commander, the specimens all seem to be the same. Large bodies blotched fur, somewhat obese. Well, except for one."

"What do you mean, could it be a threat?"

"We don't entirely sure, but it's probably not." On their tablet, they pulled up a picture of the test chamber. Inside were four to five 'cows' but there in the chamber with them was a different animal. Like the cows, it was quadruped with short fur and hooves. This animal was shorter with different bone structures and horns. "Should we still examine it, even though we have no other animals like it?" the Head Scientist asked.

"No-No, Just examine the cows this time. We'll ask the human about the tagalong later."

"Yes, Commander," they responded.

Once again, we came back to our regular routine then again I got the message. "**It escaped the container and ran away!**" I started running, "Make an announcement, technical crew stand on guard!" I couldn't have this go wrong, if the first research expedition was a failure they would never fund it again.

It didn't help that the creature was small and surprisingly fast. There were four sightings, then it stopped. "Past the Science deck, Main corridor, Sub deck, and lower transporter... It doesn't seem to have any rhyme or reason, it just does. Not even for food or warmth." The technical captain pitched in, "The lower transporter.? Well, they could probably go to the technical bay or the power core-"

Just like that, the power cut off. The lights were replaced with a dark red glow, the backup power. "They did go to the power core!" the technical captain said while rushing there. "How?" the scientist squealed. "Alright, we can't underestimate them now. The power core connects to the technical bay and the ventilation. Make sure we can catch them if they get in there."

I was alone with a few crewmates, in the silence my dread built up. My blood got hot, then we heard it. An echoed roar, we all froze. I slowly went closer to the vent. There was scraping, pounding, yelling. I cautiously opened the vent, slowly then stepped back. Sure enough, it came out. We stood still, and it did too. I slowly touched the communicator, "We caught it, and might need back up." One of us came closer, but the thing rushed away. "NO!" Suddenly it froze up and dropped to the floor.

Part III:

We got it to the test chamber and discussed what happened. "It doesn't seem injured in any way, it just... tensed up," the Head Scientist noted. Then the human and the translator walked in, for some reason they switched clothes. I turned to them, "Do you know what happened?"

They tilted their heads, "Well, we were in my room trying to learn about each other.... And the alarm turned on." The Technical Captain turned around confused, "You couldn't hear what was happening on the communicator?" The human pitched in, "No, distractions!" Then the two of them slapped their hands together.

"Anyway, we had trouble with the cow you had us bring in. I would like you to explain this to us." I said while walking closer to the chamber. When the human saw the creature, he smiled but quickly tried to contain his laughter. "Oh, I see how this could be bad." He said, lowering his head. "Sorry, this is a little funny." The Technical Captain nodded, "He's good." The translator shrugged.

"Hey, No Distractions..."

The Head Scientist turned around, "What *is* it? What is the thing that almost killed us all?" "Captain," I said, "Calm down." The translator and the human mumbled for a bit, then they looked at us. "The animal is called a goat. *Goat*? Yeah, Goat. Like a cow, it's used as a crop. That's probably how it was with the herd."

The Head Scientist seemed even angrier then, "It's just a crop? Are you kidding me? That thing ate through our wires, it can't just be a crop!" The group was silent, we all had different reactions but the human seemed the most affected. He cowered behind the Translator who seemed like they were going to pounce at the Scientist.

"Commander, you can't *believe* this either. Right? The human is obviously playing with us." The Head Scientist turned to me.

"I personally think that he hasn't had enough time to explain." I turned to the human, "Please, Continue." The Translator gave the Scientist a death stare while talking to us. "Goats are often harmless, but yes. They do have a strong stomach. The only reason it became a hostel was that it was afraid."

I looked at the goat in the chamber, they looked terrifying in the moment. But, then that we knew what they were then the fear faded away. At that moment, I was more interested in them. The focus of the room was just the head scientist. They seemed like they were making a response, but the translator did it first. "Captain, I have actually talked to him. I can tell you that *Alex* didn't mean any harm. The only reason there was a problem was because you were afraid of what you couldn't understand. Maybe, if you just asked him in the first place, this wouldn't have happened."

"Alright," I said. The group turned towards me like they just realized I was there. "Beam the cows back down, but continue checking the goat. And ... Alex." He perched up. "You should start to attend every meeting."

Jayden Huynh-Vuong

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Glen Allen High School, Glen Allen, VA

Educator: Alyssa Shevchuk

Category: Critical Essay

When Will Schools Reach Out a Helping Hand?

As the 21st century birthed an era of children unlike no other, mental health is becoming a prominent struggle that is characterizing this generation of teenagers. This national crisis is causing high school students to experience a plethora of ailments invisible to the eye. Literally, I've seen peers on the verge of balling and have read Instagram posts of mental breakdowns longer than the Constitution. What can I do to help them? I don't know what to do! These occurrences of mental burn-out are becoming the "norm" for teens as the Pew Research Center shows an alarming number of teens with depression and other kinds of mental illness. Students who are turning to "risk behaviors" such as alcohol or drugs could be experiencing a hell of a world that is tearing them apart. Is the American culture emphasizing the importance of mental health enough, and to what extent is our education system accommodating students are questions that demand to be at the forefront of our discussions.

School is a highly impactful and widely consuming part of teenagers' lives. What children are taught builds their identity, perception of the world, as well as skills and values that carry on into adulthood. Simultaneously, if the education system neglects the importance of mental health alongside physical safety, this will create a notion of stigma and ignorance among students. Possible consequences of this are already being reflected by the rising number of high school students dealing with depression, anxiety, stress, etc (Pew Research Center). Every day, I bump into a classmate who's desperately crying out for help -- help for some sort of guidance and navigation through their many mountains. However, schools are reluctant to give a helping hand, and the students themselves, while experiencing similar worries, are stranded fish flopping on a beach before a tsunami comes crashing in; they don't know how to advise and/or console each other.

It's indisputable that the crisis of mental health is becoming more prominent in teenagers. Those who still have the audacity to believe mental illness to still be a myth – I'm talking about you, Thomas Szasz – need to face the studies and percentages developed by credible research institutions and universities. They are screaming at us to recognize that our ignorance of mental illness is harming our children. According to the Pew Research Center, "13% of U.S. teens ages 12 to 17 (or 3.2 million) ... experienced at least one major depressive episode in the past year" in 2017. While the number of cases of teenagers who experienced depression increased by a whopping 59% from 2007 to 2017 (Pew Research Center). Other research centers also support the abnormal rise of teens with mental illnesses. The facts are present. The public education system needs to overcome their stubbornness and see the children who suffer alone through defeating times. If schools fail to heed the alarming numbers produced by research centers, what else is needed to engender change? Students attacking one another or harming themselves? – certainly not. The United States has already been presented with the truth, but who will initiate action?

Through a local perspective, my middle and high school are not effectively preparing students to manage problems with mental health. Throughout my experiences, the issue was rarely emphasized, and resources were unknown to the general student body. Hungary Creek Middle, a time where adolescence sprouts, exhibited 3 years where the faculty and counseling departments did not encourage a word of being mentally healthy. Unless going directly to counseling behind closed doors, in the public mind, mental illness was a topic unspoken and unfortunately, began to build a community of students who were unaware of how to approach their personal troubles. At Glen Allen High, there have been a few moments of awareness and programs that try to promote mental health such as Building a Culture of Kindness, a program similar to Big Brothers & Big Sisters and Equity Ambassadors, a channel of advocacy designed to amplify students' voices. However, B.A.C.K. is only applied to freshmen homerooms, and E.A. only issues presentations once or twice a month. It's frightening that the student and faculty culture in G.A.H.S. seems to remain silent; teachers perpetuate the crisis, developing stigmas among the students. However, my experiences cannot generalize that of every middle and high school, and I am aware of the legal confidentiality requirements that teachers uphold. But these are not reasons that dismiss us from adding mental health to the forefront of priorities among sports and academic responsibility to actively discuss what it means to be mentally

healthy.

High schools, including Glen Allen, need the collaboration of the counselors and faculty to actively and consistently communicate the importance of mental health to students. From the moment students walk into freshmen orientation to when they graduate, mental well-being as well as emotional intelligence must be delivered by teachers and student-run programs throughout the school years in order to remedy the stigmatized student culture. This will aid in promoting definitions, causes and effects, as well as symptoms of mental illness, so that students will have the knowledge to identify mental stressors as well as the courage and support to seek school resources. When my sister, who is currently at Virginia Commonwealth University, was at G.A.H.S., she wished that teachers and counselors placed more emphasis on educating students. She feels that if her classmates were to be more open and talked about mental illness, that would have emboldened her to pursue counseling help.

In addition, more programs and classes such as B.A.C.K. and E.A. that focus on the well-being of students need to be added to a weekly agenda or create specialized classes that educate students of all grades without a burdening workload. A more informal option would be to establish one-on-one readily accessible therapy sessions, allowing students to express their dilemmas without experiencing the ordeal of hackling down an appointment with a counselor. These plans would ultimately require the help of teachers, students, and counselors. However, a lack of funding for additional counselors could explain why Henrico County Public Schools haven't already implemented this. But, isn't the safety of students schools' number one priority? 1900 students with only five counselors doesn't seem safe. We practice safety drills and unfortunately, hide-and-locks to prepare for on-campus shooters. But, mental health deserves just as much attention as the human psyche is just as fragile as any other body part.

In order to analyze the angle of Glen Allen High counselors, I conducted a short, thirty-minute interview with my guidance counselor, who I will refer to as Mrs. Brendan for the sake of protecting her identity. I got into contact with her by requesting an appointment via their new Tinyurl submission forum that was advertised in my school's weekly newsletter. How handy – sounds like a great place to advertise help! In our conversation, the key points Mrs. Brendan dictated were that there are programs that G.A.H.S. offers to assist those undergoing mental conditions. Including “mental health week” and “mindful Mondays”, students who meet with counselors are being taught to handle stress and anxiety compounded by social media and school as well as offer strategies on how to “take a deep breath” from life's pressures (Brendan). Henrico County even offers a facility of medical professionals dedicated to providing students with mental health resources and has plans for students in need of a medical leave of absence.

This was the first time I was hearing this. This is where the root of the issue lies: the absence of communication and awareness. Schools are silent; furthermore, teens aren't aware that there are trained counselors dedicated to guiding students and medical professionals who are licensed to assist their troubles. Think of how comforting it would be to know your community and school has your back. Mrs. Brendan also indicates that “mental health is not stigmatized”: Glen Allen High has a “supportive student body” and a “great faculty/staff development” who dedicate their lives to nurturing fine students. While this may be true, then it shouldn't be difficult to implement plans of change to save students' lives.

In contrast to the stressful lives high school students live, schools have the potential to bring a sense of reassurance and ease. By actively promoting awareness of signs of mental illness and encouraging students to seek available resources, this will help to change the stigmatized student and faculty culture and pave the way for a new community – one where students support each other and advocate for the well-being of all. We can facilitate this through teachers, counselors, classes, as well as recommend Henrico County's own medical professional support. The resources are certainly there, and schools absolutely have the potential to execute this. It's the initiative to circumvent this change throughout the county that seems to be difficult. If students' safety is the number one priority, and the American culture is changing to accommodate mental illness, what are we afraid of?

Yasmeen Jaaber

Age: 18, Grade: 12

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

Educators: Cindy Cunningham, Patty Smith

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

German II. Vocabulary Quiz

Pia Jackson January 11th, 2017

I chose Pia as my German name because it was simple and it was sweet. It reminded me of a cinnamon roll, teeth sunk in the too-sweet center and shivered and shook like a bell that rang and rang. Grainy cinnamon and butter on your tongue, Pia was the first bite.

Conjugate SEIN:

Ich War - I am

sitting alone at the table closest to the teacher's, my eyes squinting and down. My neck is down, down, down, and I can't look him in the eyes.

Er ist - He is

sitting at *my* table. With JD and Jaden and Chris. He is laughing, hunched over like a roly-poly. He is scared. The few times I can look at him, he is scared. Hands thin and pale and frightened, with a smile that is weak and insecure.

Sie ist - She is

worried about me. She spends the day shopping for therapists. Squinting at reviews, making marks in her notebook. She wanders into my room and picks up my journal. Holds it in her hand, feels the weight of it against her palms, and sets it back down. "If something was wrong she'd tell you," She thinks.

Wir Waren - We are

leaving the eighth grade in six months. I will never have to see him again. Why would I tell anyone? Why would I walk those skinny white halls and sit in front of a man in a sweaty suit and talk about German class? It would just make him hate me. I didn't want him to hate me. We are leaving the eighth grade in six months. Just six months.

Ihr Wart - You all

sat there silently while he touched me and I told him to stop. You all averted your eyes when I tried pushing him off of me. You all wondered why I moved tables. You all begged me to come back. You all needed me to sit there and take it, so maybe it wouldn't have been wrong what you said last week about wanting to see me naked, or the week before when you reached over to pinch the seat of my pants. You all needed me to sit there and take it, so maybe it wouldn't have been wrong. Because *you* had never touched me. But you watched.

Schreibe im Deutsch:

Warning Lights - der Warnblinker

It was hard not to blame myself. He'd touched me before, but it always seemed like an accident. He had a girlfriend and I told him I didn't like boys. So when sweaty pink hands brushed against my thigh, I ignored it. When balled fists knocked into me, I laughed when I told him it hurt. I laughed and he apologized and I ignored it. We were friends and I was so adamant about being friends with someone who I thought was just misunderstood, I didn't see the signs. I didn't think that maybe things were how they were supposed to be- him, unpopular, and me, somewhere far, far away.

Accident - einen Unfall haben

I left German class smiling the day it happened. It was the last day before Winter Break. Chocolate stayed on the tips of our tongues and the anticipation for a break had us all giddy and live. I saw him later and gave him his Christmas gift, a Yowie. A piece of chocolate with a monster hidden inside. I gave it to him and smiled and told him to have a good break. And he gave it back. He shook his head. "I don't want it," he said.

I spent Winter Break confused, crushed, and repulsed by myself. I hated my body because he had touched it like that. When I got undressed to shower, I couldn't even look at myself. This body is tainted, this body has been ruined. It wasn't even my body anymore. When I'd close my eyes to sleep, I'd feel his hands all over me again. Everything I did was echoed by the memory of him.

To have repaired - Reparieren lassen

After we came back from break, I skipped German class constantly. I'd say I was going to the nurse or the bathroom, but really I'd just sit on one of the benches outside, reading books and writing.

One night, I was curled up on the wall behind my door, sobbing. Loud, shaky sobs that were painful and good. My mom knocked on my door and I didn't try pulling myself together like I usually did. I had lost all sense of reality. She knocked and knocked and I just kept crying. Eventually, she opened the door and scooped me up. I leaned into her.

"Something is wrong." I shook my head. "Are you in danger?" I shook my head. "Are you in pain?" I shook my head. "Did somebody touch you?" She asked. I started crying harder and she held me tighter and we sat there for a while. She asked me questions and some of them, I answered, but mostly I just shook my head.

Every Saturday morning after that, I went to therapy. I walked up tall rickety steps and sat in a room that smelled like lemons. I cried into fancy tissues that had been spun with clouds. I tried my best not to look up from my lap.

Healing happened in a room that smelled like lemons with my mother holding my hand and a woman I had just met telling me I was valuable. During the week, I skipped German class and barely passed the midterm. Healing, for me, wasn't excelling despite it all, it was doing the best I could with what I had. I didn't conquer anything that year, but I survived. That promise of "better" was there. It was that extra credit question, that sweetness melting over Pia, and it was real and palpable.

Jada Johnson

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Manchester High School, Midlothian, VA

Educator: Rebecca Lynch

Category: Poetry

Unwanted Advances

Unwanted Advances

I didn't explicitly say no, I expressed a few nervous laughs after.
After.
After what was done I distanced myself,
It wasn't an explicit "no" but it was all I could comprehend in the moment.
I wonder if you noticed.
You did,
In the wrong way.
You got closer,
You did it again.

Before there was an inch or less between us, but now,
Now I want feet,
Yards,
Miles between us.
But you want to be closer
I need to go,
I have to run.

Run, run, run.
Am I running?
Can I run, will he let me?
What would happen if I do?
What will he do?
Am I afraid, Am I scared?
"Big bad girl from the southside", I can't be scared.
The things I've seen.
The things I've heard.
I can't be scared of him.
5'10 towering like the twins.
Breathe, run.
Why aren't I running?

Once upon a time someone told me "You leave seeds in every step you take."
But your seeds planted roots around me
And when I finally broke free,
Grew a terror I couldn't escape.

Jaelynn Johnson

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: Holman Middle School, Glen Allen, VA

Educator: Abbey Warren

Category: Flash Fiction

The Mindless Wander

The Mindless Wander

What if 4 kids wander mindlessly into the woods, where a monster feeds off of them one by one?

Whether they have crazy lives, lonely lives, too popular lives, or perfect lives, they all want to get away. They all want to be somewhere where they can do whatever they want. There are four kids that made a wish, a promise that one day they'll get away from the world around them. 5...4...3...2...1....Let the Mindless Wander begin. Most people might say "The day started like any other", but I say this day was a day that changed their lives forever or a day that ended their lives. A day where they lost total control of their own minds. These kids all get up and leave their homes and head into the deep dark woods. Where no one could save them, no matter how hard they tried.

Walking into the woods there is a tree that stretches its root across the floor. A kid trips and falls onto the sound ground making a soft thud. The child sinks into the ground. Being consumed by mother nature itself. Dirt and minerals filling every hole in this child's body. Drowning him. Sucking the life out of him as a vampire would. They continue their walk. Three kids left. There is a rumbling sound. The ground starts to open up. It opens up like a monstrous mouth and a child falls through. It's a long way down. Into a pit of darkness. There is another rumbling sound as the ground pieces itself back together. Leaving no trace of what happened. The journey through the deep, dark woods continues.

There are now two kids left. There up ahead is a creepy old shack. One of the kids starts to sing. Very sweet lullaby. A lullaby so sweet that you could fall into a trance, so sweet you could fall into a deep sleep and never awake. The door to the shack starts to creak open. A black, shadowy arm makes its way out of the shack and grabs one of the two children. It slowly retreats back inside leaving one child standing outside.

There all alone is a child, outside in the woods. No one is there to care for her. She stops singing and closes her eyes. There is a cool breeze. A heavy fog starts to build up all around the lake. A fog so heavy that you could even see through it. She starts toward the lake, not bothering to stop. Not even when she got waist-deep inside. She continues to walk until she is completely below the surface. No one is there to save her. Blackwater starts to fill her body. She sinks deeper and deeper. All the way to the bottom, never to be seen again.

These four kids were never seen again. The police were called and they searched every inch of the woods. Not one spot left unlooked. Not even the creepy old shack. Nothing was found. These children disappeared without a trace. No one really knows what happened to them. There are some scary stories told about these kids and there is one thing that you learn from each and every one of them. Be grateful for the life you have and never take a quiet mindless walk through the deep, dark woods for you will never be found, seen, or heard from again.

Laurn Jones

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Manchester High School, Midlothian, VA

Educator: Rebecca Lynch

Category: Humor

Employees Must Wash All Their Hands Before Returning for Work

Employees Must Wash All Their Hands Before Returning for Work

I nonchalantly push the door open and stroll into the bathroom right before my first shift begins. I glance at the sign hanging on the wall for dear life next to the grimy mirror.

“Employees must wash all their hands before returning to work!” Ronald McDonald exclaims on the sign. Stopping dead in my tracks, I am paralyzed with anxiety.

“What?” I breathe out. “B-b-but I only wash one hand. I have to.”

I lift up my quivering, glove-covered right hand, which had once grazed Beyoncé’s left pinky finger ring. I’ve kept the glove on it ever since to preserve her presence.

“No,” I say, backing away from the sink and running into the door of a stall. I crumble to the ground by the weight of sadness. My boss, Marvin, struts in with a tune on his lips. That tune falls flat and a puzzled look overcomes his face when he sees me huddled on the bathroom floor clutching my right hand tightly to my chest, and rocking back and forth.

“Um, are you ok?” he asks, starting to head back to the door.

“I’M FINE!” I scream. He shuffles out of the bathroom in a hurry, and I begin to cry.

“NO.” My whole life crumbles before my eyes. The room begins to spin, and I find myself getting dizzy. “I have to wash it at some point. I mean, it has been 4 years,”

I try to convince myself. But when will something so monumental happen to me again? I pause in deep thought and gaze off, locking eyes with Ronald McDonald’s cheery eyes.

“WhatdoIdowhatdoIdowhatdoIdo!” I panic with more intensity, nearly screaming the words. What if I lose my job? What if I get blackballed from the fast food industry?

“I can’t let that happen,” I say with narrowed eyes. I pull myself up and trudge to the sink shaking. The faucet creaks as I turn the knob. I slowly pull off my glove from my sacred hand, pulling it off each finger one by one until I get to my pinky finger. Dirt is in every crevice of my hand; it is also caked with a layer of ashness from years of no lotion.

I close my eyes, and a singular tear glides down my cheek. I put my left hand under the frigid water first, and then my right, with a little resistance. A cry escapes my lips as the only greatest achievement I have ever done washes down the drain, along with four years worth of dirt and grime swirling with the water into the abyss of the drain and turning it a brownish-green.

“It’s for the best,” Marvin says leaning in the doorway. My eyes widen in embarrassment and I freeze at the sink.

“How much did you see?” I ask in a meek voice, keeping my eyes locked on the faucet to avoid his gaze.

“Pretty much the whole thing,” he says stifling a laugh. “I’ll leave you two alone.” He nods to my hand. Turning on his heel, he leaves the bathroom. The echo of his distant cackle bounces around in the hall, as well as in my head.

Hilda Joseph

Age: 17, Grade: 11

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

Educator: Linda Mills

Category: Dramatic Script

One of Us

One of Us

[Scene 1]

[It is a clear winter night and the moon is high above the wispy clouds. Sasha Trent's neighborhood is quiet today except for a couple of passing cars and late-night dog walkers. She is wide awake studying for a test. Her family is just about to go to bed. Mrs. Trent turns off the lights downstairs and heads to her bedroom.]

Mrs. Trent: Good night dear. (She kisses Mr. Trent on the cheek)

Mr. Trent: Sleep well, sweetie. (He kisses her back) Are the kids sleeping?

Mrs. Trent: I know Silas is sound asleep, but I highly doubt Sasha is anywhere near her bed.

Mr. Trent: That girl is studying too hard to get into her dream school. Senior year has taken a toll on her, hasn't it?

[Mr. Trent gets out of bed and opens his bedroom door. He sees the light from Sasha's room sweeping through to the hallway. He walks silently as possible towards it. Meanwhile, Sasha, who was busy watching a video, hears the footsteps approaching and hides her phone, and pulls out her math notebook. Mr. Trent knocks on the door.]

Sasha: Yeah? Come in. (She eyes the door without looking up).

Mr. Trent: What are you doing up this late?

Sasha: Dad, it's only 11:30 PM. This is really early for me. Besides, I haven't even finished my math homework.

Mr. Trent: Math homework? You need to sleep. If you need a note for school, we can write one. Just don't ruin your health.

Sasha: (Sighs and rolls her eyes) All right dad. Fine. Five more minutes, and I'll be in bed.

Mr. Trent: (Smiles and chuckles) That's my girl. Good night sweetie! (He heads back to his room)

Sasha: (She hides her math test that she failed under her notebook. Then she dials a number on her phone).

[She's talking on the phone]

Hello? Derek?

Derek:

Babe! Are you still coming over tonight? Why haven't you answered my texts?

Sasha:

Ah, I know, I'm sorry. I forgot. (She pauses) I don't know if I can make it to the party. My dad wants me in bed in five minutes.

Derek:

But it's Thursday night, who cares about Friday? (His words start to jumble) Come on babe, I'll even...drive...(sneezes) you back home. (Loud music starts blaring from his end of the phone).

Sasha:

Wait, Derek, are you drunk again? (Gasp) I definitely cannot come to this party.

Derek:

Babe, wait no, it was just a couple of sips. I-

[She ends the phone call. A tear slides down her face. She hasn't been to a party in weeks, but she can't be caught with her adult boyfriend. Just then her dog Patcher, a black lab, walks into the room.]

Sasha: (She pets Patcher's ears) Did you hear all of that?

[Patcher looks up in confusion]

Well, if you did, don't tell mom or dad. They think I'm a good girl. Besides, mom has been getting suspicious of me lately.

[Patcher smells Sasha's backpack then circles around and finds a cozy spot to lie down on his old bed]

You know what. I'll text Melody. She'll know what to do.

[Sasha grabs her phone again and sends out a text]

Melody, are you still awake?

[Then with her phone in her hand she heads downstairs for a drink of water. She feels a cold breeze as she enters the kitchen.]

What the-

[The light outside the backyard door connected to the kitchen is on. She goes outside to turn it off.]

Huh? Where's the switch that-

[She stops mid-sentence. Behind her, she hears the bushes rustling and a shadow-like figure darts next to her. Without turning around, she dashes for the door and opens it.]

God. Save me now.

[With her back still facing the door, she locks it. As she moves her hand away from the knob, a cold grip grabs her. Sasha feels her whole body going numb and her hair turning white.]

Lord, I'm scared.

[Without thinking twice, she whips around, and staring back at her with wide, red eyes, is her worst nightmare.]

[Scene 2]

[At the Shester High School, the students are transitioning classes and talking to each other in the hallways. Melody is talking with a group of her friends.]

Melody: Hey girl, long time no see!

Deena: Yeah, right. I literally saw you at the party last night.

Melody: (Rolls her eyes) Gosh, I was being sarcastic.

Fred: Well, your voice is the same for everything. So...

Deena: (nods her head in Fred's direction) See? I'm not alone on this one.

Melody: Whatever. Guess what? I finally got my phone back this morning. I was so excited, I completely forgot to check my texts.

Fred: Pft, who would text *you*?

[While Deena and Fred are in the middle of laughing, Melody's eyes widen in surprise.]

What? Let me guess. Two spam calls and one text reminding you of your dentist appointment?

Melody: (Ignores him) Sasha texted me at 11:50 PM last night. But I thought Derek said she was grounded.

Deena: Well, I mean, she could have taken her phone without her parents knowing. It's not like parents can outsmart their children nowadays. (Glances at Fred) Well except for Fred.

Melody: At the party last night, Derek clearly said that he called Sasha and talked to her. He told me that she was grounded and lost phone privileges.

Fred: Hold up. Melody are you dumb?

Melody: Um...

Fred: First of all, why would you believe Derek?! Secondly, he literally told you she lost phone privileges, yet he claims that he just got off the phone with her.

Melody: Oh my God!

Deena: Fred! Where have you been all my life? (She playfully punches him in the arm) Also, Melody, Sasha and the word *grounded* do not go together.

Melody: Oh no. You guys are right. I'm so stupid and such a terrible friend. She needed me. But then, where is she today? (She looks around the hallway) I'll try calling her. (The call goes through, but no one picks up).

[As the three of them look for Sasha around the crowds of students, Derek pulls up in the school parking lot and runs into the hallway out of breath. His hair is filled with sweat and his shirt is ripped up near the sleeves and collar. Fred, Deena, and Melody notice his arrival and look at him with bewilderment.]

Fred: Derek?

Deena: Speak of the devil. (She turns away and dials Sasha's number) Hm. She still won't pick up.

Derek: Hey guys. (He's heavily hyperventilating and holds his knee to catch his breath)

Melody: Dude, what are you doing in our high school?

Derek: Okay, before I get caught, where is Sasha? I need to speak to her.

Melody: Sasha?! We should be asking you that question. You lied to me last night!

Derek: (He flinches away and holds his head in his hands) No, I did something terribly wrong. I got drunk and called Sasha. She angrily hung up on me. And I didn't really have a good reason to tell you without sounding like a jerk. I babbled some random crap.

Deena: Mhm, sure. Like we'll believe that. Where's Sasha?

Fred: Girl, he sounds like he's telling the truth.

Derek: Thank you, Fred.

Fred: But where's Sasha?

Melody: Okay, guys, chill out. Last night was weird for all of us. (Looks at Derek) Derek, we all have the same first and second-period class, when she shows up, we'll tell her to call you.

Derek: (Sighs in relief) Oh my gosh, thank you so much! I owe you all. (Sees the principal coming) Okay, I better get outta here. See ya!

[They wave goodbye to Derek. The bell rings and they head inside to class. The teacher takes attendance, but still no sign of Sasha. A while later, their second-period class rolls by, and when the teacher takes attendance, there's still no sign of Sasha.]

[An announcement chimes in through the PA speakers. The principal is passing an important message: *Students, please do not be alarmed. Some of you have probably heard about the missing student from our school. Word has spread like wildfire on this one. The police and FBI are handling the situation right now. I ask that you respect the student and their family's privacy at this time. It is important that you become aware of your environment and please do be safe. We'll be calling a few students to my office for investigation. Again, do not be alarmed. Thank you.* The announcement ended with loud feedback. Murmurs between friends arose in the classroom. Melody, Deena, and Fred looked at each other in distraught.]

Deena: I don't get it. How did we not know?

[The three of them are walking together to a table in the cafeteria]

It's not like she was missing on Thursday. And what do they mean FBI and police?! Did she run away? Skip School? That doesn't sound like Sasha.

Fred: Whoa, whoa, whoa. You're getting ahead of yourself. We don't know who is missing. We just assumed it was Sasha...

Melody: If I text Silas, do you think he would know?

[Melody grabs her phone, but Fred stops her and tells her to look up. A group of boys in a baseball jersey walk into the cafeteria.]

Isn't that-

Deena: Those are Silas's friends. But Silas isn't there.

[She looks at Fred and Melody in dismay]

I think we have our answer.

Fred: That doesn't prove anything. They could both be home with the flu or something. [He gets up] You know what? I'm asking them.

[He walks over to the group of boys in the baseball jersey]

Boy 1: Hey, it's Fred. What's up my man?

Fred: Don't call me your man, Freshie. Where's Silas?

Boy 2: Yo, chill. You, seniors, are passive-aggressive.

Boy 3: Yeah, what's wrong with y'all? And we don't know where Silas is. But I did see a K-9 at their house earlier this morning. The dog was lit.

Boy 1: I think his sister lost her mind or something, and now she disappeared.

Fred: Sasha?! You're kidding.

Boy 2: Oh, is that her name? I think that's who the principal was talking about this morning too in the announcements

Fred: So... that means...Sasha is missing? But then where's Silas?

Boy 3: Don't know, man. He didn't pick up his phone.

[Fred looks around at the boys one last time before heading back to Melody and Deena.]

Deena: So?

Fred: You're right...She's gone...

[Scene 3]

[Back at Trent's house, police cars and vans are surrounding their once quiet neighborhood. They have been there the entire night and day. Crowds of people passing stop by to see the commotion. There's a line of yellow police tape bordering the backyard and the kitchen. Two German Shepherds are sitting patiently on the porch.]

[Inside, Officer Jonah is asking Mr. and Mrs. Trent and Silas some questions about Sasha. They are seated at the coffee table. Next to them, Patcher is limping. According to the witness statement, as soon as Patcher started barking last night, Mrs. Trent ran downstairs and saw the backyard porch light on, a pool of blood from Patcher's paw, and her daughter's hair band on the ground.]

Officer Jonah: (He spreads out four objects in front of them) This is what we found in this house and inside of her backpack. (He points to each object) A failed math test, her phone now cracked, these love letters, and uh...I'm afraid, these were in her backpack. (He points to a bag of white capsules). The K-9 unit sniffed it out. I'm hoping this possession was unknown to herself as well. She seems like a good kid according to her records.

[Mr. and Mrs. Trent's faces both turn pale. Silas's eyes rapidly survey the objects again. His eyes keep coming back to the white substance in the bag]

Silas: My sister doesn't do this.

Officer Jonah: I believe they have her fingerprints on it.

Silas: No, that makes no sense. She tells me everything!

Mr. Trent: Officer, I know my daughter. This would not even cross her mind. I don't think I can process this extra thing right now. Can we focus on finding her?

Officer Jonah: Our detectives are doing their best. Right now, we can only use the evidence and clues to figure out her whereabouts. All we know is that obviously, someone else was here last night.

[Mrs. Trent who has been taken by shock finally speaks]

Mrs. Trent: Sir, my Sasha is a great girl, and she can handle herself really well. (Pauses) I think she ran away. I think I have been putting too much pressure on her. There's no way someone could have broken over the fence.

Officer Jonah: This is normal to think it's your fault and that she did run away. If so, it wouldn't be a pressing case. However, our evidence suggests otherwise. (He points at Patcher) Your dog wouldn't have barked at Sasha. And even if he did, where could she have gotten a hunter's knife to bash his front paw. If they were really close like you said, she would have taken Patcher with her in the scenario that she ran away.

[Mrs. Trent lets out a deep moan and Mr. Trent drops his gaze and hesitates to embrace his wife. He can't process the information fully.]

Silas: Is my sister still alive-

[Just then, the front door opens, and Melody, Fred, and Deena enter the kitchen]

Officer Jonah: Hey! You kids can't be in here! This isn't just some open house party. (Presses his walkie talkie to say something)

Deena: Sir, sir, sir, we're Sasha's friends. We come here all the time.

Officer Jonah: Oh? So you say. (He writes something in his notebook)

Melody: (Whispers to Deena) Oh, great now you've done it.

Fred: (Whispers to Deena) Way to go, blabbermouth. Now we're suspects.

Mrs. Trent: Oh my, it's so good to see you all! You probably already know that our Sasha...that our Sasha...well...she... (She starts sobbing)

[Melody and Deena rush over to Mrs. Trent's side. Fred walks over to Silas.]

Silas: She's missing. And Patcher is hurt. There are suspicious substances in her backpack. Oh, and I almost forgot-someone else was here last night.

Mr. Trent: Silas, that's enough. (Looks at Sasha's friends) Do you guys know anything about this stuff in her backpack? (He points to the love letters) Like who is Derek?

[An awkward silence between Silas, Melody, Deena, and Fred fills the air. They exchange uneasy looks.]

Officer Jonah: I would like to know that as well. He could be the missing lead to this case. (Pauses) Oh, and don't touch anything on this case table. The forensics scientist will be here soon.

[Melody is the first to break the silence.]

Melody: Derek is her boyfriend.

Silas: I- um. Yeah...

Mr. Trent: Boyfriend?!

Officer Jonah: I see. Is he in Sasha's class?

Deena: Yes. No. Just kidding. I don't know?

Fred: Oh boy. Well, you see, how do I put this in the nicest way possible? (He thinks to himself for a moment) He's a 20-year-old high school dropout who just quit his job.

Officer Jonah: (Pulls out Sasha's phone) And according to her call history, he was the last person she called at 11:35PM. And after that, she texted someone named...Melody?

[All eyes but Officer Jonah shift to look at Melody. Melody fidgets her shirt.]

Melody: I only saw her text this morning. Honest. My phone was taken away from me for a whole week, and I got it back before school.

Fred and Deena: Yeah.

Mrs. Trent: So, I was right! The other night I asked her if there was someone she was seeing...She lied to me.

(Pauses and holds her head) What's happening to Sasha?

Mr. Trent: Silas, go get mom some headache pills.

Deena: If I may intervene- as rowdy as Derek seems, he's not aggressive or ill-mannered.

Officer Jonah: (Writes down everything) I see. Well, we should be able to figure out the fingerprints and the DNA traces from the pool of blood from your dog.

Mrs. Trent: Fingerprints? DNA traces?

Officer Jonah: Yeah, it's the sample we collect. We can figure out whether Derek is really behind this.

Mrs. Trent: Fingerprints? DNA traces? (Her face turns pale) Oh. I forgot about those.

Melody: Forgot...?

[Silas who brought the headache medicine hands it to his father who hurriedly tries to open the bottle.]

Mr. Trent: She gets a little dazed when her migraines kick in.

[Officer Earl gets up to move around. Just then, Melody, Fred, and Deena recognize the tattered t-shirt moving outside the house.]

Fred: (Whispers) Derek?!

Deena: He really needs to work on his timing.

Melody: Should we let him in? The police out on the porch won't. We were barely able to pass them.

Silas: Yeah, let him in. If he has my sister... (His glance drops)

Deena: Silas. (She hugs him)

Fred: (Rushes outside where the police are) That is Derek. We know him.

[Derek who looks relieved to see Fred hugs him]

Derek: Thanks man, I owe you...again.

Fred: Don't get ahead of yourself. Where's Sasha?

Natalie Koehn-wu

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Category: Short Story

The Stranger's Gift

I wandered through the empty streets. Not a sound echoed through the alleyways except for my own quiet footsteps and the low moan of the wind. Everything I owned was on my back and yet the chill of the cold still cut me to the bone.

A clock somewhere in the distance struck two. In my deliriousness, I giggled at its sound. Such a funny thing it was. A time that was both so early and so late that no one dared face it outside of slumber. No one that was, except for me. My remaining traces of humor faded away as I thought longingly of a warm bed and peaceful sleep.

As if conjured from my own lonely mind, a man turned the corner up ahead and I froze in my tracks. He was slim as a blade of grass and had the longest beard I had ever seen. With sure steps, almost as if he had planned to meet me here, he approached me.

My first thought after a long life on the streets was to run. Anyone that had walked that way towards me in the past had only wanted trouble and I had enough of my own. Then I caught a glimpse of one of his eyes in the glare of a lamp. They were kind. The lightest porcelain blue, filmed over with a milky white film. They were peaceful eyes, intelligent, and most importantly to me; unseeing.

"Good evening." He called as he approached me.

Hesitantly, I managed to utter a quiet response. "It should be a good morning, should it not?" I didn't expect him to hear me.

To my surprise he chuckled heartily. "That seems to be correct, young one." His milky eyes crinkled at the corners.

"You seem to be an intellectual young man. Would you be willing to share some tea with me?"

From my pocket I pulled my most prized possession. Red leather handle, shiny silver blade, my initials on the rear.

"Y-you can't make me go, sir. I have a knife and I won't be lured into my death by tea." To make a point, I swished my knife through the air and at the sound, the old man sighed.

"I was just an old man looking for some conversation but it seems you have a troubled soul, youth." He reached into his pocket and emerged with something glinting in his hand. A knife? No, a key. "If it makes you feel safer, I will give you this key to my house if you have tea with me."

"And what good will that do if you kill me?" I studied his seemingly honest eyes for the truth.

Half of his mouth quirked into a smile. "I would hope that if we fought hand to hand you would come out the winner.

I give you permission to end my life if I try to end yours and in doing so, you would get all of my belongings." He

threw me the key and cocked a questioning eyebrow at me. "Now who's to say you won't kill me?"

Holding the key in my hand, I rubbed at the ridged end and slipped it into my pocket. "Alright, then. Let's go get some tea."

His home wasn't far from our meeting place. A turn left and a turn right and suddenly we were standing at the foot of two stone steps and a blue door. We stood there for a few moments before I got impatient.

"Aren't you going to let us in?" At that, he chortled a bit.

"It seems that you've already forgotten my gift." Embarrassed, I retrieved the key from the depths of my pocket and quickly slid it into the door. With a soft click, the door unlocked and swung open to reveal a quaint apartment.

"Where are the lights?" I fumbled around to find a lightswitch and was frightened when I couldn't find any. The old man walked into the apartment behind me and took measured steps to the wall across from where I'd been searching frantically for the light. There was no hesitation in the way he found the light switch and promptly flipped it on.

Light filled the space to reveal a cosy living room with a plush couch and armchair, a small kitchen, and an empty fireplace.

"Sorry about the lights, young one. I hardly use them now." He waved his hand in the general direction of the living room. "Have a seat while I make some tea and tell me why you've been roaming the streets at such an early hour."

I did as I was instructed and took a cautious seat in the comfy armchair. It had been such a long time since I had been able to relax even a little. While the old man set the teapot, I got up the courage to speak.

"I grew up on the streets. Much of it was spent alone and fending for myself." I stopped there for fear of sharing the true hardships that I'd faced. I could never lay down my burdens for another to bear; not when a demon lived within me.

It was a sorrowful life that I led; with nowhere to rest and no will to rest. In my tired mind, I knew that I could never have the peaceful sleep that so many others took for granted. It was my curse to carry that I could only lay my head down to rest after collapsing in exhaustion from many sleepless nights of walking the streets. Even then, it was not a true slumber. Nightmares that came straight from the depths of hell plagued my mind in ways that might drive a strong man to madness. They ripped at my soul and polluted the thinking of my mind so that I could not even pull myself back to consciousness.

When I would open my eyes, all the dreams would disappear into smoke as if they were never there. But I knew that they had been. For every time I woke up from my dreams, I was in a completely new place then I had fallen into unconsciousness with no memories of how I'd gotten there.

The old man pulled me from my unpleasant reverie with a hand on my shoulder and an offering of steaming tea. Gratefully, I accepted it from his palm and he settled into the couch across from me.

"Believe it or not young one, I had a similar childhood." The pain in his voice was palpable. "I never had a family to look after me and instead, I had to make my own way in the world."

"Did it get less lonely?" I asked him quietly.

A single tear fell from his eye as he shook his head. "For a short time it did. My late wife was the love of my life."

His voice grew gruff with emotion. "She passed away almost a decade ago. Now it's unbearable to sit in this apartment all alone."

"So that's why you were looking for someone out there on the streets then." I stated.

He smiled a bit at that. "Actually, I walk at night sometimes because it's something my wife used to do. Asking you to tea was completely unplanned on my part."

"Well," I smiled at him even though I knew he couldn't see it. "I'm glad that you did." Nodding his head, he smiled back.

We talked for many hours about everything from our childhoods to our philosophies on life. Through our chats, he had to make three pots of tea and together we ate our way through endless boxes of biscuits.

When the sun began to rise and peek through the blinds, the old man asked me if I needed a place to stay and offered up his apartment.

"It doesn't have to be permanent. The company would just be nice for both of us until I can help you get a job." The 'yes' was on the tip of my tongue. It would be so easy to finally have a home. A friend. A family.

Then I remembered reality. This man had been kind to me. There was something inside of me that I knew was wrong. By staying and letting him care for me, it would be immoral. So I said the only thing I felt that I could.

"Thank you, sir. But I really have to get going." The disappointment was so clear in his milky eyes that I wanted to take back my refusal as soon as I'd said it. Still, it had been done and there was no going back now.

"Well then come back and visit me soon." He smiled sadly. "Perhaps this evening? And I beg that you take these gloves. It's cold outside." The old man pulled some brown leather gloves from a drawer and handed them to me.

Unable to refuse him anymore, I pulled the gloves onto my hands and promised to visit him in the evening.

Then I was out the door. Running from my first chance at a normal life. Turning corners so fast that I lost track of where I was going. I ran until my legs gave out and I had to crawl to the side of the street to avoid being run over by carriages.

There, I caught my breath. I should have stayed. I should have said yes.

I tried to push myself to my feet to go back when I felt it. Darkness crept around the edges of my vision. I needed to stay awake. I needed to stay here. The darkness only spread across my vision until I was sinking into a stormy sea, tossed overboard from reality.

It was morning again when I woke up. I wasn't sure how long it had been since I lost consciousness or what I had dreamt of. When I tried to grab at the fragments of my nightmares, they dissolved into thin air until all I had left was three images.

A broken chair leg. A knocked over water glass. A drop of blood.

Nothing that could really tell me what I dreamed about. I sat up and looked around only to realize that in my unconscious state, I had ended up back at the corner where I'd met the old man. Feeling guilty for missing our meeting, I quickly got moving and took a left and right turn as if I'd been doing it my whole life. I was going to tell the old man that I'd accepted his offer.

When I arrived at the apartment, I couldn't believe my eyes.

Police officers had swarmed the place. A crying lady seemed hysterical as she pointed towards the old man's apartment.

As if in a daze, I walked through the crowd unnoticed and into the open door of the apartment. The calm set up of the furniture from my visit was in wreckage. The coffee table had been thrown across the room, dishes smashed. I looked frantically for anything that might give me a clue to what happened, where the old man could be.

Then I saw it.

A broken chair leg. It's the cushioned armchair that I once sat in not so long ago.

A knocked over water glass. The water from the glass had spilled into the green carpet and small pieces of glass had broken off of it to form a sparkling sheen.

And a drop of blood. So small I might have missed it if I hadn't known exactly where to look for it. It shone defiantly at me from atop a broken piece of porcelain.

Before I knew it, I was out the door. I immediately went to the most important looking police officer and pointed back at the apartment with what I'm sure was a crazed look in my eyes.

"What happened in there? Tell me."

The police officer studied me coolly. "Are you family?" Without stopping to think about the answer I nodded. It didn't matter if it was true, I needed to know the truth about what had happened. "Alright then." He stroked his small black mustache.

"Late last night, someone entered the apartment. There is no sign of forced entry. It seems as though they might have had a key." My heart stopped. "They then used a knife to end the resident's life after a brief struggle." I couldn't breathe. "The only evidence we found from the killer was the knife. Which had no fingerprints."

At that moment, the police officer held up a knife that sat in a plastic bag. It was bloody. Red leather handle, shiny silver blade, my initials on the rear. I looked down at my hands. My leather-glove-clad hands.

At that moment, I started to back away. I tried to make an excuse about something I had to do. Anything to get away from there. Then, with a traitorous clink, the key dropped out of my pocket.

The officer stared at it for a moment. I turned around and ran. Behind me I thought I could hear the thunderous sound of thudding police boots but I didn't look back. I ran and I ran until I was lost and it was late in the night.

I wandered through the empty streets. Not a sound echoed through the alleyways except for my own quiet footsteps and the low moan of the wind. Everything I owned was on my back and yet the chill of the cold still cut me to the bone.

A clock somewhere in the distance struck two. In my deliriousness, I giggled at it's sound.

Lautaro Lo Prete

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Category: Critical Essay

Capitalism vs. The World

Capitalism vs. The World

Capitalism is an unstable system, that is simultaneously ruining world peace and our lives. There have been wars fought and lives lost on this very topic, and the fight continues today. Can there ever be a right answer and a perfect system? No, because mistakes are what make us human – the unavoidable quality that keeps us humble. In Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, there is a perfect world, but it is horrific. I have no intent on convincing that communism is the right answer, but only to show the faults in our current system. Under capitalism there is a need for the workers to constantly work, without a break for the lowest wages possible, and a need for them to go back to work even when there is a global pandemic ravaging the world. The only reason for the lack of lockdowns is capitalism compromising our safety.

To begin with, capitalism has ruined world relations, ruined lives, and sparked the slave trade. Without capitalism, there would have been no need to buy and sell humans – just one example of the extent that capitalism will go to, to make more money and spend less. Capitalism emerged in the Middle Ages, because of the rise of the merchant class. Before this, in Western Europe, there was no real value to currency and local trade.

Colonialism happened because of the need for profit and growth of capital from this new economic system. Colonial powers such as: the Kingdom of Spain, the Kingdoms of Italy, Portugal, and the United Kingdom benefited from the exploitation of people and resources from the newly discovered American continent. The mercantile economy created the first sites of national government and the first modern nations. Although, does that excuse the atrocities committed? Or the heavy exploitation of the new colonies? Having colonies was a way to begin the centuries-long process of the exploitation of the people, without having to exploit your friends, or people within your social class.

In capitalism, wages cannot be raised without also raising prices if the same profit margin is desired; concluding that it is a system made to keep people in their social standing. This creates a class struggle. By the knowledge of that, and the sheer fact that it is so obvious would make someone wonder why we have not tried to change things for the better. Wouldn't we rather live in a society that benefited everyone, instead of morosely working each day with a lower wage and a larger wealth gap?(1) In the Great Depression, the worst financial crisis in United States history, was a fine example of class struggle. In the depression, everyone was hit hard, businesses lost value, and people sunk into multi-generational poverty.

While all this was happening, businesses created a new way to rapidly create a growth in stock called a "buyback." By definition, a "buyback" means that a company sells their stock, then buys it back from the investor. This can raise their stock market value exponentially. This made the CEO's wealth grow beyond control, while the workers, and the unemployed were fighting for food and shelter. This act of buybacking was illegalized in 1938. In the 1980s, Ronald Regan said "government is not the solution, it is the problem," and later he legalized buybacks.

To tie this into a modern perspective, the only reason for the lack of lockdowns to slow the spread of coronavirus is capitalism compromising our safety. The constant need for work and people buying things is what makes it so hard to get proper lockdowns and implement coronavirus safety precautions. The government is letting capitalism threaten the health and well being of the public, all in the name of economic growth and stability. Therefore, the very nature of capitalism is one-sided, colonialist, and a reminder of our ruthless past.

The country that contributed the most to the founding of capitalism was the Netherlands, just after they won a war from Spain in 1648. The Netherlands participated in the land grab of the Americas and Africa (New Amsterdam, a portion of the Caribbean, and somewhere just north of Brazil), and they also held Indonesia as well. With this land, the Netherlands was profiting off of the natural resources of each location. For example, in the Americas the Netherlands became one of the largest sugar traders in the world, greatly profiting from the fight for chocolate.

The modern chocolate industry is a current example of the power hungry system of capitalism. The industrialization of the chocolate industry, created by Cadbury, Hershey, and Mars, led way to the largest slave trade industry in the 21st century. At the time of the Industrial Revolution there were a large number of slave trade industries in Africa. One of the hotspots was the Portugesse colony of São Tomé. Reporters from the United Kingdom were coming in secret with the will to feast their eyes on the horrific sites of the so-called “suspended” chocolate related slave industry. One of them reportedly saw a path littered with human corpses, when he grabbed the head of one of them the scalp came off. The newspaper to catch the scoop was *The Standard* reporting on Cadbury with this scathing article: “*The white hands of the Burnsville chocolate makers are helped by other unseen hands some thousands of miles away, black and brown hands, toiling in plantations, or hauling loads through swamp and forest.*” There is no ethical consumption under capitalism. It does not matter what you are or from where you are purchasing, there can never be true ethical consumption when under a system of private enterprise that depends on the exploitation of people. If this doesnt show the horror capitalism will go to get more money, and that it should be changed, then I don’t know what will.

Is entertainment a subtle indoctrination of the next generation? The indoctrination of the next generation is key for the future of capitalism, colonialism, and imperialism. These forms of child indoctrination are placed as propaganda in television, marketing, games, and anything you can think of that a child would like. Nerf guns, and *Avengers* movies are a fine example of the imperialist war ideas brought into a child’s entertainment. This is created by the psychological method of association. The most common variety is creating an association of something unpleasant with the thing that was creating the unpleasantness. It can also be used to associate a fun childhood game such as Monopoly, with capitalism. Because, subconsciously, you automatically trust it, or distrust it, depending if you have experienced something similar, and whether it was unpleasant, or pleasant.

Furthermore, capitalism has dug its claws so deep into our lives. How can someone trust a system that crushes others with differences like an ant in your way? For example, when the presidential elections in Chile were decided in 1975, a socialist was elected bringing in a new policy to make the United States pay the true price for copper. The military supported a coup in Chile, shooting the president in his office, and replacing him shortly after, undemocratically. This year, the United States supported an attempted coup in Venezuela and more in South America. The extent that capitalists will go to keep their system stable is incomprehensible. Capitalism is unstable and bound to fail. Capitalism requires constant growth in the market and therefore, accumulation of wealth, and when that growth stops it fails with a recession, or a depression. And as Karl Marx thought when this happens the true revolution can begin. Was he wrong?

Before Cuba converted to communism, it was the hotspot for the rich. “The tropical air was fragrant with the scent of money,” is how Cuba is described in the book, *The Chocolate Wars*. There was a large social divide, and many impoverished people whilst there was a small community of the rich, which controlled the majority of the wealth, coincidentally like the United States. Then when Fidel Castro started the revolution, the only ones fleeing Cuba were the rich who widened the wealth gap by oppressing the poor.

During the coronavirus pandemic, the wealthy, and the capitalist system have begun to reveal their true colours to the masses. Once the pandemic hit, Amazon raised the prices on PPE by 110%. The wealth gap has widened, and lower income households are being devastated. Elon Musk added 224% to his wealth since the first months of the pandemic. (2) With the capitalist economy in the United States, there are permanently lower wages, leading to it being impossible to pay rent and bills from lost jobs, and lowered wages during the pandemic. That in the end will inevitably lead to a ripple effect in the economy, creating an economic recession.

Capitalism is unstable, and runs off of the idea of divide and conquer. For example, the wealthy take all of the pizza but one slice, and offer it to a homeless man, and a common worker. They tell the worker to be afraid of the homeless man, that he will steal your pizza. They start a feud, so that people cannot unite to change their lives for the better. People will fight with each other forever while they are actually in the same social class. Once the people realize this, they can improve everyone's lives. But the corporations would take in less profit with the unison of the

people. So instead corporations create rumors and distrust in a political system or leader to prevent this from happening.

For example, the Soviet Union when Valdemir Lenin was in power. Lenin brought progressive ideas to the table. The Soviet Union was the first country to legalize abortion in 1919, the first country with paid maternal leave, and first country with womas suffrage. His idea grew ever more popular, and so other countries like Cuba, China, Vietnam began to adapt these ideas into their politics. For the United States this meant a sort of closing in the market for them, and potentially less money. So the United States campaigned hard with propaganda to prevent these ideas from taking hold in the United States. A 1960s era poster reads, "Where will you draw the line against communist aggression?" even while the United States was starting wars over communism.

What is right and what is wrong? Is the oppression of the underpaid working class right, and is communism bad? Can there be a solution that benefits everyone? All political and economic systems have their faults, that is why you mustn't full heartedly trust any of them. Does risking your life and well being to fund this system feel like it benefits the people? The question one must ask themselves is capitalism truly benefiting the people, and is working in a global pandemic really seem fair to the worker?

Claire Mansfield

Age: 14, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Julie Elmore

Category: Short Story

Who Can You Trust?

Who Can You Trust?

I love fall weather. This is my favorite time of the year to sit outside and read a good book. The sun is blazing on my face and the sounds of birds chirping and leaves rustling makes me so happy. I also love the fall because it's my birthday season. Tomorrow, November 4, is my birthday and I am turning sixteen. Oh my gosh! I almost forgot to introduce myself. My name is Lena. I am fifteen years old and I live in Reno, Nevada with my mom and dad. My parents are really strict. They never let me go to anyone's sleepovers, they don't let me have social media, and I have always been near them for as long as I can remember. My parents do not seem like normal parents. They don't watch the news, they throw away all newspapers and magazines that we may have, but they tell me they do this because the world is a negative place and they don't want me listening to all that negativity. Some people say that they are really bad parents, and aren't letting me live my life, but I still love them, after all they are my parents. Anyways, fall is my favorite time of the year. This year seems like it will be colder than others, with the wind blowing, and the icy air on my cheeks, but it is still fall, my favorite time of the year.

I am sitting outside on a rough towel reading my favorite book, *Little Women*, when I hear a loud bang noise coming from inside my house and see my parents running outside towards me. The worried look on their faces indicates that something bad is happening. My mom screams with a shaky voice "Get in the car now!" and I see a flash of something move in the house. I turn and run to the car, not knowing what is happening, or what is inside. I can hear the loud breaths of my mom and dad behind me. We make it to the car and my heart starts racing; I feel like it is going to hop out of my chest. Another loud bang noise comes from the back of our car, and I turn to see a dark figure almost fly across the back windshield. My dad throws the car into reverse and we hastily drive out of the driveway. So many questions are passing through my mind.

Who was that? What is happening? Is this a joke? Why are we running? Will we ever go back home? What did y'all do?

I figure out what is happening; We are being chased.

We pull into the parking lot of a McDonalds. The sun has gone down, and the moon is high in the sky. I look at the clock on the car and see that it is 9:23 pm. I must have been asleep for about two and a half hours. I can tell we are far away from home by the eased faces of my parents. My dad turns around and whispers to me, "Hey Lena. Do you want anything from McDonalds? Do you need to use the restroom?"

I talk with a normal voice and say back to him: "No Dad, I'm fine. So what exactly just happened?"

The eased look on my parents' faces turn red and they look at each other. It stays silent for a couple minutes and they look like they had done something wrong.

"So... are you going to answer me today?" I ask.

My mom turns in her seat and she says in a scared voice, "You are a princess. We are not your real parents. When you were little, your mom and dad had told us that people were trying to take over the palace and they wanted us to keep you safe. The person that was in our house is one of the people trying to take over the palace where you were born, and where your parents are. They want to take you. There are more people looking for you so we need to keep on running to keep you safe. Sorry we didn't tell you sooner."

My heart stops. My stomach drops, and I feel like I have just been shot. My whole life is a lie, and now people are trying to get me! I want to scream at these people I hardly know. I want to run out of the car, hide in my closet. But I can't.

"Are you okay?" the now random man tells me.

"What do you think? I have been lied to my entire life, I don't even know who you are!"

"We just wanted to keep you safe," the middle aged woman says, "I get you are mad at us but we are trying to keep you safe."

I unbuckle my seat and get out of the car. I walk into the McDonald's bathroom and lock the door behind me. I drop to the floor and start thinking through my life, trying to figure out what is a lie, and what isn't. I stand up and look in the spotty mirror.

You are you. You cannot change the past but can change the future. They are trying to keep you safe from the creeps that are following you.

After my small pep-talk, I splash my face with water and turn around to walk out of the bathroom. I turn the corner and see everyone in the McDonalds on the floor. One of the workers looks at me with fear in her eyes, and I hear a man talking. I peep my head around the corner and see a man standing on one of the registers holding a gun. I turn back to go to the bathroom when the mens door opens, and a man grabs me and pulls me in. He is holding a gun and is wearing all black. He covers my mouth with his hand, and I try to kick and scream, but this man is much bigger than me, and I cannot break free. He throws me over his shoulder and runs out of the bathroom to a beat up van and throws me in the back. The man that was standing on the counter jumps into the passenger seat and tells the driver to go. We drive away from the McDonalds, and I look out of the back window and see my old parents' car following the van. The driver speeds up and the tires scream. I see my old parents speed up as well.

About thirty minutes have passed and we pull off of a highway and my old parents pull off the highway as well. We stop in a grassy field and all the men in the van hop out, grasping onto guns. I noticed a teen guy around my age jump out of the van too. I hadn't noticed him before now, and like the other men, he is also holding a gun, but he doesn't look like he knows how to work it. My old parents jump out of the car holding onto guns too. A couple minutes pass and no one has pulled the trigger of the gun. I can hear the talking back and forth of them outside. My old parents are outnumbered, so they cannot win the gun fight, so they decide to do something else. My dad looks at the men surrounding him and puts his gun on the ground, and I can see everyone outside making a deal.

The back door of the van opens and the man that threw me into the car grabs me and throws me onto the ground. My caretakers grab me and I stumble to my feet. I stay quiet as my old mom tells me to get into the car. The men that had taken me got back into their van, but the boy that seems my age took a while to get into the car. He kept looking back at me in the car, and he looked sad. I just assumed that he was disappointed that he didn't complete his job of getting me. He finally got into the van and they drove off, and we drove off into the opposite direction towards a building with something on the roof. We make it to the building and they take me up to the roof where a helicopter was. They are in some rush to get onto the helicopter, and I cannot hear anything because the propeller is so loud. We get on and start flying off, when my old mom turns around in her seat and says one word. Sorry. The smug look on her face indicates that this is not the end of what is happening, and shows that something bad is about to happen.

"What?" I say "Aren't we safe?"

They both look at each other with an evil look on their faces, and my old dad turns around and says, "Actually no. We are safe;, you are not. You are with the people that are trying to take you right now."

I am confused. *What is happening? How am I with the people that were trying to get me if I am with the people that have been with me for the past fifteen years?*

Then it hits me. The people that had put me in the van weren't trying to take me or kill me, they were trying to save me. We never watched the news or had newspapers or magazines because they were trying to hide the fact that they had stolen me from my parents when I was a baby. They were the ones that the people had tried warning my parents about. Once again, I wanted to scream, but there was nothing I could do. I try to think of why they would kidnap me. They must have tried getting my parents to pay them money for myself back. I assumed they were going to sell me or kill me, but how could I know. My life feels like a big dream, and I can't wake up. I start crying and eventually fall asleep.

I awake to the scraping of the helicopter landing somewhere and of course I have no idea where. I still keep my eyes somewhat closed and stay in the position I was sleeping in to see if I can hear any talking of the people in front of me. I check the clock at the front and it shows the time as 11:04. I have only been asleep for about half an hour, but I do not know where I am. The sliding door opens and I hear a voice yell at me to take off my seatbelt and get out of the helicopter. I do as he says because I am scared of what will happen if I don't. I see my kidnappers standing off to the side smiling, laughing at me. I want to collapse, I want to run, my body is aching with every breath I take. Then it happens. I do collapse, but not on my own.

Someone runs at me and throws me to the ground. My knees start bleeding as my whole body slams to the concrete. My vision is blurry and I can barely see the people standing above me and who the person is on top of me. I try for what feels like eternity to focus my eyes, when I see a familiar face. Is that him? The boy that was with the others that had thrown me into the van? Some relief flows into my body when I make an inference that he has come to save me. What else would he be doing here? I feel cold hands grab me up and I can see the people putting me and the boy into handcuffs, and dragging us into a dark room. We sit in the dark, silent room for a couple of minutes, when I hear a small mumble from the boy next to me. "Elijah"

I guess that is his name. I respond with "Lena. But you probably already know that. So what exactly are you do-"

In the middle of my sentence, the door to the dark room we are sitting in opens and a tall man walks in. It takes me a while to adjust my eyes because I have been sitting in a pitch black room for about ten minutes. He has bright blonde hair and looks to be in his fifties. Elijah and I stay silent while this man talks to us. "Hello. I hope you are enjoying your time here in the dark." he pauses "Such a nice place. No one to see you, no one for you to see. Here is what is going to happen. In a couple of minutes, a man will come in here and ask you some questions. Then we will contact your parents Lena, and see if they still want you. If they do, we will make some type of bargain, but if they don't we will either kill, or sell both you and your friend here." The door opens again and a woman walks in and tells the man that was talking to us to hurry up. "Looks like it is time for me to go" He says in a creepy voice.

The door closes and Elijah whispers to me, "We have to go, I have to keep you safe"

"I am pretty sure I can keep myself safe" I say with a small attitude, but I decide to listen to him because it seems he knows what he is doing.

The smallest light from under the door shines and I whisper over to him, "How do we get out of here? There are no windows"

"How do you think?" He whispers back "You seem to be a smart girl".

I think over all the ways we could escape. *There are no windows, we can't go through the door, we cannot crawl through the vents because that only happens in fictional stories, the ceiling?* I stand up in my chair and feel my fingers against the rough ceiling. *I am looking for. . . yay, I found it.*

My fingers touch an indent in the ceiling and I suddenly know that there is an attic entrance in this room. I whisper to Elijah to stand up, and he does. My knees are aching, and my arms feel like they may fall off, but I manage to pull off the cover for the attic opening, and whisper "We can go through here, there has to be a way out of this place but we must act fast, they will be back any minute." He locks his hands together and I step on them and he lifts me up into the attic. I hear talking below me, and I can see a small light from a window in the attic. I hear Elijah hurl himself up to the attic, and we both stand up. We walk across the attic slowly to the window. We make it to the window and he pries it open with a piece of wood that was laying on the floor. I slip out, and make it up onto the roof. I am looking for a way down and hear grunts behind me. I turn to see Elijah trying to squeeze his Dwane Johnson like body out of a small window. He makes it, but has cuts on his shoulders and hips.

After a while of trying to plan what our next step will be, I see a helicopter land on the roof. Elijah and I stay down and when the man inside the helicopter walks away, we run over to it, see the keys still in the helicopter, and jump in. The door to the inside opens and we see multiple people coming out with guns at us. I have no idea how to work the helicopter, but it looks like Elijah knows how to. He turns it on and we start hovering over the ground. I don't know if I should be more scared of Elijah flying the helicopter, or people shooting at us with guns. I control myself and buckle up. I look over and see Elijah nod his head, and we start going up, and then away.

It takes me a couple of minutes to control myself and realize that I am safe. We land about an hour later at an airport, and we meet up with many other people in black suits that take me onto a private airplane. I feel so much relief and cannot stop thanking Elijah for helping save my life.

We fly to a small island and land near a palace, where I meet my parents for the first time in almost fifteen years. I am the happiest I have ever been in my life.

Fast forward one year. The people that had kidnapped me when I was a baby got arrested and went to prison. Now I am almost seventeen and the past year with my parents have been amazing. This may sound bad, but I want to thank the people that kidnapped me. They gave me a chance to grow up with a normal life and now I am grateful for what I have. This doesn't mean that I like the people that kidnapped me, because afterbeccauseafter all, they took me away from my amazing parents for fifteen years of my life. That one day about a year ago changed my life forever, and taught me who I can trust. I can hear my parents calling me inside to go eat dinner, but I do not want to. I am too busy writing a book instead of reading one, and it is fall, my favorite time of the year.

Grace Marcus

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: Sabot at Stony Point, Richmond, VA

Educator: Sarah Lile

Category: Novel Writing

The Deeper Ocean

Brief summary:

"The Deeper Ocean" is about 3 people who started an internship at the OSTL, an Ocean Studies Testing Laboratory. The OSTL is run by Dr. Stein, a wealthy and particular boss. On the outside, the scientists are conducting regular observation on ocean life and plants, but there's something else under the surface. A collection of "special scientists" are on a project for Dr. Stein, who is creating mutant ocean/land animal creatures by fusing DNA cells. This involves capturing and torturing ocean animals and polluting water. One of the scientists, Dr. Canmore, found what was really going on at the OSTL, and Dr. Stein had to stop it. A "scuba diving accident" was staged, but Dr. Canmore survived. Meanwhile, the 3 interns are learning about the horrible testing at the OSTL and what they can do to stop it, with the help of Dr. Kendal, another "special scientist" who used to work on the project. Then the interns find out that Dr. Stein is working for someone well known by the scientists at the OSTL as "The Client". Dr. Stein is actually creating this creature for the Client who is heavily investing in the projects. The Client is serving as a protection service for the OSTL so that the government won't be involved. The interns now have to find a way to expose the Client and the OSTL to end the horrible projects. This novel is dedicated to awareness of global warming and pollution to our oceans and seas.

Excerpt:

Chapter 1: Under the Surface

Dr. Canmore's eyelids snapped open. She felt nausea, like she could throw up at any moment. Her breathing accelerated and she started to grind her teeth, a custom she had ever since she was a child. All she could see was a watery surface, far above her. Only bits and pieces of light came through, serving as her only indication of where she was. She heard an engine like sound and twisted her head to the left. A boat started to make a buzzing sound as it took off, the motor leaving a trail of bubbles behind. Dr. Canmore could feel the vibration the boat had left through the water and wondered where she was and how she had been here. Her anxiety soured up through the water as she longed to breathe fresh air. She was stuck under the surface.

Dr. Canmore was about 30 feet under the water, a long swim upwards. Whenever a diver was deep under the surface, they had been trained in a skill that was useful to coming up to the surface in a much faster way than normal. This was a very proficient skill used by deep sea divers when exploring caves when not using an oxygen tank. Dr. Canmore was lucky to have an oxygen tank, because normally she would refuse one. She had also been trained to hold her breath for long amounts of time with ease. She then realized that she had blacked out, not being able to remember what had happened before. She suddenly saw a fat huge fish swim right by her face, causing sand to cloud over her head. This fish had big, long, sharp teeth sticking out of its mouth. She tried to move, and when she did, realized that she had been covered with rocks and stones. She could not even move a finger. Only her face was exposed to the watery abyss. She was in a scuba suit, with the oxygen tank that kept her breathing. But for how long? How much time did she have left before she ran out of air, bits of seaweed growing out of the cracks between the rocks. If only she could move her arms, she could find how long she had before the mask would do her no good. She started to hyperventilate. Who would do this to someone? To Dr. Canmore? She knew for a fact that any scuba accident could not result in something this extreme. Somebody had planned this, staged it. Dr. Adette Canmore was a very skilled diver. She was even a marine biologist and a veterinarian. But her memory was clouded just like the sand swirling around in the open sea. She did remember that she was working at a lab. But nothing felt right about this lab. Somebody had possibly tried to kill her. But why? She had no memory of how she got there. Over time, she

presumed that her memory would start to come back to her. But for this moment, she had to figure out how she was going to survive.

Feeling in her right arm was coming back to her. She took a deep breath. She could not waste all her oxygen by worrying or having a panic attack. There was no room for mistakes. She managed to wiggle her toes, and almost moved the rock crushing into her knee cap. Once she could manage to get feeling into most of her body parts, she would attempt to move the rocks.

The stones were in very odd positions. Although the rocks were heavy and hard, with a bit of momentum Dr. Canmore could shift all the rocks from her body and proceed to swim up to the surface and see how much time she had left. But another challenge occurred. She was positioned on a sort of cliff. If she moved in an unordered fashion, the rocks and boulders would slide off the cliff and pull her down with them into the deeper ocean locations, and since most of her body was still frozen in place, she would not be able to swim out quickly and would sink. She started to feel colder, and even a bit lonely. She attentively turned her head to the side and found the cliff. She moved her legs a quarter of an inch and heard some tiny stones as they were pushed off the ledge and tumbled down to unknown points.

As Dr. Canmore started to drag her arm away from the boulder, a sharp pain spiked up her neck. If she were not careful, she could receive damage on her arm. She wondered about different strategies to use. The thought of having to amputate her arm was definitely a possibility. She decided that the best option was to rip the band aid off. She counted down in her head. 1. She started to wiggle her fingers, loosening up her arm. 2. She tried to twist her wrist, side to side. 3. She took a deep breath and grinded her teeth. With her other arm she got traction from the other rocks, enough to finally yank her arm away and out from under the gigantic boulder and tumble down from the ledge.

Chapter 2: The Misty Green house

As Cady Lodge walked through a greenhouse, she noticed how a faint smell of chlorine lingered on. She liked the smell and thought that it was an exceptionally clean fragrance. She was taking a tour of the building alongside 1 other new intern, Aron Wilkinson. She was fresh out of Yale university, and presumed that Aron was young too. She moved to Honolulu Hawaii after she found out about the amazing lab programs that presented amazing opportunities for scientists who studied within the topics of ocean studies. That is why Cady signed up for an internship for the OSTL, which stood for Ocean Studies Testing Laboratory. She was not head over heels at the sight of salt water, but she figured that an internship here would look good on her resume.

"Please follow me to Dr. Stein's office. In this building there are 52 offices and 75 laboratories in total, but for this tour I am only going to show 6 labs and 1 office." Ms. Davila said. She had a gigantic bun at the top of her head that looked like it was going to fall out. Cady wondered if she should offer her a bobby pin. "It seems that the third intern is 25 minutes late. Hurry up now." She sighed, picking up her yellow pad of notes and clicking her half inch heels down another hallway.

Dr. Stein had chosen her to lead the interns on a tour, so she decided to bring them to Dr. Stein's office 10 minutes earlier than he had expected, which he hated. When she first started working at the OSTL, she was fascinated by how many rooms there were. No one really knew what all of the rooms were. Except Dr. Stein of course, and some other scientists. He always called them the special scientists for the "special experiment" that not everybody could look at. He hired her thinking that she could be kind of a secretary, but she mostly did water mineral research. This also bothered Dr. Stein.

One of Ms. Davila's jittery interns wanted to go to the nearest bathroom, but since they were in the east wing Ms. Davila did not know exactly where that was. Sometimes she would spend her break with the special scientists, and they knew where everyone was. She had not seen one in a while though.

"I really have to go Ms. Davila ma'am." Said Aron.

"Please do not call me ma'am" said Ms. Davila. She turned her head but was still walking, and accidentally ran into a custodian. "Oh, my apologies." She said, brushing her pants down.

Mr. Bronchos grunted. He did not like all of the scientists running into him all the time. Dr. Stein wanted the building to be in top shape all of the time, which required a lot of cleaning. Dr. Stein also wanted the custodians to assist the scientists at their every need, as if he actually cared about them.

Mr. Bronchos sighed.

"Do you need anything?" He said.

"As a matter of fact, I would love some help if you would be so kind to escort Mr. Wilkinson here to the nearest

bathroom.” Ms. Davila asked.

“Of course.”

“Splendid, I will need him back as soon as possible.”

“Are you the one using the chlorine?” Cady blurted out. She was very curious how the custodian cleaned the toilets. She needed things to be clean if she was going to work there.

“Umm, I don’t think so.” Said Mr. Bronchos. He did not like interns very much. They always wanted to walk around the halls when it was cleaning day.

“We really need to go on now.” Ms. Davila said. She was growing impatient. Mr. Bronchus took Aron down the hall, and Cady went with Ms. Davila into the elevator.

Chapter 3: The peeling building

Jamie Harrison let out a groan as she let down her head onto the car horn. She was 35 minutes late for her internship interview and tour of the OSTL Lab. She unfortunately ran into a nail on the road and her tire was flattened. After she called her mom to help her change it and drove to the internship, she was extremely late. But she was here. There were not many cars in the parking lot that presented themselves. She glanced up at the huge rotting building, with yellow paint peeling off the walls. She signed up for the interview because she wanted to learn more about ocean animals.

She was also a huge fan of Dr. Adette Canmore, who she heard worked here. Reading about Dr. Stein on his Wikipedia page, she read about how his Father, Thomas Stein, had wanted his only son Jack Stein to be in the wine business like him. After Thomas Stein became a millionaire, he built multiple areas to store his overflowing wine business. One of the buildings was in Honolulu Hawaii, where Jamie happened to live. But, overtime, since his son Jack wanted to be a scientist and not carry on the family legacy, the business went under. Jack Stein inherited the buildings and decided to turn the rooms into labs and offices.

Jamie reluctantly opened her car door and stepped out into the warm Honolulu summer weather. She skipped up the concrete steps. When she reached the door, she took a deep breath and tried to open the huge double doors. They would not budge, just as Ms. Davila said they would if you did not have the special chip that acts as a key. They made them so small, and Ms. Davila didn’t want the new interns to lose the keys. But that was exactly what Jamie had done.

Jamie was pounding on the doors and tapping on the windows, but it was no use. The building was massive, and it seemed so empty. She got distracted and began to study the large building. “This is extraordinary.....” Jamie murmured. She had not seen a place this big in her whole life. Jamie Harrison had grown up in a small town in Maui, and the biggest building she had ever seen was when her mom would drive her the 30 minutes to the local grocery store.

As Jamie trudged around the side of the building, a chemical smell got much stronger. She wandered along the tall yellow walls, Jamie noticed an odd-looking rock about 15 feet ahead of her. It was a very dark colored rock, practically pitch black. She gave it a kick, knocking it over on its side. Underneath, the rock was hollow. She could see an intricate array of red, black, blue, and yellow wires all connecting to the side of the rock where there was a tiny glass camera. Jamie knew that it must be a security camera. Her fingers drew her towards the tiny handwritten note on the side of the wires. The print was exceedingly small, and she did not have her reading glasses (She had forgotten those in the car), but she could make out the last few words:

Protection camera for Delphinus Delphis and Testudines testing lab.

Jamie was not too confused by the writing since this was an ocean lab but was a bit concerned why the lab needed a fake rock as a security camera. Jamie was inspecting it thoroughly. A tiny flash drive was hidden under a set of wires. Jamie proceeded to reach for it. Her fingers felt cold on the hard metal in the flash drive, but only for a few seconds. For after that a sharp pain engulfed her body and shocked her arm. She let out a scream and jumped back from the rock, her fingers tingling from the sensation.

“What kinda security camera is this!” Jamie exclaimed. Tears started to sprout from her eyes. She looked down at her fingers, seeing tiny red marks on the fingertips that had touched the tiny flash drive. This did not seem to be working out. Jamie sunk to the wet ground and leaned her back against the massive wall.

Mr. Bronchos picked up his pace a bit, looking at his watch. Aron was falling a bit behind him, and Mr. Bronchos wondered if he even had to go to the bathroom at all. Mr. Bronchos was not sure where every bathroom was, because he only oversaw cleaning the first-floor bathrooms and cleaning out all the trash cans. He led Aron to the stairwell and told him to hurry up.

Aron looked down at the winding stairs. He had been told that there were many levels in the whole building, and they were on the 5th floor. Aron dug out his phone from his pocket, and snapped a quick photo of the deep staircase, his long ponytail swaying over his shoulders. As Aron stumbled down the stairs, he looked out the windows on each landing. All of the windows were pretty tiny, about two square feet. They all had thick iron bars that looked pretty new to him. He even remembered that all the windows in the whole buildings had the same bulky poles, like they were trying to keep something out. Or in. Aron shivered.

As Aron was looking out of the windows, he was also looking down at the forest next to the laboratory to see when they were getting lower to the ground. Below one of the windows that was a bit closer, he saw the top of someone's head. This was the top of Jamie's head.

"Hey, Mr. Bronchos I think that somebody is out on the side of the building!" Aron remarked. He was worried that it was a thief, or maybe somebody was trying to break into the lab.

Mr. Bronchos let out a grunt and walked over to the window. He was too short to see outside the window, so he had to jump to be able to see Jamie sulking and clutching her scarred hand. Aron watched as Mr. Broncho's eyes went wide and pulled out what seemed to be a knife from his pocket.

Jamie was still sitting all by her lonesome.

Just as she was about to go back to her car and take a nap, she saw two figures at the front of the building. It kind of looked like two characters from a cartoon, because one of the figures had a long ponytail swinging from side to side and was rather tall and skinny, and the other was a bit bigger, and much shorter. Jamie jumped to her feet, hoping that the two people trudging toward her, the tall one trailing behind a bit, could help her find a way to make everything right.

Mr. Bronchos approached the possible intruder.

"Excuse me, what do you think that you are doing here?" Mr. Bronchos said as he glanced at the broken fake rock that he had installed a few months before, ripped out of the ground. He was not sure why they needed a security camera. Who wanted to rob or break into an ocean studies lab? Not him.

"Um, I'm sorry. I am not really exactly sure why or how I got here, but I'm supposed to be the third intern, but I had some car troubles, and I lost my key to get in the building, and I found a rock and I touched this flash-drive thing and it shocked me and it really hurts and I am not a security threat." Jamie rambled on. Her palms were very sweaty, and she really hoped that they believed her. The short man looked like he was a custodian of some sort and was giving her a look.

Mr. Bronchos grunted a small "Come with me."

"Oh, thank you so much." Jamie said as she walked behind the two men.

Ms. Davila starts to tap her foot. Cady could tell that she looked terribly upset.

Mr. Bronchos walked down the hall with the two other interns trailing behind him. Jamie felt uncomfortable when she saw the woman that was presumed to be Ms. Davila (the woman who had sent her the email with the job description). In the email, she seemed very desperate to hire interns, and seemed very enthusiastic when she agreed to get the job. Now, Ms. Davila did not look very enthusiastic.

"Hello! My name is Jamie Harrison. I'm deeply sorry that I am late and will do whatever it takes to make it up to you." Jamie said. She was about to go in for a handshake when Ms. Davila turned quickly on her heels and walked in the opposite direction.

"Follow me interns." Ms. Davila remarked. "We are going to visit Dr. Stein."

Raiya Nathan

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Henrico High School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Keith Hollowell

Category: Flash Fiction

Whispers and Screams

Whispers and Screams

Open your eyes. You bathe in the luminance and warmth of the sun. It's 8 am and time to seize the day. Your first impulse, regretfully, is to grab your phone. You lazily scroll through TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, and other nonessential essential apps. The algorithms are custom-tailored to your interests. You see the latest styles from Vogue, an overwhelming amount of birthday posts for one of your friends, a CNN article here and there about escalating tensions with the Middle East-which you overlook-, vacation pics, and then you see it. "This photo contains sensitive content which some people may find offensive or disturbing". Your interest is piqued by the obscured photo and cryptic message. You proceed to click on the photo.

You see a video of a white cop kneeling on a black man, rendering him unable to breathe. You see graphic videos of men beating up their wives. You see a magnificent country torn apart by an explosion in a matter of seconds. You see fear and anguish and distress intertwine each of these pictures- then you see nothing at all. You put your phone aside and remain silent for a few minutes. And then you get out of bed and get on with your day.

The morning's news has overwhelmed you, so you decide to go on a jog in hopes that this will remedy your quasi-depression. You feel lingering sentiments from this morning but push them away and concentrate on your breathing. 30 minutes later, all out of breath, you take a brief break. The brisk air and energizing sunshine have regained your vitality. You have reemerged with newfound vigor. Take a deep breath and set off in a new direction. The images from this morning race through your head. You are aware of all the injustices happening around the world and even behind closed doors. The enormity that prevails in the world has not made itself unknown. You need to do something about it because you cannot and will not remain silent. What can you do? What do you have?

You have a voice. Use it. Scream. Scream for the sick. Scream for the poor. Scream for the survivors. Scream for the dead. Scream for the victims. Scream for the oppressors. Scream for black men. Scream for white men. Scream for the women. Scream for the children. Scream for the beautiful. Scream for the ugly. Scream for those you know and those you may never know. Scream for the justice and injustice that perpetuate in the world. Scream for those who have been silenced. Scream until your throat is red and raw so that you may feel a fraction of the pain they endure. Scream so that their fear and energy pulsate through your body. You are equipped with the resources, the ability, and the potency to actualize change. No trial or tribulation will obstruct you and if you have to move Heaven or Hell so be it.

Mobilize and feel the energy and fire surge within you until you become the beautiful creature that has remained dormant for all this time.

Or don't. Go back to your run of the mill everyday life. Go ahead and stay silent. That is your prerogative. Don't use your privilege for you think nothing you do will be impactful. Let your momentum from this morning die down and become stale and stagnant until it bears no semblance to before. Stay silent for the ones who need you, but never forget that you will always have the power to change this. You circle back home and look up at the sky. The sun has retreated just as you have. It is time to begin the proceedings of your mundane life-grab some coffee, maybe put on a face mask if you have time. While racing around the house trying to find your iPhone charger, you catch a glimpse of yourself in the mirror and see that all that passion and rage and beauty inside you have shirked away until you become only a whisper of a scream.

Emily Nation

Age: 16, Grade: 11

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

Educators: Cindy Cunningham, Gail Giewont

Category: Poetry

Intelligent Design

If I Existed Somewhere

Somewhere I exist
Twenty-something & drinking stupid, stupid luck
I whisper to my new & only friend &
Finally those coastal rocks can glide down my hair
Slicked back & chest forward I cross my legs
To the tune of cool mountain breeze on the back of my knees
I could wear more green
I'd sing to no one & hum to everyone
My arm around a girl who feels beige
This kind of fantasy only found in blinking slow
& Somehow, in this bustling mountain city I'll find
Sand in between my toes
Made of ashes & grey memories
For a staccato moment, I realize
I could join those rock-filled waves
& That's what I'll tell her
My new & only friend
I'll kiss her cheek & step into wet traffic
& she wouldn't mind
& I wouldn't either
She knows I don't mean it
When I say I'm sorry

Guzzle Ghazal

In a sailboat along the sea, floating on notes sung high above the sky, you guzzle
the salt like it's candy, staining your tongue with this brew, guzzle

(what you know) is a colored-glass window on pink mountain peaks-- balance
your last unbroken toe on glue and leather, this is your destiny, welcome to waterloo, guzzle

(down) snow banks. stand on water glowing gold in the moonlight, long for curtains
made of cotton, like the ones you once wore on your arms, you chew, guzzle

(erasers) make marks on your bones, shreds of words make homes in your veins;
you'll scrape them out as best you can, but still it itches, a new guzzle

(of medicine) you take it because it's a forest flooding, unlike you've ever seen before;
you, now, are covered in petroleum, smooth like you are a newborn baby; i'll coo, guzzle

(milk) your fruit dry, it's all ash and fiber now, now is time to awake; spray pesticides and
scare away the insects that plagued you that one time-- the swarm will come into view, guzzle

(poison) your friends with everything you have; they'll sip two cups of tomato-flavored wine
but you are still alive, still breathing and beating your chest, a wild thing, click undo, guzzle

(time) to say goodbye. you are singing and muttering again. a silly dream you have.
you are not a nation, Nation. You exist on an island. Bid adieu. Guzzle.

Agatha

How much sugar lies in your breasts?
How much salt in your satan?
Did the Earth crumble to make way for you,
Or was it hell shaking its fist?
How often are you an amazon?
Were you a woman kept silent?
Can I see myself in your reflection?
Did you dance in the flames,
Or rejoice in release?
How clear was your cut?
How sour the taste in your mouth?
Did the lack of something sweet
Ever make you less of a woman?
Or was it your savior?

my dream about not believing

was it a warning? He said:
don't listen anymore. I was never yours.
what do i do? my jaw is locked in
permanent praise, trapped by fantasy
of something more. i am a person of
love yet there's nothing left.
i'm swallowing down my words
and burying them in hell.
i let my hair fall down to my
shoulders and now we are roots,
cultivated by trees. we are branches.
we are stardust. and though there
is nothing there, for He has told me so,
I reach My hand to the sky.
and I am My own intelligent design.

Cari Pallo

Age: 13, Grade: 8

Home School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Vicki Pallo

Category: Flash Fiction

Invisible Girl

Invisible Girl

I watch her, taking in the world with empty eyes. She stands, her frail frame straight and tall. She sees the world, but the world doesn't see her. No one takes time to look at a lonely girl, watching the world go by. A fully tangible being slowly fading away. It is as if she was never there. A dandelion seed, floating around trying to find a space to set root, never getting in anyone's way. She hangs in space, gaunt frame floating in a bulky sweatshirt.

She never looks sad, just watches the world with solemnity and bravery. No one will commend her for that bravery. No one really cares about her bravery. They just move along only thinking "Me, me, me". For that is the way the world is, you get swept away if you aren't big enough, bold enough. She is brave for hanging in the balance, waiting for someone to come, to notice her, for she is in too deep to save herself. The question is, will someone see the invisible girl? Will anyone care enough to slow down and see that she is hurting? Will anyone save her before it is too late?

This is how she lives her life, thoughts spiraling around in her brain. The things she's seen. The things that will plague her forever. The things that will push her to the breaking point. Doubting, fearing, wondering if she will ever break the cycle and become tangible again. She lives her life in a cycle, going around and around, until she is swallowed up in the world, no one noticing, no one caring, for she is an invisible girl.

Lexi Pasternak

Age: 16, Grade: 11

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

Educator: Ed Coleman

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Reservations

My dear great grandma Ruth has always been tight-lipped. As a stout, time-worn Polish mother, it's not surprising. She tended to mind her business and go about her day independently, and always stubbornly. My dad would go white as a sheet when he saw the old woman shuffling around the house doing dishes, or standing on a chair to wash a window, and would immediately start yelling at her to stop, and try to convince her it was dangerous. Grandma Ruth knew he hated it. They would argue, and argue, but even if she eventually swore she'd never exert herself again, she would be making her rounds and balancing on the living room ottoman the very next day. Stubborn is a word and a trait which I know well, and as a child it was intimidating. Sometimes going to see her each day felt like a chore, and sometimes she was so icy I thought I was walking into the lair of a dragon that would trap me motionless in a cold stare or god forbid, pinch my cheeks. She didn't talk much, and neither did I. We spoke more through crooked smiles and contraband pirolaine cookies than we ever did with words.

The first hint why she was so often quiet: English wasn't her first language. I'd always known this because of her thick accent and Russian quarrels with visitors, but it was something I never quite processed until I got older. It was in third grade that I started to wrap my mind around the fact that she wasn't born in America, like I was, and that her past was not like most. That year, my teacher assigned a school project in which we had to interview a family member. Wanting to get closer to my Grandma Ruth, I wrote out a list of questions and went into the dragon's lair. Like usual, she was reluctant to give me more than vague, uninspiring answers with questionable grammar, but she let slip a story I years later came to know was just the tip of the iceberg. She said that she once had to hide in a neighbor's basement with a group of people, and that when they were hiding they had to be absolutely silent. Among them was a baby who, at one point, began to cry. Grandma told me, with an unnerving level of composure, that the crying was going to reveal them, and that they had to get the infant to stop... by whatever means necessary. She made a troubled face and a small gesture that suggested that means was death.

That grim story was the second hint why. I never asked her about the war again, but a few years later, I asked my father, who grew up raised by Grandma and her husband- his grandparents- about what had happened to them in Europe. In Sunday Hebrew school, we had talked some about Jewish history and World War II, and by then I understood that there was denial in the world about what had happened. I felt obligated to learn my history. My dad didn't tell me details so much as facts. Grandma Ruth- then, Veronika- had lived in a town on the outskirts of Pinsk, Poland. She was sent to a concentration camp, survived, and eventually made it to America where she was reunited with her husband (who had been a prisoner in Auschwitz) and her son who she had sent to live with a Catholic family in hopes of his survival. What little I knew was in itself a story of seemingly cosmic luck but neither my grandmother, nor my dad, nor anyone left on that side of the family seemed to think of it that way.

Grandma Ruth passed away at 101 years old, after taking a bad fall. We covered up all of the mirrors in our house and went through all of the normal mourners' proceedings that are somehow bitter, sweet, and dull at once. Baked goods and kooky stories, but also kaddish and grief. Our house was quieter without her, and time passed quickly. A year or so later my dad got a letter from a company he had hired to gain Polish citizenship for me, himself, and my brother as only first-and-second-generation Americans. He'd been working with them for a while to find documentation of his lineage for the Polish government to process, and so he had been getting semi-regular email updates about found birth certificates and legal artifacts. This enclosed document, though, revealed that the man he knew as his grandfather (who raised him with Grandma Ruth in his actual father's absence) was not biologically related to him. My dad had a lot of new questions and answers after learning this. He was raised by the man and had never known. I had lived with Grandma Ruth for thirteen years of my life, and had known close to nothing about her

past. My dad surprises me now and then with stories from his life or from his parents', but he is sparing. In many cases, he casually mentions what seem to me like monumental life events and critical information; I can only imagine what he's leaving out. Some days I feel like I know so much but on others so little. As I grow older, my dad is starting to trust me more with these stories, though it feels like I constantly have to strain to put together the pieces. And, I suspect, it's exactly the same with him.

My parents told me that once, they got Grandma Ruth behind a camera and filmed her talking about the war and her life. They tell me that she talked about it like she talked about anything in English, sans detail. They think she may have lied about a lot of it. They haven't yet shown me the footage, and I want to know what she said. I still wonder about her past, hoping to god that all of the snacks she smuggled me were not from some place in her head where she remembered what it was like to be hungry. But she would never admit that. I find the hesitation to be another hint. Perhaps the discretion comes from stories it would be easier not to know. Though, if we're being fair, I hesitate too. "I want to watch the videos of Grandma Ruth sometime," I say now and then, never entirely eager. I've known about the recordings for years but have never out and asked to see them- silent. Because in every lie sits a morsel of truth.

Nya Patel

Age: 13, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Kamal Patel

Category: Poetry

The Magical Place

The Magical Place

India being colorful and toasty as bread,
Sharp sunlight piercing through your burnt umber skin,
Dark nights shiver to create a ripple in Ganges River,
Sunsets full of orange, pink, purple, and the golden sun,

Towns full of fine tan dirt that spread like wildfires,
Children outside sitting on steps of rusted paint and wood,
Spotted cows, skinny dogs, frightening bulls, jumping monkeys crowding the streets of India,
It's a magical place.

The honking horns of the hurry echo,
Crisp dusty air consumed with pollution bringing sorrow to my heart,
The broken down stores and restaurants create antique beauty,
It's a magical place.

Outdoor school full of children young and old,
Frightening look fill the kids faces, but then turns into excitement as we creep in,
Some of those who stand out with long silky hair and ravishing crystal green eyes,
It's a magical place.

Searching through crowds of humans for shops on our city streets,
Vendors selling on the side of the road both wealthy, and poor,
Shoppes including gorgeous gems, dazzling diamonds, and silky sweaters,
It's a magical place.

The colorful bhadran buildings reflecting through suns shadows,
I see night bats in the sharp daylight escaping from broken homes,
Plush pottery created by an old man in a shed full of mosquitoes,
It's a magical place.

Seeing the taj mahal,
One of the eye opening seven wonders of the world,
My heart pounds then skips a beat,
The stunning marble and stone draping the walls,
A moment that will last a lifetime,
It's simply beautiful,
It's a magical place.

I open my eyes to see a shimmering palace room,
Thousands of miniature mirrors plastering the walls,
Another room filled with ocean colored blue designs,
It's a magical place.

Deep in the mysterious jungle of Sujana lays creatures big and small,
dark and tangerine colored striped tigers,
Polka dotted deer in fear,
Bushes and monkeys silling the land,
Thick brutal air blowing in my eyes and lips as we drive through the forest,
It's a magical place,

A country where the water shimmers and the people smile,
We must see the good and bad, it is life,
I take a deep breath of india's memories hoping to never exhale,
We all lay under the same stars, but indias different,
It's a magical place.

I must remember where i came from,
Because my roots are my roots,
I will cherish this,

It will remain a magical place forever.

Nya Patel

Age: 13, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Kamal Patel

Category: Poetry

A Flock Flies Free

A Flock Flies Free

I am a woman with a voice.
No one can change me,
No one can style me,
Because I am a women,
I have a voice.

We must speak,
For the unheard voices in the dark,
Speak for the unheard voices in the light,
Speak our words from dusk to dawn.
We are women,
We have a voice.

Ladies, we are the creators,
They can't tell us what to do.
They can't tell us what to wear.
Power is seen yet not made use of it?

Our voices shall branch out,
Our eyes shall widen,
Awakened, by the people around the world.

Choked up on spoken words.

A flock flies free.

Ellary Porter

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: Holman Middle School, Glen Allen, VA

Educator: Abbey Warren

Category: Short Story

Isabella's Daydream

This can't be real she thought. But before she could ask herself what couldn't be real, what she was thinking about, she woke up and forgot all about her question.

"Isabella! Isabella Silva!"

Isabella jerked awake to the brightly lit lights of an eighth grade classroom, her dark brown hair covering her eyes. Specifically, to an English teacher who was starting to get annoyed with Isabella's napping.

"Wuh?"

"Isabella," Ms. Miller said, shaking her head, her loosely tied bun of dirty blonde hair swaying with it, "can you please stop napping and actually listen to my lesson? You go to school for a reason."

"Pfft, sleeping?" Isabella said, faking a laugh, "I wasn't sleeping. I was just listening with my eyes closed."

"Mhm," Ms. Miller said, her voice dripping with doubt, "then what are we about to do?"

"Weeeeeeee're gonna finally talk about how messed up your sense of fashion is?"

"No, Isabella, we are not talking about my sense of fashion. You are all about to go into your groups to discuss the last chapters we read of *The Giver*."

"Kay."

Ms. Miller sighed, "Everyone, please just go into your groups."

"She's so gonna fail you for this class. You really need to step it up," Isabella's friend, Charlie, told her as she walked over to his table.

"I know," She said as she sat next to him, "But I was gonna fail this class even if I tried, so why bother?"

"Do you really know that?" her friend responded.

"Yeah. What, you care about my grade now, *mom*?"

"I mean you're probably right," He said quickly after that remark, "you probably would still get an F if you tried."

"Hey!"

"Can we please get on to the work?" One of her group mates, Alex, interrupted coldly, handing over two worksheets.

"Fiiiiine," Isabella said, taking one.

With a pencil in hand she scribbled her name onto the blank space on top left of the paper. Moving her pencil to the other top corner of the paper she put a three and a slash together before realizing she didn't exactly remember the rest of the date. And so she asked, "Hey is it the third or the fourth?"

"Fourth," Charlie responded, looked over at her finishing the date, and laughed, "you put today as March."

"Isn't it though?" Isabella said, genuinely.

"No," he responded, as he continued to laugh thinking she wasn't before realizing, "wait you're being serious?"

"Yeah."

"Huh, you don't have a good memory."

"Must not," Isabella said, even though she swore it was March. Charlie would have normally made a bigger deal out of her not knowing what month it was, but she guessed he just didn't today, right?

She ignored her thoughts of doubt and went on to read the first instructions on the worksheet: 'Discuss the chapters you read over the weekend with your group.'

"Sooooo," Isabella started, "chapter 18 was tense."

"Chapter 18?"

"Yeah, what about it, Charlie?"

"We've only read until chapter 6."

Isabella shook her head, that wasn't right. She knew they had read up to 18. She told him, "Okay, now you're just pulling my leg. I know we have read up to chapter 18. You may have been right about what month it is but you are not right about what chapter we've read up to."

"No, we've only read up to chapter 6, right, Jessica?" They both looked to where the fourth member of their group, Jessica, was sitting. She wasn't there.

"Jessica?" Isabella asked, scanning the room for her. Not only did she not find Jessica, she didn't find anyone else who was supposed to be in the room. Everyone was gone.

"Guys?" she said with a nervous laugh, continuously scanning the room, "you all leave with Jessica or something? You hiding?"

No response. Complete silence.

"Guys?" she asked again, even more nervous, "Where are you-"

And then she woke up.

"Isabella! Isabella Silva!"

Isabella awoke to the brightly lit lights of an eighth grade classroom. Specifically, to an English teacher who was starting to get annoyed with Isabella's napping.

"What?" Isabella said, she quickly glanced around the room. Everyone was back in their seats, as far as she could tell.

"Isabella, look at me," Ms. Miller said, shaking her head, her loosely tied bun of dirty blonde hair swaying with it, "can you please stop napping and actually listen to my lesson? You go to school for a reason."

"Uhhh," Isabella said, she had no new excuse and she already felt so disoriented, so she just said what first came to mind, even though she knew she had said it last time? Was 'last time' even real? "Well... I wasn't sleeping..? I was just listening with my eyes closed..?"

"Mhm," Ms. Miller said, her voice dripping with doubt, "then what are we about to do?"

Wait, she knew the answer to this. They were... "We're going into our groups to discuss the latest chapters of The Giver."

"Yes," Ms. Miller said with a look of stunned surprise, Well, I guess you really were listening with your eyes closed."

"Yeah," Isabella said, trying to think back to what had just happened, "I did listen with my eyes closed...?"

"Well," Ms. Miller said, still confused, "everyone, get into groups then."

"Were you actually listening with your eyes closed or do you just have insane guessing abilities, today?" Isabella's friend Charlie told her as she walked over to his table.

"I.. I don't know," she said, sitting down next to Charlie, "I... We've... I remember doing this before."

"What?" Alex said, looking at her skeptically, "what are you talking about?"

"Yeah, Isabella," Charlie said with a completely bewildered expression on his face, "what are you talking about? What case of *deja vu* do you have?"

"I... I remember doing this. I remember me taking a nap and Ms. Miller waking me up. I remember getting into groups and me forgetting what month it is. And I remember telling you guys that we have read up to chapter 18 and you disagreeing with me. Then I looked at Jessica and she was gone and then everyone was gon-" Isabella stopped as she turned to look at Jessica again. Now Jessica wasn't exactly gone, but she wasn't really there either.

All that was there was what Isabella could really only describe as a shadow. A shadow with dimensions and an eye floating in it where Jessica's right eye should be.

Isabella covered her mouth so that no screaming would come out and into other people's ears. She technically succeeded in this, but that was just because everyone else only had shadow ears as well.

Eyes wide open, she stared at all the shadows around her. Each and every one of them were like Jessica, minus the fact that they had both eyes floating instead of just one.

She continued to stare at them all, and they stared back, with their emotionless and cold eyes. They looked absolutely dead.

It took her a while, a few minutes. Could've been hours, she couldn't really tell. It doesn't make too much of a difference to her at this point. So it took her a few minutes, but she finally said something.

"Well," she said, her body tensed, uncomfortably, "I'd say this isn't normal but that's pretty obvious at this poi-"

And then she woke up.

"Isabella! Isabella Silva!"

Isabella jerked awake to the brightly lit lights of an eighth grade classroom, her dark brown hair covering her eyes. Specifically, to an English teacher who was starting to get annoyed with Isabella's napping.

"Wh-what?" Isabella said, turning her head wildly across the room, everyone was back in their seat, *again*.

"Isabella, look at me," Ms. Miller said, shaking her head, her loosely tied bun of dirty blonde hair swaying with it, "can you please stop napping and actually listen to my lesson? You go to school for a reason."

Ms. Miller said the same thing, *again*. They were probably going to get into groups to talk about the same book and the same chapters, *again*. She was repeating the same sequence of events *again*.

"Isabella, please answer me when I am talking to you, please," Ms. Miller said, getting closer to her face, "just tell me what were you doing sleep-"

"Shut up."

"... What?"

"Just shut up," Isabella stood up out her seat, "Y'know, I don't think any of this matters since I'm in like Groundhog Day or something. Groundhog Day's about, like, a dude who repeats a day over and over, right? I dunno, I never watched the movie. It's a movie, right?"

"Isabella, please, what are you talking about?" Ms. Miller said frantically as she watched Isabella start to pace around the room, "Please sit down."

"Nah. It doesn't matter anyway since I'm gonna repeat this again. Like this could be a dream for all I-" Isabella stopped suddenly. Stopped talking and stopped walking. She had done this sequence of events before. Not today, but a month ago. But instead of repeating, she just remembered going on with life.

She laughed, relieved because she knew exactly what she was in, "this is a dream! I'm in a dream that's just taking place in something that happened last month! This isn't real, this doesn't matter!"

"Isabella," Ms. Miller, much more forcefully than usual and in a deeper voice, "come outside of the classroom with me right now."

"No!" Isabella said, looking Ms. Miller directly in the face, "What are you going to do dream Ms. Miller? The real Ms. Miller is already a push-over, so I bet you are as well! This is *my* dream and I don't think I want to get dream-punished in my own dream!"

Ms. Miller glared directly back at Isabella. Her face was full of rage. And as her eyebrows furrowed further down, down towards her eyes it seemed she herself got more and more like a beast. Her teeth became sharper, her eyes more wild, and her nails were basically claws at this point. And for once, Isabella was scared of Ms. Miller, if that thing could even have been called her English teacher.

"Well if you want to dream-kill me then go ahead!" Isabella said as she felt cold sweat run down her face as she backed away from the thing, "it's just a dream so it won't hurt! It won't hurt... It won't hurt at all!"

"Stop talking, Isabella."

She stopped. She turned to the sound of the voice, well, voices. It sounded like a bunch of voices merged into one, but still you could clearly hear in it the voice of-

"Jessica," Isabella said silently as she looked at what she could only describe as a pure light version of Jessica, the exact opposite of her shadow, which was standing right next to it.

She looked around at everyone else in the classroom, they were shadows again as well. But as the light touched them they faded out of existence. All that was left were the 2 Jessicas.

And then there was one Jessica. For the light had died out, or had the shadows consumed it? No one could tell.

And then she woke up.

Isabella waited for Ms. Miller to screech at her, but there was no sound. She waited to see her English teacher's face, but she saw none of it. She looked around the classroom and found that everyone was gone. Well, everyone was gone except...

"Jessica," Isabella said, Jessica was still sitting in her seat staring blankly out the window, with a pencil in her hand. Isabella decided to do the one thing that killed people in horror movies, confront the thing causing everything to be weird.

"Jessica," Isabella said as she walked up to her classmate, "what's going on. You have something to do with this, I know it. Whenever you appear things suddenly, like, restart. What is going on?"

Nothing. Jessica continued to just stare out the window.

"Hey, answer me!" Isabella said, stopping right next to her. She looked down at the pencil in Jessica's, the tip was splattered red.

Jessica turned around immediately as Isabella looked down at the pencil. Her left eye was gone.

Isabella finally remembered what had happened. She remembered it all.

Jessica stood up. And then everything seemed to flicker as there was a furry monster in her place. And then

Jessica was back.

“Jessica, why did you stab out your... your...” she stopped as she saw it flicker back to the monster. Was there really any point in asking something that may not even be Jessica?

And then it flickered back to Jessica.

She would’ve asked the monster why it did what it did to Ms. Miller, but why would a monster answer truthfully? Why would it even answer at all?

It flickered back to the monster.

Ms. Miller.... She didn’t think she’d ever want her English teacher this much.

It flickered back to Jessica.

Seeing Ms. Miller on the floor like that... All she could think to say about it was that it was absolutely traumatizing.

It flickered back to the monster.

She stopped thinking about Ms. Miller and thought back to the monster.

It flickered back to Jessica.

She remembered it.

It flickered back to the monster.

“You killed me... Why did you kill me?...”

She remembered the monster. She remembered the monster’s face right before its teeth tore through her gut.

The monster flickered, but instead of flickering to Jessica, it flickered to Isabella. No, not Isabella exactly, just a copy of her.

“Because,” it said, in a voice somehow exactly like hers but also completely different, “your classmates trust you. It’s easier to kill who I need when they trust me.”

It started walking away, out of the classroom. Leaving Isabella to sob, in what she could only guess was her afterlife.

Akshaya Ramasamy

Age: 13, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Patricia Walker

Category: Short Story

The Portal to 44

I was used to every minute of my life being calculated and planned until the day I felt the need of change. My alarm was set to ring any second. I had been wide awake for more than half the night, staring at the ceiling, overthinking. Every night I toss and turn because my mind never stops planning the next day. This night was no exception because the company I worked for was downsizing. I would have to work the hardest I ever had when I woke up. There was no way I was going to lose my job when I had lost everything else in my life.

Throughout most of my childhood, my dad would come home late every night, and I rarely saw him even on the weekends. I wondered what he was actually doing instead of spending time with his own family. I knew it was not his work since his lab partner, our neighbor down the street, drove his dark blue Mercedes SUV into his driveway at five everyday. My mother would not question my dad because she was afraid of him. His secrets repeatedly occurred my whole life until my delicate mother finally got pushed over the edge.

"Where were you tonight and every other night, Killian?" she demanded, in her serious voice. I tip-toed down the stairs to hear more.

"Just leave me alone. I need my time," my father effortlessly replied. They both shifted their heads towards me as the stairs creaked.

"Please go upstairs, now, Theresa," my mother pleaded.

"Yes, ma'am," I responded. That night, I spent the whole time awake, whimpering, worried for my parents' relationship. Now that I look back on it all, the time he left us that night and staring at his cold face in court a few weeks later are the main memories I have of my father.

Now sixteen years later, I got up from my bed and slowly walked over to my bathroom. I took a refreshing and hasty shower, and then applied my eyeliner and mascara. I curled my brunette hair and slipped on my formal navy blue top and dress pants. I had to look as professional as possible so that my boss would understand that I deeply care about this job. I drove into the lab and greeted everyone. The day went by fast with all the work I had to complete. At lunchtime, I was still worried since I had not noticed anyone walk into my boss's office and come out disappointed. So, there still was a chance I could get fired.

At the end of the day, just as I was packing all my things, my boss came out and asked, "Theresa, could you join me in my office for a few minutes?"

"Sure," I replied with mild confidence, even though my heart was pounding so hard, I could not hear my own heels' clicking.

"So, you know about the downsizing going around the lab, right?" he asked.

Oh no. "Um yeah."

"Alright, well, I am really sorry to say that I have to let you go. You just have not gotten as far into your research as I expected you to have by now," he said with tenderness.

This cannot be happening right now. No, no, no no. What will I do if I have no one for me and no source of money? This has to be one of the worst days in my life.

"It is okay, sir. I understand," I manage to slip away, without crying. I cleared my desk and walked out into the refreshing breeze which did not console me at all. I entered my trusty silver Honda Civic, and sobbed and sobbed until I felt slightly better.

After a couple hours of watching my favorite show, *The Office*, I realized it was not helping, so I took a bubble bath, poured myself some wine, and lit some candles. As I was standing on the cold bathroom tiles, I felt a breeze. Goosebumps popped up on my skin. I turned around and saw nothing, but when I returned to looking at the mirror, I was so shocked that I dropped my brush on the floor. A red hollow and shiny outline of a circle appeared on the shower glass, and it reminded me of the portal to another world like in *Alice in Wonderland*. Inside the circle, I could see what seemed like a lab. In fact, it looked just like the lab I had just gotten fired from, but more futuristic.

Did I drink too much or have I lost my mind? There is no way that Alice or a mad scientist is coming into my bathroom. Let me just go get dressed. Maybe that will talk some sense into my brain. I padded toward my closet and put on sweatpants and a T-shirt.

Laughing at myself, I walked back into my bathroom, convinced that I had been dreaming. Yet, a few steps in, and I dropped my wine glass on the floor. Standing there among the shattered glass, I gaped at the portal that was undeniably in front of me.

I am not sure where I gathered the courage, but I stepped over the shards of glass and tried putting my hand through the portal. Unbelievably, I saw my hand phase right through into the strange world that I had glimpsed before. As I stared disbelievingly, I spotted a woman walking toward me from the other world.

As she came closer, I tried to detect her exact features, and she looked terrified. As she got closer, I realized that she had the same hair as me, length and color. In fact, all her features were exactly like mine! *I have to be dreaming! Let me pinch myself. Ouch! This absolutely cannot be happening right now. I should call 911 or something. Could she be me from the future? No, that is never going to happen. Well, a portal just opened up into my bathroom, so anything is possible at this moment.* I had absolutely no idea what was going on. My mind was completely confused.

As I was trembling, she got closer and closer to reaching me, until she was a foot away from my face. She looked as terrified as I felt. Suddenly, she spoke and quickly said, "I know I look just like you and this doesn't make sense, but it will soon- I am your clone." My blood turned cold. "I'm Number 44," she introduced.

I was speechless, but I managed to say, "Uh, uh.... Hi. I am Thres-."

"I know," Number 44 interrupted, "My- my master creates portals, and I found the one that leads to you, so I jumped in."

"Woah, woah, woah. Master? Portal? And also, why do you need me?" I ask.

"Okay, well, you are one of the most intelligent scientists of my time."

Me? The unemployed mess.

Number 44 continued, "I need help from you because my master, Dr. Diabolos, is trying to make more of you. He already has control of America and is trying to expand. I thought you would know what to do."

Diabolos? Control of America? I'm a part of it My mind could not comprehend anything this mirror image of myself was saying. "Okay, wait. So exactly when are you from?" I ask, slowly.

"Oh, me, I'm from 2035." *Impossible.* I almost laughed, but I was also starting to feel sick at the same time.

"He needs me to make more clones of you," she continued.

"Why can't he just use *me* from the future?" I demanded.

"Oh um.. You die in 2028." My heart stopped beating for a second. Water filled the rim of my eyes, but tears didn't fall.

"I'm sorry," she said, sensing my emotion.

I was unable to speak. I tried to, but I couldn't. My mind was not running, and I felt cold and dead already. "No it's okay," I manage. *At least I have eight more years.*

"Okay, well, Dr. Diabolos and his workers made me immediately after... you know. And, now they can't use your DNA, so they have to use mine. But I have been hiding around for seven years, so he has not been able to clone me," she attempted to explain.

Then why does she need my help. Can't she just hide around?

"Dr. Diabolos found.." Number 44 was interrupted by heavy footsteps.

"44!" a deep voice boomed. I turned and spotted a white bearded, tall man coming out of the portal. He looked extremely familiar. As I noticed all his facial characteristics, I realized that that was my father.

My lungs started to hyperventilate. I could tell my veins were popping out in anger and fear. Before demanding an answer as to why he had come now, Number 44 whispered in terror, "We should run!"

I decided to follow her lead since she seemed to know a lot more than I ever did. *Wait, but why does she have to run? Oh no. No, no, no. Is Dr. Diabolos my dad?*

Thankfully, the door to my world's outside was on the other side of him. Rapidly, I stepped over the glass shards, pulling 44 with me by the hand. Together we sprinted to my apartment's front door, only stopping to slide on my shoes. We ran through San Francisco's steep and slope hills, not even noticing the blur of pastel-colored houses. Both of us did not look back once because we did not want to waste time, and we were scared of how close to us he really was. After we ran for what felt like ten minutes, my chest was tight and my legs ached like never before.

Could this day get any worse? Hopefully, it does not finally turned, looked behind me, and saw hundreds of robotic men in black and white suits with Dr. Diabolos. The people that seemed like robots walked unnaturally fast. *They all must be Dr. Diabolos' people.*

I used my last few breaths and asked Number 44, "Who are those people? Dr. Diabolos' people? And, how are they catching up with us?"

"Oh, no. Yeah it's them. This is bad, real bad. We're dead," she replied.

Well, I know I'm not dying until 2028. So that's good, I guess. God, I wish I could shut my mind up sometimes. Just as we were talking with fright, we ran into an alley. Dr. Diabolos' people had cornered us.

Everywhere I looked, I saw one of them. "You do not have to do this, Dr. Diabolos." Number 44 said with what sounded like confidence, but I could see the panic in her eyes.

Dr. Diabolos replied, "Yes, I do. And I see that you have brought my baby girl, Theresa. Come here, Theresa." Unwanted tears dripped down my eyes while my heart pounded.

"No! I cannot believe you've become a worse person than you were before," I whimpered, but also snapping at the same time.

He replied, "I left your mother and you for your own good. Imagine what you would be doing if I were here in your life right now. I knew that if I disappeared from your life, you would be successful in the future. I thought it would be better to leave rather than making life difficult for your mother."

I fired back, "It didn't always have to be like that! You could have at least made an effort to spend time with us and get to know us. Then, I would have a normal childhood just like all my other friends. You broke mom's heart, and you shouldn't have just left her after that. She loved you." *He was angry now, and I was glad.*

"Enough already! You just don't understand," he screamed as one of his robot-like people came near us with his fist ready to punch me. Before I could even flinch, everything blanked out for what felt like five hours. I woke up and found myself in a small and dark room staring at my own face. Suddenly, it all came back into my mind. It was 44 who was standing directly above me with a heated expression.

Number 44 asked, "You *know* Diabolos?!"

I stood up from my earlier position, and reluctantly I replied, "He's my father."

She looked alarmed and as if she suddenly understood much more now. "Is there anything we can do to stop this wreck?" I asked, after a long minute of silence.

Coming back from her deep shock, she replied, "Yeah, but I do not think it's the best way."

"Well, no matter what it is, we have to," I demanded. I saw Number 44 hesitate deeply. "Tell me now," I ordered.

Number 44 gave an unsettling reply, "Ok um... well, you can push Dr. Diabolos, your father, into the quantum dimension of the world. It is a blank time in space, and there is no getting out, ever."

This is the time to prove myself. I have never ever been a hero, and even if it means practically killing someone, my father that is, to save the world, it is worth it. "How do I do it?" I asked.

"Okay, I will open up a portal with my encirclers. We just have to push him into the portal," she explained while taking out three metal rings from her pocket and holding them up.

Alright, this seems simple, but there are some crucial holes to fill in this masterpiece plan of ours. "If we are in this small, dark room all alone, how will we get Diabolos here? And won't he come with his little robots?" I asked.

She replied, "Oh, I'm not sure. I guess we have to find our way out of."

One of the walls in the room started to slide open with a gruff noise. My heart started beating crazy fast, and I thought I was hyperventilating because I knew who would be behind that door when it was completely opened.

"Guess who's here?" my father's voice was calm, but frightening.

I gave 44 a quick, unnoticeable nod to follow through our plan. "Diabolos, what is going on? You can't do this, it's wrong."

"Oh, honey, call me "Dad", and I know it's wrong, that's the whole point."

"Please let us go, *Diabolos*," I fake pleaded, to distract him.

"I know you want to be free. I want that for you too, but I simply can't let that happen."

Please, please, please! I'm begging you." I diverted the attention from 44 getting her ring things ready.

"I can't. Now stop talking, and let 44 speak."

I jumped directly in front of him to halt him from looking at 44, and he stopped talking because of the sudden shock.

Number 44 opened the portal, and my father realized what our plan was. He stepped back and said, "Oh, I understand. You two little girls were planning against me."

Before even replying, I grabbed his arm, and 44 jumped in and grasped his evil, white beard. We both used our other, open hands and pushed his back forward as he screamed, "No, no, no! Stop! Please!"

My eyes started tearing up, but I had no idea why. *Am I scared? Do I feel guilt?*

Before I could give it any more thought, Number 44 gave that extra effort and pushed him completely into the magical opening.

As I gasped, I heard the painful, faded howl of my father, Dr. Diabolos. Even though I realized what I had just done, I still felt content.

I looked over to my clone and saw a huge smile displayed on her face.

“Don’t get too proud. We still have to get rid of Diabolos’ robots,” I reminded her.

44’s smile didn’t fade as I expected. She explained, “I think it’s time that this should be my mission now. You’ve helped enough for now and you should focus on your career avoiding your death in 2028. I think I can help with both of those things after all you’ve done for me.”

Now it was my turn to smile. She then bent over and whispered, “When we started running away from Diabolos in your apartment, I placed a note on your bathroom counter. I think it should help.”

We both walked out through the sliding wall, and we saw a lab with three of Diabolos’ minions heading toward us. Number 44 turned to me and assured, “I got this, Theresa. If you need any other help, use that fascinating brain of yours and create a portal to 2035.” She playfully winked at me, and began to chase the minions.

Aniyah Rose

Age: 16, Grade: 11

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

Educator: Gail Giewont

Category: Short Story

Breaking Away

Breaking Away

I sat at the table, pretending to read. The low ticking of her watch and periodic clinking of her fork hitting her plate as she ate her eggs filled the tense silence. If she thought I was being productive, she wouldn't say anything. At least that's what I'd hoped.

I was wrong.

As I took another bite of my blueberry muffin and raised my copy of *Every Day* by David Levithan closer to my face, I heard her clear her throat. I made eye contact (a mistake on my part) and flipped to the next page. She crossed her arms and rolled her eyes, setting her fork down.

"I don't understand why you read such useless, uninformative material, Rhys," she said, pushing her plate of unfinished eggs to the side.

"Are entertainment purposes a good enough reason?" I asked.

"You could be spending your time reading much more interesting stuff, kiddo: like my old notes I took in law school. You're a junior now; it's time to start getting more serious about your education. You should come into work with me this weekend!"

"Oh sorry mom, no can do. I've got plans with Adrian and Jamal doing literally anything but that!"

"You're impossible," she sighed. "We'll finish this conversation later; I'll bring home some more of those law school pamphlets from Shannon at work, okay? Is Adrian picking you up today?"

Before I had the chance to answer, we heard the familiar sound of Adrian pulling into the driveway, honking his horn from outside as his tires crushed the gravel on the ground. I grabbed my backpack and what was left of my muffin before I rushed out of the house, waving a quick goodbye to my mother. I took a deep breath as I crawled into Adrian's car, feeling the tension leave my body.

The deep breath was probably a bad idea, though. I nearly gagged at the smell of my best friend's car. It seemed like a mixture of dirty socks and rotting Taco Bell with a touch of something I couldn't identify. I covered my nose and shook my head at Adrian. He looked like he at least shaved today, and his t-shirt seemed clean. His jeans were covered in stains though. He'd definitely worn those yesterday. I pulled a bottle of mini Febreze out of my hoodie pocket (this was *not* the first time I'd had to disinfect his car) and sprayed him and the car with it. He ran a hand through his bright red hair and laughed.

"Morning, Rex," he said before taking my backpack and tossing it into the back seat of his car. I cringed as I watched it land on a pile of what looked like old guacamole. He pulled out of my driveway and began our journey towards school, eyeing the leftover muffin in my hand.

"Your car stinks dude, and when are you gonna stop calling me that?" I said, handing him the rest of my breakfast.

"Probably never," he stuffed the muffin in his mouth with a grin. "And thanks, I haven't eaten in like half an hour. I'm *starving*."

"You're gross is what you are. And the nickname got old like 4 years ago, quit it."

"It's your fault for carrying around that stupid dinosaur toy until you were like thirteen. The nickname is stuck. You should probably change your name, dude. I don't even think I remember your birth name anymore!"

"It's Rhys and you know it douchebag."

"Huh? I can't hear you over the music, you're gonna have to speak a little louder, Rex."

"I hate you."

"No you don't."

A few minutes later we pulled into the parking lot of Crestview High. We arrived an hour and a half before classes were scheduled to begin. It was sort of desolate looking, empty and a little dark. It was damp outside from the rain

of the previous night. Adrian unlocked the doors and popped the trunk with a smile.

"You ready to see your campaign posters Rex?"

"Yeah I guess. But so help me Adrian Louise Harper if any of them say Rex on them, I'm showing your search history to your mom."

"Relax man, I'm not *that* much of a jerk. Anyway, are you excited? You're gonna be class president dude!"

"I couldn't be less excited if I tried. Besides, I've barely spoken to anyone at this school in my whole 3 years here because of this little thing I've got going on called anxiety. What makes you think I'll win?"

"Because you have to. Didn't Cynthia say that if you won, she wouldn't make you do that lame internship at her office?"

I rolled my eyes and crawled out of the car. He was right of course. Winning was really my only option. It'd been getting harder and harder to avoid my mom's persistent attempts to get me interested in her line of work. Lately every conversation we had would be about law firms, and law school, and law this and law that; it was getting old very fast.

The discussions tended to be one-sided too. Mom could be a little self absorbed at times, and while I admire how proud she is of all she's accomplished, getting a word in while talking to my mother every once in a while would be nice.

"Both of those options lead me to law school one way or another so why does it matter? She only wants me to be president for college applications. I'm gonna be a super successful lawyer like my mom and never be happy with myself. It is what it is." I shrugged as we pulled the posters out from his trunk.

"Well I personally don't care if you end up a successful lawyer or not. I just need you to make lots of money so I can freeload without consequence. Cynthia probably wouldn't be too happy to hear that, though."

"Duh."

"I'm serious. I love Cynthia like I love my own mom but that woman is nothing if not persistent as hell. She's been planning your career since you were in diapers. I'm impressed you managed to avoid it for so long. I still remember when she bought you all that Stanford merch for your 8th birthday. You were 8 Rex! 8! Let that sink in."

"I know man. Honestly her intensity scares the hell out of me. How am I supposed to tell her no? This is all she's ever wanted for me!"

"You're gonna have to tell her someday, dude. This law thing might be what *she's* always wanted for you, but it's not even close to what *you've* always wanted for you. You're the smartest guy I know Rex, you'll figure it out. In the meantime, we've gotta start putting up these posters before classes start." He grinned and let out a loud burp right in my face. "Do you think we'll have time to get something to eat after we're done?"

Adrian might've been the grossest guy I knew, but he was killer at giving advice. He was right, this isn't what I want for me at all. I shouldn't be running for class president. I barely knew any of these kids well enough to be begging for their vote. And getting on a stage in front of all the other students to give a speech would probably give me a panic attack.

That day at lunch, I sat in the library with Adrian, zoning out to the music in my headphones while he played computer games with his boyfriend, Jamal, and munched on a giant pile of french fries. I shot a forced smile at them when they asked if I was doing okay and sunk deeper into my beanbag chair. I knew what I needed to do, but actually going through with it, and *talking* to my mom about how I felt was a completely different story. I didn't want to disappoint her but I also don't want to lie to her for the rest of my life. What if she doesn't listen? What if she completely disowns me? What if she makes me go live with Dad because she can't stand the sight of me anymore?

"Hey Rhys you doing okay over here buddy? You're breathing a little weird," Jamal said, kneeling in front of me as Adrian looked on with confusion and worry. I hadn't even seen him get up.

"Yeah I'm totally fine, just stressed about the mom thing." I said. I paused my music and ran my hands through my hair, taking a deep breath and sitting up a bit. "I'm just thinking. You know how I get sucked into my own head sometimes."

I turned to Jamal as he rolled over in his desk chair and patted my shoulder with a smile. I hadn't known Jamal nearly as long as I'd known Adrian; I'd only met him about 6 months prior, but he quickly became a really close friend of mine.

"If it's any consolation Rhys, I've met your mom and I honestly think she just wants you to be happy. She may be a little intense about the lawyer thing but maybe it's because you've never explicitly told her that you weren't interested. You should talk to her." He smiled.

"Yeah." Adrian nodded. "Just sit her down and tell her that you aren't just a carbon copy of her. You have your own dreams in life even if you haven't entirely figured them out yet. You're only 16; you can barely drive Rex! You have lots of time to figure out what you want to do."

"Yeah you guys are right." I said, fishing my phone from my hoodie pocket. "I just need to talk to her."

I took a deep breath and typed out my text. This was it. My finger hovered over the send button and I looked to

Adrian and Jamal smiling down at me. I closed my eyes and pressed send.
To Mom: Hey can we talk tonight? It's really important.

Aniyah Rose

Age: 16, Grade: 11

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

Educators: Gail Giewont, Patty Smith

Category: Poetry

Melicoccus Bijugatus

Melicoccus Bijugatus

But I called them
Tree candy

Juicy bittersweet
Orange Pulp
Under a thin
Brittle green peel

Melicoccus Bijugatus

Sometimes called
Quenepas
Huayas
Mamoncillos
Or tree candy

Great grandma watching in fear
As I used uncles truck as leverage
to jump to the top of the tree
Stubbornly refusing to let my tree candy go
When I got stuck there

Melicoccus Bijugatus

Known to
Improve blood pressure
And immune systems

Known to get me into trouble
As I wandered off
countless times
On a quest
For the sweet and sour juices
Of my tree candy

Native to South America

Native to my great grandmas backyard
With the starfruit trees and the local chickens

That's the only *real* tree candy

The kind I can eat while still wrapped in the arms of a tree

Melicoccus Bijugatus

No.

Tree candy.

Mason Rowley

Age: 16, Grade: 11

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

Educators: Gail Giewont, Patty Smith

Category: Flash Fiction

Exit Music

I'm at my friend Jamison's house. It's New Year's Eve, tomorrow's my birthday, and Okaga is getting its first snowfall since I was 10. Yet, we're all in here, cramped in Jamison's small-ass living room, trying to party the last day of the year away. There's gold and black streamers everywhere, everyone's wearing shitty sparkly hats or 2020 sunglasses, and some have glasses of champagne in their hands even though everyone in the building is below 21. I hear somewhere in the party that they're on the last performance and the ball is gonna drop soon. The air feels too stuffy. I need a smoke.

I wade my way through the crowd, bumping shoulders with drunk teens and trying not to start any shit. Finally, I reach the sliding glass door at the other end of the living room and open it up. A blast of cool air hits my face and knocks my hat askew. There's a couple making out on the porch, no idea how the wind isn't a mood killer, and someone with a toque and a mop of curls beneath it using the same escape I am. I pull a crushed pack of Parliaments out of my pocket and stick one loosely between my lips. I reach for my lighter in my inner jacket pocket, feel nothing, and shrug. Guess no menthol for me.

"Need a light?"

I nod at the helpful stranger next to me. She (I assume she's a girl. Her hair's long and her voice is light) strikes a match and sticks the burning end on the tip of my cig. It does the trick and within a moment the smoke fills my lungs. I motion a thanks and lean on the porch's railing. Okaga looks beautiful, dusted with snow under the stars.

"So, what's got you down in the dumps?" she asks. I don't know where she got the impression I was sad from. I mean, it's more of a numbness anyway. Anyway.

"Nothing. This," I gesture with the cigarette, a vague swirling motion that knocks some ash into the snow below, "isn't really my thing."

"Crowds? Or..."

"No, no, no, it's.... I don't know, time? Celebrating the passing of it? Woop-de-fuckin-do, another year's gone."

She cracks a smile at me, well, more of a half-smile, like she's teasing me or has caught me mid-cookie-jar.

"Oh so you're just a hipster then."

I roll my eyes and return the smirk. My cigarette is burning closer and closer to my fingers.

"Yeah, I came to this party so I could brag about my vinyl collection and share my iced coffee recipe."

She lets out a chuckle. I feel a minor tugging at my heart that I then promptly shut the hell down. Another drag of smoke and I'm almost done now. The air is nipping at my face.

"No, but really, I think I'm just people-d out for tonight. I wanna go home and pass out. I'm done with humanity for the moment."

That statement lingers in the air for a hot second. We turn back out to the balcony. Staring into the middle distance. Again.

"What about you?"

She sighs deeply, like the answer's weighing heavy on her. She mimics my cigarette waving and shows a small smile.

"This feels fake. Commercial. Like if I were to jump off this balcony I'd respawn right here. This is a cutscene. You are an NPC. Maybe an actor, if you prefer the Truman Show route."

"I get what you mean. It's artificial as hell. Would we really, *really* give this much of a shit about the New Year if we didn't use it to get fucked up on bubbly and kiss when the ball drops?"

"I guess not."

We go back to leaning. Staring.

All of a sudden, my unnamed compatriot lets out a loud, wistful sigh and hits her hands against the railing.

"Well, if you ever feel a sudden reinvigoration," at this she throws her hands in the air and does the best praise

hands she can, “of your faith in humanity, feel free to rejoin us.”

She throws down the used up cigarette, stomps it out with a boot, turns around and walks over to the sliding door and shoves it to one side. She gives a final look back at me, watching the slow heat finally reach the filter.

“I’m sure we’d all like to have you.”

She walks inside and closes the door behind her.

I feel the heat of creep closer and closer to my fingers. I sit there, mulling over her words. The wind’s relentless now. It’s sending my scarf this way and that. I hear someone shout, “It’s time!”

I snap back when I feel my fingers being burnt. I take one last look at Okaga, throw the spent butt off the balcony, and reach for the sliding glass door. I pull it open on the count of five.

Mason Rowley

Age: 16, Grade: 11

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

Educators: Gail Giewont, Patty Smith

Category: Flash Fiction

The Moon

whatever you do, dont look at the moon

Well, that's not a message you want to get in the middle of the night. I was genuinely freaked for about a second there.

Wow, nice prank. Really got me there. I'm quivering in my slippers.

Look. We can't tell you much. Just don't look at the moon. We'll be there soon.

Are these guys serious? Who exactly do they think they're fooling?

It's 3. Don't you have school or something in the morning?

Listen. We know you don't believe us. But your life hangs in the balance. Get ready. Now.

Do they honestly expect me to believe them without any proof whatsoever?

You realize when the person figures you out, you're supposed to stop the prank, right?

Look outside, down on the street. A black van. Run. DON'T LOOK AT THE MOON.

I don't have any reason to believe them, but I also have no reason *not* to. Gingerly, I peeked through the blinds out to the street below.

What. The. Fuck.

It was surreal. Bystanders were staring up at the moon, their eyes bleeding and their mouths foaming. Some were convulsing, others stood straight like a board.

I don't think there was any possible way for me to get to the bathroom quickly enough. The landlord would kill me for getting vomit on his carpet. At least, as long as the moon didn't kill me first. Taking another tentative step towards the blinds, I saw the alleged black van across the street. They were smart, with a tinted windshield and covered sides. I had two options, as far as I knew; book it across the street, or hole up in my apartment. There always was the far easier choice looming in the sky, begging for a peek or two, just to indulge in it's spectacular glow, which seemed to get brighter and brighter by the second.

I threw on a wide brimmed hat and some spare aviators. It wasn't the best protection, but it was the best option at that point. That's when the texts started.

It was a near constant barrage of notifications, sending my phone's vibration into overdrive. The sheer force of it damn near launched it off the table. It was messages from friends, family, unknown numbers. All begging me to look at the moon. I tossed the phone into the trash and opened my apartment door. The silence struck me immediately. The complex was usually buzzing with life, assaulting passerby with smells of home cooked tamales or barbeque, the sounds of kids screeching or of friends celebrating a touchdown. Now? All that remained was dead silence. Television static, burning food, the stench of death. I shuddered at the sheer force of it all. Every step down the staircase felt like I was being dragged by lead chains, dragged downward into the hell I knew was occurring on the streets. I was wading through piles of dead, people convulsing, foaming at the mouth, with eyes bloodshot. Some were even attempting to claw them out. Finally, I reached the bottom and opened the final door.

By now, the moon's brightness had reached such a level that it appeared to be day. I tilted my head down and walked urgently. The van's doors slid open, and the man inside waved to me. Turns out, when you are focusing intently on trying to not look up, you tend to not watch where you're going. I slipped and fell, sending the aviators flying from my face. I looked upward as I got up. Not on purpose of course, purely instinct. But that was all it needed. I had gazed upon the moon, and it was magnificent. The craters were extremely defined, it was closer than it could have been. It glowed an amazing white, and it seemed to talk to me. It was truly spectacular.

You should see it sometime.

Prater Sanderson

Age: 14, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Julie Elmore

Category: Short Story

Escaping the Corridors

Escaping the Corridors

I woke up as I heard the echo of the chiming bells through the corridors. I started to get dressed for a long day ahead of me. I looked over at my friend, Zoey, and we gave each other an understood look of frustration. Zoey and I had known each other since we were babies. Although, my first memory of her was from when we were four and she gave me one of her dinosaur shaped chicken nuggets. I knew from then on that we were going to be the closest friends. In our society, every baby is taken away at birth and raised in an area with many other kids. We are trained to be elite thinkers so that when we go out into the world at the age of sixteen, we will be successful.

As we neared the age of sixteen, we knew everything about each other, good and bad. We hurried to get dressed and walked out into the hallway.

"Hey, Alyssa!" I turned around to see a tall, blond, smiling boy walking towards me. Brandon. Brandon is my other best friend that I have known for the longest time.

"Hey, loser. Are you heading to get food?" I asked him.

"Yeah, Oliver and I were planning on heading over to the cafeteria. Although, I can't seem to find him. That little trickster is always sneaking off and playing some kind of prank", He said.

"Well, we'll tag along. And, Ollie will turn up once he finds out we're getting pancakes," I said.

"Alright. Let's go then. I'm starving!" The three of us headed towards the cafeteria and ate our breakfast for the day.

Later that day, Zoey and I were walking to our History and Civics class. We were in the creepy and cold hallways of the West Wing. As we walked through the halls we talked about something that had been in the back of our minds for a while.

"Do you think they're watching us?" Zoey asked me.

"Zoey, of course they are watching us. They have to make sure that we are prepared to go out into the world with all of the adults. I mean, that's what we're here for, right?" I said.

"I don't even know at this point. Nothing makes any sense. I mean we were brought to this sketchy place with all of these adults walking around and monitoring us. Why can't our parents just teach us what we need to learn?"

"Do you miss them?" I said as I quieted my voice.

"My parents? Yes. I think about them everyday. I just can't wait until I get out of this place and finally get to see them after sixteen years. I can barely even remember what they look like." Zoey said.

"Yeah me too. Promise me we will stay best friends even when we get out of this place?" I asked her.

"I promise," Zoey said.

Later, when we had a bit of freetime, Zoey, Brandon, Ollie, and I walked around the grounds of the East Wing, where people usually hang out.

"Let's go exploring!" Ollie said to the group enthusiastically.

"Ollie, we've been here for sixteen years. There can't be anything that we haven't seen before." Brandon said.

"Well let's go anyways. Maybe we'll find a dead body!" Ollie said in a creepy voice that made us laugh.

"Ollie there will be no dead bodies. That would be disturbing and gross." Brandon says back to him.

We walked around the building talking and listening to Brandon and Ollie bantering back and forth. I zoned out as I heard a clunking noise coming from the room we walked past. *Clunk! Rattle rattle. Clunk!* Confused about what that noise could be I stopped in my tracks and listened.

"Alyssa? What are you doing? Come on!" Brandon said turning back and looking at me.

"Do you guys hear that?" I asked the group. The noise continued.

"Well now that you mention it I do." said Ollie.

"What could be in there? What could be making that noise?" I asked, becoming very curious of what could be

behind those doors. Something took over me as I felt myself taking steps towards the door. I put my ear against the cold, shiny, metal and listened. *Clunk! Rattle rattle. Clunk!* I took a risk and slowly opened the door making sure it didn't make even the slightest noise.

"Alyssa! What are you doing? You're going to get us all in trouble!" Zoey scream whispered from behind me.

"Give me a minute, I just need to know what that noise is."

I walked further into the room when I saw metal tables, dark walls, and interesting machines making noises. I saw a bulletin board hanging on the wall next to the door. It had a list of names on it. The list had the names Peter, Joseph, Claire, Amalie, Preston, Kara, Addison, Mary Ellis, Treyton, and Brandon. My heart shuddered when I read the name Brandon. Brandon is supposed to turn sixteen next week. If my mind had made the connections right, the names were a list of people who got to go home by the end of next week. I walked a little bit further when I saw something that made me gasp. A girl with a name tag reading Kara was tied up to a machine and was breathing through an oxygen mask. There was a needle poking out of her wrist that had liquid flowing into her body. There was a screen that had a low percentage on it that read *Brain Activity*. I remember reading about this in a book before. The machine is used for erasing all brain activity and memories from the past. Kara was being brainwashed. Confusion and fear flashed through me as I realized that whatever was going on wasn't good. I hurried out of the room, and closed the door silently behind me.

I walked back to my friends and they could all tell that my expression of shock was not a good sign.

"What was it? What did you see?" Zoey asked me.

I stood there in silence freezing in fear. Whatever I just saw could change everything. A thought evolved in my head. A very very deep thought. Did people ever get out of this place? Or was it all a lie.

"Alyssa, are you ok?" Brandon asked me.

"I think I need some fresh air." I responded.

I rushed through the hallways to the nearest entrance. I slammed open the door and gasped as the cold and crisp November air hit me in the face. I breathed. In. One, two, three, four. Out. One, two, three, four. I heard the doors open behind me. All of my friends came by my side, beginning to look concerned about me.

"Alyssa, what did you see?" Ollie asked me.

I told them what I saw when I entered the room. "There was this list of names on the wall of people who turn sixteen by the end of next week." I said, picturing Brandon's name on the list.

"Wa- was my name on there?" Brandon nervously asked me.

"Yes." I quietly responded.

"And that girl Kara, the one in my math class, she was tied to this, I don't know, machine." I staggered. "I thought at first maybe she was just sick, until I saw this IV in her arm. It looked like it was putting this liquid substance into her." I said.

"Are you sure you saw that right?" Zoey asked me after all three of them gasped.

"Yes. I'm positive. I know what I saw," I said.

"Well what does this mean?" Ollie asked.

"I don't know. But I don't think it will mean anything good." I said.

"Guys?" Brandon said in an unsure tone. "My name was on that list."

We all went quiet. This was what I was afraid of.

"Which means whatever is happening to Kara in that room right at this moment, could happen to me anyday." Brandon said while he started to nervously pace.

"Brandon don't worry. We will figure out what is going on. In the meantime, stay on the downlow. We don't want them taking you earlier than they need to. Let's go back to our corridors and think this all through. Let's meet up after dinner. Plan?" I said.

"Plan." All three of them responded at the same time.

I walked back to the corridors with Zoey by my side. We were both too shook up to say anything. I laid down on my bed and put my face into my pillow. I breathed in the smell of the laundry detergent that was soaked into my pillow case. I tried to breathe as many thoughts clogged up my brain.

My whole life has been a lie. I thought to myself. *Everything I have been told, everything that I've ever believed has been a lie.*

I slept for the rest of freetime because I was exhausted from everything that had happened this afternoon. I dreamed of what the world looked like. I dreamed of seeing my parents and family again. I dreamed of getting out of this place. And then it came to me. We needed to escape.

When Zoey and I met up with Brandon and Ollie I began to tell them my idea.

"We need to get out of this place. They've been lying to us this whole time we've been here. They aren't teaching us how to live in the world. They are injecting us with a serum that makes us think in different ways and make us forget all of our experiences that we've had here for all of our sixteen years. When you turn sixteen they take you

into this room and they set you up on a machine. When you wake up, you don't remember anything." I explained.

"So you think that we should escape?" Ollie asked.

"Well we don't have much time. Brandon turns sixteen next tuesday which gives us four days to escape successfully. In order for him to remember everything and for us to be safe, we need to get out of here."

"I think it's a good idea." Brandon said.

"But we don't even know what's out there. We don't know what is outside of this place. There could be anything out there." Zoey questioned.

"But anything out there is better than forgetting everything we've ever done. All of our memories of each other will be gone. Everything we've ever experienced, good and bad will be gone from our minds. I don't know about you but I'd rather run than stay here and be injected." I argued.

"Yeah I guess you're right." Zoey said.

"So we all agree?" I asked.

"Yes." Everyone said in unison.

"So it's a plan. We need to keep this a secret until we actually figure out what we are going to do and when we are going to do it," I said.

The next couple of days felt like years. We were waiting for our escape plan to come in action. We had all decided that we should escape Sunday night, once everyone had gone to bed. We would break into the security room and shut down all of the security cameras and unlock all of the doors. Ollie said that he can make this happen him being the king of tricks and all. We would run out the doors and not look back because if we did there would be a possibility of getting caught, which would change everything.

I woke up Sunday morning and already felt nervous. So many questions filled my mind. *What if we got caught? Where would we go when we got out? What was out in the world? Would I find my family?* An empty feeling filled my body. I would be leaving the only place I'd ever been able to call home.

The day went on as every now and then Zoey, Ollie, Brandon, and I would gather to make sure we all knew what was happening and when. Maybe we didn't know exactly what would happen when we escaped but we did know that we had to get out of that place as soon as possible, before it was too late for Brandon.

Soon enough it was nearing dark outside and we had finished our dinner. We packed secret supplies in bags and hid them under our beds. Zoey and I waited in silence for the right moment.

"What do you think is out there? You know, in the world?" Zoey asked me.

"I'm not sure. Trees. Lot's and lots of trees." I said. Trees were the only things we could see out the windows besides from the sky and clouds.

"Do you think that we will be able to find our families?" She asked me with a hint of longingness in her voice.

"I hope so. It's weird because we don't even remember what they looked like. I just remember the feeling of my mom holding me and telling me she loved me." I said.

Tears welled up in Zoey's eyes. "I miss them. I really do." She said.

The door shut quietly to the corridors. We tip-toed through the hallways to where the boys were soundlessly waiting. As a group we walked down the hallways to the security room.

"Wait here." Ollie said to us.

He went into the room making sure that the security guard, as always, was asleep. A few minutes later he walked out smirking.

"I turned off all the cameras and unlocked all of the doors to the building. And I might've drawn on the security guards face a little bit. The purple marker was way too tempting." Ollie whispered while quietly laughing.

We continued down the cold, dark, and silent hallways to the easiest door to escape from. The door was right next to the field, so all we had to do was run and jump the fence.

"We're actually doing this. We're getting out of this place." Brandon said.

"It's now or never." Ollie said.

I opened the door and a rush of adrenaline and cold air went through my body. But the only thing I could think of was to run. All four of us ran out the door and began running across the field. We reached the fence and three of us started climbing. Ollie stopped and turned back.

"What if we're making a mistake?" He questioned.

"Ollie there is no time to second guess. We're getting out of here now." I said.

We all began climbing the fence again. Zoey, Brandon and I were at the top and Ollie was about halfway. I looked at Ollie. He was looking at the building.

"But what about the others. The ones who are sleeping noiselessly in that building right now. What's going to happen to them?"

"Ollie, we don't know." I said.

"So we're just leaving them behind to get whatever that injection is? Some of them could be killed tomorrow, while

we get the chance to run away and escape. I don't know about you guys, but to me it sounds selfish." Ollie said.

"Well what can we do?" Zoey asked the group.

A few seconds of silence passed by.

"I have an idea, but you guys might not like it." I said. "What if two of us went back and got as many as the others as we could, while two of us waited here and kept watch?"

"I like the idea, but who would go and who would stay?" Brandon asked.

"I'll go." Ollie said.

"I'll go too." I said.

"Alyssa! You can't! You are the one who saw the room, and had the idea to escape. If you get caught, everything you've prepared for will be for nothing." Brandon said.

"Yeah well who else is supposed to go? If you went and got caught there is the possibility that you might not even remember us in the next few days. And Zoey, if she went she would never get to see her family again, which I know she has always dreamed of." I explained. "So Ollie and I will go and try to save the others. But if we get caught you have to climb the rest of the fence and leave us."

"What?! We can't leave you!" Zoey said.

"You have to." Ollie charmed in.

So Ollie and I carefully climbed down the fence and made our way across the field. I looked back at my two best friends sitting on the top of the fence and smiled. I hope I will see them again.

Suddenly the outdoor lights turned on and shone down onto the shiny grass. We were like deer in headlights.

Guards started swarming the areas coming in all different directions. We were caught. But I didn't care about that. I cared about my friends.

"Ollie run!" I screamed at him. "Run as fast as you can!" I yelled loud enough so that Zoey and Brandon would get the message. Ollie didn't take a second before turning around and bolting towards the fence. I stood there. Frozen. Alone. Frozen. Shining in the light.

I heard the shuffling of guards running towards me. There was a loud noise that echoed in my head. Suddenly, I felt a pain shoot through my body. The last thing I saw was Ollie making it over the fence with the others finally escaping to their new lives. I couldn't grasp what was happening but I knew that I wasn't dying. All I knew was that it was cold, wet, and dark. Cold, wet, and dark.

Emma Schlusser

Age: 14, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Julie Elmore

Category: Short Story

Voices

Voices

Rebecca had always heard voices, not only those of which came from the wind or rustling leaves, but those of lost sailors, lost friends or family, and the undead in between worlds. She was told she had a form of schizophrenia or a dramatic form of hallucinations. Rebecca had no idea that the voices were trying to communicate with her, and that somewhere in her small coastal town called Dunebrook, there was a girl her age, hearing these same voices, as well as a boy slightly older, seeing what others couldn't, seeing what Rebecca and the girl could hear. Rebecca had no idea her entire life was about to change when she packed to go an overnight doctor's appointment for her schizophrenia.

The sun had just begun to set, and the clouds that covered that sky began to turn to a dark grey. As Rebecca Moore sat in her hammock overlooking the cold and salty shore, she listened, intensely, to the whispering of the wind. The wind was speaking to her, sharing lost stories or crying out for help.

Rebecca was taken back suddenly to when she was younger, when she had just begun to hear voices. She remembered crying, yelling, and covering her ears.

"MOM! Make it stop!" Rebecca had screamed through tears.

"It's okay, it's just in your head. They will leave you alone, just calm down," her mother had said.

Suddenly, Rebecca was caught out of her little trance. Her mom was calling for her.

"Becca, we need to leave for the clinic, have you packed yet?" her mom asked.

Rebecca replied quietly, "Yes".

Rebecca ran upstairs and grabbed her journal, as well as the small faux leather bag filled with her clothing. She said goodbye to her fish Ray and her two dogs named Copper and Windle. She got into her mom's car and began to listen to the voices again. It was always harder for Rebecca to hear the voices inside of a car, because nothing good ever happened there, so she rolled down the window. Suddenly a flood of voices came breaking through. They called out to her, and as she and her mom drove closer downtown near the historic church, the voices grew angrier, louder, and they sounded more directed at her. Rebecca screamed, and her mom pulled over.

"Becca what's wrong?" she asked. Rebecca didn't reply, as usual, and so her mom continued to the clinic.

Rebecca and her mom pulled up at the usually deserted clinic to see that there were already three other cars, one belonged to the doctor, but Rebecca didn't know who the other two cars belonged to. Rebecca stepped out of the car, touching her already dirty shoes to the even dirtier pavement. The usual feeling of uneasiness came upon her as she walked through the doors of the clinic. There, she saw a good looking boy, about 16, sitting in the plastic chairs. To the boy's left a few chairs down, she saw a 14 year old girl, just about her age, looking at a magazine. Rebecca wondered who these people were, and why they are in a clinic for people with mental disorders like her.

Later, after her appointment, Rebecca went with her mom to the church. Her mom was extremely religious, so Rebecca often went to the historic building with her. When Rebecca walked through the heavy doors, the quiet voices you could hear from outside grew intense. They were calling out to her, screaming her name, yelling for help, and crying, so much crying. Rebecca screamed yet again, but the voices didn't stop like last time. She was sent into a swirling spiral inside her brain where all she could see was darkness and all she could hear was screaming.

Rebecca later woke up inside the clinic three hours later, at about 8 pm. She had a cap on that the doctors often used to monitor her brain waves, and she was told that while she was out cold, her waves were off the charts.

After being tested the doctors told her it was just another episode. So, Rebecca went to lie down. While Rebecca was sitting in the lobby after she had rested, the girl from earlier came up to her.

"Hi, I'm Mary Bleu. Do you hear them too?" she asked.

At first, Rebecca was confused, because she didn't know who "them" was. She didn't have time to ask, though, because suddenly a faint tapping appeared at the door to the closed clinic. Mary and Rebecca got up to look who it

was, and saw it was the boy from earlier. They unlocked the door and let him in. Rebecca was caught off guard by his looks, but realized now was not the time.

"Why are you here so late. The clinic has been closed for hours," Rebecca said.

The boy looked at her dead in the face and said, "My name is David Hill, and I am here because I see what only you two hear."

After a quick conversation relating to the most recent events Rebecca had experienced, the three teenagers sat in a circle to figure what was going on. The four things they had agreed on were that one, the voices were louder and meaner, two, that they were the only ones hearing things, three, the voices needed help, and four, they were coming from the church's basement. All of a sudden Rebecca felt utterly and completely understood, as if this was all she had needed for years. All of sudden, she wasn't alone anymore. There were people who understood her, who knew what she was going through. Knowing this made her problems seem smaller, more manageable.

Rebecca asked her mom if her new friends Mary, David, and herself could go downtown to get a lemonade and some food. Her mom agreed, and David drove downtown. When they arrived, they started walking. Past the restaurants and lemonade, until they reached the large victorian church with high spiers and a taunting gray stone entryway. All three of them closed their eyes, and began to listen. Obviously, David heard nothing, so he opened his eyes and began to see a red fire spread across the church.

"Mary! Rebecca! Open your eyes! There's a fire! We need to get out!" he yelled. As Rebecca and Mary frantically opened their eyes, they saw no fire, and asked David what he was seeing. "There are people down there, you must be able to hear their screaming, I see their mouths moving but no sound coming out," David muttered. Rebecca and Mary closed their eyes again and then shot them back open.

"I hear the screaming," said Mary.

They all three agreed to meet each other at the nearby diner for breakfast at 6 am the next morning.

At the diner the next morning, the three friends were too scared to eat. They discussed what they had experienced the night before. Rebecca had thought to herself how close she and her friends had become from this shared trauma so fast.

"They need help, they need our help," Mary said.

"Yeah they do, but how do we help them?" Rebecca replied.

David spoke quietly "I know someone who can help."

They walked to the church yet again and this time, went inside. They walked to the back of the old building to the small set of church history books they kept in the back. There, sat an elderly man that looked at least ninety-five years old.

David said, "sir, we need help. It is David, remember me? You were the only one who believed that I could see things, and now look! Here are two girls who *hear* what I see! Sir, we need help. Sir,".

"Ah, David, it is you. What can I do you for?" the man replied.

Rebecca said "We, I mean me and the other girl next to me, hear voices. We were told we had schizophrenia, which I believed until now, but I met Mary, and she also heard what I heard. But sir, these voices are so loud, so distressed, and we need to help them".

The man said "I know what you need. Follow me."

The man took the three friends to the front of the church, and then showed them to the front of the church. There, he led them into a small wooden structure.

"What is this?" Mary asks.

"This is where you get your sins forgiven," The man said quietly.

He walked into the extremely small room and stopped. He bent down and tapped on a few boards, then said, "I've shown you all you need".

He then left. Mary, David, and Rebecca looked at each other, then bent down onto the ground. They tapped on the wooden boards until they found one relatively hollow sounding. David pulled it up, and inside was a book and three newspapers.

"Open the newspaper already!" Mary and Rebecca said impatiently.

David opened the newspaper that had to have been at least 50 years old. The date at the top read November 23rd, 1924.

"Oh my God, what is this?" Rebecca asked.

"I have no idea, let's read it," Mary said

David began, "Today at 2am a fire broke out beginning at the base of the historic church downtown, and moved upwards. The fire team was able to put out the fire once it began to climb the building, but the entire basement was burnt. The team went into the basement and pulled out 12 unidentified bodies."

David took a breath then began again, "As of today the bodies are unknown, and no one knows who they were, what they were doing, and why they were meeting in the basement of the church."

David stopped.

"Keep reading!" Mary yelled.

"There's nothing left, the rest was ripped off," David said.

Rebecca handed him the next newspaper, dated November 25th, 1924.

David began to read again, "As of today, the cause of the fire that occurred in the historic church basement is still unknown, and the 12 bodies that have been pulled out of the basement have also not been identified. One thing that was found in the jacket pocket of one of the bodies was a small leather book, with an unknown language written inside. We have scholars working on figuring out what the book is and what the letters and words mean."

Mary handed David the third and final newspaper, that was dated to last year, November 23rd, 1974.

David read, "Today is the 50th anniversary of the devastating fire in the historic church downtown. We still today do not know who the 12 unidentified bodies were and what they are doing. The book found in the possession of one of the 12 had disappeared mysteriously about 15 years ago. All hope of decoding this mysterious fire is gone."

David set the paper down and looked up. He closed his eyes. He then opened them and picked up the small book. Inside the book were small letters that he did not understand, but did in fact make sounds. The three walked back through the church to the man again and spoke to him.

"What can we do to help the voices in the basement?" David asked

"You know what to do, use the book. Say the words, tell the voices they need to move on, tell them they do not belong here. Tell them to get out!" the man said.

"Okay," The three friends said, "lets meet here in the morning."

The next morning was incredibly wet. The salty air blew all around them and the clouds highlighted the shadowy church. The three friends went inside and picked up the book.

"I don't know if we should do this," Mary said, "what if we get hurt?"

"We won't. You can only hear them, you cannot be touched by them" David reassured her.

"Okay, let's do this, we'll be together." Rebecca said.

They walked into the church with the book in their hands. They walked down the silent stone stairs to the basement. Mary stopped.

"It's so loud. I can't," she said.

"Yes, you can, Mary, tune them out like you always have. I hear them too, it's okay," Rebecca said kindly.

The air became stale as they got deeper underground. Once they made it to the door, they stopped. David could see the shadows dancing around and the fire spreading around the melting people. The three closed their eyes and covered their ears. At the same time they yelled what was written in the book. They had no idea what they were saying and what it meant, but they knew it was doing something, because suddenly Rebecca and Mary heard a high pitched noise ringing in their ears. Then, they heard fire.

"What is that?!" Mary whispered.

Rebecca replied, "I don't know, it sounds like fire. David, what do you see?"

David was staring blankly at the empty, still smoky basement. He was holding his hands out, and looking slightly in the direction of where the fire looked like it had burned first 50 years ago.

"Move on, you don't belong here, get out, move on, you don't belong here, get out..." David said, gradually getting quieter.

The ringing in Mary and Rebecca's ears stopped, and the voices around them ceased. The three ran out of the basement quickly, then realized they had left their leather book. Rebecca ran down the stone stairs to the basement and when she went inside, the book was gone. She saw a shadow appear, holding the book, then she heard a faint "thank you", then nothing. The slinking shadow fizzled out. That was the first time she had ever seen what she had been hearing all these years.

After this incident, Rebecca and Mary never heard another whispery voice again, and David never saw the voices again. The three of them were still friends, but they never, ever, spoke to the old man again or went into the church basement. The events of that night were forgotten, as if they had never happened.

Collin Shiflett

Age: 15, Grade: 10

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

Educator: Gail Giewont

Category: Short Story

The Crimson Room

A shrill and irritating tone rang through Walter's room as the alarm clock on his bedside table reached 9:15 AM. On most mornings, Walter would have just hit the snooze button one or two more times. This morning, however, he shut the clock off and reached for his thin black-framed glasses. He had business to attend to at quarter to eleven and as much as he liked messing with people, Walter didn't like to keep people waiting. He rolled out of bed, his hazel eyes carrying heavy bags from a lack of sleep. A visit to a strange place in his dreams kept him in an almost a semi-awake trance for most of the night.

It was the second night in a row that he had ended up spending his sleeping hours wandering through a hallway. It felt eerily familiar to him but Walter couldn't remember ever traveling to the place in real life. The hallway was lined with large Victorian gold picture frames, embellished with the carvings of swirling vines and small flowers. Strangely they were empty but Walter did expect his brain to conjure up anything too interesting to put in them. He thought the hallway looked like one you'd find in a hotel but where each door should be, an overly fancy frame took its place. Then again, that could have something to do with the Shining-esque carpeting, a design made up of hexagonal shapes in maroon, black, and dark orange, or the peeling 80s wallpaper that had a similar floral print as the wallpaper in the motel room in which Walter currently lived. A strange force made him walk forward within what he could only describe as a dream. The hallway that lay ahead of him appeared endless and the same force that pushed him forward kept him from turning around.

Walter didn't remember falling asleep last night or the night before but it didn't matter. No matter what they contained, dreams were for children and Walter was anything but childish. He grabbed the jeans he laid out the night before as well as the button-up that was hanging on the bathroom door. Walter got dressed quickly, noting that next time he had some spare change he needed to buy some new pants. Even with a belt, Walter's slim waist wasn't filling out the jeans he had stolen from the motel's lost and found. Within just a few more minutes, Walter had tamed his messy brown hair with a bit of gel and thrown on his favorite leather jacket before heading out the door towards the parking lot.

"You're up rather early today Walter. You've got a 'business deal' I presume," said Irene Hales walking out of the check-in area of the motel.

"You know how it is Irene, I'm meeting some lady on the other side of town who needs a bit of black magic in her life. She thinks this ring is going to actually give her some mind control powers over her cheating boyfriend," Walter said, chuckling to himself.

"You know I hate all that stuff. You need to get a real job and quit banking on the fact that people at my motel often leave things behind you can steal. Fake cursed jewelry shouldn't sell as well as it does."

"What can I say? People will buy anything from someone with a smile like this," Walter flashed his signature smirk. "If it pays the bills then why change?"

"It only pays the bills because of the family discount I give you due to that sob story you crafted all those years ago about leaving your family."

"I gotta go. This lady's expecting to pick up the item that will fix all her life's problems in less than an hour. Thanks for letting me borrow your car again Irene." Walter dangled the keys to her 1986 Cadillac Fleetwood Brougham out in front of him.

"How did you-" and that was all he let her say before climbing into the front seat of the classic car and pulling out of the parking lot.

The drive to the coffee shop where he was meeting the woman was calm. Walter was a little surprised at the lack of traffic on the road for a Saturday morning in Chicago. After parking the car on the line of a space just to ruin someone's day, he headed into the coffee shop. There weren't too many people inside, so Walter ordered a black coffee and sat down in one of the leather chairs by the window to wait for his client. After only a few minutes of

waiting, Walter recognized the woman he would be selling the black magic ring to from her eBay profile picture as she walked through the door.

"Vanessa, right?" asked Walter, standing up to shake her hand.

"Yes! You must be Walter," she responded. "Do you have the ring?" she asked more quietly as if it was really some dark web item.

"It's right here," Walter said as he pulled it out of his pocket. The same pocket he had originally found the cheap ring in. "Now be careful with this. The palmist that I received it from was reluctant to let me purchase it as they claimed it was one of the most powerful items they possessed." Walter confidently spit out fake facts he knew she wanted to hear in a smooth tone, "they said it gives the wearer the power to control and read others' minds."

"That's exactly what I'm looking to do. How much do I own you again?"

"Only \$250, you got it at just the right time," Walter told the woman. He caught her looking into his eyes. He smirked knowing that the gold flecks buried in the hazel practically hypnotized any woman who stared into them.

"Thank you so much," the gullible Vanessa said, blushing. She handed Walter the money she had just counted out from her purse and in exchange, Walter handed her the ring. He flipped through the profit as she walked out of the coffee shop knowing very well that the ring wasn't going to do anything for her relationship. Walter didn't see it as anything but another successful scam as he left the coffee shop and headed to Irene's Cadillac.

The rest of the day Walter spent at thrift stores picking out cheap jewelry that he could later post on his eBay accounts with crazy descriptions people were sure to click on. If someone even had the slightest belief in magic, Walter would be able to convince them of the jewelry's power. No matter the situation, Walter always had a product posted on his account that could magically solve it. He didn't believe in black magic but all that mattered was that others did.

After grabbing a quick dinner at Burger King, Walter got back to the motel around six. He went into the front office to give Irene her keys back and was greeted by the usual sigh and shake of the head.

"You're nearly out of gas," Walter told her. He threw her keys onto the desk she was working at.

"I figured as much." Walter flipped her off as he walked out of the office and back towards his room.

Finishing up his work by posting a couple of eBay listings, Walter took a shower and then collapsed down on to his bed. He turned the tv on and flipped through channel after channel. As always, nothing was really on so he settled on watching reruns of Ghost Adventures on the small screen. Exhausted from the long day he had, as well as the lack of sleep he had gotten the past two nights, Walter drifted off to sleep by the second time the show went to commercial.

Walter was reawakened once more in the semi-dream state of the hallway. He cursed under his breath as he just wanted a goodnight's sleep but this would make it impossible. Although, it seemed that there was something different about the hallway upon arrival. The lights, which he had never really thought to look at before, seemed more scattered. Some even flickered in the distance before going out. The wallpaper which was previously only peeling slightly, looked like it was ripped from the walls. Patches of white plaster walls could be seen where the wallpaper once was. In many places, it was stained or yellowed making the regal frames seem out of place.

Walter started walking forward and noticed that images were slowly materializing in the golden frames. Photos of the people he had sold his "magic" to. His heart started pumping faster as he picked up his pace. The photos in the frames became short videos and he heard the distant echo of yells from couples arguing over wasted money and cries of the people who couldn't fix their problems. The faces haunted Walter. They screamed in the pain he caused. There were no longer arguments but threats bounding out of the mouths of people that trusted him. Walter noticed he was running. The screams became louder, even plugging his ears couldn't block out the sounds.

He saw a door in the distance as the cries of his sister, only five when he ran away from home, erupted through the hall louder than any of the screams from his former clients. Walter screamed apologies at the walls and begged for forgiveness but no one could hear him. He reached the dark wooden door, only quickly glancing at the corroding copper plaque that sat beside it. He read the large cursive letters on the plaque: *The Crimson Room*. Walter threw the door open and slammed it behind him praying he would escape the plague of guilt the hallway choked him with.

It was silent in the room. It was cold. Walter noticed the room didn't seem to have any lights but was instead illuminated by an untraceable deep red glow. He felt trapped. The floors, wall, and ceiling all seemed to be made of the same triangular metallic plates. Each step he took sent a small *clang* around the room which seemed to linger as it bounced off all the walls and ceiling. There was no furniture, decor, it was nothing but an empty room bathed in an unexplainable crimson light. Walter turned to look back at the door but there was nothing behind him. Turning back to his front, he noticed that something now sat in the center of the room. On the top of a small metal cube sat a black box. Walter felt a force pulling him towards it similar to the one that pushed him through the hallway. He reached out to grab the box, but as his hands grazed the surface of the lid, they lit fire. The screams of the hallway filled the room.

"So you want to play with black magic?" The crimson light flashed.

Collin Shiflett

Age: 15, Grade: 10

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

Educator: Gail Giewont

Category: Poetry

Stop Writing Fire

They see me at the end of the hallway
with a blurred face, a photo
smudged by carelessness. Their
dirty fingers distort my features,
their minds sleep with my words.

I'm the hero in the hall, cloaked,
the villains are who? I see them sleep
in those masks where they think
safety lies. Clarity chars their cheap
sheets. Justice? Inevitable.

Oh Death, they long to live in the shadow
cast by your flames. *Please*. If only the film
was left untarnished, they would see
a necessity in educating.

Collin Shiflett

Age: 15, Grade: 10

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

Educator: Gail Giewont

Category: Poetry

Oceans Drain, Embers Ignite

1. Ocean Eyes

She hides herself away, her room
the only place she doesn't feel judged.
The door left unlocked but no one
bothers to check on her. A glass heart
shattering unknown to the culprit
who fired the remark. Her arms wrap
tightly around a plush blanket.
He feels closer that way. Messy hair
colored the deep orange of autumn leaves
falls just above her chest. The shimmer
of the ocean in her eyes is gone.
Salty water draining, cooling
her hot face, a deep red
which once was pale. She reaches
for her phone, the screen lighting up
to illuminate pathways left by the leaking sea.
She sees his name through puffy and bloodshot eyes,
he doesn't judge. Deep inhales
bring shaky exhales, she tells her story.

2. Sea of Flames

No longer will she be the one
fired upon by the figures of guidance.
The ever-shifting flames of her
inner fire are set ablaze, a fierce heat
engulfing all those around her.
Except him. The rising flares of blue and orange
that control her are unfelt.
No longer will she get close enough,
afraid his cold blue eyes will douse
the embers that now guard her heart.
She will no longer let her fire consume
him. Their smokey spirits will dance
together on frigid nights. Wispy grey ghosts
embracing, fading under the new moon.
A sea of flames can protect
herself from commanding figures
meant to understand her. Understanding,
he's taking too much away.
Absorbing the leaked sea, his soul

resides in a cloudy ocean. Cold waves
crash against his ribs, chills coursing through
veins filled with saline. Her fire was hurting
him, she knows he hides his blackened skin.

Emmy Sumpter

Age: 14, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Julie Elmore

Category: Short Story

The Missing Faces

The Missing Faces

The strange house stood on the side of Ellis street perfectly still. The crooked brown shutters curdled against the painted beige exterior of the house. The roof looked as if it was pieced together, tile by tile, by the hands of a burly man. As much as every detail looked like it was not meant to be there, it almost made sense. The house was so uncoordinated, that it fit like pieces of a broken puzzle. The mismatchedness of the house itself was opposite of its neighbors. All the other houses down the block were plain and simple and identical. Every single suburban house on Ellis street looked like it meant to be there, except for the Barnabee's.

The Barnabee's house enclosed just as unusual as a couple. Mary and Samuelson Barnabee lived in that house on Ellis street for the past ten years. Unlike every other detail of this couple's surroundings, they fit perfectly. Well, perfectly in a sense that they were each as equally abnormal as the other. Mary had features that were almost creature like. She looked as if she had fallen out of a nest and lost all of her feathers. Her blonde hair was the biggest thing on her bony figure. Her husband, Samuelson, looked just as animated as she did. Unlike Mary, Samuelson didn't look like a creature, he almost looked fake. His face was so shiny and round, and his hair was so perfectly parted and combed. There was not an imperfection on this man that could be seen by the blind eye.

The Barnabee's house seemed quite quiet from the outside since they had been there. But now, someone unfamiliar had to intentionally endure their peculiarity: Marcia Wallace. Marcia Wallace had lost her parents at a very young age, so she had no recognition of losing them. Marcia knew how not to get easily attached due to her many years in and out of foster homes and through family after family. She was never the problem, homes got full, people lost their jobs, then she had to abandon them and find a new temporary family. And Marcia knew that. In Marcia's twelve years of living she thought she had experienced the maddest things she ever could, until she was placed with the Barnabee's. Marcia couldn't brace herself for what was coming next.

On that mellow summer day, Marcia arrived at the Barnabee residence. She stepped out of the car with the child care worker and set upon that bizarre house on Ellis street. The ground she walked on towards the home was bare. There was no grass, flowers, rocks, concrete, only dirt. The uneasy, squishy feeling underneath Marcia's sneakers floated into the pit of her stomach. She knew something wasn't right about this house, but she couldn't yet place it.

The child care worker cut in front of Marcia to ring the doorbell and no peppy string of bells played, except it was the oddly rhythmic croaking of toad. Marcia and the worker exchanged confused glances and she proceeded to ring the doorbell again. They weren't mistaken, it was the ring of a croaking toad.

"Well that's rather odd," Marcia observed.

"Rather odd to say the least," the child care worker responded. Just as the worker went into her bag, rustling some papers, the big beige door opened without a creak. Behind the door awaited the Barnabee couple. Mary and Samuelson gestured for the two to come in.

The exact moment Marcia stepped into the home, she did a double take. The door opened to the dining room table straight away which was painted a bright aqua blue. The blue of the walls was so appalling that Marcia couldn't nearly focus on the many other curious details of the room. The space was covered wall to wall with plates, plates of all different shapes and sizes. Some were circular and perfectly hung, while others were upside down and rather crooked. Every single color of the ornamentation clashed and it made Marcia's head spin. The only neutral solid color item in the room was the dining table itself that Marcia now realized she was seated at. Marcia gave a nervous look to the child care worker that was beside her. The worker was too absorbed in her own documents to notice. Marcia only now saw that the Barnabee's hadn't taken their striking blue eyes off of her the entire time she had been in their abode.

"Ahem," the child care worker broke the silence, "Sign here, Mr. Barnabee, and then I'll be on my way." The papers slid across the table and Mr. Barnabee gave a surprisingly warm smile that Marcia reciprocated. Once again,

the noise dropped and silence set in.

"Well, while all of this business gets taken care of, Marcia, let me show you to your room," Mary Barnabee gingerly piped up and gave a rather amusing half-grin half-grimace. Marcia realised she didn't really have any choice, so she got up and followed Mrs. Barnabee down the hall. The walls were lined with peeling flower-patterned wallpaper. Marcia could see every bump, nudge, and indent made into those walls, and there were too many to count. Marcia was shocked as Mrs. Barnabee opened her room, it was surprisingly normal. A twin-sized bed with a patterned blue comforter was matched by a wall of identical wallpaper, and one singular window stood on the farthest wall. Marcia was gladdened by the simplicity.

"So, Marcia. This is your room. I hope you enjoy it. I have spent a lot of time putting it all together," Mrs. Barnabee said in a similar wispy tone as before.

"Well, thank you, I appreciate it," Marcia responded, sitting on the bed. Marcia saw Mrs. Barnabee's eye twitch at her sudden movement, but before she could ask Mrs. Barnabee left the room.

Marcia stayed confined to her room for the rest of the day after Mr. Barnabee trickled in with the last of her belongings. She unpacked and sat in silence. The thought of '*maybe they won't be so bad*' crossed her mind. Marcia was so worried by the strangeness of Mrs. Barnabee, that she didn't want to endure more than she already had the first day.

The next morning twelve year old Marcia was awakened by a loud hissing noise. She jerked in her bed and looked around for the source of the hideous sound. Outside the singular, rectangle window of her room stood a vulture perched on the windowsill. The horrendous screeching didn't stop. Marcia ran out of her room covering her ears wishing for a better way to start the morning. Marcia was so focused on escaping the terrible noise that she didn't seem to notice Mr. Barnabee, and ran right into him.

"I am so sorry, Mr. Barnabee. There was a bird outside my bedroom screaming and it wouldn't stop," Marcia apologized, standing in front of him. Samuelson Barnabee didn't seem to have a care in the world and started to laugh at Marcia.

"What's so funny?" Marcia questioned, puzzled by his reaction. Mrs. Barnabee appeared behind the two placing a bowl of cereal on the table.

"Oh, don't be silly dear. Birds don't scream," Mrs. Barnabee chirped, pulling out a chair for Marcia to sit in. Bewildered, Marcia sat down surprised by the mere calmness of the couple.

"Did you two really not hear a bird?" Marcia questioned.

"No," the two said in unison, exchanging shrewd looks. Mr. Barnabee abandoned the room and left Marcia at the dinner table with Mrs. Barnabee. Marcia scooped the cereal from the bowl into her mouth and saw something peculiar out of the corner of her eye. She saw three bins full of empty milk cartons, piled about eight high. Each bin had the face of a missing child with a red circle around it.

"Mrs. Barnabee?" Marcia asked, turning to her.

"Yes, Marcia," she responded, opening a carton of milk.

"Why are there bins of milk cartons with shapes drawn on the children's faces?" Marcia questioned as Mrs. Barnabee set down a empty glass in front of her.

"I think those *ads* are rather tedious, wouldn't you agree?" Mrs Barnabee asked, pouring milk into Marcia's empty glass.

"Well, isn't it just to help the kids be found? I don't think they are meant to be advertisements," Marcia added, swallowing a gulp on cold milk.

"If the missing children wanted to be found so badly, they would. Children are clever, they know what they are doing," Mary Barnabee answered rather harshly.

"It wasn't their fault."

"And while I'm at it, the government shouldn't be sticking their noses where they don't belong. Those *ads* are uncalled for," Mrs. Barnabee quickly interrupted.

Marcia swiftly averted her eyes back down to her half-eaten bowl of cereal. Her mouth didn't open for the rest of breakfast, too scared of what response might be given. The image of the missing faces burned into her brain. She couldn't get rid of the recurring picture of the milk cartons piled high, out of her brain.

Marcia kept to herself for the next few weeks. She didn't speak unless spoken to, she didn't complain when she was awakened from her sleep from the screeching of a loud bird, and she most definitely didn't question Mrs. Barnabee. She just had somewhat adjusted to the unusual ways of the Barnabee's at this point. Marcia was accustomed to not bothering the Barnabee's until this particular afternoon. As Marcia sat in her room, doodling in an empty notepad, she was brought out of her thoughts by the string of outlandish noises. She heard the laughing of a small child, the crying of a young boy, and a rather fed-up scratching sound. Her head jolted to the source of the sound, which was outside of her bedroom. Marcia opened her bedroom door and leaned her ear to the cold wall. She walked down the hallway, listening, as the noises got louder and seemed closer than before. The hallway seemed

to darken as Marcia floated down it. She was so entranced in finding the sound, she didn't seem to notice Mr. Barnabee in front of her.

"Hello," he said, making Marcia jump back in fear, "What are you doing down this hallway?"

"I heard noises," Marcia replied, her voice trembling with uncertainty.

"No you didn't," Mr. Barnabee replied with a rather angry grimace.

"What were they, the noises?" Marcia persisted, intent on finding an answer. Mr. Barnabee stood there, his eyes darting from corner to corner.

"Mr. Barnabee?" Marcia questioned.

He paused once again, "They were simply noises." He began to walk past Marcia, down the opposite side of the hall.

"Mr. Barnabee?" Marcia questioned once again. He stopped and stood still.

Only his head turned to look at Marcia, "Cats. They were cats. Cats roam around this neighborhood. That's all you heard. Exactly. A rather rowdy bunch of cats." He swiftly walked away from Marcia, giving her no time to question him again.

Marcia turned back to her bedroom thinking, *Cats? Cats don't make sense. Cats don't cry or laugh. Those were most definitely not cats.* She was not satisfied with Mr. Barnabee's answer, nor did she believe it. Marcia stayed confined to her room although thoughts of suspicion floated around her mind.

Marcia's stomach rumbled, interrupting her never-ending boredom. She crept out of her bedroom, seeking food to fulfill her need for nutrients. It was about time for dinner, so she knew Mrs. Barnabee wouldn't mind her being outside her room. Just as she was about to turn the corner to the dining room, she overheard some very hushed and harsh whispers.

"... Mary, listen. They will find us. They will find us if that *thing* sticks around any longer," Mr. Barnabee harshly whispered.

"I know, but it's not her fault, Samuelson," Mrs. Barnabee answered in the same tone.

"That *pest* is too curious for her own good!" Mr. Barnabee replied, raising his voice.

"That *being* that you won't refer to by name, is nothing but a child," Mrs. Barnabee said, sharpening her voice.

"Since when did you care about children?" Mr. Barnabee sternly said, "Besides, Mary, we need to take care of *it* before it's too late." Marcia's eyes widened, as she just found fuel to add to the fire of her suspicions. When she hurried down the hallway back to her room, she saw something out of the corner of her eye. A thick shred of paper captured her gaze. Marcia swiftly picked it up and brought it into her room to examine it.

The paper read, "HELP US!" The writing was shaky, as if a young child scrawled the small note on the piece of paper. Marcia's breath heightened as the words on the paper imprinted into her mind. Her skin suddenly went cold and her brain raced at a million miles per hour. Marcia's stomach somersaulted as she heard a knocking on her door.

"Dear, I'm coming in, supper is ready," Mrs. Barnabee's wispy voice echoed through her door as it creaked open. Marcia's hands moved like lighting to stuff the tiny note underneath her singular pillow.

"Supper is ready, if you would like to join us, Marcia," Mrs. Barnabee said, stepping closer to Marcia's bed. Her voice sounded more homely and forgiving than it had ever before. It didn't bring Marcia any comfort, as the voice was intended to. Marcia took a gulp before speaking her next words.

"Um, Mrs. Barnabee, I'm not very hungry. I would rather stay in here," Marcia said, quickly skipping over Mrs. Barnabee's gaze. She felt Mrs. Barnabee's eye on the side of her neck, while her own eyes were glued to her comforter.

"Are you feeling ill? You look pale," Mrs. Barnabee expressed, with much more humanity in her voice than before.

"No, ma'am. I'm just tired," Marcia replied, giving a slight smile. Marcia could feel Mrs. Barnabee's hesitancy to leave the room, but as soon as she made eye contact, Mrs. Barnabee left just as quickly as she came.

Marcia grabbed the piece of paper once again, rereading it to make sure she wasn't mistaken. The words were clear as day.

"HELP US," continued to replay in Marcia's head, over and over again.

More questions arised, *Who is us? Why did someone write this? Maybe there's no concern, maybe this is a scrap from the Barnabee's. Is this why they are so strange? Is someone else here? Is someone hiding? Who needs help? Do they need my help? Who should I help? Is this really happening?*

Marcia layed exhausted on her bed, not being able to rid herself of these many anxieties. She could feel her heart beating, faster with every thought, with every sound. Her palms clammed against the fabric of her bed, her skin chilled with every passing second. She laid there, dazed, until her body gave out and she fell to sleep.

Marcia was awakened from her slumber, not by a loud bird, but by a string of familiar voices. She heard the scratching, crying, laughing, and even faint murmurs once more. Marcia tossed and turned, debating whether or not to leave her room and find where these sounds were coming from. On one hand, her suspicions would be put to rest,

but on the other hand more questions could arise or worse she could be caught. The noises seemed to increase and Marcia couldn't take it anymore. She opened her bedroom door and crept out of her room again, just as she did previously that day. Marcia leaned her ear to the cold wall and followed the sounds as they increased. Down the dark hallway, Marcia went. She traveled through the pitch black for a minimum, ten minutes. Finally, she heard a shriek as her ear hit a door frame. She reached for the doorknob and goosebumps overcame her body. Marcia inhaled and turned the knob. As she opened the door her body tensed and her jaw dropped. She didn't know what she was expecting, but it wasn't what she saw. Her eyes scanned over the dozens of children huddled together, some had tears rushing down their eyes, some were sleeping, some were laughing, some were working, but they all had something in common. Marcia had seen all of them before. She had seen all of them on the sides of cartons for the past few weeks, every morning. Every carton of milk stacked in the Barnabee's dining room had the faces of the missing children. All of the missing faces that Marcia had seen at breakfast, on the side of the carton, over the past few weeks, were now crowded together in front of her.

Marcia's stomach flipped and her ears reddened with terror. A much too familiar shiver found its way back to Marcia's spine. She took a step into the room and a small child no more than eight years old let a tear roll down her hollowed face. The girl's bottom lip quivered and her gaze locked with Marcia's. The child's eyes widened in fear and Marcia furrowed her eyebrows.

"What is it? I'm not trying to hurt you," Marcia whispered, bending over, resting her hands on her knees.

The little girl's head shook vigorously and she uttered a single sound, "Shhh." The little girl's malnourished hand shot up and pointed behind Marcia's head. Just as quickly as Marcia realized that she was in danger, the Barnabee couple appeared behind her. Her eyes began to spin and her eyes went dark after she was hit with a thud.

After Marcia was discovered by the Barnabee's, her life wasn't promised. There were no signs as to whether she spent the rest of her days sweating in that dark room or six feet under. Marcia Wallace wasn't heard from after her stay at the Barnabee residence. Marcia had just been 'lost in the system' and no one seemed to bother finding her.

Scarlett Townsend

Age: 13, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Julie Elmore

Category: Short Story

The Evil Within Us All

The Evil Within Us All

Azealia spoke her daily reminder into the mirror softly, "This is not about you, Azealia. This is about so much more than you." She feared that if she didn't repeat it enough, she would start to lose sight of it. Over the five years she had been held captive in the country of Adolia, Azealia had almost reached insanity several times. But this, her daily reminder, was what kept her focused on the end goal: to save her own country from being torn apart by war. For each time she felt the walls of her room closing in, that she cursed her dad for trading her to be a prisoner, that she wished to be back home, she told herself the same thing: that should she fail, she would be responsible for the gruesome death of millions.

Adolia had declared war on Azealia's country of Esudire over eight years ago, five of which she had been prisoner. In those years of fighting in Esudire, the country had been torn apart by war. Her father, the king of Esudire, had decided that to win the war, he needed a leg up. And somewhere in the back of his pea-sized brain, he came up with the brilliant idea of using his 12 year old daughter. That daughter was Azealia. At just twelve years old, she was told she could have the opportunity to save her country, at which she was ecstatic. Her father told her that she would be going to live in Adolia for a little, and that she needed to be his eyes and ears in the castle. Everything she heard would need to be written down and relayed to him. What he failed to mention was that when she crossed into Adolia, she would never again leave it. Furthermore, he had traded her for 2,000 prisoners of war, and each year she remained trapped in Adolia, 550 more were freed. But instead of the horror one might expect her to feel at this realization, Azealia took pride in the lives she was saving, 4,200 already.

Azealia had spent most of her time either pressed up against the wall, listening for gossip and information to report back to her father or staring at her reflection in the mirror. It was in this mirror that she had watched herself grow from the little twelve year old she was when she first looked into it to the grown seventeen year old she was now. With each time she thought of how much she loathed her father for putting her through this, she looked into the mirror, trying to feel pride, and was reminded that this was not about her. This was not about her. This was *not* about her. This was about gleaning Adolia for information and destroying the country that destroyed her childhood. At some point, Azealia had made peace with the fact that this would not, this could not, end well for her. Her father knew this, the king of Adolia knew this, and now she knew it too. This would most certainly end in her death. But at least she would make it a death that would mean something.

And so, beginning five years ago, Azealia had begun to gather information on Adolia and the king's war plans. She would cautiously lean against the wall, holding her ear up to hear the gossip servants passed along to her guards. All this she wrote down, waiting until night to tie it onto a bird's leg, a bird that would bring it to her father. She never would have associated this bird to her father had it not sung the national anthem of Esudire each night. After receiving the letter, the bird would sing Azealia to sleep before flying off, and if she concentrated enough, Azealia could almost hear her mother humming. By morning, the bird was back, ready to be given another letter to deliver.

But the scandals and gossip of the working class had grown too little, and Azealia had known it wouldn't be helpful in the long run. Her father didn't need to know how rude the chefs were, he needed war plans. The only thing she hadn't known was how she would ever obtain that information. After several months of listening to every piece of gossip, Azealia had struck gold. The guards and servants frequently talked of rumoured secret passageways that ran in between every room. While first built as an escape route, they had since faded into a myth. Azealia, who had been only twelve years old at the time she heard this, had immediately scoured her room for any sort of sign that there was a passage. After literal hours of frustration towards everything, and she meant *everything*, Azealia had found the entrance by accident. She had collapsed to the floor in a heap of sobs, had tried to stifle the tears and become the strong leader her twelve year old self desperately wanted to be, and she had looked up into the mirror. In this mirror she hadn't seen herself, but instead a weak, little girl who was failing her country. In anger, she had kicked the mirror

as hard as she could, causing it to fall back. Instead of hitting the wall, she had watched as the mirror fell back into a dark space. Upon further investigation, she found a hallway behind her mirror that disappeared into darkness in either direction. These, she soon had realized, were the rumored passages connecting each room.

Shortly after that, Azealia had begun to sneak out at night, when the guards posted outside her doors were least aware, to map the castle in her head. She had begun to hear whispers through the paper thin walls of secret war meetings. Wherever those whispers led, she had followed. And thus, she had discovered the perfect way to destroy Adolia from the inside out.

For five years Azealia had done this, never quite sure if her efforts were any help or if the bird was even delivering the messages. It had driven her to near insanity. That is, until the bird returned with a letter of its own. And its contents made her sick. The letter was from her father, the only communication she had had with him in years. Azealia's heart filled with pride as she read words of praise and gratitude, but two sentences later immediately sank and shattered into a million pieces. The letter told of the millions who had died, suddenly making 4,200 feel consequently microscopic, and the millions more who were about to. Along with his praise, the king, her very own father, handed her the weight of the entire war. He wrote of a plan his messengers had intercepted that told of an organism that would destroy whole kingdoms when released into the ground. Adolia planned to watch as their weapon caused the whole of Esudire to sink beneath the ground. But no, the king did not stop there. His words pinned all responsibility on Azealia, told her everyone's life depended on her ability to figure out where this organism was and stop it from ever reaching Esudire.

Her mind and heart racing, Azealia could do nothing more than stare at the letter, at his words. This couldn't be true, it couldn't all depend on her. But as the silence closed around her and the bird began to sing, somewhere deep down the news resonated with her, and she began to understand. *She* was the last hope, this was her father's last resort. And so she slowly rose and walked over to the mirror. Sitting down, she stared at herself for a long time, wondering where it was that her father saw courage. It couldn't be in her eyes, they looked empty, but there was no way it was in her face, she looked too tired. But it also couldn't be her stance, for time had worn her down. At just seventeen years old, Azealia looked like she was carrying the weight of the world.

She slowly pushed the mirror back, never breaking eye contact with the girl in it, who surely was not Azealia, and stepped into the hallway. She took her candle with her, and read the schedule she had written on the back of the mirror. Every whisper she had heard she wrote on this wall. It contained all of the castle's secrets, but more importantly, it contained this week's meeting schedule, based off of codes she had deciphered. Though she knew a meeting was taking place right at this moment, she wasn't exactly sure where. Her best bet was simply to walk to the servant's favorite gossip spot and listen in. It wasn't a foolproof plan, but she still ran through the hallways, carefully navigating the many turns and twists and she wove through the walls, until she reached the south wing. She walked until she heard voices, and put her ear up against the wall. It was no one special, just two servants gossiping about soldiers they found cute. Before she could move on, Azealia heard the words she was waiting to hear.

"But Missy, didn't he ditch you? You told me yesterday you were going to be eating dinner with him right now."

"No, oh my gosh no! Jack would never ditch me. He had this emergency meeting in that room near the King's chambers."

Their voices trailed off as Azealia sprinted through the passageways towards the King's quarters, furious at herself for not knowing there was a meeting. She ran, carefully dodging sharp edges, and looked for the space on the wall that was marked with a red crown, a marking that Azealia herself had drawn on. She frequently visited this part of the castle in hopes that she would hear the king describing war plans to his queen. Yet another thing that despicable man who led this despicable war took away from Azealia: love. How could a man, even one that evil, destroy such a young girl's life? How could he not care? While Azealia was on the opposing side, weren't children considered the innocents? Why must she pay for her father's sins? She suddenly snapped out of it. Stopping dead in her tracks, Azealia took a calming breath and refocused her thoughts. It wasn't like she had been given a choice on the matter.

After about 30 seconds of running down the dark paths to the left of the king's rooms, Azealia slowed down. If the maids had been correct, which she was praying that they were, the meeting would be taking place somewhere near here. Pressing her ear up against the wall, Azealia walked slowly, listening for any type of sounds. After several minutes of walking, and a few more of tears, because despite wanting to be strong, Azealia was terrified of failure, she began to hear soft murmurs.

Following the sound of voices, Azealia turned in one of the many sub-pathways, into a small, tight tunnel looking corridor, which she assumed ran along the wall of the meeting room. She could just barely make out the voices, but only a few words. Her breath caught however, when she heard "... the organism, they'll never know ..."

Azealia dared not to breathe too loudly, scared that the men, barely feet away, would hear her, but also knew she needed to get through somehow. If she couldn't make out more of the conversation, her country would be slaughtered and destroyed, not to mention that without Esudire, Adolia had no use for her. Was it selfish for Azealia

to be thinking of herself while millions were at stake? Yes, she thought it was. Azealia knew she would die, and she knew it was soon, so why did she even care anymore? Why was she still worried about surviving if it wasn't going to happen? And, God! Why was she thinking about this while she was supposed to be focused on the meeting? Pushing her ear up against the wall, she strained to hear everything and absorbed it all. Phrases containing "S-42," "the organism," "Esudire," "security," and "troops" were used frequently. Azealia missed out on many phrases, but she did feel she had enough to piece it all together. Obviously, the topic was the organism, a small piece of luck that Azealia thought she should appreciate, and they were planning to use troops to transport it to Esudire. But what was S-42? Could it really just be the room number? Could it really just be hidden away in a storage room?

She made her way in the dark down to the second floor, and through a catacomb of dead ends until she reached the hallway at which the end she believed room S-42 resided. As she walked forward, she ran face first into a wall. She must've reached the end sooner than she thought! S-42 was a room on the side of the castle, one that she hoped would have huge windows that she could easily jump out of. There was no way that there wasn't some kind of alarm on the organism or guards at the door. It would have been next to impossible to have reached it from the outside, and yet she still struggled to figure out how to get through the wall into the room. As she stood there, debating what to do, a sudden realization came to Azealia. Today would be the day she died. So long as she got the organism away her country was safe, but what about her? How could she ever get out of that situation? The answer was simple, she couldn't.

And so, with little hesitation, Azealia kicked the wall as hard as she could, again and again, until it broke a little. Here she paused, waiting for the inevitable sound of guards pouring into the room as the sounds coming from in it. But the inevitable didn't come. Instead, she was able to pull the loose stones out until the hole was big enough for Azealia to climb through. Once in the room, she gasped. There was nothing out of the ordinary, and yet she was astounded by the interior. This was the first room besides her own that Azealia had seen in five years. It smelled wonderful yet terrible at the same time, and it felt amazing. Azealia walked over to the window and quietly unlocked it, pulling it up just enough so that she would be able to jump out.

A plan had slowly been forming in her head. She would grab the organism, which looked to be just casually sitting on a table in the back, encased in glass, and then would jump out the window. And before she could doubt herself, or in retrospect debate what she would do after she was outside, surrounded by Adolian troops, she was walking towards it. Though the organism was microscopic and impossible to see, Azealia had a strange feeling of certainty. This was it, she was finally doing the right thing. She watched as her arm reached out, her fingers enclosing around the slender tube, and her ears erupting in pain as an alarm blared and she began to hear yelling. Almost as if she was in slow motion, Azealia turned to the window, sprinting over and jumping out before looking one last time over her shoulder, straight into the barrel of a guard's gun.

Azealia's landing was not pleasant, and even more painful were the sounds of chaos, which seemed to be chasing her as she ran to get away from them. Azealia ran like she had never run before. She ran, knowing that even though this would end in her death, with the weight of her whole country on her shoulders. And she ran to the only place that troops weren't coming from, the cliffside on which the castle sat. Azealia turned, one last time looking back at the war that was finally closing, and she knew this was the end. She, without looking back, organism in hand, began to step backwards-

"No! Please.. Don't do this! I can explain- I can really explain!" A man in the crowd stepped up, the Prince by the looks of his uniform.

Something about it pulled at Azealia, stopping her dead in her tracks, "And give me one good reason I shouldn't kill you all. You've destroyed families, you've started a war, and you've held me captive. You should be *thanking* me for destroying this God-awful place." Azealia glared at him in the eyes, daring him to confront her pain, to acknowledge his kingdom's horrors.

But instead she was slammed face first with his desperate words, "Are those the lies you've been fed? Adolia wanted none of this! We wanted PEACE. But your father was too greedy, he wanted more than he could have, and so he attacked. Did you know he *suggested* that we take you, practically begged us to. He wanted *yogone*, Azealia."

The lies! How *dare* they lie to her? Her father would never, her country would never. And she would never. Azealia could not let this happen, could not let them win. "NO!" She screamed, and she slammed the organism into the ground.

And in a moment of peace before the beautiful destruction Azealia had just caused, vivid memories came flooding back. Memories of her begging her dad for her very own country, of her dad pointing in the direction of Adolia and asking, "Now, my princess, how would you like me to get one for you?" All the hatred she had internally, even unknowingly, built up, hatred for her father, for Adolia, even a little for her own country, all of it should've been for her herself.

And one last thought before Azealia was met with her death. It was *she* who had done this all, it was *she* who was

to blame.

Savannah Vonesh

Age: 17, Grade: 11

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

Educator: Devon Mattys

Category: Poetry

Moment of Peace

I slide into bed,
feet grassy
still warm cold from the rain
and the external numbing
and the internal humming;
the rain sings the house to sleep,
just as I sang to it minutes before
galavanting through shadowed grass,
sweeping my arms to the moon
as I leaped across the church soccer field,
hiding behind trees when
the unnatural flash of headlights
dared to glance in my direction
and dispel the beautiful darkness.
Barefoot, I blindly trusted my toes,
hopping to the song surging through my ears
as I made my way to deserted pool parking lots
and dilapidated basketball courts
where weeds dominated the weary coarse cement,
and the leaf litter sank under my tread.
The two yellow street lamps illuminated the stage
where a childish plastic hoop awkwardly bowed
while the ancient and bare and tall elders guarded the wings.
I would stay only briefly,
seeking the solitude
and quiet power of shadows over the harsh lights.
The warm pre-post-storm wind pushed me toward the mottled sky
and I, softy euphoric, drifted peacefully for the first time in ages.
but now, only the frizz of my hair
and the faint heat from the scrapes on my soles remain
as I drift off to sleep.

Phu Vo

Age: 14, Grade: 9

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

Educator: Michele Surat

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Hearts That Don't Beat

The cicada chirping had faltered, and the blistering sun fell under the horizon. Saigon, scorched in the morning and bustling with people, had become solemn when dusk rolled around. Fathers retired home, and mothers served dinner to the family. Or so it should be, but that proved to be erroneous at my house. In the fresh breeze of the night, bottle caps popped open, and a lavish feast nourished the members of my extended family. They had traveled from the northeast in preparation for our move to Nha Trang and to celebrate my father's success at work. When the alcohol had set in, and stomachs filled to the brim, it proved a ripe harvest for the little critters of the city.

The uncles began preparing games for the family to play while their wives would help tend to the kitchen. Sitting down to wager my money in a friendly game of Vietnamese Bingo, I saw ants scurrying to the food that had fallen off the table. I was always puzzled over why ants acted as if they had found salvation whenever they would secure something as little as a morsel of bread. How they cherished the smallest things in life, I wouldn't have understood at my tender age due to the sheltered life which I gloated upon. Then the spiders and cockroaches came, and at last, the scorpion had made its presence. When I was a kid, I felt uncomfortable with insects. They behaved systemically and would always swarm their prey in a mob as if they were rioting against a higher up. I thought that they felt no emotion, and their hearts were of stone, never beating. As the scorpion approached my grandmother, adrenaline surged through me. The quick, poisonous jab from the stinger at the end of its body would prove fatal to someone in the later stages of their life. I'd read up on the effects of a scorpion sting, how your chest would tighten up and your muscles would thrash around. The nature guidebook warned that your heart might burst from the shock of the poison. I opened my mouth to call out, but all I did was eat the wind. My body froze up, unable to change the tides of the situation. Poised ready for the strike, the scorpion suddenly met its fate to the clad of my grandmother's shoe. Everyone was unfazed. This predicament might've been just a standard routine for them, but I was astonished at how she was able to kill the scorpion without hesitation, without fear.

Sometimes when I look back, I question why I remember this event. When I celebrated my first Lunar New Year, how I was able to ride the bicycle, I forgot all of that with time. Plastic memories are fabricated at the sleight of hand as I distort the reality of my experiences further. I needed more and more to cease my memories from drying out. But the scorpion's death resides in me as if it were a lonely parade. Even if slid into a VHS, out it would bloom, clear as day. Why do I recall this moment so vividly? Why do I continue to chew on this memory, despite its bitter taste? Was it the courage of my grandmother, or was it my anxiety? The only thing I could recall was my fear of bugs as I was a child. Creatures that feel no emotion, with hearts cold as stone. But after watching another scorpion quell the life of a rat, I know the truth. At the moment of the kill is when they are the most alive.

Patience Wallace

Age: 17, Grade: 12

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

Educator: Gail Giewont

Category: Poetry

Pyrite and Gold + They Always Shoot Us Down

Pyrite and Gold + They Always Shoot Us Down

Pyrite and Gold

My culture is bronze
The tan from the sand in Ghana
and the gold from the mines in the Motherland
We are the people of the Earth
Ochre swirled with the specks of sunlight
Mud reflecting the glow of blessed sunbeams
Activating the melatonin in our skin

Our luscious tone is untouched by the technologies of this era
When the fingers of an arrogant white lover press into the mountains of lust with erect nubs,
I'm still forced to arch my back to feel his loving in ripples connecting my valleys
He's nothing but pyrite— only a fool would fall for that luster

My soul is untouchable. Unbreakable. Unbeatable.
My mind is wrought-iron
My heart is a block of ice being melted by the heat in the savanna
Salty as the many grains of sand that always end up under my nails
God I hate sand

I am as wild as the gazelles I run amongst, always sprinting from the oppressive lions
I am as gentle as the long grasses dancing in the wind
Angry as the sudden wildfires that consume all

Touch me as I break your skin between my teeth
Teach me a lesson
Give me a test
Teach me who I am, who I was, and who I will be
Past, Present, and Future
I am the wind, the sun, the stars, the moon, and the sea
And a bronze culture including the gold inside of me

They Always Shoot Us Down

Lyrics from "Bang Bang (My Baby Shot Me Down)" by Nancy Sinatra

*"he wore black and they wore white
they would always win the fight"*

*“he didn’t even say goodbye,
now he’s gone, we don’t know why”*

zero weapons

*“bang bang,
they shot him down”*

one shot fired

*“bang bang,
he hit the ground”*

two shots fired

*“bang bang,
that awful sound”*

three shots fired

“bang bang, they always shoot us down”

three, two, one seconds of life

Patience Wallace

Age: 17, Grade: 12

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

Educator: Cindy Cunningham

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Vanilla And Blueberry Babies, A Diptych

Vanilla and Blueberry Babies, a Dypictic

Vanilla Babies

I'm sitting on the carpet, staring at my fuzzy Wiggles house shoes in frustration. My grandmother is sitting on the couch looking at the home phone every couple of minutes, seeming like she was sitting on edge. She would look, shake her head, then return to flipping through her magazine.

"What's taking so long, granny? I wanna open presents now!" It's eight at night, I'd never had to open my presents at nighttime. I stare forlornly at my hastily packed presents; I had to know if I'd finally get a baby alive.

"Paw-Paw, why can't we open presents?" He's sleeping on the other couch, his faded blue ball cap over his face and he's snoring quite loudly.

"Huh!?" He says, jumping up as if I had dropped a plate in the kitchen and hurt myself.

"Paw-Paw!" I stand up, heading over to the couch and shaking him. I wanted another reason to be mad at grandma more about my presents.

"Granny still won't let me open presents!"

"Don't look at me! You have to talk to granny about that one," he says laughing. I nod at him. He usually knows what he's talking about. My grandma shot him a I-know-you-didn't-just-say-that look. They enjoy arguing.

"Granny!"

"Honey— please. We have to wait until your parents get home." She looks at the phone again. "They should've already called..." she mutters to herself.

"What's taking so long? They should be here by now!" I looked out the window, it was dark outside. They were taking entirely too long. I sit back down and huff. I glance at Traxon who is happily pushing around a toy truck on the floor in front of paw-paw, not seeming to care that it's Christmas.

The security alarm beeps as parents push into the warm house, snowflakes melting on their jackets and in their hair. My mom is looking exceedingly tired, my father holding shiny blue balloons in one hand and a baby carrier in the other. It's taken them forever to get home! Where have they been all day?

"Can we finally open presents now!?" I yell jumping to my feet. My grandma sighs.

I stare grumpily at the tiny baby in the folding crib. He just lays there, small and white. I've been waiting for like— forever for this? He lays on his back, his little socked feet and hands moving around as he yawns. I was not impressed.

"Why is he white? Where did he come from?"

“What do you mean honey?” my dad inquires. “He’s black, you can’t tell?”

I couldn’t. “No, he’s not! His skin is white!”

“Well he’s a new baby honey, he’ll get darker. You said Travon was white but he’s black too right?” my dad said chuckling. I laugh now, I didn’t understand the concept of being light-skinned.

I peered into the crib again, really focusing on him. I was not convinced. “I don’t know... maybe you brought the wrong baby home.”

“Well remember, you saw him in the hospital.”

I didn’t reply, just kept looking at him. “He’s supposed to be a girl, I don’t want another brother.”

“You’ll like him honey, just like Travon.” On cue, Travon ran and fell on his face trying to show granny his new fire truck I would grow to hate from the siren constantly going off.

“It’s almost like he’s a gift this Christmas! You’ll love your little brother, I promise.”

“Sure daddy.” I still was disappointed I didn’t get that Baby Alive. I figured I’d put up with him until I got the Baby Alive... I don’t think that worked for me, but it didn’t matter because I grew to love my brother more than I could ever love a doll.

Blueberry Babies

It’s late afternoon, the sunlight streaming into the room as the sky starts to turn orange. I remember being in the dining room, sitting on the wooden floor in front of the forever empty turtle tank with Travon at my knees; but it could’ve been in the living room, sprawled out the carpet in front of our temperamental fireplace. Travon is on his back, his little fat baby legs kicking in the air as I tickled his stomach.

He’s a cute lil thing, chubby and happy with his curly hair and hazel eyes. His tummy would always be sticking out and I’d tickle him; his laugh would be contagious, sounding like he was making a g-g-g-g-g sound. I was in charge of watching Travon while my parents went and did something. I can’t remember what but they weren’t far away.

He’d be there laughing, his few baby teeth in a bright smile; I’ve never seen a baby as happy as he was. Then, there would be silence. Heavy and empty silence. His laughter would fade and his smile disappeared; he appeared to be stuck in place. His bright eyes would be staring into mine, probably reflecting the fear in my eyes. His arms and legs would go limp and the seconds felt like hours as his cheeks turned bright red then his entire face changed to a lapis blue, the same blues that decorated his nursery.

I can’t fully remember what happened next. I remember sitting on the floor yelling for my parents, too afraid to leave him there alone. My parents flew in the room and it was a flurry of movement; I remember seeing their lips moving but all I heard was a dull buzz. And then suddenly my mom’s voice cut through my haze; she was screaming. My dad was probably yelling too, trying to calm me, guard Travon, and console his wife who was currently in a mess. I think they were too afraid to move him because they didn’t know what was happening.

Travon shook ever so slightly and his eyes rolled back into his head. And just as soon as it started it was over. Then he was asleep, still and silent. Babies were supposed to cry, but as he was laughing everyone else was crying. It was the same when I was holding him in the backseat of the car, cradling him and holding a cotton ball on his eye because he had run into a table and it cut deep, deep enough for stitches. Even more so when he was five; unable to get out of bed because he couldn’t move his legs. He only started crying then because we all looked so upset.

I remember my mom running into the kitchen, crying while trying to phone the doctor I assumed then. Dad picked him up and carried him somewhere, cradling his head so gently, as if he might break. We were worried he might. I continued to sit on the floor, staring at the blanket he was lying on; the color of fresh blueberries.

Patience Wallace

Age: 17, Grade: 12

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

Educator: Patricia Lyons

Category: Flash Fiction

Ballet Class

Ballet Class

Rosie grips the bar as she raises her leg behind her, hitting a shaky arabesque position. Her ballet class is fairly large, with almost thirty girls of various skills practicing before class starts.

"Lemme go!" a girl shouts. Rosie goes back to position one, looking at the pair fighting in the doorway. The frail woman struggles with a girl attempting to run out the door. Tendrils of her light brown hair escaped from her bun, dirt-smudged into the scratchy fabric of her tutu. The girl clashes with her mother, a tear blooming in the sheer fabric on her arms. Her ballet shoes hadn't been tied right, her light pink tights already ripped on her calf.

"Mom no! You can't make me!", the girl yells. "I have to watch my tomatoes grow!" The girl continues to tussle, bucking in her mom's veiny arms, the mother's legs planted in place to hold the disgruntled six-year-old.

"Lily, I promise to keep an eye on your tomatoes, but you will try ballet, you promised!" At this point the whole ballet studio has fallen silent, pairs of bright eyes focused on the quarreling pair.

"Mom, you have to WATCH the tomatoes, not just keep an eye on them!" Lily's green eyes are nearly ablaze as she gives her last hurrah before going completely still in her mother's arms.

Her mother huffs. "Fine Lily, I will watch your tomatoes, but you will try this; your doctor said a physical activity will help. Especially one with other girls your age."

Lily's face turns sad as her scowl fades into a frown. "OK mom, I will try."

"Good, I'll make sure to call if I even see a little bit of tomato." The woman relaxes, the tired wrinkles around her eyes melting, the flush of color in her cheeks making her look twenty years younger. Rosie realizes the woman is beautiful. Lily hugs her mom, the rip in her sleeve growing. Lily then lumbers over, grabbing the spot next to Rosie. Lily looks around frantically, the wisps of her hair looking like flying snakes. "Why am I the only one wearing this pink crap, how come you guys get to wear black?" Lily shrieks, referring to the standard black leggings and tank. Rosie gasps, her hand flying to her mouth and her eyes opening wide. "You said a bad word! How could you!?" Lily rolls her eyes, placing her hands on her prepubescent hips. "You're a wuss y'know. But at least you didn't have to wear this pink sparkly thing."

"I am not a wuss," Rosie whispers. "You're just stupid for not listening last time. Our teacher told us not to wear it since it's only for recitals, but you still wear it each time! I think you like wearing it." Rosie crosses her arms, smirking as she stares at an insulted Lily.

"Fine you're not a wuss, but I'm not stupid. I've been watching my tomatoes." Lily smiles, smoothing out her ruffled skirt. "And I hate wearing this thing, why do you think I try so hard to get it dirty?"

Rosie smiles, "Ok, it's agreed. I'm not a wuss and you're not stupid. It's a deal, let's shake on it." Rosie holds out her hand, her nails with a fresh coat of sparkly nail polish.

"Fine," Lily says, shaking on it while discreetly crossing her fingers behind her back. "Wuss." Lily thinks.

"Idiot." Rosie thinks. They smile at each other then start to stretch, peeking at each other from the corners of their eyes.

Patience Wallace

Age: 17, Grade: 12

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

Educators: Cindy Cunningham, Patty Smith

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Color Me White

Color Me White

When I was younger, I never realized all of the decorations in my home were African and African-American based. The mahogany masks on the wall, decorated with colorful beads and vibrant paint, yet terrifying with sharp wooden teeth and slanted eyes. The bronze faces protected by shadow boxes, their anguished faces permanently melded into a silent scream, tinted green with rusty bells, were just art. The daily verse calendar with big breasted women in Kwanzaa colored head wraps with dark brown faces. However, I did notice the black mother and daughter on a bread-colored pew reading a bible. The grandmother on a pottery-glazed bench reading a wordless bible to a boy with eyes that didn't blink.

As I got older I paid attention to the solemn-faced painting of Rosa Parks, her back rigid to a dark leather bus seat. The black empowerment poem by Maya Angelou written in dancing purple and green letters, her brown face with a salt and pepper afro plastered to the bottom. The statuettes of black angels, a black Jesus with beaded dreads on the boat with his Followers, black pottery women on their knees, hands clasped, heads to the ground. For Christmas, a black nativity scene, topped with a nappy headed Mary and a dark-skinned baby Jesus. My mother's Jesus was black, while my picture bible taught me Jesus was white, God an old white man with a beard white as snow and eyes blue as the first ocean he created. I was pretty darn sure Jesus was white. I didn't understand why mom's stuff wasn't the same. I always took her black power disposition a little too far. Black Jesus, as far as I was concerned, did not exist.

These things became too real, 10 year old me angry as my mother told me to sit in the front of the bus, away from my friends; furious as she talked about ancestors who died for me to sit in the front, saying it was just plain disrespect. My twelve-year-old dark brown face drawn with secret tears I'd never admit to, as I learned light-skinned were in; when my friend sat me down and told me guys just didn't like girls as black as I am. Even in second grade, I was told my skin was like dirt and I suddenly became less-than than my copper-colored girls in my class. When I started to write all my characters were white. Every character with silky brown hair and green eyes, the princesses I wrote about had blond boyfriends with hair the color of gold. I just never thought about writing about black characters, it was just obvious to have people that looked like the girls around me who were called gorgeous complete with a freckled smile, should have the center stage. I didn't realize that white was my "regular", it'd be strange to think of anything else, what novels had I even read with a black girl as the main character? When did my Barbies not have freckles and rosy cheeks, there wasn't even a black Ken to marry my Barbies to.

Wasn't the peach crayon the first color I reached for? How even in the innocent book of fairy tales Rapunzel's hair was the color of straw, Peter Pan a little boy with coffee-colored hair and devilish green eyes, always on the lookout for the atomic blond fairy, Tinkerbell. It wasn't until I was eight I even had a black princess to compare myself to, someone with lips and a nose just like me. Flipping through the pages of my old coloring books, each face is the same as the last; my dandelion yellow crayon-colored down to nothing more than a snub.

When did I stop coloring black women, when did every eye I colored was blue? I was just another black girl, nothing special. I grew up thinking there was no beauty in blackness, no beauty in curves, and mocha-colored skin. Why would I? Had I ever seen a model with hair as kinky as mine on the front cover?

I hadn't. I felt like I would never be enough unless I was white. Unfortunately, so many people of color consciously or unconsciously deal with this inferiority complex. It doesn't take much time, even at a young age, that there was something that made us different-- and not in a good way. Whether it be the way we were addressed, little comments, or just the way we were looked at. As we grew older we were faced with images of black boys getting shot dead in the streets, when female African-Americans started fearing for the lives of their black fathers and brothers. When we realized that because we were colored black-- not brown, could determine if you lived or died. Looking at my old crayons, the black crayon; labeled "negro" in Spanish reminded me that we are just pictures in a

coloring book; waiting for our fates to be determined by a color.

Patience Wallace

Age: 17, Grade: 12

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

Educator: Patty Smith

Category: Flash Fiction

Burnt

Burnt

My hands are covered in Crisco and sweat, baking flour-coated under my fingernails. I breathe in tune to the steady scratching, grinding the small spatula back and forth to clean the crusted pan. My son stands by me with his face still and judgemental.

Blackened crumbs dust the stovetop, breaking apart into a dry sand. I left them in the oven for too long. Again. They burned to the pan, the sweet cookie dough transformed into tasteless coal.

All cookies bake differently, I've had my share of them. I made ones in my third trimester that were as flat as a pancake and thin as paper. I didn't know it then, but I should've put more flour in the cookies. I had to grow up all on my own, stubborn to help, and a slave to Family Dollar cookbooks. He left me loveless, an empty clueless shell drunk off powdered sugar and isomalt crystals. I became determined to keep my cookies from failing; it's no use going falling in love with baking, love of making something wonderful then ending up with regrets.

I made snickerdoodle cookies on my son's first birthday, picture perfect but spicy as a bitch. My mother stood holding my baby and shaking her head at my insolence. Like my single motherhood was my fault, like I chose to make spicy snickerdoodles instead of the cinnamon flavor we all love. I rarely had the money for sugar so in my innocence I assumed cinnamon would make it sweeter, but cinnamon is foreign and mysterious, not unlike the man who stared at me from the empty bar. Not unlike the man who sealed every promise with a hershey kiss, proved our love with a butterfly cupcake ring. Snickerdoodles are a waste of time.

On my third birthday after becoming a mother, I made sugar cookies with lime green icing. The grittiness was too much, clumps of granulated sugar in my icing, bits of eggshell in the cookie. We used to make cookies together, he made the dough and I made the icing. He could be elbow deep in flour and still be beautiful. Cookies should last forever, but it so quickly hardens to a sugary rock. I threw the cookies out, I can't love anymore.

Today I made cookies for my son. He loves chocolate chip cookies, how the chocolate sticks to your fingers and the cookie dissolves in your mouth. His friend's mother's could bake better cookies than me, could make better icing than me, better lives than me; primped and plucked husbands to guide their hand through the mixing bowl. But I can do the same. I could make cookies, I could be better, I could mean something. I don't need a man to buy me flour, I don't need a rose gold ring on my finger to be happy. We all have the same chocolate but only mine burns.

I scrape the remaining pieces of cookie into the trash, the burnt chocolate morsels sticking to the wax paper, the oil in the cookie leaving an ugly yellow splotch. My son stands behind me, somber and silent, his six-year-old obsidian eyes regarding the trash can with looks of disappointment.

"You can't bake," my son states plainly.

"No-- I never could."

Patience Wallace

Age: 17, Grade: 12

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

Educator: Patty Smith

Category: Flash Fiction

Wood Burns

Wood Burns

Her legs are folded under her, smooth skin to scratchy dark blue carpet. Raindrops race down the window panes, lush greenery glowing behind streaked windows, gray afternoon skies cast darkness over the tidy living room. Pippa sits by the coffee table, her medium brown hair inches from a vanilla candle. White powder is spread across the glass table, dusted on her face and pointed nose as if she had eaten a powdered doughnut. Her freckled face is illuminated by the open flame, wax cooling by her splinter filled fingertips.

She had blindly dug through the old wooden cabinets for a candle, her hands shaking as she lit the wick. When the power went out Mary would light the candles and they'd cuddle while watching Pinocchio, but that was before. Pippa's bleeding fingertips tremble as the crickets chirp under the floorboards, she no longer has someone to tell her powdered sugar from cocaine. Her conscience is missing, along with her dead sister; both rotting somewhere unreachable.

Pippa decides the fire is beautiful, the dancing golden girl on top of her candle leaks fiery grace. She's bright blue, dropping embers as she twirls, her fluid movements smoldering as she dances. Pippa reaches towards the flame, the fire so gorgeous, she could almost touch it.

"Pippa."

Pippa whips around, the feather on her red hat fluttering. Why, Mary looked green. Pippa turns back to the flame. Mary is dead, Mary is not here. She focuses on the flame intently, almost hearing the flame sing.

"Pippa, you wish to be a real girl right? Wood burns."

Pippa turns around slowly, Mary now had a top hat and a cane.

"Why Mary, what particular fashion you have picked up." Pippa grasps the table, her warm hands leaving musty prints on the glass.

"Pippa, I've always dressed as such, you mustn't lie you know," Mary says, her smile stretched across her melting cheeks. Thunder booms, her warning ominous. She appears to be meddling with gold cufflinks, nonexistent light bounces off the gold as the shadows pass right through her blue suit.

"Yes Mary, I mustn't lie. It's just so pretty." Pippa turns back to the candle, the white wax dripping like tears, gathering on the table by Pippa's fingers. Her nose almost grazes the fire, her eyes memorizing the curves of the golden woman. "I'm only a little bit wooden Mary, splinters are such a pain." Pippa doesn't notice her nose grow, or catch flame. "I'm only a little bit wooden Mary, just a smidge." She starts laughing, the fire tickling her face as it crawls up her throat.

"Yes Pippa, but all wood burns."

Pippa doesn't answer, her wooden eyes alight with flame, captivated by the lady who dances in them.

Hours later the parents despair to hear their remaining daughter burned alive in her home.

Paige Walworth

Age: 16, Grade: 11

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

Educator: Michele Surat

Category: Critical Essay

Poetry, Patronage, and the Pastoral Realm: An Analysis of Vergil's Eclogue I

In Vergil's *Eclogue I*, he explores the lives of two shepherds, Tityrus and Meliboeus, and their varying relationships with nature. Although *Eclogue I* is modeled after the earlier Alexandrian poet Theocritus' *Idylls*, the *Eclogues* differ, as they contain references to the political events of the time period, thus allowing *Eclogue I* to be approximately dated to the year 41 BC, following the civil conflict and the confiscation of farmer's lands for the purpose of redistributing it to soldiers. Vergil manages to assert the importance of security through the interactions of Tityrus and Meliboeus, both with each other, the city, and their flocks. By developing a contrast between the two shepherds in their relationships, Vergil establishes the importance of patronage and the growing civil issues with the conclusion of the recent civil disputes.

Eclogue I begins with the tranquil scene of Tityrus relaxing under a beech tree in the shade, as described with *patulae recubans sub tegmine fagi* (Verg. *Ecl.* 1.1). The idyllic setting described by Tityrus's close relationship with nature is one commonly seen in the realm of pastoral literature and is fortified by the use of a synchysis pattern in lines 1 and 2 to show how intertwined Tityrus is with nature. With this, Tityrus's bucolic setting is enhanced by his musical freedom and use of a *tenui...avena* (Verg. *Ecl.* 1.2), and his musical freedom is enhanced by the alliteration of *Tityre tu* and *Musam meditaris* (Verg. *Ecl.* 1.1-2). The use of *tenui* to describe the pipe also reflects the style of the *Eclogue* itself and Vergil's writing, as pastoral literature tends to be rather condensed. Vergil additionally includes Tityrus's thoughts about a *silvestrem...Musam* (Verg. *Ecl.* 1.2) to suggest that Tityrus's mind is free from worry about his future as a shepherd, as he is able to think about music and nature. However, Tityrus's bucolic setting is contrasted with Meliboeus's state of flight away from this peaceful and natural setting. Because of recent events, Meliboeus must *patriam fugimus* (Verg. *Ecl.* 1.4) and leave behind *dulcia...arva* (Verg. *Ecl.* 1.3). The contrast in the two shepherds' conditions are emphasized with the anaphora of *tu...nos...nos...tu* (Verg. *Ecl.* 1.1-4), which shows that the two are in considerably different states by emphasizing their varying actions. While Tityrus is free to *lenus in umbria* (Verg. *Ecl.* 1.4), Meliboeus must flee from the world which he knows.

Tityrus' relaxation is not without reason, as Tityrus states that *deus nobis haec otia fecit* (Verg. *Ecl.* 1.6). Despite establishing the importance of this god, Vergil never actually states who it is, instead opting for the anaphora of interrogative pronouns with *ille, illius, ille, and ipsum* (Verg. *Ecl.* 1.7,9). By doing this, Vergil takes the attention off of the god himself, and rather places the importance of what he does by protecting Tityrus's leisure, thus asserting the importance of patronage and protection. The presence of this god and the fortunate Tityrus in the poem resonates a similarity to Octavian and Vergil himself, especially with the line *et ipsum ludere quae vellem...permisit* (Verg. *Ecl.* 1.9-10). Octavian's patronage to Vergil allowed him to write, just as the god's patronage allowed Tityrus to play music.

The contrast between Tityrus and Meliboeus is again made through the varying descriptions of the two's flocks. Tityrus describes the god as allowing *meas errare boves* (Verg. *Ecl.* 1.9), therefore letting Tityrus relax in the shade. The use of *ut cernis* (Verg. *Ecl.* 1.9) emphasizes the tranquility of Tityrus's setting, as it invites the reader to take the time to imagine the bucolic world which surrounds Tityrus. Meliboeus, however, describes his flock in disorder, with the line *undique totis usque adeo turbatur agris* (Verg. *Ecl.* 1.11-12). The hyperbaton of *totis* and *agris* illustrates the extent of the disorder, and the anastrophe of the impersonal verb *turbatur* additionally emphasize the disarray of Meliboeus's flock and life. Meliboeus additionally describes the recent event of one of his *capellae* giving birth to *gemellos* (Verg. *Ecl.* 1.14), which typically would be seen as a good omen, however, the she-goats *in nuda...reliquit* (Verg. *Ecl.* 1.15), thus leaving them to their death. This contrasts with the situation of Tityrus, as he sacrificed his lamb as a thankful offering to the god on an altar. Tityrus's sacrifice was one intended for future prosperity and thanks, while Meliboeus's was wasteful and a result of his current situation.

Tityrus then describes his recent journey to the city of Rome, which is contrasted in size with their usual pastoral realm. Through a tricolon combined with the polypticon of *sic* (Verg. *Ecl.* 1.22-23), Tityrus describes the difference

from the city to his own world, as he used to believe that they were similar in size, however, now he sees that is not the case. By including the city of Rome in *Eclogue I*, Vergil breaks shortly from the pastoral genre and establishes the connection between the two worlds. Following this, Tityrus describes the importance of the city to his life, as his journey there provided for his freedom, as his reason for leaving the pastoral world was *libertas* (Verg. *Ecl.* 1.27). Meliboeus responds with the sadness, *maesta*, of *Amarylli*, Tityrus's lover, while Tityrus was away, and the additional inclusion of a tricolon in lines 38-39 emphasizes that Tityrus had left his rightful place. Additionally, through the polyptoton of *ipsae*, *ipsi*, and *ipsa* along with the personification *pinus*, *fontes*, and *arbusta* and the repetition of *te*, Vergil emphasizes the idea that Tityrus belongs in a state of nature. Furthermore, while he was in the city, Tityrus encountered the *iuvenem*, who told him to live a pastoral life with the statement *pascite ut ante boves, pueri, submitte tauros* (Verg. *Ecl.* 1.45), again contrasting him with Meliboeus, who is forced to depart from the same setting.

Despite the land of Tityrus being described with *lapis omnia nudus limosque palus obducit pascua iunco* (Verg. *Ecl.* 1.47-48), therefore establishing it as not the best, Tityrus still has the upperhand to Meliboeus, as Tityrus actually has land. This leads Meliboeus to describe Tityrus as *fortunate senex* (Verg. *Ecl.* 1.46) and his land as *satis* (Verg. *Ecl.* 1.47). Tityrus is again regarded as *fortunate senex* in line 51, from which Meliboeus continues to describe the appeals of Tityrus's land and the natural setting through imagery. Meliboeus additionally describes the security that Tityrus enjoys *inter flumina nota et fontibus sacros* (Verg. *Ecl.* 1.51-52), surrounded by *vincino ab limite saepes* (Verg. *Ecl.* 1.52), and *alta sub rupe* (Verg. *Ecl.* 1.56). The land which was provided for Tityrus by the god in turn brings him protection, as Vergil again ties in the connection between the pastoral realm and politics, and the importance of patronage. The bucolic setting of Tityrus's protected land is further developed with the visual imagery of *Hyblaeis apibus depasta* (Verg. *Ecl.* 1.54), and the use of *Hyblaeis* is a reference to Mt. Etna located in Sicily, thus again associating the poem with Theocritus. Vergil also uses auditory imagery through *canet* (Verg. *Ecl.* 1.56), *rauca...palumbes* (Verg. *Ecl.* 1.57), and *gemere...cessabit turtur* (Verg. *Ecl.* 1.58). The repetition of the "t" sound in *turtur* adds a melodic tone to the passage and emphasizes the peacefulness of the setting. This passage echoes the first passage and Tityrus's relaxation, thus adding to the claim that the god allowed Tityrus to do as he wished, as well as the contrast between him and Meliboeus.

Tityrus's response includes a tricolon describing things out of their place, emulating the situation of the shepherd Meliboeus forced to leave the pastoral world. This idea is enforced through the anastrophe of the subjects of the sentences, *cervi*, *pisces*, and *exsul*, as they are all positioned at the end of the line, and thus out of place. The descriptions of these out of place objects creates a feeling of disorder and chaos, which contrasts with Tityrus's calm, protected, and stationary position, which is fitting as Tityrus states that these impossible and unsettling events will happen before *nostros illius labantur pectore vultus* (Verg. *Ecl.* 1.63), supposedly still referencing his unnamed benefactor. By asserting this, Tityrus establishes that his bucolic world will not fall into chaos like Meliboeus as long as the god, his protector, remains.

Responding to Tityrus and caught up in his woes that he must leave his farmland and pastures, Meliboeus contrasts Tityrus's stable nature with his own movement away with the future verb *veniemus* (Verg. *Ecl.* 1.65) and the accusatives of motion towards as seen with *Afros*, *Scythiam*, *Oaxen*, and *Britannos* (Verg. *Ecl.* 1.64-65). These locations do not contain the same peaceful and bucolic setting as Meliboeus is accustomed to, and Scythia in particular is known for its bad weather. Vergil chose these locations as they are located at what was believed to be the furthest edges of the world, thus emphasizing the distance that Meliboeus must travel and his large life shift. The strong adversative *At* (Verg. *Ecl.* 1.64) additionally makes a sharp contrast in the two shepherd's nature and serves to further the indignant tone of the passage. Meliboeus again describes the extent that he must travel away from his home with the sentence *et penitus toto divos orbe Britannos* (Verg. *Ecl.* 1.66), which describes Britain as being deeply divided from the whole world, as it is separated by a harsh body of water, the English Channel. This water reference resonates with the current emotional state of Meliboeus's life and his indignation with his current state. It additionally contrasts with the peaceful and protective *flumina nota et fontis sacros* (Verg. *Ecl.* 1.51-52) that are present in Tityrus's land. The synchysis pattern of this line additionally echoes the disarray of Meliboeus's life.

The anastrophe of the words *fines*, *culmen*, and *aristas* (Verg. *Ecl.* 1.67-69), all subjects positioned at the end of the line, emphasizes the humble life that Meliboeus lived, and is similar to the syntax used earlier by Tityrus and again provides a contrast in their lives. The words *patrios* and *fines* in line 67 do not fit in with traditional pastoral themes, and through their use, Vergil again ties in the dependency of Meliboeus and Tityrus' pastoral way of life to the political realm. Meliboeus continues to grow indignant at his situation as he describes how the land which he put time and effort into for the purpose of helping him in the future is being given to an *impius...miles* (Verg. *Ecl.* 1.70) or *barbatus* (Verg. *Ecl.* 1.71), a point which is emphasized by the polyptoton of *haec*, *has*, and *hic* (Verg. *Ecl.* 1.70-73). Because of his requirement to relinquish his land as a result of *discordia civis* (Verg. *Ecl.* 1.71), Meliboeus describes himself as *miseros* (Verg. *Ecl.* 1.72), again contrasting the two shepherds, as Tityrus was described earlier as *lentus* (Verg. *Ecl.* 1.4) and at peace because of his patronage from the god. The repetition of the interjection *an*

(Verg. *Ecl.* 1.67,71) additionally emphasizes Meliboeus's disbelief, indignation, and sadness that he must give up his land and pastoral life.

After departing from the themes which are typically discussed by the pastoral genre, Meliboeus returns to speaking in pastoral language, characterized the inclusion of many natural things. However, he shifts from describing a serene and protected setting to describing his lack of singing, thus representing his inner sadness. Meliboeus's statement of *carmina nulla canam* (Verg. *Ecl.* 1.77) contrasts with the earlier description of Tityrus in line 10, in which he was able to play what he wanted on his pipe. This asserts that Meliboeus, although reluctantly, has chosen to give up his position in the pastoral world, as he is resigned to his life away from the bucolic land he is used too through his abandonment of music and song, elements crucial to the peace of the pastoral world.

The poem ends with a return to the humble hospitality and the pastoral setting of shepherds, as Tityrus invites the troubled Meliboeus to spend the night and describes all that is available for them. These goods include *militia poma, castaneae molles et pressi copia lactis* (Verg. *Ecl.* 1.80-81), all of which come from nature and echo their bucolic setting.

However, the final lines vary from the bright colors, nature, and peacefulness seen in earlier descriptions of their setting, as Tityrus instead opts to describe the smoking chimneys in the distance. Vergil's use of the words *maioresque...umbræ* (Verg. *Ecl.* 1.83) ends the poem rather suddenly with minimal closure and their hyperbaton adds emphasis to difference from the rest of the poem, as the *umbra* that Tityrus rested in in line 5 had a peaceful connotation, while the *maioresque...umbræ* has a more sorrowful tone.

Ultimately, Vergil's *Eclogue I* shows the importance of patronage and protection through the lives of Tityrus and Meliboeus. Although slightly different from the pastoral precedents set by Theocritus, Vergil still maintains many themes of the pastoral genre with his development of a bucolic landscape and the shepherds' relationships with nature. However, Vergil does include references to the city of Rome and current events, thus asserting that the pastoral and urban realms are closely intertwined and setting a precedent that will be continued in the later *Eclogues*.

Emerson Woodley

Age: 14, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Julie Elmore

Category: Dramatic Script

Scraps

Scraps

All of my life I have been misunderstood. Whether it's by my parents, or people at my school, or teachers, or employees at stores. It might be my bright red hair covering half of my face to hide my scar or just the way I awkwardly stand, but no one understands me. In middle school, everyone would bully me for my life at home and the way I looked. By high school, everything settled down and everyone became uninterested in me. Now I am treated like I'm invisible at school, which I like. I like being unnoticed because whenever someone talks to me once in a blue moon, I don't like it because I freak out. My heart starts pounding, I start sweating, I scramble my words, and whatever I say plays in my head on repeat for the rest of the day, haunting me. My parents also don't understand me. They say I was an "accident" and constantly threaten to send me to an orphanage. Every day I fear waking up and being abandoned. My dad doesn't come home until late at night, and he only works in the morning. I know that if I went missing my parents wouldn't notice or care. I only enjoy a few things, such as jeans, lemonade, and Scraps.

Scraps is my only friend. He is a skinny stray light-brown pitbull with his ribcage imprinted on his torso. He has fleas, uneven hair, and looks like he hasn't been washed in years. He lives in the woods that surround my house. Mama says that she's surprised he's still alive, but she doesn't know that I feed my leftovers to him every day. Whenever I need to get away from everything that is happening in my family, Scraps is always waiting for me outside. I tell him everything, and even though it may not look like it, I know he's listening.

I live in a small town in South Dakota, called Sherrysville. I work every day at the local market. I finish my shift at 8pm and walk home. Scraps was always waiting for me at the front of my house, which is deep in an isolated forest.

"CAM!" my mom screamed, "quit talkin' to that mut and get in here!"

I gently pat Scraps and gave him some of my lunch from earlier.

"See you later." He licked me on my face where my scar is, grabbed the food from my hand, and went to his favorite spot, under a big dead tree with orange and red leaves surrounding it. I walked inside my house and was immediately met with the stench of cigarette smoke.

"Get over here," My mom told me. She was sitting on the couch, with the TV reflection dancing on her face, and a cigarette in her hand. I haven't talked to my mom in multiple days. I could see cigarette butts surrounding her chair, and the air in the house is foggy. She's stressed. Whenever she's stressed, she smokes a lot and yells at me.

"How long were you at work today?"

"I did a five-hour shift once I got out of school, like always."

"Cameron, I need you to work harder. You should be appreciative of your family, and work hard so you can keep where *you* live nice. Wouldn't you like that?" She said sourly.

"Yes mama, I'm sorry but I jus-" I was cut off.

"No buts. You could work an eight-hour shift and help your family pay the bills if you weren't out with that dirty dog."

"I know mama, but he's my best friend and I love him!"

"Don't make me call the pound, Cam."

I freeze. My mom and I have this conversation weekly. She tells me to stop hanging out with the dog and do something helpful for "us" but she's never said this. I've seen how the pound treats animals on TV, and I would never let anyone touch Scraps.

"N- No, mama, no need to do that. I'm trying to find time to work more and-" My mom quickly stands up and slaps me in the face. By this point, I'm used to it. Whenever we have a conversation, she usually ends it by slapping me, or kicking me, or pushing me, causing us to not talk for multiple days, and for it to just cycle over and restart. I

walk upstairs to my bedroom and look out the window. There I see Scraps peacefully sleeping under the oak tree, which gives me the OK to go to bed.

One night, when I was younger, my father came home late and got into an argument with my mom. I still don't know what it's about, but their screaming woke me up. I could hear dishes breaking. I walked to the top of the staircase and see my mom screaming at my dad, who had a really red face. It ended with my mom leaving the house, and my dad walking up the stairs towards me and grabbing me by the collar of my shirt, ripping me down the stairs. I tumbled down the stairs and ended up face planting on a sharp piece of glass, which was previously a piece of china that was gifted to my parents as a wedding gift. Blood immediately started pouring down my face out of a cut going from my left temple to my chin. Ever since then, I've had a scar surrounded by freckles and hidden by me as much as possible. All of these bad memories pour through my head causing me to not be able to sleep. I look out the window and see Scraps there. I need to see him.

I creep down the stairs and slip out the door into the chilly, moonlit night. Scraps immediately jumped up and started wagging his tail.

"WOOF! WOOF!" Scraps barks in excitement.

"Shhh," I tell him. "I have to be quiet."

As we walked through the woods, I let everything that has been running through my head out to Scraps. I don't know how long it took, but eventually, it was light outside, so I crept back inside and went to sleep. I woke up to the sound of a car in my driveway.

When I looked out my window, I saw a tall skinny man closing the doors to his aquamarine, dented, old looking van. On the sides of the van, I read out the words "Sherrysville Pound" followed by a number to call. I raced down the stairs and got to the door to be met with Scraps trying to bark through his muzzle, inside the van.

"NO!" I screamed.

I sprinted to the truck, banging on the doors to get the attention of the driver.

"STOP! STOP DRIVING!"

The driver quickly caught on and pressed on the brakes. The tinted window rolled down to reveal a much older man with a scruffy beard and a foul look.

"What do you want, kid?"

"This is my dog! You can't take him away!"

"Well, that's not what I heard," he said with the most northern accent. He pointed toward the direction of my mother standing in the doorway with a smirk on her face.

I look at her coldly in the eyes.

"How could you?" I scream at her. I was furious.

"Cam, calm down. You saw it coming. You let that dog get between all of your life, so you have to pay the price."

This is the angriest I have ever been to. I felt the rage collected from the past 18 years I've been alive rising up and out of my ears, like steam.

I run to the back of the car and open the two back doors. Scraps quickly jumped out. We both run. We don't know where, but anywhere away from my home. I heard my mother screaming at me, gradually getting quieter. This gave me satisfaction. We stopped in the middle of nowhere. Surrounded by trees, and sat down. I felt sick. This might have been because I've never ran that much in my life, or because of the fact that I just ran away. I vomit all over the ground. I vomited for what felt like minutes. I don't know what came out of me, besides my lunch, but once I rinsed my mouth out with water, I felt like a new person. All of the dark clouds in my head cleared up, revealing a bright sun. A smile immediately spread from ear to ear, on my face. I turned towards Scraps and started petting him while laughing in relief. I couldn't believe I just ran from home. It made me feel free. It made me want to run even more. Scraps and I ran and ran happily, farther and farther away from home. The farther I got from home, the happier I felt. I realized that I didn't need any person in my life to rely on when I had Scraps. I hear rustling in the distance. The movement seems far enough to the point where I shouldn't have to worry, but the back of my head is telling me that something's off her. I overpower that thought by telling myself that it was just an animal or the wind. A few minutes later, I start to smell an offly familiar smell. Cigarette smoke.

I hear a stick snap behind me. I slowly turn around to face my mother, foully looking at me, and two strong-looking men behind her. I have so many questions. *Who are those men? How'd they find us? What should I do?*